

BUILDING EXPORT FROM SOCIALIST POLAND: ON THE TRACES OF A PHOTOGRAPH*

ŁUKASZ STANEK, *lecturer, Manchester University*

In February 1981, the main Polish architecture monthly *Architektura* [Architecture] dedicated an issue to 'Polish architects in the World' [pic. 1]. While the presentation of designs delivered by Polish architects abroad was not rare on the pages of *Architektura*, the dedication of a whole issue to this topic was unprecedented. With an economic crisis hitting the country, the editors returned to the pride of socialist Poland: the export of architecture and urbanism. Capitalising on the post-war experience of the reconstruction of Warsaw, Gdańsk, and the construction of new towns such as Nowa Huta and Nowe Tychy, Polish architects and planners had been much in demand since the 1960s and their commissions included such key projects as the master-plans of Baghdad and Aleppo; administrative buildings in Kabul; museums in Nigeria; the trade fair in Accra and governmental buildings in Ghana; followed in the 1970s by large-scale research projects such as the General Housing Programme for Iraq and the regional plan and urban plans of the Tripolitania region in Libya.

Strikingly, none of these high-profile projects is featured on the cover of *Architektura*. Instead, the full-colour image chosen by the editors was a rather surprising one: on the first plan one sees several palm trees; on the second something between a building site and a beach—a lot of sand in any case; and on the third, where one would expect the blue sky meeting the sea, one discerns an object with three white large chimneys which could be an ocean liner but is, more probably, an industrial facility.

How to make sense of this choice? Were the editors dreaming about being on a sunny cruise when preparing their February issue in the midst of Polish winter? Without discounting this option the cover also seems to convey something of the ambiguous atmosphere surrounding the work of Polish architects on foreign contracts. These contracts for them, meant not only the possibility of realising projects, getting away from the grim reality of socialist Poland, but also the rare opportunity to travel and to earn significantly more than it was possible to earn back home. All this resulted in a combination of admiration



1. Cover of *Architektura* 2, 1981, 'Polscy architekci w świecie/ Polish Architects in the World'.

and jealousy among their peers, and perhaps it is this marked irony that the cover of *Architektura* is referencing.

But what is it the building shown on this cover? *Architektura* is not of much help here, but a visit to the archives of the International Trade Fair in Poznań offers the answer to this question. After the Second World War this fair – which during the Second Republic (1918–1939) fashioned itself as a showcase for architectural experimentation – became one of the most important hubs for trade between enterprises from the socialist block. The journal *Polish Fair Magazine*, published in Polish, English, French, and Russian, features the building from *Architektura*. The 3rd issue of 1979 reproduces the facility in black and white and the shot makes it clear that the building does not stand in a jungle but rather on dunes covered with scarce vegetation [pic. 2]. The picture does not have a caption, but it was included in an article presenting Polish export projects in Libya – a country which since the revolution of 1969 and the proclamation of the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya in 1977, became one of the most important trade partners for Poland and several other countries in the Eastern Block. The text lists two neighbourhoods in El Marj,

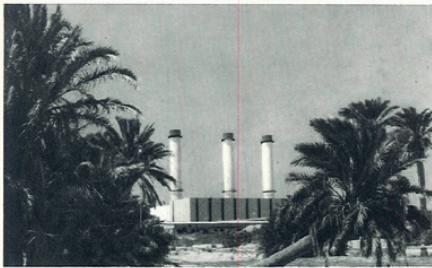
En Libye...

Les exportations polonaises de travaux du bâtiment vers la Libye ont été inaugurées en 1966 par la construction de deux quartiers de la ville El Marj — situés près de la ville Barca détruite par un tremblement de terre (photo à gauche). Le contrat comprenait la construction des maisons, des immeubles d'utilité publique et des rues avec leur infrastructure complète.

A l'heure actuelle, les entreprises polonaises sont spécialisées dans la construction d'exploitations agricoles,

de maisons d'habitation, de routes et de ponts, dans la construction d'unités énergétiques, que dans la livraison et le montage de réservoirs, services de consulting.

Les exportations polonaises de travaux du bâtiment vers la Libye sont réalisées par les entreprises de commerce extérieur BUDIMEX, DROMEX et POLIMEX-CEKOP — soit directement, soit dans le cadre de la sous-traitance pour le compte de firmes étrangères — ainsi que par POLSERVICE.



