

Conference

'Struggles in the Concrete – Architecture, Architectural History and the Marxist Tradition'

ABSTRACTS AND SPEAKERS' DETAILS

Summerson's Marxist Moment: *Georgian London* and Historical Materialism

Elizabeth McKellar, Open University

Sir John Summerson (1904-92) along with Nikolaus Pevsner and Howard Colvin was one of the triumvirate of pioneers of British architectural history in the post-war era. He is often seen as the ultimate establishment figure as one of the founders and Deputy Director of the National Buildings Record (1941-45) and long-term Curator of the Soane Museum (1945-1984). He was a major figure in public life sitting on numerous committees including the Royal Fine Arts Commission (1947-54), the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (1953-74), and the Historic Buildings Council (1953-78). From the early stages of his career he was at the centre of British modernism in the 1930s to 1950s as a founder member of the MARS Group, an architectural journalist and regular contributor to the BBC, and through his wife Elizabeth the brother-in-law of Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth. Summerson trained at the Bartlett and after leaving in 1926 he embarked on a quest to widen his intellectual horizons embracing Marxism among other things, even visiting Russia on a *New Statesman* tour in 1930. His enthusiasm for communism as a political system was short-lived but he was deeply influenced by historical materialism. It offered him the type of coherent theoretical framework for analysing historical change for which he was searching in the methodologically barren environment of the 1920s. This was prior to the arrival of the Warburg Institute and the new German art history in 1933, which was also to have a huge impact on his writing. The Marxist approach can be most clearly seen in his second book *Georgian London* which he began writing in 1939/40 and was published in 1945. This talk will focus on *Georgian London* before going on to briefly consider the extent to which historical materialism also influenced his later writings.

Elizabeth McKellar is Professor Emerita in Architectural History at the Open University and the President of the SAHGB. She is currently writing a cultural biography of Sir John Summerson, for which she was awarded a Paul Mellon Senior Fellowship in 2018-19 and a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellowship for 2021-23.

Siegfried Kracauer, Architectural Employee

Tom Wilkinson, Birkbeck

Before he abandoned the profession to become a staff writer at the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, where he produced the essays for which he is chiefly remembered, the cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer had studied architecture at several German universities. He began his career working at an architectural firm while writing his doctoral thesis on decorative ironwork, and he spent the war years working for the firm of Max Seckbach, designing a military cemetery for Frankfurt. He had spent the first 14 years of his adult life working on and in architecture, a career that he found tedious and depressing. In this paper I will set Kracauer's experience of the frustration of architectural labour in the context of the design profession in early twentieth century Germany, using his own investigation into the lives of white-collar workers, *Die Angestellten*, 'The Employees' (1930), as a theoretical framework for my enquiry, and referring to his 1928 novel *Ginster*, in which the central character is a disenchanted architect. Before his turn to Marxism, Kracauer had developed a first-hand understanding of modern labour conditions, coloured by his intense engagement with sociology, especially the work of Simmel; I will ask how this experience affected his theoretical concerns.

Tom Wilkinson is Lecturer in History of Architecture at Birkbeck, University of London. He has previously been a lecturer at the Courtauld Institute and a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the Warburg Institute. He has a PhD in the history of art from UCL.

Down below, Disqualification - How to Design the Formal Subsumption of Labour

Silke Kapp (Federal University of Minas Gerais) and Katie Lloyd Thomas (Newcastle University)

The work of the Marxian architect and theorist Sérgio Ferro (1938–) offers the possibility of an architectural history which goes beyond the idea of architecture as the production of design, opening it up to issues of labour, materiality, concrete processes on real building sites, class struggle, the larger picture of the economy and the role construction plays in it. Where other critical approaches have focused *either* on architecture as design process (Manfredo Tafuri) *or* on building and labour (Linda Clarke), Ferro argues that the very separation between design and its material realisation did not exist before — and does not exist outside of —

the historical process that transformed construction into a branch of capitalist commodity production. It was born as such in the so-called period of manufacture, when subsumption of labour was still only *formal*. But, in contrast to fully industrialised and mechanised branches, where *real subsumption* of labour takes place, construction has kept that form because it provides an indispensable mass of surplus value shared by capital as a whole through ‘the equalization of the general rate of profit’ (Marx). With this in mind, the history of architecture and the work of architects appear anew as developments in the economic and social devaluation of labour and the techniques of its disqualification. We aim to show that the deskilling of building workers and the breaking up of co-operation are mobilised at both ends of architectural practice: the highly celebrated practice of design and the rather underestimated ‘technical’ practice of specification. To support the former we look at built details and examples from Ferro’s recently published *Construction of Classical Design* (edited in the Portuguese by Silke Kapp) which shows how during the Renaissance classical design was a key device in putting the knowledge and know-how exclusive of skilled craftspeople under a heteronomous control. For the latter, Ferro’s arguments about prescriptions elucidate our own research into architects’ paperwork — in particular the ‘trades-based’ specification — which developed in Britain as general contracting became dominant and renders explicit the efforts to transfer knowledge and skill from builders to managers, and increase the division of labour. Thus we argue that the work of architects — in both senses — must be understood as designing the subsumption of building labour.

