

FROM SOCIALIST MODERN TO SUPER-NATURAL ORGANICISM: Cosmological Transformations through Home Decor

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A focus on the natural, environmentally friendly, and durable qualities of products has been a staple of commercial advertising in Hungary since the fall of state socialism. The billboard advertising Bramac roofing tile that stood outside the former “socialist new town” where I did my fieldwork (see Figure 1) is a typical example. With the smokestacks of the town’s steel factory visible in the background, the billboard displays quaint red-roofed houses nestled in a landscape of rolling green hills. The advertising copy at the top reads, “In friendship with nature.” Below the idyllic scene, a set of tiles is wrapped like a gift and superimposed on text reading, “If once you build. . . .” Left unspoken is the rest of the familiar phrase, “If once you build, *you build to last forever.*”

Because housing developers in Hungary are not attracted to the provinces, many families continue to build their own homes, often by their own labor. They assume that if they throw themselves into this Herculean task, they will be building a house to last for generations. The roofing tiles in the ads are not, of course, made of clay dug from the earth and processed by the sun, but are manufactured of poured concrete, mixed with dyes and petroleum products, and fired at temperatures over 2,000° Fahrenheit. But they do provide durable, weather-resistant protection for structures that shelter fragile human life—“super” natural tiles that are also high-end commodities.

In Dunaújváros (New Town on the Danube), however, most of the town’s 59,000 residents have lived in urban apartment buildings since its ideologically



FIGURE 1. Billboard advertising roofing tiles, 1997. (Photo by author.)

motivated founding as an exemplary socialist town in 1951. The bulk of these apartments were built between the early 1960s and the mid-1980s and designed in a fairly uniform modernist style. Because they were constructed of steel-reinforced concrete panels, they came to be known throughout the region by some variation of the word “panel.”¹ In addition to having a “panel” apartment, many working- and middle-class families also acquired a weekend cottage with a garden during the later decades of the socialist period. Hence, they were able to realize the socialist ideal of living in a modern, urban apartment during the workweek and retreating to the countryside on the weekend (Callmeyer and Rojkó 1972:5). Although this ideal had been crumbling well before the fall of socialism in 1989, it was quickly supplanted in the 1990s by the new middle-class ideal of a free-standing family house on the outskirts of a nearby village. These new houses, despite their diverse styles, shared in an aesthetic that marked their difference from the older, rural houses around them but, more importantly, from the concrete panel buildings of state-socialist construction (see Figure 2; see also images at <http://production.culanth.org/supplementals/58-the-museum-of-resilience-raising-a-sympathetic-public-in-post-welfare-chicago>). In subtle or over-the-top ways, these new houses incorporated organic, rounded, and often playful forms into their facades; featured “natural” materials like wood and stone; and used paint in earth tones or other natural colors. Most people referred to these as ice-cream colors, but an engineer whose house was painted a dark pink insisted



FIGURE 2. Organicist architecture for new house in a suburbanizing village outside Dunaújváros. (Photo by author.)

it was the color of red meat—a reference to the organic explored in this article. Although most roofs were made of the red tile featured in the Bramac ad, some were also roofed with thatch, a prestigious material used in the retrofitting of old, peasant houses into modernized spaces.

This postsocialist manifestation of an organicist aesthetic was made possible by the availability of new paints, materials, and technologies, but it was far from new. It was the explosion into the public sphere of an aesthetic that had emerged over the 1960s–80s in Hungary in opposition to a *Socialist Modern* style and the “unnatural” socialist system that had produced it. Hungarians of diverse ages and incomes were compelled by affective desires and social pressures to transform their homes, even if still stuck within concrete buildings, to align with the emergence of a new, more “natural” order.

The hostile reaction to the cubelike, concrete materialities of Socialist Modern housing is perhaps not surprising, but it is important to remember it was not always so. Modernist forms and materials once held the promise of a prosperous, egalitarian social order. Many families had once been excited about moving into their modern panel apartments, fully equipped with running water and central heating. This article investigates the shift from the dreams of modernist utopia embedded in “man-made” (and thus better than nature) miracle materials like plastic and concrete

to a neoliberal social order embedded in “natural” (in fact super-natural) materials like Bramac roofing tiles. It is an exploration of the reciprocal relationships among ideology (of the state, market, or particular groups), things (residential housing, furnishings, and aesthetic styles), and people (esp. people’s embodied experience).

We have long understood that ideologies about the ideal organization of society can be embedded in the materialities that, in turn, reproduce these ideologies in embodied practice (Bourdieu 1977, 1984). This article attempts to think through how embodied experience of materialities can contradict their ideological framings, often generating transformations to these very same ideologies. Socialist states are ideal for exploring questions regarding the articulation of materiality with political ideologies. Not only was ideology baked into the very infrastructure (Humphrey 2005) but also these regimes were thoroughly invested in harnessing the powers of the material world for the political project of social transformation. Like avant-garde modernist city planners and furniture designers, socialist planners understood transformative powers to inhere in the material forms themselves, *independent* of ideological framing (Holston 1989). However, architectural designs are unable to shape social life in any deterministic way. Material forms are not only polysemous but they can also be experienced variably depending on the person, era, or economic conditions. Indeed, my argument here is that embodied experience of particular material worlds always exceeds discursive framing, often in unpredictable, generative ways. To be sure, discursive or ideological framing can foster expectations for a particular experience, and such framing can also influence our affective orientation toward such objects or places (e.g., advertising). Nonetheless, material properties salient for embodied experience can contradict those salient to discursive framing and have the effect of subverting such discourses. Ideologies about human nature and political organization are thus not just embedded in particular materialities; materialities can also become the catalysts of transformative change to ideologies and their related cosmologies. As I show in the state socialist materialities discussed here, the disjuncture between ideology and experience had consequences not only for how these materialities came to be valued but also in how the value of their associated ideologies came to be transformed. New ideals for materialities emerged in tandem with new ideological framings, both generated out of and in opposition to those once propagated by the socialist state.

