"Friendly Atmospheres"?
The Union Internationale des Architectes between East and West in the 1950s

The relationships between Eastern and Western architects after the Second World War have long been understood as a “battle of styles.”¹ This description of a battle refers, above all, to the rivalry between competing systems as manifested in the buildings in East and West Berlin. The investigation of an alternative East–West dialogue on architecture and urban design is only in its early stages.² Today, ways of approaching Cold War culture and the Nachkriegsmoderne (postwar modernity) have developed that allow one to reexamine East–West relations in architecture: in the global context of urban development, construction in the postwar period is seen less as the renaissance of a functional, international style and more as a heterogeneous phenomenon.³ The “making of” certain buildings and their iconic status as examples

of liberal-democratic architecture is receiving greater attention. In addition, recently, the concept of the Iron Curtain has been replaced with that of a porous “Nylon Curtain”: nylon is used to indicate not only that the curtain was transparent and permeable, but also that modern consumption functioned as an element of transnational competition. Goods, materials, and technologies created a “global” yardstick:

The curtain was made of Nylon, not Iron. It . . . yielded to strong osmotic tendencies that were globalising knowledge across the systemic divide about culture, goods and services. These tendencies were not only fueling consumer desires and expectations of living standards but they also promoted in both directions the spreading of visions of “good society,” of “humanism,” as well as of civil, political, and social citizenship.

Architecture, too, can be included in this competition because buildings also displayed technologies and materials to great effect.

In the 1950s, architects from the Soviet Union and Western European countries came in closer contact than at any point since the famous meetings of the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (International Congresses of Modern Architecture, CIAM) in the 1920s and 1930s. The socio-economic problems of society after the war and the reconstruction of cities presented architects in the East and the West with the same problems. Both responded to housing shortages and the problem of undeveloped or inadequate urban infrastructures with large-scale projects: spatial planning concentrated both on the division of cities into quarters as a progressive form of socialization and on the planning of leisure and green spaces; discussions on the creation of satellite towns were renewed. The rationalization of construction methods, which was already widely established in Soviet housing con-

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struction before Nikita Khrushchev’s call for cost cutting in building, also created a common denominator in the approaches adopted by architecture and urban planning in the East and the West.

The desire to belong to an international elite was also strong among Soviet architects: as early as 1945, they had depicted their work and tasks after the war as an international matter. The first meeting in 1945 of Moscow’s Council of Architects, which had been formulating general aesthetic principles since the 1930s, called for a development of cultural relationships via travel: “Actors travel, sportsmen travel. . . . We have to place the questions [of building] on the basis of that which we see.”8 “Seeing” something was, however, not easy for the architects because organizing exchanges, not to speak of travel, under the supervision of the Soviet administration was bureaucratic and protracted.9 In general, the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) oversaw foreign contacts in the realm of culture, as well as journeys to and from abroad. VOKS drew up the itineraries for foreign visitors and provided guides and interpreters. VOKS had to receive the approval of the party for its activities. On the Western European side, fraternal associations were set up by famous individuals with a soft spot for Russia or the Soviet Union, for example the Society of Cultural Relations with the USSR10 based in London and the France-USSR Society in Paris. An important interface for foreign contacts was the Union Internationale des Architectes (UIA) founded in 1948. The UIA sought to define professional architects as a transnational elite that crossed state boundaries.11 The Soviet Union belonged to the founding members of the association.

