

Martin Kohlrausch

*Brokers of Modernity. East Central Europe and The Rise of Modernist Architects, 1910-1950*

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The canonized, often oversimplified history of the Modern Movement has clearly left out numerous nuances, building up, in the past few years, the urgent need to push forward alternative narratives. Steven Mansbach's *Advancing a Different Modernism* is a telling example to that effect. In this context, retracing a faithful history of Eastern Modernism does not turn out to be an easy task, not even for a historian working in the field of architecture. The manifold challenges deriving from this quest include dealing with political, economic and social themes, as modernist architecture assumes "the role of 'the total art that could transform everyone's life'."<sup>1</sup> More often than not, the political seems to stand at the intersection of the multiple layers making up these alternative narratives, as is the case with Martin Kohlrausch's *Brokers of Modernity*.

The timeline of the book is set between the First World War, followed by the consolidation of the post-monarchic states and the aftermath of the Second World War, with the emergence of communist regimes around 1948. Kohlrausch thoroughly navigates this time span with a focus that shifts between a nuanced analysis of the social function of architecture in relation to economy and state-politics in East Central Europe, the evolution of the trans-regional network developed around the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) and a more subtly assembled narrative of what seems to be the portrait of the East Central European architect couple *par excellence*:<sup>2</sup> Helena and Szymon Syrkus.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, shifting perspective along this timeline allows the author to analyse both the transformation of the East Central European architects' group dynamics under two very different types of political developments and the generational aspects of what Kohlrausch calls Eastern Modernism.

The first chapter explains the political context of the region, understood as the newly drawn territories of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Germany. These states gained political

1 Martin Kohlrausch, *Brokers of Modernity. East Central Europe and The Rise of Modernist Architects, 1910-1950* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), 25.

2 In his essay, "Spousal collaboration as a professional strategy for women architects in the Polish People's Republic," Piotr Marciniak points to the success many professionally associated Polish couples (including the Syrkus couple) gained under the communist regime, questioning whether this "strategy" helped women architects building professional credibility. However, there was a general belief that couples brought stability to work groups. See Piotr Marciniak, "Spousal collaboration as a professional strategy for women architects in the Polish People's Republic," in *Ideological Equals*, eds. Mary Pepchinski and Mariann Simon (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 63-77.

3 Although Kohlrausch is far from downplaying the role played by other architects in the region for the modernist cause, the Syrkus couple is mentioned 606 times throughout the book, while their co-national Brukalski couple is mentioned 60 times. Other central figures are the Hungarian-born architect Fred Forbát, mentioned 111 times, the Czechoslovakian architect Karel Teige, mentioned 57 times, the Hungarian-born architect Farkas Molnár, practicing in Germany, who is mentioned 46 times and the Polish architect Józef Szanajca, mentioned 21 times in comparison with established figures like Le Corbusier and Gropius, mentioned 152, respectively 146 times. Although this quantitative analysis should be interpreted as a personal curiosity, it is telling for the importance the Syrkus couple gains in the economy of Kohlrausch's Central and Eastern Europe history of modernist architecture.

legitimacy against the backdrop of the economic crisis following the end of the First World War, the difficulty of integrating diverse territories belonging to the former imperial power structures and an increasingly dramatic housing crisis. Although highlighting “the existing structural problems of the region” by pointing to the “unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities, and the question of ethnic diversity,”<sup>4</sup> modernization was an urgent task for the East Central European states. It was also undertaken with “unusual optimism,” both by the financially strained states, acting as the main sponsors for housing programs (as is the case of Poland), and by the architects who saw the opportunity of reconstructing the cities destroyed by the war.

In this context, Kohlrausch labels modernist architects in the East Central Europe “brokers”, partly because of their positioning as “a group at the interface of state and society”<sup>5</sup> but also through the communicative aspect of the self-empowerment process stressed in the second chapter of the book. Acting as “experts of the social” through the modernizing power of their profession, modernist architects assumed both a political and a technical expert role in the post-war society, therefore turning “housing and urbanism [...] into the most important fields of action of social engineering.”<sup>6</sup> The transnational effort put into architectural education also played an important role in gaining “expert status” for the generation of architects born around 1900. The Polish architect Szymon Syrkus was internationally educated as well, having studied in Vienna, Graz, Riga, at the Academy of Fine Arts at Cracow. He graduated in 1922, the newly established Polish Warsaw University of Technology, depicted by Kohlrausch as an internationally oriented institution, with a curriculum “influenced by French, German and Russian traditions.”<sup>7</sup>

The rise of the new type of architect, whose expert status entailed a political, social and economic understanding of the world led to the profound transformation of the profession. Furthermore, the “catching-up logic” of Central and Eastern Europe in relation to the West, along with the many opportunities that modernist architects benefitted from by working with the state as a direct sponsor led to viewing the region as a laboratory for applying the design principles developed within the CIAM framework. However, as Kohlrausch explains in the third chapter of the book, the different, more or less radical ideologies adopted by the somewhat already politically divided CIAM members caused the disappearance of a mutually shared enthusiasm, while “the belief in the universal nature of the discourse on architecture and urbanism also vanished” by the 1930’s.<sup>8</sup> In this context, a collaboration group between Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Greece, Austria and Romania takes form under the name CIAM-Ost, with the intention of taking up the challenge of regional planning. At the same time, Kohlrausch stresses the importance of the collaboration between the newly formed Polish professional organizations and the CIAM, referring both to informal groups such as the constructivists of BLOK, followed by the Praesens group after 1926, and official professional organizations such as the SAP (Association of Polish Architects) and SARP (Association of Architects of the Republic of Poland). Szymon Syrkus is the central figure connecting these groups, along with his wife, Helena, the Brukalski couple and Józef Szanajca, who were members of the CIAM as well. The fourth chapter tackles the importance of travelling and the circulation of books and magazines for the intense international exchange between the members of the CIAM network.