Silke Kapp is an architect, PhD in Philosophy, and professor at the School of Architecture of UFMG, in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. She is a co-founder of the research group MOM, which since 2004 has been engaged in critical theory and experimental practices for an emancipatory production of space.

Katie Lloyd Thomas is Professor of Theory and History of Architecture at Newcastle University and a founder member of the feminist collective *taking place* www.takingplace.org.uk. Her research is concerned with materiality, labour and technology, as in her most recent publication *Building Materials: Material theory and the architectural specification* (Bloomsbury, 2021).

Industry and (Ir)rationality: Tracing the Formal Tensions in the Architecture of Nineteenth-Century Manchester.

George Jepson, Architectural Association

In his canonical *Architecture and Utopia*, Manfredo Tafuri outlines a ‘crisis of the traditional concept of form’, provoked by the purely rational forms of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century industrial architecture, of which the early mill—and its scion, the hyper-technical factory—are the paradigms. For Tafuri, it was the mid-to late nineteenth-century Victorian city that best embodied the tension between this new, mechanised ‘universe of precision’ and the re-emergence of Classical, Gothic and Venetian styles. Against this grain, the urban development of Manchester in the final half of the nineteenth century can provide a tool to dismantle and interrogate the teleological rigidity of this, necessarily Marxian, thesis. In mapping the emergence of the early mill and factory systems of Ancoats, north Manchester, from 1780 to the end of the canal age in 1830, we can, *a la* Tafuri, begin to recognize the early stages of a typological breakage between the factory and the warehouse. Where the distribution of space across the factory floor, contained within increasingly generic facades, would come to be dictated entirely by the needs of production—architecture here becoming a machine for the production of capital—the commercial warehouse, and its broader urban environment, would begin to utilise the symbolic trappings of former empires; be they Greek, Roman, Francophone or Venetian. By tracing the development of the warehouse typology from an abstract rational form, attendant to and developed from the spatial norms of the factory, to an artfully stylised, but still internally rational, space the rigidity of Tafuri’s binary between the rational and the irrational can begin to be dismantled. The development of Manchester’s urban spread in the late nineteenth century will be used here not simply to interrogate a crisis of form, insofar as the social and ideological function of the architects themselves was being called into question. Rather, I seek to parse how far this crisis—*manifested in form*—is in fact itself a consequence of the dissolution of the local in the face of the increasing, and ultimately total, global spread of the logic of capital. Thinking through the tensions between rational models of factory architecture in the designs of engineer William Fairbairn and architectural firm Stott & Sons against those for warehouse and administrative buildings by firms Thomas Worthington & Sons and Travis & Magnall, I hope to trace the ways in which the relations of production became deeply embedded into the city’s urban fabric, both functionally and rhetorically. Following this line of thought through the political philosophy of Mario Tronti, as well as what Peter Osborne recognizes rather as crisis *as* form, I hope to revive and revise a Tafurian thesis in which the city (of Manchester) remains the space of capital

(re)production *par excellence*, while tracing the broader scale of urban and infrastructural transformation provoked by these more localised urban transitions.

George Jepson is an SAHGB funded doctoral student at the Architectural Association. He has taught history and theory at the AA, Royal College of Art, Edinburgh College of Art, and University of Manchester. Currently, he is Gilles Worsley Fellow 2022/23 at the British School at Rome.