8 CAGM, f. 534, op. 1, d. 59, l. 115.
9 The exchange in architecture was divided organizationally into two spheres. Both architects and civil engineers traveled. In 1955, such journeys took civil engineers to thirty-two European cities and to the United States. Their goal was to view the “assembly and use of reinforced concrete constructions, the production of new building materials and components, scientific research in the area of construction” and the “project planning and construction of residential buildings, schools, hospitals and businesses.” In addition, Soviet engineers took part in the first and second congresses of the International Association for Reinforced Concrete in 1954 in Dresden and in 1955 in Amsterdam. The groups provided a comprehensive report to the architects’ association with a large number of statistics (Russian State Archive of Literature and Art [Rossiskiy Gosudartstveniy Arkhiv Literatury i Iskusstva, RGALI], f.674, op. 1, d. 1136). In the four years from 1952 to 1955, thirty-four architects from “capitalist countries” traveled to the Soviet Union (Great Britain, FDR and Brazil). The Soviet Union, thirty-four architects traveled to the West (RGALI f. 674, op. 3, d. 1135).
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who at that time held the post of the main architect in Leningrad, was, alongside Paul Vischer from Switzerland and the American Ralph Walker, one of three vice presidents of the UIA. Exchanges with the UIA were organized by the international department of the Soviet society of architects together with the party and VOKS. The architectural encounter between East and West in the 1950s was therefore closely connected to cultural diplomacy, foreign policy, and international communism. The travel and organization of guest lecturers took place above all against the background of attempts—motivated by politics and ideology—by both sides to assert their superiority and get the measure of the other.12

This article deals with the exchanges between Eastern and Western architects and urban planners via the UIA, above all those taking place in the context of the Fifth Congress on the “Construction and Reconstruction of Towns,” organized in 1958 in Moscow. In the various personal and press reports of the congress, there is unanimous talk of a “friendly atmosphere” in the encounter between architects and urban planners from East and West. How did this atmosphere come about? Which contentious issues were brushed over in order to present architecture and urban planning in the 1950s as an area of “friendly” activity? The following will explore the opportunities and means for communication within the sphere of architecture and urban planning that crossed ideological boundaries, as well as the moments in which divergent ways of seeing were expressed.

The UIA’s founding general meeting in Lausanne in 1948 named the body’s goals as the organization of conferences in order to promote international cooperation among architects regardless of racial, religious, or political and ideological boundaries. Thus, the UIA pursued the ideal of peaceful cooperation following the examples of the UN and UNESCO. From this starting position, architects should take up their “new tasks”—the elimination of housing shortages and large-scale urban construction projects. The named goals were compatible with the “peace mission” connected to the program of international socialism, which had guided Soviet foreign policy, above all in Soviet international cultural policy, since the 1950s.13

The central networker of the body was Pierre Vago, the general secretary of the UIA, who had already cultivated contacts with the Soviet Union in the 1930s as a participant in the “Réunion internationale d’architectes” in Moscow in 1932. The exchange within the UIA was limited to certain groups: the only people to travel within the framework of the UIA were the elites responsible for planning, who also occupied important positions in the architects’ association, the academy or the departments of urban planning.

An important stage of cooperation was the Fifth Congress on the “Construction and Reconstruction of Towns” that was organized in 1958 in Moscow. The congress had three subthemes: first, the project planning and reconstruction of new cities; second, the norms and guidelines for an urban construction that saw itself as an international assignment; and, third, the technologies and creative aspects of the industrialization of architecture. The speeches were organized by region, which produced the following geographical blocks: Eastern Europe and Eastern Asia, i.e., the “People’s Democracies” (Bulgaria, Hungary, China, North Korea, Poland, Romania, the USSR, and Yugoslavia), Western Europe (Austria, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Switzerland, Sweden, and other Western European countries) and the United States and Canada.

The congress ended with a communiqué that confirmed the division of cities into quarters (mikroraion) and the employment of plans for land use that could be promoted by centralized administrative structures. It raised the problem of monotony produced by a standardized architecture. Although there were controversies at the conference on the aesthetics of construction and the aesthetic expression of ideologies, the summing-up underlined common principles: it presented flexible building methods and the new variety of materials as offering new opportunities for aesthetic expression, which could remove the impression of monumentalism even in large-scale projects. In the Soviet press, the closing speech was presented as a confirmation of Soviet leadership: “The discussion shows convincingly the leading position of the socialist countries in the development of contemporary urban construc-

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Figure 22.1.
“Students works. Town planning”, in Mezhdunarodnye vystavki po gradostroitel’stvu, Arkhitektura SSSR, no. 9, 1958, 15.