The article follows four ideological-material transformations that I have identified, and draws on ethnographic fieldwork and a variety of print and visual media sources.² In the 1960s, media discourses about a Socialist Modern aesthetic successfully devalued once-beloved furnishings such as heavy and ornate armchairs,

and created value and expectations for lightweight and multifunctional furniture. These modern furnishings were linked to Western designs but were also iconic of socialist cosmologies of an egalitarian society. However, as people moved into modern buildings and lived with furnishings that broke easily or did not age well, the value of these materialities (along with their embedded ideologies) was subverted. Instead of materializing a modern, egalitarian society, Socialist Modern housing and furnishing became affectively aligned with the impersonal, bureaucratic state, especially as this aesthetic proliferated. It was transformed into a devalued *Socialist Generic* by lived experience. As much of the population had no choice but to move into such generic environments, a vernacular aesthetic I term *Organicist Modern* emerged that was deployed to appropriate and “humanize” them, for example, by putting thick sheepskin coverings over modern, lightweight sofas. With the retreat of the welfare state in the postsocialist 1990s, this much-valued organicist aesthetic for domestic spaces was transformed by newly available commodities into a *Super-Natural Organicism*. The transformations of these aestheticized materialities were reciprocally implicated in transformations to social and political cosmologies.

This is not just a story about Hungary. Interior design worldwide has followed a similar trajectory, as the trend of bringing “nature” inside has gained powerful affective appeal with the end of the Cold War and its corollary, the demise of the modernist welfare state. The Hungarian case brings into stark relief processes that are more muted elsewhere. It suggests that the superiority ascribed to “natural” materials—granite countertops, rich hardwoods, stonelike tile backsplashes, and leather furnishings—aids in discrediting modernist projects and generates the cosmologies that have replaced them. These cosmologies valorize the moral project of being in harmony with the natural world and at the same time, allow for the naturalization of the free market as arbiter of human value. The reasonable search for “quality” in material goods that are more healthy and durable, is inextricably linked to the production of inequality.

QUALISIGNS, AESTHETIC COHERENCE, AND MEANING

This approach to understanding the relationship between cosmologies and the affective power of aligned material aesthetics draws on the work of scholars who have developed a semiotics of materiality, using Peircean ideas to explore how our embodied experience of materialities contributes to processes of signification (see, esp., Munn [1986]). Unlike a Saussurean semiotics, where the relationship of signifier to signified is divorced from materiality, a Peircean semiotics allows us to think about the suggestive or resonant nature of our sensory experience of the

material world, of how this experience can be taken up by systems of representation to evoke or index values, affects, and ideologies.

Peirce calls the qualities or properties of things that are available to sense perception *qualisigns*. The color red, for example, is a qualisign, as is a texture like softness or a property like luminosity. To be comprehended as a qualisign, such qualities must be perceived across multiple realms (objects, substances, bodies). The quality of red in a tulip petal, for example, is shared by a Coca-Cola logo or blood when exposed to air. This capacity of qualities to appear across a variety of objects, materials, or substances allows for the homologous alignment of these domains, linking aspects of the perceptible world to one another. At the same time, qualia cannot exist on their own: they have to be bundled with other material properties (Keane 2006:188–189). Redness can only be perceived as a sensuous property of something else, such as the petals of a tulip, where it is combined with its pliability, its waxy texture, its smell, and so forth.

This focus on qualities, rather than on objects, allows us to think about how the coherence implied by an “aesthetic” can emerge from a collection of seemingly unrelated things. Qualities, such as a color scheme, can unite otherwise diverse materials. The linkages of such qualia to other things in our experience contributes to the significance we attach to them. Such significance is not arbitrary but comes from the resemblance—or iconicity—between qualia and the meanings they evoke (see Irvine and Gal 2000; Manning and Meneley 2008). For example, Anne Meneley (2008) has demonstrated how olive oil’s property of “luminosity” (as fuel for light or as imbuing luminous properties to other materials) lends itself by iconic extension to affective states linked to concepts such as spirituality, power, and life force. Iconicity thus characterizes the relationship between sensuous qualities of things and how we take them up in language to describe concepts, values, or emotional states. At the same time, if this iconicity is not arbitrary, it is also not deterministic. Not every culture makes the association between “lightness” and a feather, but more important, “lightness” does not everywhere become a qualisign of prosperity, as it does in the Melanesian island of Gawa (Munn 1986). This kind of homologous alignment of domains through particular qualia (feathers = lightness = prosperity) is not fixed but obtains power in and through the work of continuous social practice. In this way, qualisigns can constitute an aesthetic that can then be extended into the realm of sociopolitical cosmologies.

Critically, only some of the material properties of things can be recruited for signification at any one time, because the qualities of an object always exceed those taken up for cultural recognition. Our attentiveness to the particular qualia of a

thing is affected by convention, training, and context—but can change depending on the circumstances. For example, the fossilized tree resin we call amber has a wide range of potential qualia: it is transparent, has a golden color, can burn, and also has electrostatic properties. Yet only the first two are salient when appreciating amber as a material for jewelry. This excess in the material qualities of objects, as Webb Keane observes, can act as “vehicles of transformative pressure on . . . systems of meaning and of pragmatic action” or provide openings to new possibilities for meaning and action (2006:200). In other words, unexpected transformations arising from the material (like a cabinet door warping or color fading) draw our attention to different qualia and force a revaluation of the object, and potentially, also warp the systems of value in which it participates. The contingencies introduced by the material can be agents of change.

In Nancy Munn’s account of Gawa (1986), value-producing transformations of the material world are stable historically: things and people are reciprocal agents of each others’ value, but the material itself does not catalyze disruptive transformations. Heavy, rooted trees are regularly transformed into light canoes that transport Gawans swiftly over the fast-moving water. Moreover, “light” bodies are full of life, quick, and unencumbered by excess weight—an ideal shared with canoes and contrasting with passive and heavy states of sleep, illness, and death. Any deviations from these trajectories are assumed to be the work of sorcerers who try to arrest and invert such positive transformations (Munn 1986). For more turbulent histories, however, we need to look at how radical changes to people’s lived environments and their experience of those environments become implicated in transforming or challenging the sociopolitical ideologies with which they are aligned.

