

# THE DESIGN INSTITUTE: BUILDING A TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY

## Date:

10-Mar-2017 - 11-Mar-2017

3:00 pm - 5:00 pm

## Venue:

Room 419, Knowles Building, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong

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## About the Conference

“The Design Institute: Building a Transnational History” is a two-day scholarly conference that will examine the key institutional mechanism for architectural production in the socialist world over the course of much of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Comprised of international scholars in fields such as anthropology, architectural design, architectural and urban history, and government, among others, this event will map, historicize, and theorize the transnational history of the socialist design institute, with a particular emphasis on China. This undertaking involves tracing the institute’s bureaucratic origins in the Soviet Union as well as Eastern Europe, its emergent role in the development of China’s international diplomacy after 1949 throughout the socialist world, and its participation in the economic and political reconfigurations that define post-socialism.

The conference is particularly relevant to the study of architectural design’s history in China. Long overlooked as an influence upon twentieth-century Chinese culture as well as society, the design institute has played a formative role, not only in the shaping of the socialist Chinese landscape, but in affecting forms of economic, diplomatic, as well as cultural production throughout the country’s post-1949 history. Domestically, the design institute transformed China’s built environment into valuable, ideological terrain; internationally, the design institute offered a valuable conduit through which China’s architects and engineers gleaned insight into socialist building methods and procedures while exporting their own expertise abroad to southeast Asia, the Middle East, as well as Africa.

The conference is organized into three major panels: “Formation,” “Transformation,” and “Reformation.” The first panel, “Formation,” will illuminate the bureaucratic origins of the socialist design institute in the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and the former Yugoslavia. The second panel, titled “Transformation,” examines the development of the design institute in socialist China amid the fluid dynamics of knowledge and commodity exchange taking place between various socialist interests in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, as well as Africa over the course of the Cold War. “Reformation” will address shifts in the nature and practice of the design institute both within and beyond mainland China since the advent of the country’s early reform era beginning in 1978.

Ultimately, this conference is designed to contribute to the study of Chinese architectural design while challenging the standard narratives that have largely defined the history of architectural production in the socialist world. Critical reassessment of the history of the socialist design institute in China, and the Chinese design institute’s relationship to other state-run design mechanisms around the world, is crucial to understanding the ways in which architecture knowledge and technique circulate in connection to broader processes of economic, political, and cultural exchange.

This event is being organized by the Architecture, Urbanism, and Humanities Initiative in the Faculty of Architecture at HKU.

This event is being funded by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation as part of the American Council of Learned Societies’ Program for Comparative Perspectives on Chinese Culture and Society.

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## Conference Schedule

### **Panel 1, “Formation” – Friday, March 10, 3 pm**

- **Richard ANDERSON**  
Lecturer,  
School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture,  
University of Edinburgh  
“The Institutes: On the Organization of Soviet Architectural Production.”
- **Kimberly Elman ZARECOR**  
Associate Professor,  
College of Design, Iowa State University  
“Stavoprojekt and the Collective Model of Architectural Practice in Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945-1990.”

- **Vladimir KULIC**  
Associate Professor,  
Architecture and Urban Planning Department,  
Florida Atlantic University  
“The Self-Managing Architect: The Modes of Professional Organization in Socialist Yugoslavia.”
- **Eunice SENG**  
Associate Professor,  
Faculty of Architecture, University of Hong Kong  
Discussant

**Panel 2, “Transformation” – Saturday, March 11, 10 am**

- **LI Shiqiao**  
Associate Professor,  
School of Architecture, University of Virginia,  
“The Design Institutes and the Chinese State.”
- **Elidor MËHILLI**  
Assistant Professor,  
History Department, Hunter College  
“On Foreignness: Sino-Albanian-Korean Contacts and the Crime of Capitalist Architecture.”
- **Charlie Q.L. XUE**  
Associate Professor,  
Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering,  
City University of Hong Kong  
“Design Practice in Universities – a China Phenomenon.”
- **HSU Li-yu,**  
Ph.D. Candidate,  
Department of Architecture, National Taiwan University;  
studio instructor, Chung Yuan Christian University  
“Tracing Institutional Transplantation in Taiwan through the Civil Construction of the Ret-Ser Engineering Agency (RSEA), 1956-1987.”
- **ZHU Tao**  
Associate Professor,  
Faculty of Architecture, University of Hong Kong  
Discussant

**Panel 3, “Reformation” – Saturday, March 11, 2 pm**

- **Lukasz STANEK,**  
Senior Lecturer,  
The University of Manchester, in collaboration with Miruna STROE,  
Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism, Bucharest

“Architecture and Petrobarter: Romanian Construction Export to Oil Producing Countries, 1970s-1980s.”