‘The City is not a Living Organism’: Class Struggle in Claude Schnaidt’s Environmental Critique

Tijana Stevanović, Bartlett (UCL)

Responding to the prompt by the symposium organisers to discuss historiography of architectural history which touches on environmental critique, this paper analyses Swiss architect and academic, Claude Schnaidt’s engagement with the latter. Marxist architect, teacher, and a life-time member of the PCF, he was a rare figure whose aspiration and work traversed socialist and capitalist economies (FRG, Poland, Cuba, Algiers, France). At a time when environmental concerns swept through spatial thought across the Cold War divide, Schnaidt’s environmental criticism, published in the post-war professional international press and practiced through his short-lived attempt at coordinating the Institute de l’Environnement Paris, 1969-1971 (in some ways a successor of the then-dissolved HfG Ulm), reveals the significance of his thinking for today’s understanding of the work of the architect in a time of climate emergency. Political marginalisation of the non-hierarchical postgraduate research institution that was the Institute de l’Environnement, and its ultimate closure, prepared the ground for Schnaidt’s discussion about the long-preserved myth of the innocence of technology in architecture. This paper situates his production-oriented critique in relation to the work of his contemporaries: Sérgio Ferro in France, Bernd Gronwald in GDR, and the Bartlett International Summer School. Schnaidt’s introduction of the idea of *environmental citizens* highlights the ‘red-green’ thread of his criticism, linking any ecological aims with political reforms towards direct democracy. In order to challenge then-predominant and, for him, uncritical calls for return to the pre-industrial past under the banner of environmental conservation, he returned often to the writings of William Morris. Such appraisal of the environment as a unified field (totality) presents a fresh call for rethinking architects’ responsibilities, for it does not consider environmental action to be a mere consumption problem, but primarily a production-related one.

Tijana Stevanović is an architect, researcher, and lecturer in architectural history and theory at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. She is interested in questions of technology, labour, and social agency in design. Tijana’s PhD (2019, Newcastle) explored conditions of architectural production within the culture of self-management in socialist New Belgrade.

Designing the Environment of Self-Management: From Marxist Theory to Technocratic Practice

Rujana Rebernjak, London College of Communication (UAL)

In the mid-1960s, a new conceptual model emerged within Yugoslav architectural and design practice – that of environmental design. In the context of a non-aligned, self-managed socialist state, yet very much attuned to wider global discourses, Yugoslav designers, architects, artists, critics and technologists engaged in debates about the way the environment could be ‘designed’. This process of ‘designing the environment’ presented a set of ideological, conceptual and methodological challenges for Yugoslav architectural and design practice. What was ‘the environment’? What kind of spatial, material, visual, social or intangible elements did it consist of? What tools did architects and designers have at their disposal to shape the environment? How did that approach sit within the state’s ideological discourse as well as Marxist theory that underpinned design practice? This paper will examine the intellectual lineage of environmental design in post-war Yugoslavia and trace the way it was put in practice in the context of a self-managed socialist state. The environmental design discourse emerged at the intersection of two wider concerns of the period: first, a greater awareness of the depletion and destruction of the natural environment and the role that designers had to play in this; second, ongoing experiments with digital technologies, cybernetics and automation first spearheaded by the neo-avant-garde group New Tendencies. These debates about the environment were inflected by ideological and political considerations rooted in Yugoslav workers’ self-management. While Marxist theory underpinned the conceptual discussions of Yugoslav architects and designers, their practice often succumbed to technocratic solutions. By examining this intellectual and cultural history, this paper seeks to explore the way ‘environmental design’ became emblematic of wider tensions and contradictions in the Yugoslav translation of Marxist theory into everyday practice. The very concept of ‘the environment’ – how it was to be defined – was unstable and subject to continuous re-evaluation and change in line with the wider political and ideological discourses. By mapping these tensions, this paper seeks to show the way post-war Yugoslav architects and designers engaged with Marxist theory in complex and often contradictory ways.

Rujana Rebernjak is a design historian focusing on researching, teaching and disseminating knowledge about architectural and design practice in Eastern Europe under state socialism. She is a Senior Lecturer at the London College of Communication, UAL, where she leads the Contextual and Theoretical Studies in the Design School.