By the CIAM IV Congress, the members of these groups had not only met a few times, but also started a written correspondence that later crossed continental borders, in spite of ideological incongruences and the many constraints caused by the beginning of the Second World War. CIAM IV takes place in 1933, in the context of the consolidation of the Nazi forces in Germany, on the one hand, and the pinnacle of Stalin’s authority in the Soviet Union, on the other hand. *Warszawa Funkcyjnalna*, the plan for a Functional Warsaw presented on this occasion, was the collective work of the Polish CIAM group, the Syrkus couple, Stanisław Brukalski, Rutkowski and their *Realisatoren*

4 Kohlrausch, *Brokers of Modernity*, 39.

5 *Ibid.*, 25.

6 *Ibid.*, 94.

7 *Ibid.*, 73.

8 *Ibid.*, 114.

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KOHLRAUSCH

OF BROKERS  
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friend Teodor Toeplitz, president of the WSM (The Warsaw Housing Cooperative). Although too radical for some CIAM members, who were more inclined towards analysis than planning, Functional Warsaw worked as an international case study for the Functional City topic pushed forward by Le Corbusier. Kohlrausch presents *Warszawa Funkcjonalna* both as an opportunity to apply the theoretical models developed by the CIAM within a concrete plan for reconstructing the Polish capital and a chance for Polish architects to gain popularity within the *Congrès*.

The sixth chapter deals with the changing of the times after the beginning of the Second World War and the increasingly harsh conditions in which the East Central European architects practiced their profession. For Szymon Syrkus, who also had a Jewish background, the Nazi occupation of Poland ultimately meant his transfer in 1942 from the Architectural-Urbanistic Workshop PAU to the building division of the Auschwitz concentration camp, from where he was liberated by the Americans in 1945. The CIAM network proved to be functional even throughout the years of the war, with some members such as the Hungarian-born architect Fred Forbát benefitting from the influence of Gropius by safely travelling to Sweden.

Martin Kohlrausch's well informed research also pays attention to the role women played in the professional landscape of the region. *Brokers of Modernity* presents data related to the number of graduates from the WUT in the inter-war period and constant mentions of the women involved with the modernist cause, as well as an emphasis on the contribution of Helena Syrkus to the activity of the CIAM, the complexity of the projects developed with her husband and her desire to tell the story of the CIAM later in 1970, on the occasion of establishing the CIAM Archive at the ETH. However, when speculating on the reason behind the increasing number of women in architecture, the author throws in a surprising and somewhat unreasonable judgement, that "given that the caring professions tended to be those considered suitable for women at the time, this may also be viewed as a result of the relevance of the social dimension of architecture for the group."<sup>9</sup>

There are a few further remarks to be made in relation to the subheading of the book, namely, the reference to the East Central Europe territory. Firstly, Martin Kohlrausch's analysis indeed highlights the importance of the role played by the CIAM-Ost, proving the active involvement of East Central and Southeast European architects for the modernist cause. However, the study is strongly developed around the Polish CIAM group and the Syrkus couple in particular. Certainly, collaboration came in naturally between members of various interest groups when the political circumstances allowed, as explained in the third chapter of the book. Moreover, the professional and personal relationship developed between the members of these groups plays an important part in Kohlrausch's analysis. However, the bias towards the Polish case seems blatantly obvious as the multiple, highly nuanced narratives lead to the *Warszawa Funkcjonalna* core case study almost unanimously, finally replacing the CIAM luminaries Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier with the figure of the Polish president stating "I wanted Warsaw to be great!" before being arrested by the Germans at the beginning of the Second World War.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of a few problematic aspects and the factual errors pointed out by Sarah M. Schlachetzki,<sup>11</sup> Martin Kohlrausch manages sensibly more than to rewrite the history of Eastern Modernism into the frame of the wider history of modernism. It is his bias and his attachment to the personal narrative of the Syrkus couple, the anecdotes and intimate correspondence between the members of the CIAM, along with the numerous references to cinematography and the literature of the region that turn *Brokers of Modernity* from an immense research work into a history of Modernism rewritten from an Eastern perspective, proving that not *all that is solid melts into air*.

9 Ibid., 106.

10 Ibid., 280.

11 Sarah M. Schlachetzki indicates a series of factual errors, such as Stanisław Towiański's supposed participation in the Brussels and Paris CIAM in 1930 and 1937, the mention of the Łódź's Art Museum as the first museum of Modern Art in Europe, and the misspelling of the city of Lviv along with the names of El Lissitzky, Paul Valéry, Virgil Bierbauer and Bohdan Lachert. See Sarah M. Schlachetzki, "Rezension zu: Kohlrausch, Martin: *Brokers of Modernity. East Central Europe and the Rise of Modernist Architects, 1910-1950*. Leuven 2019. ISBN 9789462701724," in: *H-Soz-Kult*, 18.10.2019, [www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-28699](http://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-28699), last accessed Oct 30, 2019.