- **Cole ROSKAM**,  
Associate Professor,  
Faculty of Architecture, University of Hong Kong  
“Redesigning the Design Institute: Reform-era Experiments in Chinese Architectural Production.”
- **Christina SCHWENKEL**  
Associate Professor,  
Department of Anthropology, University of California – Riverside  
“The Afterlife of East German Urban Design in Vietnam.”
- **ZHU Jianfei**  
Associate Professor,  
School of Design, University of Melbourne  
“The Design Institute in China: a Different Political Ethics of Design.”
- **Max HIRSH**  
Research Assistant Professor,  
Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Hong Kong  
Discussant

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Paper Abstracts

**Panel 1, “Formation”**

The Institutes: On the Organization of Soviet Architectural Production

**Richard ANDERSON**

University of Edinburgh

The organization of architectural production was among the most salient differences between the architecture of the Soviet Union and that of the capitalist world(s). While the history of twentieth-century architecture commonly focuses on individual architects and private firms, the development of Soviet architecture cannot be properly understood without reference to its predominant form of design organization: the institute. In the USSR, the near complete absence of a private market for design and construction turned the design institute into an organizational infrastructure for the delivery and management of architecture. Founded on a model that combined distributed authorship and political patronage, the Soviet institutes coordinated architectural labour within a planned economy. They produced everything from typified housing

to theatres, and even the Palace of the Soviets. After World War II the impact of these organizations expanded as their features were exported to countries within the orbit of Soviet influence. This paper explores the distinctive features of the design institutes that emerged in the early 1930s and addresses the interpretive challenges that they raise for the writing of architectural history.

Stavoprojekt and the Collective Model of Architectural Practice in Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945-1990

**Kimberly Elman ZARECOR**

Iowa State University

Czech and Slovak architects transitioned from private architectural practice to collective work in state design institutes within a few months of the Communist Party takeover of Czechoslovakia in February 1948. This institutional model survived virtually unchanged until the end of the Communist period, providing an unusually long and varied record of a communist state's engagement with architects and the effects of this relationship on architectural production itself. This paper traces the ideological origins of collective practice from the interwar avant-garde to the technocratic leadership of the early communist decades and into the 1960s era of experimental reform followed by post-1968 'normalization.' Multiple internal attempts at decentralized leadership structures and alternative working models that gave architects more individual freedom in their design choices ultimately proved too challenging to the regime's legitimacy and were abandoned by the 1970s. In a comparative historical study of state design institutes, this paper argues that Czechoslovakia's system was a hybrid of the technologically sophisticated knowledge base of the interwar building industry, which operated to standards similar to those in Western Europe and the United States, and the weaknesses of an institution that insisted on highly standardized, inflexible, and aggressively economic solutions to complex design problems.

The Self-Managing Architect: The Modes of Professional Organization in Socialist Yugoslavia

**Vladimir KULIĆ**

Florida Atlantic University

The paper discusses the functioning of design institutes and other professional organizations in socialist Yugoslavia within the system of workers' self-management. After a short period of reorganization into highly centralized state institutes modelled on Soviet precedents, the

architectural profession underwent decentralization and diversification in the wake of the country's expulsion from Soviet orbit in 1948. From the mid-1950s on, design institutes, previously funded and controlled by the state, became increasingly independent. The gradual introduction of market mechanisms also made them responsible for acquiring their own commission, inside the country or abroad, while they still operated under the system of social ownership and self-management. The building boom of the late 1950s further facilitated professional expansion: new design offices splintered from old ones, new kinds of research and design organizations appeared to answer certain highly specialized needs, whereas construction companies began founding their own in-house design departments to improve competitiveness. In such an environment, architects had a chance to tap into their entrepreneurial abilities to secure and negotiate jobs, in some instances even conceiving projects for which they had to "invent" the clientele. Based on published sources and interviews, this paper will outline the major developments of the 1950s and the 1960s as the formative period for the Yugoslav architectural profession under self-managing socialism.

## **Panel 2, "Transformation"**

### **The Design Institutes and the Chinese State**

**LI Shiqiao**

University of Virginia

While socialism provided a powerful platform for countries with vastly different cultural practices to test a common institution of architectural design, the Design Institutes in China seem to have worked well with a deep rooted conception of a "state function of architecture." Instead of a contested ground for aesthetics and theoretical formulations, this state function dictates forms of buildings through state rituals. Some of the most important manifestations of this state function can be found in the manuals of construction such as the *Yingzao fashi*. In classification, manuals of construction were seen to be documents of "political administration"; in content, they manifest state-mandated "grades" in terms of sizes of materials, colours, and ornamental schemes. Despite the desire for revolutionary change in architecture since the mid twentieth century, the establishment of the Design Institutes in China recast this tradition through the grading of the Design Institutes and its architects, and through a management of styles in the past decades – pared-down industrial design, national styles, generic modernism, as well as the most current design trends. The Design Institutes in China are transformed by an equally powerful conception of the fundamental role of buildings in the management of state affairs, leaving indelible marks on the built characters of the Chinese city.

