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Book Review: Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc

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Book reviews

David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002. 261 pp. (inc. index). ISBN 1-8597-3533-9 (hbk), £50.00; ISBN 1-8597-3538-X (pbk) £16.99

Like most editions of collected essays, this volume contains some stronger, some weaker contributions. However, unlike most such publications even the weaker essays here are extremely interesting and stimulating. The book's aim is to provide a series of case studies exploring the interactions between space and politics, mediated by practice and symbolism, in the context of everyday life in socialist Eastern Europe. 'Do spaces have politics?' the editors ask in their valuable and thoughtful introduction and, conversely, 'Do politics have spaces?' (p. 2). Their answer, of course, is strongly in the affirmative. State socialism, they argue, witnessed not only the subjection of all orders of space to political interests, with new uses and meanings being ascribed to national territories and nationalized land, public and residential buildings, historical monuments and so forth, but 'pervasive efforts to permeate . . . also the intimate spaces of the everyday with ideological meaning' (p. 3). Indeed, as many of the contributors demonstrate, state socialism considered 'everyday' spaces of leisure, learning, consumption or domesticity just as important as 'sites for ideological intervention' (p. 5), as more self-evidently political spaces of public or ceremonial activity. Indeed, one of this book's greatest strengths is the way in which it enriches its forceful and consistent argument for the intrinsically political nature of everyday life with engaging, detailed empirical studies of how politics in practice asserted itself in the private sphere and the subtle forms of negotiation and adaptation to which it was subject in this process.

The first group of papers addresses what might be considered the more traditional and straightforward issues of the politics of urban planning, civic architecture and monumental sculpture. Karl Qualls explores the conflicts that arose between local Sevastopol officials and central planners in Moscow over the reconstruction of the Crimean city after the Second World War. While Moscow's schemes sought to marginalize local history and memory in favour of using the urban space to make



grand symbolic statements about national heritage, local citizens strove to inscribe their specific 'urban biography' (p. 24) into the space of the reconstructed city. They were successful in this endeavour: powerful naval interests ensured that Moscow acquiesced to local plans asserting the city's own traditions and retaining its familiar spaces. Similarly, Olga Sezneva's chapter on Kaliningrad outlines how the postwar Soviet reconstruction of this city aimed deliberately at the eradication of all traces of its German heritage and its sense of historical distinctiveness, and how the local population in later decades resisted and subverted this de-historicization of their urban environment. Using oral history methods, she presents a subtle and persuasive picture of the imaginative resourcefulness of the city's inhabitants in their efforts to recapture elements of their own distinct spatial identity. The next chapter, by Reuben Fowkes, considers the role of public sculpture in Hungarian socialist spatial construction in the first postwar decade, focusing on official efforts to create a 'new socialist monumental landscape' (p. 65) and local resistance to the imposition of alien values and the expunging of national traditions, which culminated in the demolition of the mammoth Stalin statue in 1956, five years after it was built.

The remaining contributions to this volume all address the interaction between politics and private life in the design, construction and representation of space. Astrid Ihle's chapter on urban photography in East Germany in the 1950s raises some interesting questions about the ways in which the socialist regime wished urban space to be viewed and the ways in which some artists challenged the official 'picture', capturing elements of everyday life – the deprived, the excluded, the stricken and the commonplace – which were hidden or excluded from normative visions of a prosperous, collective, joyous and exalted social reality. The next two contributions, by Stephen Lovell and Paulina Bren, both reflect on the phenomenon of the country 'cottage' in socialist societies. They illustrate and analyse how, both in Soviet Russia and Czechoslovakia, people strove to renegotiate the character, meaning and uses of their private rural retreat in the face of official suspicion of individual property and idealization of collectivist labour and leisure.

Susan Reid's paper on the Moscow Pioneer Palace is a fascinating, sensitive and sophisticated study of the 'connotative functions and symbolic meanings' (p. 143) of Khrushchev's 'children's paradise'. This showpiece educational and leisure complex, constructed between 1958 and 1962 near central Moscow, was conceived to capture and convey to child visitors, through its material and metaphorical spaces and structures, the experience of the rural pioneer camp. Reid demonstrates how the Soviet 'ideology of childhood' (p. 145), as well as Khrushchev's de-Stalinization of city planning and public architecture, informed the siting and design of the complex and leads the reader on a fascinating analytical tour of the individual elements of the building and its surrounding



parkland. David Crowley's chapter explores the 'ambiguity' (p. 184) of the 'private' socialist home in Warsaw, focusing on tensions in the design and construction of residential apartments between creating them to be convenient physical dwellings and as 'representations of ideal spaces'. In the initial phase of urban residential construction, priority was given to the latter consideration, which produced an over-emphasis on the monumental external form of buildings, designed to fit into planned urban vistas and 'publicizing' the private just as articles in popular women's magazines stressed the role of the home as a 'site of production' (p. 190) of commodities and good character. Only from the mid-1950s did architects and designers begin to create spaces which offered scope for the individual creativity of residents, potential for the 'personalization' of the domestic and the assertion of 'personality'. Remaining indoors, Katerina Gerasimova's chapter considers the relationship between public and private space in the Soviet communal flat, addressing issues of social control, the normalization of behaviour and strategies of individual resistance in an environment of 'public privacy' (p. 224). The final chapter by Mark Allen Svede tells the intriguing story of how a Latvian proposal for the Soviet pavilion at Expo 92 in Seville first won the commission, was then disqualified on spurious grounds and finally reinstated, thanks to the fact that the jury of distinguished Soviet architects failed to recognize the cunning and subversive symbolism incorporated into the model. By the time Expo 92 opened, the Russian pavilion realized all the mischievous intentions of its Latvian designers: it stood as a 'dysfunctional mausoleum' of Russia's socialist heritage, ugly, bedecked with broken-down technology and relegated to a peripheral site on the world's stage.

All the contributions to this volume represent useful contributions to the growing body of literature on the politics of space, material culture, urban planning and everyday life, as well as offering engrossing insights into East-European social history and some valuable ways of conceptualizing social reality and practice. As such, it will be of great interest not only to East European area studies specialists, but also to cultural and social historians and to practitioners in the field of urban planning and architecture.

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Martin Parker (ed.), *Utopia and Organization*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. 233 pp. (inc. index). ISBN 1-4051-0072-9

Martin Parker, recent author of *Against Management: Organization in the Age of Managerialism* (Polity Press, 2002) and *Science Fiction and Organization* (Routledge, 2001), among other works on the topics of