SOCIALIST MODERN

As in socialist states across the region, the planned town of Dunaújváros was to shape a new kind of society and a new kind of person, in opposition to those produced by capitalism. The built environment was itself to play a part in the transformation of a largely rural population into an urban proletariat. Even though the construction of this town in the early 1950s was a Stalinist project (its first name was “City of Stalin” or Sztálinváros) and the first buildings were constructed according to the conventional monumental dictates of Socialist Realism, it was laid out according to modernist city-planning principles.

After 1960, the state introduced the new technology of prefabricated concrete panel construction for both residential and administrative buildings. To furnish new modern apartments and offices, the state promoted the “contemporary” (*mai*) style.

This style was popular in Europe and the United Kingdom and consisted of mass-produced utility furniture arranged according to an open plan.³ Production costs were kept down through inexpensive materials and simple, rectilinear shapes free of decorative elements (Vadas 1992). The contemporary style was promoted relentlessly in magazine articles, newspaper editorials, and furniture exhibitions as the only appropriate style for modern apartment living, while the tastes of the peasantry and bourgeoisie were ridiculed. One television skit featured a large woman dressed in a housecoat, frantically directing four sweaty men who were vainly attempting to move her enormous wardrobe into her modern flat (Papp 1998). A local journalist in Dunaújváros insisted that “the fashion is clean lines, low sizes, preferably in light colors and lightweight forms,” and directed her ire at “useless decorations, carved angels, twirled columns” (Bars 1963). She was particularly strident about what the modern apartment should not contain: monofunctional spaces like the permanent dining room or bedroom. The kitchenette was to have a dining nook with a plastic or other easily washable surface. The open plan placed furniture “against the wall so that the center is left free . . . allowing space for movement, work, comfort, hominess” (Bars 1963).

The cultural elite’s condemnation of bourgeois and peasant material worlds was couched in a somatized language of pollution. Modernism was posited as a purifying force that would vanquish the formal, dark, and heavy qualities of bourgeois furnishings beloved by a proper peasantry as much as by an urban middle class. Qualisigns of “lightness” and “cleanness” were realized in lightweight furnishings, light colors, and the bright light of the sun flooding through windows liberated of bulky curtains. Sparkling white kitchen appliances, the smooth surfaces of linoleum countertops and floors, and the clean, uncluttered lines of rectilinear furnishings allowed people to wipe away the dust and grime of objects that tied people to the past. Lightweight furnishings contrasted with the heavy furniture sets traditionally inherited or acquired at marriage and kept for a lifetime—“inalienable possessions” that were now configured as burdens. Expressed in embodied terms, these were materialities not of patina but of stasis and decay. New furnishings, in theory, could be easily replaced and “freed” people from the fetters of traditional obligations. These qualisigns of lightness aligned with “mobility,” and thus they extended physical experience to mobility in a transformed social order. Unadorned windows and open spaces would release people from claustrophobic interiors and allow them to “breathe.”

It is worth taking a moment to ponder the miracle materialities of man-made plastics and concrete, both celebrated for their “plasticity” and their durability.

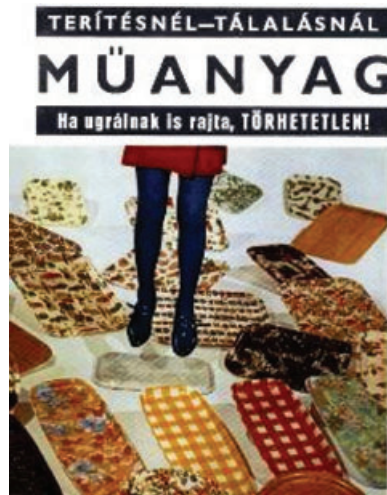


FIGURE 3. Ad from 1967 for plastic kitchen products in *Lakáskultúra*. (Reprinted courtesy of the National Széchényi Library.)

These wondrous qualities were aligned with the zeitgeist of the times, of mankind's capacity to transcend the limitations and destructive powers of nature to usher in a bold, new world. In the West, the postwar boom in prosperity allowed members of the skilled working classes to participate in a new, universal "civilized" society marked by its modernity rather than by class hierarchy. Jane Schneider discusses this period in her marvelous analysis of the rise and fall of polyester in the United States and England, reminding us that polyester was not always a taboo, impure fabric. It was once embraced for its vibrant colors and liberating wash-and-wear qualities, at prices almost anyone could afford. The positive qualities of this synthetic material eclipsed other sensations (or qualia) that later came to the fore and were imagined to be intolerable: static cling and the suffocation implied by describing polyester as a fabric that doesn't "breathe." Compared to cotton, and the backbreaking labor and environmental destruction involved in its production, the history of polyester was that of an equalizing fabric—a quality good for the masses—embraced by a postwar generation that represented a new, classless spirit (Schneider 1994).

In socialist Eastern Europe, the powers of industrialization were used to convince agricultural populations imbued with deeply held notions of a "limited good" (Foster 1965) that it would be possible to provide abundantly for all. Technology and man-made materials were thus intricately linked with utopian promises. A colorful ad for plastic trays published in 1967 (see Figure 3) exemplifies this spirit, publicizing the virtues of plastic, its bold, modern colors, and its



FIGURE 4. Electronics advertisement, circa 1970, of a giant television replacing a prefabricated concrete panel as it is hoisted into place on a new building. www.retronom.hu

functional strength compared to wood or porcelain: “PLASTIC! Even if you jump on it, it’s UNBREAKABLE!” (*Lakáskultúra* 1967).

By the 1970s, the imagery and rhetoric stigmatizing bourgeois furnishings had successfully transformed aesthetic dispositions by inverting older qualisigns of value (Munn 1986), especially for a younger generation living in the new town who aspired to “bring modernity home” (Attfield 2007). New, modern furniture had been discursively imbued with progressive ideals and embodied sensations of lightness, cleanliness, mobility, openness, and informality. Moreover, this aesthetic had been aligned with contemporary trends in the West, rather than with Soviet design (see, e.g., Bánkúti 1958). Indeed, governments in London, Stockholm, and New York City had looked to the new technology of prefabricated panels in the 1960s to solve housing problems and built such structures in quantity. In Hungary, media images of workers assembling the massive blocks of concrete panel apartments were ubiquitous, as in this advertisement for new, color television sets (see Figure 4).

