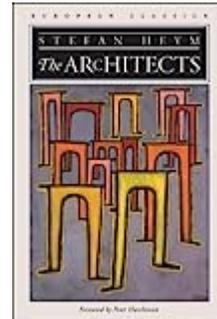




Stefan Heym. *The Architects*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006. xii + 327 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8101-2044-0.



Reviewed by Rachel Halverson (Department of Foreign Languages & Cultures, Washington State University)

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From Bedroom to Building Project: Revisiting Love and Architecture in Real Existing Socialism

The path of Stefan Heym's *The Architects* from pen to publication embodies the silence and intrigue that are the very substance of the story it tells. In his foreword to the novel, noted Heym scholar Peter Hutchinson posits that Heym was the only East German author in a position to write about German communists, their fate in Stalinist Russia, and the suppression of this chapter of history by the GDR. Heym had access to the *New York Times* and therefore was able to read reports of Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech denouncing Joseph Stalin, information not publicized in East Germany (p. ix). Hutchinson's foreword provides a highly useful interpretive framework within which to read Heym's novel. He includes a brief biography of Heym and places *The Architects* in the timeline of his major works, explaining Heym's conception of the novel, his decision to write it in English, his unsuccessful attempts to publish it in the 1970s, and his return to the manuscript in 1999 when Heym translated the novel into German, making way for its publication in 2000 by Bertelsmann. Five years later, after Heym's death in 2001 in Israel, Northwestern University Press published the novel in the original English. Although Heym's notes, outlines, and research on East German

architects and architecture, as well as rough drafts of the manuscript, are currently available in his archives, housed at the University of Cambridge since 1992, all insights into Heym's personal commitment to this project will not be accessible until his diary is made public in 2031, thirty years after his death (p. ix).

The Architects has many of the elements of compelling historical fiction: unanswered questions, mysterious characters, and a love triangle, all set against the backdrop of major events in history. The novel opens with a dramatic prologue detailing the transport in 1940 of Julian Goltz, a German communist, from the Soviet Union back to the concentration camps of Germany. Flash forward fifteen years to a snowy evening as Julia, Julian's now adult daughter, and her famous architect husband, Arnold Sundstrom, enter city hall in a unspecified East German city to attend festivities celebrating the success of his building project, World Peace Road. We quickly learn that Julia's parents died tragically in the Soviet Union, although the exact circumstances surrounding their deaths remain suspensefully vague. Sundstrom, their friend and comrade, was entrusted with rais-

ing their orphaned young daughter, Julia, whom he later weds. Sundstrom and Julia now have one son, Julian, a frail five-year-old who clings to his mother. Julia herself is one of several young architects in Sundstrom's collective. Sundstrom's tripartite role as father figure, professional mentor, and husband to Julia immediately presents itself as the root of potential instability in their marriage. Furthermore, the next building project on the docket, the extension of World Peace Road, proves fertile ground for an exploration of form and function, both on a personal as well as an architectural level. Heym has staffed Sundstrom's architectural collective with representative types: John Hiller, the fiery young architect vying for Julia's attention; Edgar Voukovich, the Yugoslavian architect whose father's political alliances prevent him from returning to his homeland; and Waltraut Greve, the uptight, thin-lipped architect who serves as the female polar opposite to Julia's sensual beauty. When Daniel Yakovlevich Wollin, Sundstrom's friend from student days at Bauhaus, whom he last saw in 1940 in the Soviet Union, arrives for a visit, the facade of Sundstrom's world slowly begins to crumble. Wollin knew Julia's parents and has just been released from a Soviet work camp, prompting Julia to become increasingly obsessed with the circumstances surrounding her parent's untimely deaths. Are things as Sundstrom always has explained them to her or does he have skeletons in his closet? These questions compel the reader to follow Julia's quest for the truth.

Clearly, such a brief plot summary cannot do justice to the complexity of the story Heym's novel tells, but it does demonstrate the potential the novel has to offer its readers more than simply a good story. *The Architects* also gives insights into life in East Germany and the role party membership and cultural politics played in shaping both the physical and personal landscape of the GDR. In defending his approach to expanding World Peace Road to his collective, Sundstrom spouts the party line on socialist architectural theory: "The new element that socialist architecture searched for was not the sensational, the outlandish, the experiment in form, the new-at-any-price; the aim was not to shock, but to accord with the sense of beauty innate in the working people, and to help further and develop it" (p. 47). From his position as a party-sanctioned architect in 1950s East Germany, Sundstrom denigrates the Bauhaus tradition with its roots in the Weimar Republic as "the artificial cubist constructions derived from the teachings of the Bauhaus profes-

sors are in essence negative and soulless, anti-humanist—and repugnant to the healthy instinct of our working people" (pp. 69-70). A visit to the World Peace Road building site by Wollin, Hiller, and Julia serves as an opportunity to present the plight of East German construction workers. As Wollin takes a trowel in hand to lay a few bricks, a tradesman on the site vents his frustrations with the reality of working in their socialist "utopia." Laborers are paid by the piece, they lack adequate building supplies, and they often are forced to redo their work due to bureaucracy and late building plans (pp. 103-105). As a refugee, Voukovich criticizes an East German society where "there was a whole generation of youth who, in their struggle to survive, wriggle through, get ahead, seemed to have cheated themselves out of their share of heart and enthusiasm—people with a built-in double bottom, with two sets of feelings, two sets of values: one for public profession, the other for private consumption" (pp. 143-144). Yet these pessimistic voices are balanced by Wollin's optimistic words to Julia at the end of the novel as they attend the festivities to announce the winning design for the extension of World Peace Road: "Socialism is such a logical, sensible thing that no one, not even the biggest knave and fool, can murder it. There are always the others: those who create. And they're in the majority, irrepressible" (p. 314).

The Architects is without a doubt a "good read." My only criticism of the novel is Heym's occasional slip in word choice, particularly when describing his heroine Julia. Words like "shanks" (p. 36) and "the curve of the flank" (p. 38) when used to describe the female body conjure up images of raw meat or large animals like horses, rather than capturing the exquisite physical beauty of Heym's female protagonist. For passionate readers of Heym, *The Architects* will confirm their enthusiasm for his work. GDR experts will welcome the novel for its cultural insights. Those teaching about East German culture and literature in English will find the novel a wonderfully accessible text for undergraduates, most of whom now have no memories of a divided Germany or of a unique German life on the other side of the Wall. For the latter group, pairing Heym's novel with Peter Kahane's film *Die Architekten* (1990) would provide a wonderful window into the challenges of and dreams for life in the GDR from its formative years in the 1950s to its final phase in the late 1980s.

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