However, there were numerous platforms during the congress where architecture and urban planning could be debated and different visual mate-
rial displayed: alongside the lectures, there were several accompanying exhibitions and various publications. The large exhibition was organized into different national exhibitions: alongside models and aerial photographs of new construction projects, plans for land use were presented. The schematic depiction, in particular, which implied a visually "neutral," analytical view of architecture and urban planning, portrayed the building projects as parallel and comparable developments. Photographic documentation of individual buildings was practically lost amid the concentration on urban planning. The Soviet Union, however, also presented a special exhibition of the prize-winning design for the Palace of Soviets and the Lenin monument. These were, on the whole, elaborate architectural drawings, some of which were painted in watercolors. Although the building project of the Palace of Soviets had already been discontinued, this exhibition displayed again the practice of design that had determined Soviet architecture and urban planning well into the postwar period. The “Council of Architects” (Arkhitekturnyi sovet) in Moscow’s department for urban planning had repeatedly discussed such grand vistas.

Architectural photography also employed different methods of visualizing construction. Alongside the congress catalog, there was a Soviet publication—Novye goroda SSSR (New cities of the USSR). Its goal was to present “outstanding architectural monuments” and it mainly depicted the central sites around impressive state buildings. The congress catalog, which was published in Russian and English under the title Construction and Reconstruction of Towns, was based on a uniform questionnaire that had been passed on to the various national committees.

Therefore, the various methods of depiction with which the architectural developments were presented at the congress moved between the attempt to find a common standardized “language” for the development of cities and the need—as in the case of the individual Soviet presentations—to express specifics. This is connected to the question of how far the techniques of design and presentation employed by the various educational institutions or plan-

ning organs determined in advance the views of the architects and planners from the East and West.\textsuperscript{20}

Outside the official lecture program, there were also further talks in smaller groups. At the end of the congress, Pierre Vago gave a paper to the Soviet association of architects on “What I Saw in Moscow and Leningrad,”\textsuperscript{21} in which he tried to summarize his experiences and observations from the journey to Moscow: looking back, Vago claimed to have gone in search of the legacy of the modern building movement of the 1920s and 1930s. With this in mind, Vago gave a withering assessment of Soviet building style: “One must concede that contemporary buildings provoke little more than a smile than that they could be of interest for foreign architects.” The old Russian architecture had provoked a positive response in him, while the wooden construction of the simple residential buildings had also left “nice” impressions. The creation of green space, which he referred to in several sections, also received praise: the planning of green spaces could be a guiding principle for the organization of space and proportion in urban planning. When Vago referred to the rationalized building methods, he praised the high level of technology, but criticized the fact that production methods and design were separate: the prefabricated concrete parts seemed massive and heavy, above all due to the insufficient work done to the surface.\textsuperscript{22} Vago himself referred to the fact that particular ways of seeing related to material aesthetics had already become entrenched: “Can it be that we see the things differently?”\textsuperscript{23}

Vago took from his journey the fundamental insight into the “human factor,” that is, the general impression of Russian humanity, also evident in Russian literature. Vago’s report and his assessments were extremely nuanced; his opinions on Soviet buildings did not merge from a comparison of systems, but rather his stylistic classification was based on a nuanced knowledge of the historical development and the “national character” of building methods.\textsuperscript{24} His evaluation of the sense of space and urban green spaces, in contrast, was

\textsuperscript{20}Daniel Gethmann and Susanne Hauser, eds., Kulturtechnik Entwerfen. Praktiken, Konzepte und Medien in Architektur und Design Science (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009).
based on the general principles of large-scale urban planning. Interestingly, the greatest differences in the perception of architecture were in reference to material design.