Ground Work: Marx, Viollet-Le-Duc and Disaster Reconstruction

Alistair Cartwright, University of Liverpool

Catastrophes or crises, including 'natural' disasters, quite often present the conditions for radical, wholesale reconstruction of the built environment, and not only because of a wilful impulse to creative destruction on the part of architects and planners. Rather, as Marx argued in *Capital*, it is under these circumstances that the balance between capitalism's competitive drive for innovation and the inertia of masses of fixed capital is tipped suddenly in favour of replacement on a 'large social scale'. Major disasters raze architecture to the ground, while the ground itself, as elaborated in the work of later Marxist thinkers, is shaken and reshuffled, as capital seeks a new 'spatial fix' amid a reoriented landscape of biophysical risks, shifting ground rents, and competing political-economic agents. And yet the historiography of architectural modernity suggests that this is in fact only one, albeit crucial, way that susceptibility to environmental hazards has transformed the built environment. Rather than signifying the ruination of civilization and the pretext for imposing a fundamentally different vision, the storm and stress of environmental limits has alternatively been regarded as spurring on the incremental perfection of a society's vernacular building culture – an idea taken to its radicalised conclusion in the widespread contemporary conception of disaster relief as an opportunity for quasi-autonomous self-build practices. The relationship between precisely these two alternatives was staged in acute fashion by Eugène Viollet-Le-Duc in his *Habitations of Man*, published just a decade after the first volume of Marx's *Capital*. Through a critical reading of Viollet-Le-Duc via Marx, including the former's colonial perspective, this paper proposes an historical materialist framework for understanding architecture's relationship to socially inflected 'natural' disasters. By rupturing the continuous production/reproduction of the built environment, disasters throw into contested light the key elements in Marx's analysis that bear on architecture: fixed capital, ground rent, housing as consumption commodity, labour, labour power and the earth itself. Returning to these terms as animated in Viollet-Le-Duc's architectural fable, the paper seeks to demonstrate the usefulness and urgency of a Marxist architectural history in the context of catastrophic climate change.

Alistair Campbell's work revolves around the contested 'afterlives' of built spaces, a topic explored in his PhD on London's 'rented worlds' and in a postdoctoral fellowship at the Paul Mellon Centre. His current research, supported by a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship, pursues an historical account of post-disaster reconstruction in Mauritius during decolonisation.

Requalifying Architecture in the Foreign Aid-Funded Knowledge Economy: Marxist Trajectories in the Postcolonial Context

Sebastiaan Loosen, ETH (Zurich)

For several decades now postcolonial theory has greatly informed architectural history writing as well as the interpretative frameworks that shape our understanding of architecture in the late colonial and early postcolonial period. In recent scholarship, two tendencies are discernible: on the one hand, a 'decolonial turn' that pushes postcolonial theory to the limit, introducing notions such 'coloniality' and 'worldmaking' to scholarly debate, and, on the other, an increased attention to architecture's role in the context of development aid, often interpreted in terms of a continued coloniality. In this paper, I aim to look for the crossovers between these two tendencies by reflecting on my own work, which in several ways is emblematic of the recent scholarship on architecture and development aid, as well as of some of its limitations – the main one being its overly western perspective, i.e., based on western archives, following western protagonists, done by western scholars, and relying on a western framework of analysis. To overcome some of these limitations, I find it useful to rephrase architectural expertise in terms of its role in a foreign aid-funded knowledge economy, highlighting how the production and circulation of knowledge is intimately tied to the political-economic value attributed to it by foreign aid diplomacy. This rephrasing allows us as historians to question the notion of architectural expertise itself, and to position it as a form of intellectual labour more explicitly in relation to coloniality and worldmaking – 'coloniality', as elaborated in Latin American scholarship as a condition of inequality created by centuries of colonialism, and 'worldmaking', as elaborated by the political theorist Adom Getachew, revaluing the internationalist nature of the political imagination of actors such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere in the period of decolonization. In this context, two historical trajectories of Marxism that have developed rather separately are brought closer to one another: on the one hand, the

Marxist bearings of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, in for instance expanding the notion of class in relation to a capitalist society on a global scale, and on the other hand, the anti-imperialist strand of Marxism à la Frantz Fanon, that inspired both the political aspirations at the time of decolonization as well as contemporary scholarship in the decolonial line of thinking. I aim to make these reflections on the foreign aid-funded knowledge economy, its relation to coloniality and worldmaking, and the two distinct Marxist imprints, more tangible by means of a 1960s aid project, the Nordic Tanganyika Project, and the role of the Swedish site architect, Torvald Åkesson, therein. A remarkable self-compiled, partly autobiographical report by Åkesson allows us to problematize the notion of architectural expertise in relation to intellectual labour and craftsmanship, as well as how it informs our history writing and our use of archives.

Sebastiaan Loosen is a lecturer and postdoctoral researcher based at ETH Zürich. His postdoctoral research project charts the role of architectural schools, centres and institutes in contributing to the 1960-80s agenda of 'foreign aid' by developing training and research programs in architecture, urbanism, and spatial planning.