SOCIALIST GENERIC

By the time that the OPEC oil crisis of 1973 was felt by state socialist economies, the credibility of a socialist modernity was waning. Lived experience of Socialist Modern materialities had rarely conformed to the ways they had been

promoted in discourse, and these contradictions were apparent in letters to the editor of the local paper in Dunaújváros soon after the first residents had moved in. *Panel bogár* (“panel bugs” or cockroaches) made their unwelcome appearance (*Dunaújvárosi Hírlap* 1969). Bare concrete was a terrible insulator, radiating heat in summer and cold in winter. The fact that the walls conducted noise generated a genre of complaint, as residents claimed they were tormented by their neighbors’ snoring (Berényi 1976). Utility furniture was indeed “lightweight” but also often hard to get, cheaply made, poorly designed, and usually expensive.

The open plan had been touted as both a metaphor and the physical embodiment of social equality and mobility by removing traditional divisions of rooms and spaces. But throughout the Soviet sphere, it had been deployed not to break down walls between rooms but to crowd family members into the space of one small “multifunctional” room and atomize their activities. And while apartment buildings were similar in design to those in the West, they were significantly smaller and used lower quality materials.⁴ Yet in the 1970s, when such buildings were being demolished in the West, their production was exponentially expanded throughout the Soviet socialist states and resulted in the massive, dense districts of uniform, concrete residential buildings that became iconic of state socialism.

These cheap material goods and environments, once presented by the state as gifts, came to signify the state’s contempt for its citizenry. The radical disjuncture between the phenomenological experience of Socialist Modern and its rhetorical promises of openness and freedom catalyzed a transformation of value. Socialist Modern was transformed into one better understood as Socialist Generic. The qualities of shoddy, factory-made, and mass-produced apartments and furnishings became aligned with and reinforced affective experience of alienation from an impersonal and oppressive bureaucratic state (Fehérvári 2009). Man-made materials that had once exemplified the promise of abundance for all now exemplified the regime’s hubristic attempts to dominate nature. The difference between Socialist Modern and Socialist Generic, it is worth noting, lies not in design or form but in how experience of these materialities shifted attention from some qualities to others, transforming how they were valued and aligned with state ideology. Egalitarianism became discredited in part because it had become conflated in everyday practice with standardization and uniformity. Likewise, rational and efficient became synonymous with cheap and austere.

By the 1980s, panel apartments had become paradigmatic spaces of a “future past,” that is, the dreams of a generation that is old or dead (Koselleck 1985). And yet, the “abnormality” of socialist materialities lay in part in their denial of

the effects of time. Modernism rejected the concept of patina or the increase of material value through time and use, designing instead a style that was to be timeless and thus immune to periodization. Taking advantage of constant technological innovation, things were to be discarded as they wore out and replaced by objects of superior technology but still conforming to the style-less style of modernism. Panel buildings, I was often told, were designed to last only 30 to 50 years. But the socialist economy could barely produce enough housing and consumer goods for the population as it was, so goods could not be replaced as they aged. At the same time, because plastic and concrete do not age well, they became shabby. The design that was supposed to have defeated fashion with its stripped-down utility had gone out of fashion.

ORGANICIST MODERN

Between the 1960s and 1980s, a vernacular aesthetic evolved to transform this Socialist Generic, particularly as families attempted to make apartment interiors into heterotopic spaces that transported their residents into worlds far removed from the walls of concrete in which they were situated (see also Miller 1988). Popular decorating trends embraced organic shapes, so-called natural colors and materials (leather, linens, cottons) as well as Hungarian folk art as a way of breathing life, color, and character into “cold,” “gray,” and “uniform” materialities.

Intellectuals in the late 1960s revived interest in an “authentic” Hungarian material culture by combing villages on the weekends to find peasant artifacts like decorative pitchers and hand-painted plates to display in their urban apartments. Handcrafted objects made of clay, natural textiles, leather, and wrought iron were qualitatively opposed to the homogenizing products of state socialist mass production and their materialities. This trend extended across social classes as a hobby in the 1970s, as women embroidered pillowcases, doilies, and table runners with traditional Hungarian motifs. I myself was taught to embroider with colorful threads when I first went to Hungary as a child by my cousin, a practicing lawyer. The peasantry had long been romanticized as the repository of an authentic Hungarian kultur (Hofer 1991), but practices revitalizing traditional material culture in the 1970s and 1980s were made politically significant by the continued presence of Soviet troops in the country. By the 1980s, the stakes of this trend rose with popular antagonism to state policy that ignored the plight of ethnic Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries, particularly the roughly two million in Romanian Transylvania subject to Nicolae Ceausescu’s persecution. The style became so popular that the state itself began the mass production of folk textiles

and pottery, goods that were then bought in their commodified form by people in villages and by offspring of villagers in the city (Nagy 1987). Peasant-inspired clothing became fashionable among university students, who propelled the phenomenal popularity of the folk dance house movement in the 1980s (Taylor 2008).

As the city grew and became increasingly dense with concrete, people hung floor-to-ceiling posters of nature scenes like mountain tops or forest glades to create the illusion of a fourth wall open to the wilderness (a trend that also spread to the villages). Also popular were wooden window frames, complete with white curtains and geraniums, placed on interior walls. Wood became a central element for humanizing and warming the cold sterility of concrete panel walls, but also for restoring a masculine presence into feminized urban apartments (see also Drazin 2001). Wood indexed the masculine activity of do-it-yourself projects and thus a restoration of “natural” gender hierarchies that state socialism had distorted by pushing women into the public sphere of wage labor and decreasing their dependence on men.