Pierre Vago was a member of the editorial board of the glossy architectural journal *L’architecture d’aujourd’hui*. The reports on the development of construction in the Soviet Union published in *L’architecture d’aujourd’hui* in the 1950s seem to be one-sided: it reported even more on the historical legacy in architecture, the old Russian and ecclesiastical architecture, than on the large, new construction sites (in the southwest, for example, which the Soviet delegation presented at the UIA’s 1955 Congress on “Architecture and the Evolutions of Building” in The Hague). In 1956, a report on building in the southwest under the title “Moscou et les cathédrales” firmly placed urban construction in the old Russian tradition of monumental architecture. In 1957, there followed a longer report on “Moscou: Son histoire, son évolution,” which traced the path of development from the old Russian architecture to the new monumental constructions and their furnishings. The development of construction methods and technologies was presented from the point of view of historical evolution, i.e., as a national narrative. The illustrations for the article “Moscou: Urbanisme, architecture et techniques de construction” were designed to suggest that the new industrialized construction methods actually included the artisan techniques of wood construction. In 1958, there was little reporting on the congress. The main topic was the International World Fair in Brussels, in which the Soviet pavilion received a brief mention, although the monumental and imposing elements of using space were emphasized more than modern construction.

Alongside the lectures, there were also informal discussions; these conversations with “important” individuals, above all with diplomats, but also architects, took place on the fringes of the official program and were recorded by the VOKS guides.

One example of such informal encounters is the report on discussions with Arthur Ling from England. Ling had headed the reconstruction of Coventry and was a member of the Architects’ and Planners’ Group of the Societies.

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27 *L’architecture d’aujourd’hui* 74 (1957): 27.
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Figure 22.2.
ety for Cultural Relations with the USSR. Ling had drawn on Swedish urban planning and taken part in the debate on the “crisis of high-rise building.”

In his official lecture on “Project Planning: Functional and Aesthetic Moments,” Ling held back from taking a clear position. He mentioned the difficulties in planning created by private property, but did not clearly advocate stronger state direction. He defended the division of cities into quarters and advocated variety in construction, which he understood as the “human factor” in urban planning. Ling had numerous informal discussions with the secretary of the architects’ association, S. P. Tituchenko, which were recorded by the VOKS representative V. V. Kutuzov and passed on to the international division of the architects’ association. While crossing the southwest along the main street of Leninskii prospect on the way to the railway station, Ling criticized the scale of the arterial road and argued against the symmetric positioning of buildings and green spaces that did not correspond to “human” scales. Furthermore, he gave practical advice on how to separate vehicle and pedestrian traffic. He assessed the new development in “Novye Chermushki” positively. The report paid considerable attention to the emotional tone of the conversation: irony, humor and praise were quoted word for word.

Ling also traveled to Stalingrad, which of course was of particular interest for him on account of the comparisons between its reconstruction and that of Coventry. According to the report, the extent of the construction work impressed Ling, although he placed greater emphasis on the comparison of technology. The report also quoted his statements on Stalingrad: “I have never seen anything comparable,” and “[It is] an unbelievably large site.” Ling was extremely positive about the design of the green spaces.

During another journey, there was more specific discussion about the impact of different political and economic systems on architecture and urban planning. The report saw the advantages of the socialist system confirmed when the discussion turned to private property in England. Ling spoke of conflicts between the interests of landowners and society. According to Ling, 40% of the building area for residential housing had been bought by the state:

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29 RGALI, f. 674, op. 3, d. 1465, l. 31–37.
“We are trying to construct socialism without revolution,” remarked Ling—
“not without irony.”

In general, the conversation really does seem to have genuinely represent-
ed a means of exchange for the Soviets, i.e., the goal was to gather information
about foreign impressions and reach a consensus. A comparison of systems is
only reflected in elementary questions regarding the economy and admin-
istration. Because Ling brought with him a moderate position, there were
barely any stylistic controversies. The interest in the further development of
architecture and urban planning were both founded on the claim to the “hu-
manity” of the environment.