BUDIMEX
Entreprise de commerce extérieur du bâtiment a été la première en Libye.

La construction intégrale des deux quartiers de la ville El Marj sont l'oeuvre de BUDIMEX.

BUDIMEX a réalisé, dans les années 1972-1977, la construction de 600 maisons, 1200 exploitations agricoles et 600 km de routes intrasurales, de même que sur les travaux liés à la construction de la centrale électrique de Benghazi et de la station de captage d'eau l'accompagnant.


Actuellement BUDIMEX réalise les contrats relatifs à l'extension de la centrale électrique de Benghazi, et aux travaux de construction de la centrale électrique de Mornis (édifiée en consortium avec des firmes occidentales) comprenant les travaux de bâtiment, le montage des installations électriques ainsi que le montage des appareilsages de contrôle, et à la construction de 950 fermes agricoles.

Les spécialistes polonais à l'étranger

2. Magazine polonaise des foires 3 (54), 1979, p. 18. Archiwum Międzynarodowych Targów Poznańskich (Poznań).

constructed in the late 1960s near to the city of Barca, which had been destroyed in an earthquake; the text also mentions numerous infrastructural and engineering projects as well as services offered by various Polish firms. One of them was BUDIMEX, responsible for 600 houses, 1200 agricultural farms, 600 km of roads and two power plants in Libya, including an already completed one in Benghazi. It must be this power plant that made it to the cover of *Architektura*; which is confirmed by the caption in other another issue of the Polish Fair Magazine (1/ 1981), where the building pops up again, now in full colour, cropped to a square format.

In the 3rd issue of the Magazine of the same year, the photograph reappeared again, but now in an advertisement, not for BUDIMEX, but for another important form of foreign trade – Energoexport – which, as the advert states, specialises in 'power plants and industrial objects' built together with Western firms [pic. 3]. Advertisements like this, viewed from the perspective of the present, hint not only at the complex networks of dependency between state firms in socialist Poland, but also at their various forms of pragmatic cooperation with Western firms; this does not quite fit the picture painted by the dominant



ENERGOEXPORT
Export Office of the "Energoexport" Union
Pulaski 75, 00-535 Warszawa
Tel.: 02-28-28
Telex: 812822 pl

Numerous power plants and industrial objects have been realized within ENERGOEXPORT activities in more than 20 countries of Europe and overseas.

Energoexport


handles the export activities of the Union in the field of:

- building and engineering work
- assembly of steel structures for engineering projects
- assembly of basic and auxiliary equipment for general network and industrial power plants, such as: steam boilers and turbine-sets of the largest outputs and power, complete sets of cooling, slag removal, de-dusting and ash disposal arrangements, exhaust gases and air ducts
- deliveries of steel structures, ducts and power pipelines
- delivery and assembly of measuring and control equipment and systems, process control instrumentation and H.T. or I.T. electric equipment and systems
- thermoinsulation work and anticorrosion coatings
- designing and building of hyperbolic cooling towers of the largest outputs and of fan coolers
- designing, supervising of assembly and start-up of power plants


ENERGOEXPORT offers its services through Polish foreign trade enterprises:

BUDIMEX, Żurawia 3/5
00-503 Warszawa
ELEKTRIM, Chałubińskiego 8
00-613 Warszawa
POLIMEX-CEKOP, Czołkiego 7/9
00-550 Warszawa
POLSERVICE, Chałubińskiego 8
00-613 Warszawa

The latest processes and the most modern equipment are applied in power stations and industrial plants built by ENERGOEXPORT's specialists.



IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC.
The "rising card" of Polish power industry building in that country are cooling towers built in the Thuringian and Hagenwerder power stations. In the building stage is the power complex, Jankowickie (3,000 MW) near-by built by Polish specialists.



IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA.
where, others, erection, installation and other work has been done in the Talsman (4-200 MW) and Podybrzy (2-200 MW) power stations. In the building stage is the Prácheň power station of (250 MW installed) power, built by the Poles on turn-key basis.



IN UZBEKISTAN.
Under execution is the expansion of the power station in Benghazi and the erection of a new one in Mornis. The plants are built in cooperation with western firms.