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**On Foreignness: Sino-Albanian-Korean Contacts and the Crime of Capitalist Architecture**  
**Elidor MËHILLI**

Hunter College

In the 1950s, Albania became a kind of showcase construction project: Soviet and Eastern bloc architects and planners descended on the country to help it build socialism and propel its people on the road to industrialization. But in the early 1960s, tiny Albania broke away from Moscow. Its party leaders aligned themselves with Mao's China instead. What happened to socialist solidarity, material exchanges, and architectural cooperation after this schism? Did all transnational contacts—official and unofficial—between the former ideological partners simply cease to exist? Were they merely reformatted? And did the Albanians seek the same kind of guidance from Beijing that they had sought from Moscow—or were the Chinese even willing to provide it? These questions are not of minor importance for the transnational and cultural history of socialism. Not all those who openly or silently challenged Soviet political and cultural dominance—the Chinese, the Albanians, or the North Koreans—went on to have formidable contacts among themselves. So this paper addresses architectural, planning, and design trips and contacts between Albania, China, and North Korea in the 1960s and 1970s to look at relationships comparatively and to argue that political and material exchanges did not necessarily align. Often implicit, issues of race and cultural dominance permeated the architectural exchanges between supposedly fraternal countries. The paper is based on extensive research in Albanian state, party, architectural, and diplomatic archives, which have only recently become available.

**Design Practice in Universities – a China Phenomenon**

**Charlie Q. L. XUE with DING Guanghui and Yingbo XIAO**

City University of Hong Kong

The mission of an educational establishment is to deliver quality education and research. In China's universities, however, enterprises are run in the name of institutions after 1980. Architectural design firm is one of them. Architectural firm in higher education institutions (generally named: Architectural Design and Research Institute) plays an irreplaceable role in the

domestic construction market. With support from universities, these institutions tap expertise from their resourceful faculty of relevant building disciplines.

The original intention of running a design institute in universities was to link town and gown benefiting both students and teachers. The bureaucracies in these institutes are highly based on the classmates and master-apprentice's relation. However, under the circumstances of intense competition in the aspects of technique and creativity from international market, it is more difficult for domestic project accomplish through conventional model. So the architectural design and research institutes in the higher education sector have to utilize new form of organization and introduce more strategies into their design methodology in order to operate in a dynamic and competitive manner.

This paper reviews this trend from its embryo stage of 1958. Three institutions are considered: Architectural Design and Research Institute of Tsinghua University in Beijing, the Tongji Architecture Design in Shanghai and the institute of architecture design, Shenzhen University in Shenzhen. The cases are selected according to their representativeness in different geographical location and strategies in China. The paper aims to discover the diversified development of design institute and a unique phenomenon in China – big design firm based on the university system.

### **Tracing Institutional Transplantation in Taiwan through the Civil Construction of the Ret-Ser Engineering Agency (RSEA), 1956-1987.**

**HSU Li-yu**

Chung Yuan Christian University; National Taiwan University

This paper examines the institutional transplantation of architecture in Taiwan after 1949. In an effort to trace forms of architectural practice in Taiwan before the 1980s, I focus on the overseas civil engineering work of RSEA (RET-SER Engineering Agency) and its history. This paper addresses two main concerns, including the institutional transplantation of space production methods through the Council for United States Aid (CUSA), and RSEA's role as a labor-force institute of the Republic of China's Veterans Affairs Council. More specifically, I am interested in the architectural institution's role in reconstructing social relations and the ways in which institutionalized methods of spatial production supported Taiwan's building industry.

### **Panel 3, "Reformation"**

## **Architecture and Petrobarter: Romanian Construction Export to Oil Producing Countries, 1970s-1980s**

**Lukasz STANEK**

The University of Manchester (UK), in collaboration with Miruna STROE,  
Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism, Bucharest

