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Ákos Moravánszky

Foreword

East West Central: Re-Building Europe

The Iron Curtain stood for the static immutability of the status quo. “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent” – Winston Churchill told his audience in a famous speech on March 5, 1946. Like most metaphors, the term Iron Curtain has imprinted itself into the perception of reality and was associated with the fortified border, erected to block the movement of people and information between East and West. Architectural historiography followed suit, presenting the history of modernization and modernism in Europe from a perspective determined – and limited – by this political boundary. The imagery produced by the dissolution of the Soviet Union: the “fall,” the “lifting” or the “raising” of the curtain, the “breaching” of the wall, is a sign of confusion – regarding not only metaphors, but also underlying assumptions, methods and categories of architectural historiography.

Writing in the 1920s, art historian Erwin Panofsky famously referred to the perspective as a symbolic form. By this he meant that representing reality by means of a cohesive set of rules and symbols would give shape to a specific worldview. The exchange of views between cultures can therefore be studied using examples of visual representations, based on differing concepts of the relationship between observer and reality. When Panofsky gave his seminal lecture on Western perspective, Russian philosopher-physicist-inventor-priest Pavel Florensky wrote a study on the “reverse perspective” used in icon painting. He compared it to Renaissance representations of space in order to point out the differences between the two types of visual representation and their respective philosophical and theological underpinnings.

The exchange of glances as expressed in the German word *Blickwechsel* is a suggestive image: we are invited to switch between the viewpoints of the observer and the observed, so that our image of the world is suddenly no longer taken for granted. The metaphor of the Iron Curtain, however, sug-

gests that after WWII the boundary between the two halves of Europe was hermetic and impermeable, even to the gaze. Western and Eastern Europe regarded each other as their own dark “others”: communism and capitalism, divided by the Iron Curtain, were the “Twin Empires” on the mythical map of Europe. Yet, the perfect symmetry of the image eschewed the evidently more complex reality. As an image, the Iron Curtain was able to trigger both Western fear and desire, but actually it was far from being impenetrable. Rather, the Iron Curtain’s semi-permeability, which turned it into an osmotic membrane, refuted the supposed symmetry of the East-West division. Contrary to the widespread identification in the West with the concept of Western Europe and its corresponding values, the idea of a shared Eastern European identity has never been popular among the inhabitants of this region. Architects in the East were generally very well informed about the latest developments in Western architecture. One could hardly survive as an architect without having browsed the latest issues of *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, *The Architectural Review* or the magazines from Scandinavian countries, all of which were available in the libraries of the large state-owned design offices. The optical metaphor, however, held true: images were floating around but remained disembodied signifiers, as they weren’t grounded in personal experience. At the same time, travels of architects and professional organizations from the West to the East intensified during 1970s and 1980s. The lessons that participants drew from such exchanges more often than not depended on their respective viewpoints of the perspective.

The discrepancy between the bipolarity of block-thinking and the more complex and heterogeneous civilizational and political reality of Europe has led historians to develop different concepts to describe the historical identity of European regions more adequately than the East-West dichotomy. The term *Mitteleuropa* has never been merely a geographical term. It was a political one as well, just as East and West were connected with distinct political ideas or concepts. With the active support of intellectuals from the United States and England in the 1980s, Central Europe became a program to affirm a particular identity of the region: politically part of the Eastern Bloc, but without losing its Western cultural orientation – a result of the region’s specific historical development and its political affiliations before the war. “The phrase, a peculiar one, a hybrid of sorts, hearkened back to the Cold War period; while it reflected a certain deference to the ideas of Milan Kundera and others, it avoided the outright suggestion that the notion of Eastern Europe was outmoded, essentially a fabrication of the age of Stalin, that it brought together in a single category societies that remained significantly different” – wrote Stephen R. Graubard, editor of *Daedalus*, the journal of