Natural materials also brought into the apartment the sensations of an outside world associated with “fresh air” and the healthy dirt of the countryside, sensations families often enjoyed at their weekend cottages. This turn to natural materials came at a time when people were becoming increasingly aware of the detrimental health effects of industrial pollution. Cancer rates and the incidence of asthma among children were disproportionately high in Dunaújváros, and residents accused the state of complicity in perpetuating this poisoning by setting the fine for polluting so low that the factory preferred paying the fines, rather than installing expensive smokestack filters. Although scholars cite Chernobyl as the event that shocked the Western world with the realization that experts did not have adequate control over societal “risks” (Beck 1987), for many Hungarians it was only the most extreme manifestation of what they already knew: the Soviet Union and socialist government experts could not be trusted with the public welfare (Harper 2006). Bringing nature into the home was experienced as a means to create healthier environments. Houseplants, for example, were supposed to counter the terrible air quality in buildings whose walls did not “breathe.”

Replacing or covering up “man-made” materials with so-called natural materials aligned with popular condemnations of the socialist state’s modernist “experiment” and its godlike ambitions: of exerting total control over the future through central planning, insisting on man’s dominance over nature, and attempting to eradicate beliefs in any power above the scientific principles of Marxism–Leninism. The socialist project of privileging the material and repressing the spiritual was a denial

of the existence of forces more powerful than human industry and scientific knowledge. This transformation of man-made materials and industrial technologies from agents of liberation to agents of oppression arose with and was inseparable from experience with materials like concrete and plastic, materials never encountered “in nature.” Concrete and plastic are often understood to be “cold” materials that arrest heat and thus interfere with the temporal processes of transformation (cooking, fermenting, decaying, and fertilizing renewed growth; cf. Weiss 1996:76). Such man-made materialities in many ways mirrored the theory and practice of state socialism. In keeping with its relentless celebration of a timeless future, the socialist state was able to create secular rituals for naming babies, coming of age, and weddings, but could not figure out how to deal with nature’s ultimate triumph, or death (Black 2010). Popular focus on the qualities of synthetic materialities like PVC plastic shifted from durability to their “unnatural” resistance to decomposition.

We can see such alignments of material properties or qualisigns in narratives about married couples moving into concrete apartment buildings, narratives that took on a strikingly formulaic character in popular publications like the state’s home decor magazine, *Lakáskultúra*. For example, a 1983 article on a tiny 24-square-meter (258-ft²) studio apartment praised a young couple for finding the space to create an “intimate” corner for their bed and also to accommodate their “passion” for collecting antiques. In this apartment, such vital life forces were generated by wood floors, dark wood shelving (made by the young man), antlers and animal skins, and the “linen textile that radiates warmth” in the dining nook (Varga 1983). The fact that the birthrate in Hungary had long been too low to reproduce the population cannot be ignored in this partiality for materials that generated heat (and life) as well as intimate spaces for sexual relations. My perusal of hundreds of photos of interiors showed that middle-stratum Hungarians were drawn to “natural” durable substances (wood, stones) and to innovations that at least indexed openings to the fresh air and unrestricted spaces of the natural world, even if these were illusory. They also suggest desires for the informality and openness promised but not realized by Socialist Modern. Such attachments to homier environments were inseparable from affective alienation from the existing political order. As I show in the next section, they also generated attractions to its opposite: a democratic free-market system.⁵

More formal articulations of this vernacular style emerged among professional architects, beginning in the 1960s. One group attempted to modify Socialist Modern with such controversial innovations as painting panel buildings with giant red tulips, a folk art motif (Major and Osskó 1981; Molnár 2005). Another rejected

outright what it saw as a dehumanizing architecture aligned with the “domination of bureaucrats and the building industry over architectural creativity” (Ferkai 1998:290). Forced into a dissident position, this informal group of organicist architects advocated a site-specific architecture, one that “grew out of Hungarian tradition, used skilled rural tradesmen like wood-carvers, and reconnected people with a naturalist spirituality” (Heathcote 2006). By the late 1970s, the work of this architecture’s two main proponents, György Csete and Imre Makovecz, had become increasingly influential, both within and outside the official state architectural profession. Csete understood organic to mean “something rooted deeply in the soul of native tradition” and rejected any kind of angularity in composition in order to create buildings as shelters or sanctuaries (Ferkai 1998:290). Makovecz drew on vernacular forms and folk art (influenced by Rudolf Steiner), but extended their range beyond Hungarian traditions to the anatomy of the human body and to Celtic and Far Eastern motifs, considering them “memories of the same collective subconscious” (Ferkai 1998:291). He understood his architecture to be a “defensive magic against all impersonal powers” such as communism and, after 1990, corporate capitalism (Ferkai 1998:291; Heathcote 1997).

Nonetheless, popular exposure to these architects and their designs in Hungary was fairly limited until the 1980s (Crowley 1993:88–89), when the regime was pressured by financial difficulties to introduce further reforms of economic liberalization. Their growing popularity must be seen as part of the emergence of a wider vernacular aesthetic rather than a style devised by professionals and adopted by ordinary people.

Although organicist transformations were structured by opposition to a Socialist Generic, they were not a return to bourgeois materialities. Nor were they a return to premodern traditionalism. Instead, they were a concerted effort to generate a more “harmonious” modern lifestyle that fulfilled some of the dreams of socialist modernity while opposing others as heretical and unnatural. Natural materials, organic shapes, and folk motifs came to be affectively aligned with notions such as spirituality, autonomy, individuality, creative expression, and national pride. Even though this aesthetic was similar to Scandinavian modifications of modern design in the West (think IKEA), in Hungary it arose from embodied experience specific to the materialities of state socialism.

SUPER-NATURAL ORGANICISM

After the fall of state socialism in 1989–90, an organicist aesthetics moved from a marginalized position to become the official design ideology of the new,

independent Hungarian nation-state. Imre Makovecz was chosen to represent the country at the Universal Exposition of Seville in 1992, and his pavilion could not have been more diametrically opposed to Socialist Modern. Inverting the modernist paradigm of a roofless cube, his structure was almost entirely enveloped by a slate roof. Constructed of all natural materials, no two of the wooden joints were of the same size, and no power tools were used by the traditional craftsmen assembling it. In contrast to modernism's focus on the future arising out of *tabula rasa*, at the center of this building was a denuded tree, roots exposed under a glass floor to represent the nation's grounding in the past as it extended into the future (Eke n.d.).