Policing the Crisis: Locating the Urban in Marxist Critiques of the 1970s

Nick Beech, University of Westminster

In 1978, Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, published *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. In the work, the authors conducted a 'conjunctural analysis' – an approach developed at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) through readings of contemporary translations of Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci, Nicos Poulantzas as well as Marx's *Grundrisse*, in confrontation with popular cultural material—youth sub-cultures, newspapers, television, fashion, music and cultural ephemera. The resulting study, ostensibly centred on the 'moral panic' over the street crime of 'mugging', diagnosed a radical fragmentation of post-war political economic and social consensus, and identified the emergence of a new hegemonic project of racialised 'law and order' (later 'authoritarian populism'). The work has gained classic status for its close scrutiny of 1970s British society, its methodology, its critical analysis of the functioning and relation of social classes, media, judiciary, political classes, the state, and policing, and for its prescience regarding the nature – and hegemonic programme – of Thatcherism.

Under-assessed is the role and significance of the urban in the work. Unlike contemporary neo-Marxist interpretations of urban development within late capitalism by Manuel Castells (*La Question urbaine*, 1972), David Harvey (*The Limits to Capital*, 1982), or Henri Lefebvre (*La révolution urbaine*, 1970; *La survie du capitalisme*, 1973), or, closer to home, the study of representations of the city in literature conducted by Raymond Williams (*The Country and the City*, 1973), *Policing the Crisis* does not overtly confront the 'urban question', or the role of the built environment in social reproduction. Nevertheless, I argue that the book presents an urban study, and I hope I can demonstrate how *Policing the Crisis* provides us with a powerful critique of 1970s Britain, with insights on the racializing of urban space and social reproduction, the policing and surveillance of urban space, and the contradictions of urban development in the post-war settlement that prepare the ground for both Thatcherite policies of the 1980s, and contemporary counter-projects of municipal socialism at the Greater London Council.

Nick Beech is Senior Lecturer in the History and Theory of Architecture at the University of Westminster. He is Co-Director at the Centre for the Study of the Production of the Built Environment (ProBE), and a member of the Academic Committee at the Stuart Hall Foundation.

Other speaker biographies

Organisers

Luisa Lorenza Corna teaches at Middlesex University and is a research fellow at the Architecture Space and Society Centre (Birkbeck). Her main concern is the relationship between politics, art and architectural theory. She is now completing, with Jamila Mascot, an anthology of Carla Lonzi's art historical and feminist writings for Seagull Books and a book on the pedagogical texts of Giancarlo De Carlo for MIT Press.

Mark Crinson is Professor of Architectural History at Birkbeck. From 2016 to 2020 he was vice-president then president of the European Architectural History Network. His recent books include *Rebuilding Babel: Modern Architecture and Internationalism* (2017), *The Architecture of Art History – A Historiography* (co-authored with Richard J. Williams, 2018), and *Shock City: Image and Architecture in Industrial Manchester* (2022).

Artist

Onyeka Igwe is an artist and researcher working between cinema and installation. Through her work, Onyeka is animated by the question — *how do we live together?* — with particular interest in the ways the sensorial,

spatiality, and non-canonical ways of knowing can provide answers. She uses embodiment, voice, archives, narration and text to create structural 'figure-of-eights', a format that exposes a multiplicity of narratives. Onyeka's video works have been screened at Artists' Film Club: Black Radical Imagination, ICA, London, 2017; Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh, 2020, and at film festivals internationally including the London Film Festival, 2015 and 2020; Rotterdam International, Netherlands, 2018, 2019 and 2020; Edinburgh Artist Moving Image, 2016; Images Festival, Canada, 2019, and the Smithsonian African American film festival, USA, 2018. Solo exhibitions include *The Miracle on George Green*, The High Line, New York, USA, 2022, *a so-called archive*, LUX, London, UK and *THE REAL STORY IS WHAT'S IN THAT ROOM*, Mercer Union, Toronto, Canada, 2021, *There Were Two Brothers*, Jerwood Arts, 2019, and *Corrections*, with Aliya Pabani, Trinity Square Video, Toronto, Canada, 2018.

Roundtable discussants

David Cunningham is Professor of Modern Literature and Culture at the University of Westminster. He is Research Director for the School of Humanities, and Deputy Director of Westminster's interdisciplinary Institute for Modern and Contemporary Culture. He is a member of the editorial collective of the journal *Radical Philosophy*.

Louis Moreno is Lecturer in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths University. Specialising in urban theory and spatial theory, he is a member of the curatorial collective freethought. He runs the regular Hackney based music night 'Stadtklang', established in 2013 with Andrew Harris (of UCL's Urban Laboratory) to explore the sonic dimensions of urban experience.

Dubravka Sekulic is Senior Tutor in architecture at the Royal College of Art. Her research explores transformations of contemporary cities, at the nexus between the production of space, laws and economy. She is the author of *Glottz Nicht So Romantisch! On Extralegal Space in Belgrade* (2012).