Petrobarter, or the exchange of crude oil for goods and services, emerged in the course of the 1960s as the main practice of construction export from most socialist countries to oil producing countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Based on the experience of barter within the Comecon since the immediate post-war period, this practice explains the predominance of Iraq, Libya and Algeria among the recipients of buildings designed and constructed by state socialist design and construction companies in the last two decades of the Cold War. Yet this paper will argue that petrobarter resulted not only in the geographic allocation of these buildings, but also impacted their materiality, technology, design, and ways of use. Since barter was enforced with most rigour by the leadership of socialist Romania, this paper will focus on Romanian companies working abroad, such as Arcom and Romproiect. The refusal of the government in Bucharest to complement Romanian materials with purchases from abroad resulted in the practice of “technological adaptation”, or the production of architectural designs according to the technology, materials, and labour available to Romanian companies. When the designs were provided by a third party, technological adaptation also included a complete redrawing of blueprints and rewriting of building specifications according to Romanian supplies. By focusing on Romproiect’s industrial projects in Iraq and Arcom’s housing neighbourhoods in Libya, Algeria, and Nigeria, this talk will show how Romanian building production abroad was fundamentally defined by the affordances and limitations of petrobarter, and, more generally, how these affordances and limitations resulted in patterns of specialisation and division of labour among socialist design institutes and construction companies.

## **Redesigning the Design Institute: Reform-era Experiments in Chinese Architectural Production**

**Cole ROSKAM**

University of Hong Kong

Over the course of the 1980s, and in parallel with the country’s broader shift toward market-oriented economic policy, China’s state-managed design institutes began to engage in new, innovative forms of quasi-privatized architectural design production. This paper explores the history of such experimentation and its impact upon Chinese architectural form and practice over the past thirty years. Despite being pioneered by a handful of trusted individuals within China’s

architectural establishment, many of these initiatives were considered failures, and few exist in their original form today. Nevertheless, and as this paper will argue, they constitute important examples of the radical, procedural changes taking shape within the Chinese state in relation to the definition of architectural labor. Moreover, they may be seen as notable if overlooked antecedents to the more celebrated, “experimental” forms of architectural practice that subsequently took shape in China over the course of the 1990s through the efforts of figures like Yung Ho Chang, Wang Shu, and Ma Qingyun, among others. In providing a prehistory to these contemporary practices, I hope to challenge our understanding of China’s recent architectural history and the ways in which the country’s architectural reforms are believed to have developed over time.

## **The Afterlife of East German Urban Design in Vietnam**

**Christina SCHWENKEL**

University of California, Riverside

In early 2011, before the crash of Vietnam’s property market, socialist housing blocks in Vinh City underwent radical aesthetic and spatial change as residents accelerated the redesign and expansion of their allocated units that were built in the postwar years by East Germany as part of “international solidarity” between 1974-1980. Though technically illegal and structurally unsound, the state looked the other way as such reconstructions continued. Moving from the realm of technical experts to the embodied experience of residents, this paper explores the material and political afterlife of GDR housing in Vietnam, built after the devastation of the city during the US air war, by tracing the contemporary use of corrugated steel and metal sheets to produce “off-modern” spaces of dwelling. The ambivalence in former socialist countries toward standardized urban architecture has been well documented in the literature. For Vietnamese, socialist urban forms, like their colonial predecessors, were inserted into a longer history of traveling architecture and “foreign” styles of urban living. And while socialist housing blocks from the outside appeared as uniform and banal assemblages, in the intimacy of everyday life, there was a surprising diversity in the creative remaking of living spaces. The paper shows how residents in public housing informally, but inventively, reconfigured their GDR-built housing to better fit with Vietnamese aspirations of urban living rooted in imaginaries of rural utopias. As capitalist redevelopment in the reform era threatens a return to the spatialization of inequality, the off-modern, following Svetlana Boym, becomes a point of intervention in the shift toward free market urbanism. Rather than working against the state and local housing authorities, however, Vietnamese residents engaged in insurgent architectural acts in ways that redefined citizen-state relations and expanded the political and economic possibilities of an urban modernity that is increasingly in conflict with the socialist architectural past and its legacy.

## **The Design Institute in China: a Different Political Ethics of Design**

**ZHU Jianfei**

University of Melbourne

This research integrates two lines of investigation: a historical review of the formation and reformation of the design institutes in China in a political perspective, and a theoretical review of a ‘critical architecture’ discourse and a ‘critical’ politico-philosophical tradition in the European tradition. In the first, a historical review of the design institutes will be given with a focus placed on the reform and the current condition as historically accumulated in the modern recent past and culturally based on a long politico-ethical tradition where the state plays a leadership role. In the second, the critical-architectural discourse is differentiated, and the political and philosophical tradition of critique is outlined. A specific positioning of the state in the western tradition is highlighted – one which is often assumed as oppositional to the civic and the ethical-progressive. A counter positioning of the state is identified between the Chinese and the European-western: state as a moral and ethical leader and state as a problem and a necessary obstacle for the ethical and progressive. With this contrast in mind, this research examines the current operating condition of the design institute, and uncovers a dynamic dialectic between state and market, collective and individual, pragmatic and creative, as unique to the design institutes. The research proposes a theoretical reading on the important values of the design institute, and a new political ethics of design which selectively combines aspects of the Chinese and European traditions.