Throughout the country, newly autonomous local city councils often used organicism to transform or disguise the Socialist Genericism of formerly socialist civic squares (see <http://production.culanth.org/supplementals/58-the-museum-of-resilience-raising-a-sympathetic-public-in-post-welfare-chicago>). They were joined in their efforts by private commercial interests driven by new imperatives to "attract" people, commerce, and capital. Store fronts and interiors of new, privatized spaces like bars, cafes, and theater lobbies became canvases for all sorts of fantastic tableaux, ranging from elaborate industrial chic to the sleek postmodern. Organicism here, too, extended its range, counterintuitively becoming a style appropriate for tech stores and computer retailers. Finally, as we saw in the opening of this article, organicist motifs marked the exteriors of new private residences.

We cannot see such aesthetic transformations to the material environment as passive reflections of political change; rather, they actively contributed to the generation of new political ideologies. In Hungary, the "regime change" of 1989 was peaceful and carried out through cooperation between opposition parties and the former Hungarian Communist Party *nomenklatura*. Although there was no purging of communist party officials, the policies and reforms carried out by the new state were guided by an opposition to communism. Not a single political party claimed to represent the working classes, and even the Socialist Workers' Party dropped worker from its name. With the exodus of Soviet troops, the first democratically elected government came to power on a platform of jubilant Hungarian nationalism and took up the cause of Magyar minorities in neighboring countries. Fairly quickly, however, nationalist sentiments became divisive. The outbreak of civil war in neighboring Yugoslavia in 1990 had rapidly defused the romanticism of doctrines of national self-determination. Domestically, many lower- and middle-class Hungarians came to resent the preferential economic treatment Romanian Hungarian immigrants received from the Hungarian state at

a time when they felt themselves to be in economic peril. In some households, hand-painted folk pitchers and embroidered pillowcases quietly disappeared.

After four bitter years of life in an “emerging democracy,” in 1994 Hungarian voters rejected nationalist parties and reelected the reformed Hungarian Socialist Party, which campaigned on an image of experienced leadership and promises to protect social benefits. However, instead of slowing the pace of neoliberal reforms, the Hungarian Socialist Party in coalition with the free-market Free Democrat party, initiated austerity measures dictated by the World Bank and IMF. Four years later, the socialists were replaced by a party touting both its national and its “civic” middle-class credentials, the Hungarian Citizen-Burgher Party (Young Democrats). A rancorous polarization of Hungarian politics was thus firmly established between a socially progressive but fiscally neoliberal Hungarian Socialist Party and a socially conservative, protectionist nationalist party. Although both sides claimed to defend the interests of the nation and the welfare of their respective constituents, neither could reverse the tide of privatization and welfare-state reform. These were, on the one hand, required by international financial institutions and prerequisites for membership in the European Union and, on the other hand, the conditions for participation in global capitalism.

Despite widespread disillusion with capitalism and democracy, political subjectivities continued to be generated by the enduring presence of Socialist Modern materialities. Panel apartment buildings still dominated skylines and housed over a quarter of the population. Organicist Modern aesthetics thus shaped postsocialist desires for specific housing forms, furnishings, and designs in opposition to a Socialist Generic. This was true for both sides of the political divide, as proponents of neoliberal economics, environmentalists, and nationalists all defined their politics in some way by opposition to a state socialism aligned with crumbling concrete.⁶ This aesthetic sensibility promoted the acceptance of neoliberal ideologies even as they clashed with the lived experience of austerity measures, unemployment, radical income inequalities, and failing medical, educational, and transportation systems.

In the media and in popular discourse, glowing descriptions of transformed home decor were often in the same idiom used to describe Hungary’s “release” from Soviet domination and its political and economic “transformation” from socialist state to an “open society” and “free market” regime. In some respects, these alignments were not new. The rectilinear forms and mass-produced uniformity of concrete housing estates had been for years aligned with closed borders, the restrictions of the planned economy, and the limited means of expression associated with an authoritarian state. When city dwellers enlarged windows, tore down

dividing walls between rooms, or built an “American kitchen,” one open to the living space, they were of course doing what they could to enlarge and open their living area. But in the postsocialist 1990s, people regularly explained their motives for transforming their living spaces with expressions such as “To escape from right angles!” and “Breaking free of standardized cubes!” as if channeling Hungary’s release from the confining authority of communism. In a context in which people had regularly spoken of being “walled off” or “walled in” from the rest of the world (Hixson 1997:231), such expressions conflated the embodied experience of these built environments with the experience of citizenship in a closed country. My interlocutors in Dunaújváros shared in the rhetoric of interior decor magazines that aligned rectilinear angularity with metaphors of incarceration, regularly publishing articles with titles such as “Breaking Out of a Rule-Bound Order.” Correspondingly, breaking out of stifling apartments and into “freedom” and “open air” was somatized in continued reference to breathing.⁷ Károly, a single manager in his thirties, proudly showed me his renovated apartment in Dunaújváros, with walls removed between the front and interior rooms, cork flooring, and an “American kitchen” built where the balcony had once been. Standing in the center of this open space, he spread his arms out wide and exclaimed, “Here I can breathe!”

Condemnation of an “unnatural” rectilinear was matched by the celebration of rounded forms, asymmetry, and eclecticism in form and color—all qualities considered necessary for human beings to flourish, allowing for creativity, imagination, and such things as the “freedom of improvisation” (the title of one interior design feature).⁸ A retired schoolteacher, struggling to live on her small pension as the state progressively withdrew social benefits, nonetheless admired the colorful new houses we passed on a bus ride. She related with pride how she, too, had introduced playful elements to the interior of her small apartment and the pleasure she got from replacing the solid wall dividing her sleeping area from the living room with one of glass bricks that allowed natural light to shine through.