IN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY.
Thermal power work has been carried out. Among other things, in the power stations at Rastatt, Offingen, Gieseler, Aurang, as well as installation and erection work in the Rastatt power station. In the manufacturing stage are exhaust gas desulphurizing arrangements for the Lohr nuclear power station at Grotzberg.

3. Polish Fair Magazine 3 (62), 1981, p. 14, Archiwum Międzynarodowych Targów Poznańskich (Poznań).

discourses in architectural historiography which view the Cold War through the prism of East-West competition. The best account of the political economy behind the building in Benghazi can be found in the BUDIMEX files at the Archiwum Akt Nowych [New Files Archive] in Warsaw. In these files, some of the Libyan counterparts of the Polish firms are revealed; they show that the management of the company was under pressure to improve its performance on the international market. This was inscribed into a shift in the motivation for the export of architecture and urbanism by the Polish regime in the 1970s. Since the late 1950s the objectives had been predominantly geopolitical ones, feeding off the support of the post-colonial states from the Khrushchev administration and stabilising the post-war order in Europe; however, this changed in the next decade. With the recognition of the Polish borders by West Germany and with the necessity to pay off loans granted to the regime in Warsaw by Western financial institutions, the economic objectives started to prevail over the political ones. Yet while Polish technology became more and more outdated, it was labour – and intellectual labour in particular – which became a key export commodity for Poland.

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CONFERENCE KEYNOTE

4. Magdalena Łabęda, 'Budowa elektrowni Benghazi II w Libii' [The construction of the power plant Benghazi II in Libya], Inżynieria i budownictwo 15, 1977, p. 169.

5. 'Elektrownia w Benghazi (Libia)' [Power plant in Benghazi (Libya)], in dossier no. 387 (Empacher Wojciech), Archiwum Stowarzyszenia Architektów Polskich (Warszawa).



From a country of proletarians, socialist Poland was becoming a proletarian among countries, having not much to sell but labour.

If for the Polish regime the Benghazi power plant was, first at all, a commodity, it could have been also looked at with an aesthetic gaze. In the archive of the Polish Architects Association (SARP) in Warsaw, among the hundreds of dossiers of Polish architects, there are two that contain photographs of the power plant. These images, together with a set of schematic drawings of the plant and the administrative building, are to be found in the dossier of Wojciech Empacher, who claims in the accompanying CV to have designed the power plant in Benghazi together with a colleague K. Goliński. A different photograph of the Benghazi plant was included in the dossier of the architect Maciej Siennicki, who lists in his CV the 'architectural design and the collaboration on the working design of a power plant in Benghazi' but he does not mention the names of his collaborators, as he is himself not mentioned in the dossier of Empacher.

6. 'Elektrownia w Benghazi (Libia). Elewacja budynku głównego' [Power plant in Benghazi (Libya). The façade of the main building], in dossier no. 1254 (Siennicki Maciej), Archiwum Stowarzyszenia Architektów Polskich (Warszawa).



The CVs of the two architects reveal that their paths crossed at the Warsaw state architecture office (BISTYP), and this explains the distribution of authorship for the power plant. This office specialised in more typical projects like industrial plants, but it also contributed to the most innovative architecture in 1970s in Poland, such as the central railway station in Warsaw or the 'Spodek' auditorium in Katowice.