During the congress, the most famous Western European architects and
urban planners were accompanied by accomplished Soviet architects. Niko-
lai Kolli was the long-standing president of the Moscow Academy for Ar-
chitects. He had overseen the project for the Tsentrostroi building by Le
Corbusier in Moscow in the 1920s and 1930s.30 He had already traveled to
Western Europe with the UIA before 1958, to Great Britain and other desti-
nations. His personal notes during the congress also document informal
encounters.31 At the first meeting of the representatives of the foreign dele-
gations at the airport, the Dutch architect Cornelis Van Esteren already re-
called an earlier meeting with Kolli at the CIAM congress, which had taken
place in Moscow in 1925–26. The delegates from Western Europe repeatedly
expressed the desire to view the iconic constructivist buildings: the stu-
dents hostel by Nikolaev, Ginzburg’s Narkomfin building, and Le Corbusi-
ner’s Dom Tsentrostroi. The extent to which these locations were so removed
from Kolli’s image of the city can be seen in the fact that he visited the hos-
tel and the Narkomfin building before the arranged meeting with the guests
on 23 July in order to investigate the state they were in. The halls of residence
“made such a shabby impression that it was not possible to show them to the
foreigners.” After lunch, Kolli went by bus with a group of Englishmen to
the Ulitsa Chaikovskogo in order view Ginzburg’s Narkomfin building. The
group then went on to the “Dom Tsentrostroi.” On 25 July, Kolli took the
same route with a group of French guests and Van Esteren. The foreigners en-

31 RGALI, f. 2775, op. 1, d. 72 {Nikolai Kolli, “Diary during the Congress, 14.7.-6.8.1958”}. 
thusiastically took a group photograph in front of the Tsentrosoiuz building. The stopping points created a route through the city that lay outside the official excursion program and supplied both Kolli and his guests with a picture of the city composed of different, individual experiences. For the Western European architects, the group photograph in front of Le Corbusier’s building updated the path of development from the constructivist buildings of the 1920s and 1930s to the new postwar constructions. For Kolli, the trip to places he had forgotten or that had fallen victim to a collective “amnesia” inspired different thoughts on architectonic development: instead of drawing a line from the 1920s and 1930s to contemporary buildings, Kolli described a dialectical movement in the alteration of building forms, in which constructivism, which he referred to as “nihilism,” was ascribed to the past.

A short glance at the Moscow congress of 1958 shows that a “friendly atmosphere” really could be created in which it was possible to find common points of discussion. A closer examination of the discussion on postwar architecture and urban planning between East and West clearly demonstrates that on both sides there existed heterogeneous discourses on modern functional building. The socio-economic concerns of urban planning often superseded stylistic and aesthetic controversies. Common goals (“reconstruction”) regularly allowed one to ignore differences in appearance. The rationalization of construction also represented a bridging factor.

At particular moments, however, different ideas came to the fore, sparked by the exhibited material. Spatial planning, including the way it was communicated using graphic depictions and schematic plans, and the material level of building design and the planning of green spaces revealed different experiences and ways of discussion of the term “urban.” These created different areas of tension.

Above all, tours around local sites, particularly during informal encounters and unplanned trips, produced nuanced perceptions of the city. This multiplicity of perspectives was not generated from softening political and ideological views; instead, social hierarchies shaped the perception and depiction of detailed aspects of building. In addition, different personal

memories and attitudes determined mutual perceptions. An examination of the congress therefore also shows that the architects and urban planners knew or experienced more than they depicted and discussed in the public architectural debate. In turn, this also meant that the specialized press, in particular the picture press, employed their own mechanisms and perhaps had a longer and greater impact upon urban discourse. It is important for further examinations of the postwar exchanges in architecture to find out more about the distributing mechanisms and opportunities for the exchange of pictures between East and West, specifically in architectural literature. This perspective would aim to identify particular forms of perceiving the city among Eastern and Western architects as created or spread by the media or material aesthetics, which in the long term and in different ways also determined urban policy.