Fairy tale (*mese*), magical (*varázslatos*), and enchanted (*elbűvölő*) were all adjectives used repeatedly to describe houses and interiors. Unlike new houses built with turrets and grand entryways, often criticized as the pretensions of the nouveaux riches, the Hobbit-like earthiness and merry child-like qualities of these designs generally inspired expressions of delight. A 1998 article titled “Fairytale House in Dabas” (Czeglédi 1998) describes how the enchanted interior greets the guest with an incredibly rich play of colors, forms, and ideas. The interviewer praises its “extravagance, the influence of [the Austrian artist–architect] Hundertwasser; that it is farcical, harlequinque and flies in the face of bourgeois taste.” Meanwhile, the

owner insists that he had the house designed to “establish a home that diverges from the customary pattern, and yet is still functional.” He emphasizes how “it serves its dwellers with spiritual comfort,” something “more important than function” (Czeglédi 1998:40). By evoking the intimacy associated with family privacy and the playful leisure of childhood, these interiors starkly opposed the publicity of state socialist architecture with its austere functionalism and lack of space for intimate relations or spiritual growth. Play, fantasy, and color served as an explicit rejection of Socialist Modern’s valorization of efficient functionality and adult productivity, responsibility, and sacrifice.⁹

Postsocialist renovations also articulated with notions of individualism and autonomy. People bemoaned growing social inequalities, but they insisted on the human need for expressing creative difference and for providing an outlet for healthy, “natural” competitive impulses. A journalist for the local steel mill newspaper expressed a shared sense of longing in writing about the phenomenon of apartment renovations:

I want something different, unique, that mine shouldn’t be the same as the neighbors . . . breaking out of grayness, of the customary, of the panel-crowds. If I can’t do anything about the exterior, then at least I’ll magically transform the interior, let my individuality be seen. I don’t want mass housing. I want a home, a real one, where not just my body, but my spirit can also rest. [Kozma 1995: 8]

QUALITIES OF MATERIALS, QUALITIES OF PEOPLE

This highly moralizing materialization of “Hungarian” values helped to legitimate an emerging and visible (upper-) middle class. The affective appeal of the organicist aesthetics of new spaces placed them beyond reproach. Indeed, the moral superiority inherent in a preference for natural materials reflected a continued critique of the modernist project, including its “artificial” attempts to eradicate social stratification.

The socialist state had firmly established the correspondence between the qualities of materials and the qualities of people, a correspondence that merged seamlessly with new commercial rhetoric. The fundamental difference was that in the new order the state was no longer responsible for extending “livable” worlds to the working population. The market economy would provide “quality” materialities only to those able to pay, thus merging the many beneficial properties of quality materials with the prestige of calculable expense.

In contrast, the urban proletariat and others unable to participate in procuring such durable worlds were clearly identified with the disintegrating remains of Socialist Generic ones. The visceral disgust aroused by the detritus of shabby materials and sterile environments was transferred to the masses associated with them. A feature article in the still-popular national home decor magazine made this equation explicit by praising a young professional couple, in a backhanded way, for “creating a relatively pleasant, livable and even enjoyable home out of the much maligned world” of the panel apartment. They had accomplished this by “removing everything one expects in the standard housing block: taking out PVC doors, the boring area rug and the wallpaper, all of which indicate undemanding people” (Rubóczki 1993:5).

Daphne Berdahl captured this evaluation in the ways Wessies (West Germans) described Ossies (East Germans) in the early 1990s (Berdahl 1999): “Ossies could be identified by their pale faces, oily hair, poor dental work, washed-out formless jeans, generic gray shoes, and acrylic shopping bags. They smelled of body odor, cheap perfume, or [as one Wessi informed her] ‘that peculiar disinfectant.’”¹⁰ Here, human bodies are inscribed with the material qualities of an abnormal modernism, of sterile bodies whose bad teeth are the ultimate indexes of poverty and decay. Their value as workers and as bodily substances was aligned with inert, mass-produced, generic commodities made out of artificial instead of authentic, living, “natural” materials. Thus, the shoddy quality of state socialist commodities was no longer blamed on an oppressive state dominating workers but on the quality of those workers themselves. Blame for shoddy production had transferred from the socialist system as a form of production to the self-evident shoddy labor and inherently “undemanding” (*igénytelen*) nature of a socialist working class.

The emerging middle classes also differentiated themselves from that other marginalized population, the peasantry, long associated with good, natural, and healthy dirt as well as imbecilic backwardness. As we saw at the beginning of this article, the organicism of new suburban houses was not framed as a “return to nature” but as an advance to a “super” natural state. Although these materials index their difference from the uncooked “nature” of a peasantry, they are also transformed by powerful technologies into high-quality commodities for demanding consumers. The thatched roofs of new bourgeois peasant houses, for example, are coated with nonflammable, water-resistant materials. Italian tiles designed to look like the rough-hewn stones of castle floors or the terra cotta of Roman baths are manufactured with the latest pressure-resistant technology. In comparison to plastic, which has no visible origin in nature, materials that look and feel like slate—in

other words, have the qualia of slate—index a natural origin, never mind that we can point out the constructedness of this categorization.

Such tiles and other high-end home building products conveyed the moral superiority of being in harmony with nature rather than dominating it. At the same time, as the customer reviews of Bramac roofing tiles reveal, much was made of the tile's high quality and long-lasting durability as part of a moral project to protect future generations and to build prosperity in a house of material permanence. The expense of these commodities indexes their quality as well as the quality of those who can afford them. The high-quality materials in suburban family houses legitimate the people sheltered within them as part of a respectable Hungarian middle class. Their embrace of the powers of a natural order, which includes a free market as much as it does a natural life cycle, produces them as moral persons. As such, they become deserving of the material worlds in which nature is enhanced and controlled, worlds which may indeed help them to live longer, healthier lives.