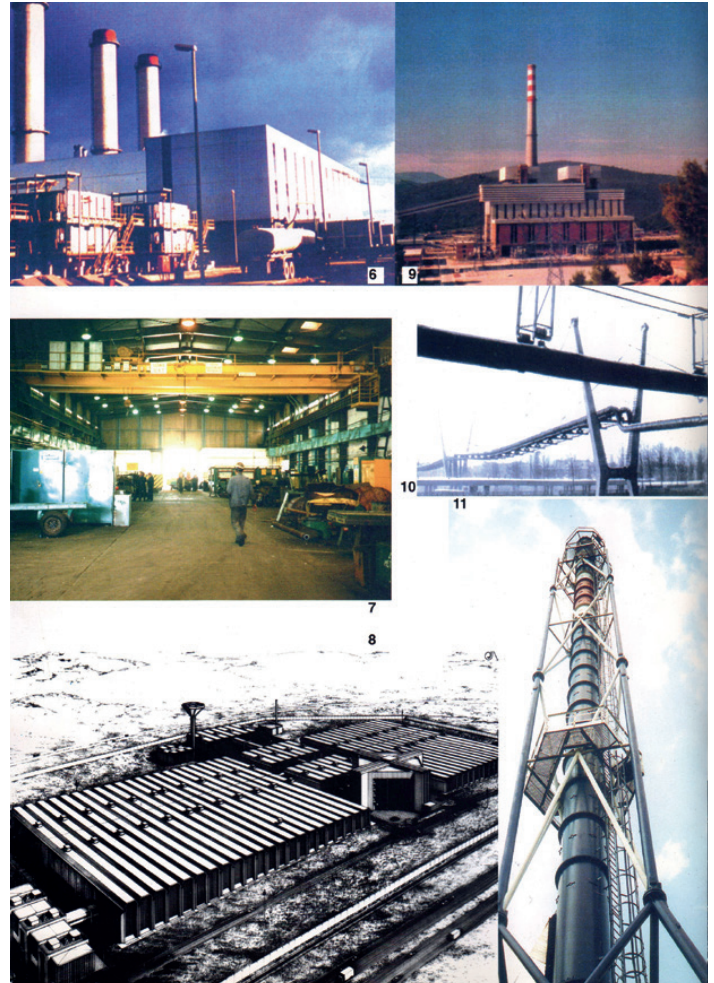
Tracing references to BISTYP in journals specialising in building technology and construction allows one to add a new set of images of the Benghazi plant to the ones gathered so far. An article published in the journal Przegląd Budowlany [Building Review, 10/ 1976], which featured numerous articles by Polish engineers sharing their experiences of building in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, is

illustrated by a photograph of sedimentation plants, and the article shows a black and white snapshot of the power plant, centered on its large volumes and three chimneys, surrounded by an array of technical equipment, vehicles, sheds, and vegetation. Yet the most complete account of the plant can be found in a paper from *Inżynieria i budownictwo* [Engineering and construction, 15/ 1977] which includes an account of the site, the technological specification of all buildings and facilities, but also the organisation of the building site and the terms of the contracts between all the firms involved, including West-German but also French, Dutch and British firms providing materials and equipment, as well as the Belgian supervisor. The article also gives an account of the most interesting technical solutions that were utilised, for example the sun-protective finish on the roof and on the facades – all of them illustrated [pic. 5].

The photographs from the SARP archive are very different. Probably taken by the architect himself, the photographs in the Empacher dossier frame the abstract quality of some architectural details and the rhythms of the façade, in contrast to the complexity of pipes and conductors [pic. 6]. The images of the power plant Siennicki enclosed in his dossier – under a dramatic clouded sky, lit by a sharp light that emphasises the volumes and the lines on the facades – are signed in an elegant typeface ('Power plant in Benghazi [Libya]. Façade of the main building') [pic. 7]. Both sets of images aim to persuade the viewer that the building is a piece of architecture: a claim which was instrumental to the objective of both architects submitting their work to the SARP in order to be granted the status of working 'creatively', which came with specific tax benefits during socialism. Evidently, in order to make the argument about the creative labour of the architects, their photographs exclude any other type of labour involved in the process, including that of technicians and engineers, let alone that of the Polish and Libyan workers employed on the construction site.

Curiously, the very same photograph reappears in the promotional folder of the architectural firm Dona from the early 1990s. The gaudy folder, typical for the first wave of advertisements entering Poland after the end of socialism, shows a collage of designs delivered by the three partners Zbigniew Kargol, Janusz Przychodzki, and Wiesław Rzepka. The power plant in Benghazi appears here in the company of several projects in Nigeria, including embassies, university buildings, offices and industrial plants. This time the image is less the proof of an aesthetic achievement and more a demonstration of the capacity of the partners to control large-scale commissions in free market conditions, collaborate with Western firms, and use modern technology: a capacity gained during the work on export contracts.

7. The Bengazi power plant in the promotional folder of 'Dona LLC,' Zbigniew Kargol, Janusz Przychodzki, and Wiesław Rzepka, early 1990s.



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