QUALITY AND INEQUALITY

The relationship between aesthetic ideologies for home decor and political cosmologies continues. In 2010, Hungarians elected parties on the right and far right that campaigned for a return to protectionist market regulations and national sovereignty in the face of European Union bureaucratic control (not to mention the parties' campaign to solve the nation's "Gypsy problem"). The rise of the far right has been accelerated by its creative use of the latest Internet and social networking sites. But it has also been helped by attachments to antisocialist, organicist materialities. In the 1990s, aspects of these materialities were salient in the constitution of Hungarians as a moral and civilized European middle class. However, by the time Hungary was granted entry in the European Union in 2004 (although not the Eurozone), enthusiasm for "joining Europe" had worn thin. Subsequent experience with EU regulations eroded much of the support that remained, and Hungary was hit hard by the financial crisis of 2008. Membership in the European Union has become conflated with membership in a Soviet-dominated, socialist order. This conflation was made possible in part by aesthetic resonances with impersonal and homogenizing bureaucratic domination from afar.

An attention to the properties of things reminds us that we can no longer dismiss differences in qualities of the commodified material worlds that surround us as "socially constructed" or as "commodity fetishism." In doing so, we ignore radical differences in people's access to "quality" material worlds, as well as in the persons produced and defined by those worlds. What do we do with the fact

that some of these materialities like Bramac roofing tiles are, in fact, superior, especially when framed as protecting one's family from the ravages of nature (fire, hail, wind) and natural decomposition over time? There are legitimate reasons to fear the monstrous productions of modern technologies and production systems and to search for super-natural solutions in materials that are both free of dangers and yet able to protect us from dangers. In many quarters it goes without saying that spending the extra money on organic milk for our children and on "natural" materials for our homes is a perfectly reasonable, and indeed moral, practice. And yet a tragic consequence of the morally justified search for quality is that it contributes to the production and legitimation of inequality. The moral dilemmas posed by such super-natural materialities and their powerful affects are endemic, one reason questions about materials should concern us.

ABSTRACT

Although the trend of bringing the "natural" world indoors took off in many parts of the world with the end of the Cold War, this article focuses on the case of Hungary, where the shift to and then away from state-socialist versions of modernist design was particularly politicized. From the 1960s to the present, Hungary witnessed a shift from the dreams of modernist utopia imbedded in "man-made" miracle materials like plastic and concrete to the neoliberal social order imbedded in "natural" (in fact super-natural) materials like organic wood flooring and high-quality roofing tiles. I draw on scholarship working with a Peircean semiotics of materiality to elaborate an approach to aesthetic styles in material worlds that can track transformations in such styles over time and link them to wider political cosmologies. I argue that the "organicist" materialities that emerged to humanize socialist apartments in generic modern buildings were part of a critique of the modernist project and its "unnatural" attempt to dominate nature and engineer human souls. After the fall of state socialism, the continued affective appeal of this Organicist aesthetics worked to legitimate neoliberal ideologies even as people bemoaned the suffering and inequalities generated by the new order. The emerging middle classes embraced the powers of a "natural" order that included a free market as much as it included a natural lifecycle. In so doing, they are inscribed as moral persons, and as such deserving of material worlds in which nature is enhanced and controlled. The morally justified search for quality produces inequality. The article is thus an exploration of the constitutive relationships among things (like residential housing and furnishings), people (esp. people's embodied experience), and ideology (of the state, market or of a particular group). [cultural analysis, aesthetics, domestic space, modernism, design, socialism–postsocialism, materiality, semiotics, political ideology]

NOTES

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1. *Panelház* in Hungarian, *panelák* in Czech and Slovakian, *panelki* in Bulgarian.
2. This article synthesizes in much-condensed form part of the argument made in my book (Fehérvári in press). Fieldwork was conducted in Dunaújváros in 1996–97 and on shorter trips in 2000, 2004, 2008, building on my visits to the new town in the 1970s–80s. Among print and visual media sources, particularly important were the local paper (1951–98) and articles in the national home decor magazine *Lakáskultúra* (*Home Furnishings*). This popular and influential publication showcased hundreds of lived-in interiors belonging to middle stratum citizens. Our relationship with the material world remains largely unarticulated (Miller 1988), and indeed, aesthetic choices are often made unconsciously even though they are structured by the social (cf. Bourdieu 1984). Material objects and arrangements, thus, constitute an expressive but nonverbal semiotic realm (Auslander 2005), and these photographs of interiors (along with knowledge of their material qualia) are evidence for the ways people attempted to “make” their domestic spaces.
3. See Buchli (1997), Gerchuk (2000), and Reid (1997) for Soviet examples; Stade (1993) for the East German version; and Löfgren (1994) for the Swedish incarnation.
4. Average apartments built during Sweden’s “Million Programme” consisted of three rooms and were about 75 square meters (about 800 ft²). In Hungary, most apartments were one or two rooms and only 30–50 square meters, considerably impacting how family life could be organized.
5. Martha Lampland (1995) demonstrates how collective farm members’ experiences with socialist technocratic organization as opposed to their own second economy activities were another realm in which the free market was seen to reward hard work and valorize autonomy.
6. In 1990s urban Hungary, the socialist “nostalgia” movement was limited to popular cultural references signifying insider knowledge, or to tourist venues (Nadkarni 2010).
7. The rejuvenation of masculinity in home interiors and exteriors continued apace, such as paint the color of red meat. See also Gerald Creed on the exaggerated use of “masculine” materials in Bulgarian mummies’ costumes in response to the marginalization created by postsocialist unemployment (Creed 2011).
8. Compare with the Comaroff’s depiction of how missionaries in Botswana promoted rectilinear housing forms against the Tswana’s rounded houses to inculcate proper notions of private property and gender relationships (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992).
9. Xiaobing Tang writes of middle-class fashioning in 1990s China, where the reification of interiority and difference contrasts with the socialist state’s moralizing discourses. Material pursuits generated vitality in a fusing of “objects, desire, money and action” when compared to the debasement of conscience and “purity” by ideological coercion (Tang 1998: 532, 535).
10. In an incredible example of the continued stigmatization of socialist Eastern Europe, a Norwegian artist recently “re-created” the “scent of communism” for an exhibit on Extinct and Exotic smells. It was described as “the smell of gray, of worn concrete, a light perfume of drab industrial stench, a hint of smoke and stale air” (Burr 2009: 110).

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