

Heritage Obscured: Undesirable Legacies of the *Prior* Department Stores in Slovakia

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Introduction

Slovak architecture, by definition buildings which followed the 1918 union of Slovakia and the Czech Republic into Czechoslovakia, began with the promising Czechoslovak functionalism from the inter- and post-war period. It was the foundation for the Slovak contribution to late Modernism, also called Socialist Modernism and Eastmodern,¹ which emerged from a program developed by the Socialist government “to manifest the national integrity of the country,”² through architecture.

Before the socialist era, Slovakia had no program of national art or architecture and very little representation of its nationality in these forms. Slovakia’s culture and economy, beginning when Communists seize power of Czechoslovakia in 1948 and ending with the Velvet Revolution in 1989, was subject to the controlling measures of the regime. All industries, businesses, institutions, creative and cultural endeavors were nationalized, leaving inhabitants completely dependent on the state.

A respite occurred during the era of political and cultural liberalization in the post-1956 period, commonly referred to in the West as the Thaw. That ushered in the second wave of industrialization, social modernization and urban migration, resulting in an economic boost which opened up funding from the central state budget for new developments. As relations between East and West had thawed slightly, Slovak architects had the opportunity to engage in the international architectural discourse and take a “more liberal approach to architectural forms,”³ pushing boundaries by promoting their aesthetic agenda while the concerns of the regime were largely focused on the development of the Czech side, and particularly, the capital, Prague.

The edifices constructed during this progressive period of building national institutions are characterized by their abstract forms, monumental scale and intricate interior concepts. These colossal buildings were the “primary medium for the techniques of establishing, legitimizing and reproducing ideology at every scale.”⁴ They were, according to the definition of philosopher Louis Althusser, ideological state apparatuses which existed as a part of civil society with the purpose of disseminating ideologies to reinforce the control of the governing powers. Regardless of their complicated role as instruments of the regime, Slovak socialist modernist buildings constitute a unique contribution to architectural history and Slovak cultural heritage.

1 The term ‘eastmodern’ was proposed by the publication *Eastmodern* in 2007 by the authors Hertha Hurnaus, Benjamin Konrad and Maik Novotny to introduce the unique juxtaposition of industrialized exterior construction with highly detailed interior design notable in the outstanding Slovak architecture of the 1960’s and 1970’s. The terms listed for this period of regional architecture are interchangeable but will henceforth be referred to as Socialist Modernism.

2 Henrietta Moravčíková, “Monumentality in Slovak Architecture of the 1960s and 1970s: Authoritarian, National, Great and Abstract,” *The Journal of Architecture* 14, 1 (2009): 46.

3 *Ibid.*, 52.

4 Kim Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (London: Psychology Press, 1999), 45.

Among the edifices which transpired from the complicated, albeit fruitful era of socialist Modernism, are the *Obchodné Domy Prior* (Prior department stores).⁵ Several iterations have been lauded as being among the defining architectural projects of Socialist Modernism,⁶ and were characterized as pure, honest and concise applications of elements of Slovak architectural vernacular, reflecting Slovak folk designs, regional materials and methods as well as the tradition of interwar functionalism, to modern prefabrication methods.⁷ The state-owned, full-range department store chain sold consumer goods, including food, clothing, books, sewing essentials, electronics and home textiles, which helped to modernize the texture of everyday life and became enmeshed into the fabric of the proletariat city center.

After opening the first two locations in Bratislava and Košice in 1968, the *Prior* concept was rapidly replicated with constructions already underway at successive locations in Nitra and Žilina that same year. Over the next 21 years, nearly two dozen *Prior* locations were opened across Slovakia and a further eleven in Czechia.

The *Prior* was, for most people in socialist Slovakia, the only place to indulge in their needs and desires for consumer goods. These prototypical Slovak department stores are almost wholly obscure outside the country, but the remaining locations continue to be integral to the lives of the Slovaks. This is due to their strategic central locations which have likewise made them an attractive commodity for hungry entrepreneurs eager to capitalize on their urban plots. Collectively they represent the dichotomy of Socialist Modernism, in that their function is utterly quotidian but their design and role in Slovak culture and heritage is completely remarkable, elucidating the complex reality of the difficult heritage of Socialist Modernism.

There is a great division concerning the future of socialist modernist buildings; only four examples of socialist modernist architecture form a rather insignificant part of the National List of Cultural Monuments.⁸ The reluctance to widely accept socialist modernist buildings as a legitimate part of Slovak architectural history permits their insensitive transformation or demolition to pass unchallenged.⁹ The impulse to preserve or destroy architecture can be “motivated by nostalgia, a desire for prestige or for legitimacy, or even economics.”¹⁰ Moreover, the “complicated tangle of memories and the multiplicity of meaning attached to a place,”¹¹ especially of socialist buildings within the post-Soviet context, makes the practice of their monumental designation a complex issue. This ideological link is exercised as justification to condemn the buildings.

This paper aims to examine the undesirability of the *Obchodný dom Prior* (Prior department stores). The heart of the argument suggests that despite these colossal architectural specimens encapsulating four decades of socialist rule, their purpose as an ideological apparatus has been largely reduced and oversimplified. It overshadows the role of the *Prior* as an integral component of socialist consumption practices, from which Slovakia emerged as a mass consumer society, and their immense collective contribution to Slovak architectural development, recognized as progressive in design and technology.

With the *Prior*, we witness the often-oversimplified role of “mass-modernist” buildings within the modernist legacy overshadowing their contribution to not only to architectural history but also to cultural identities. Currently, their legacy remains entangled in difficult memories and

5 The word *prior* in Slovak means both preferential and important. It was likely chosen to suggest it was the preferred place for shopping.

6 Henrietta Moravčíková and Matúš Dulla, *Architektúra Slovenska v 20. Storočí* (Bratislava: Slovart, 2002), 83.

7 Henrietta Moravčíková, “Late Modernism in Slovakia. Expanding the Limits,” in *Eastmodern: Architecture and Design of the 1960s and 1970s in Slovakia* (Vienna: Springer Vienna Architecture, 2007), 193.

8 The four buildings representing this period included on the list are the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, the New Bridge and the Slovak Broadcast building in Bratislava, and the Memorial of Slovak antifascist movement in Banská Bystrica.

9 Henrietta Moravčíková “Modern Architecture in Time and Appropriate Conditions for Its Sustainability,” *Architektúra & Urbanizmus* 3, 4 (2008): 183.

10 Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 3.

11 *Ibid.*, 167.



Fig. 1: *Prior* Bratislava in 1978 following the completion of the second building and the Hotel Kyjev

complex histories and they face enduring contest against their existence through economically driven reconstruction, demolition and insensitive refurbishment.

Socialist Modernism as Aesthetic Innovation

The opening day of Slovakia's first department store on the Kamenné námestie in Bratislava on November 20th, 1968 was a seminal event. Eager shoppers lined up before the 6:15 opening and by 8:30, the national guard was called in to help control the throngs. The opening, broadcast nationally on television, was hailed as “not only a success for modern architecture, but also for the Slovakian society that longed to attain a Western lifestyle. Architects were impressed by the unconventional building structure and the technical innovations; while ordinary people rushed enthusiastically to purchase rare products.”¹²

Modernism Arrives in Bratislava

Lauded as one of the defining architectural projects of Socialist Modernism,¹³ work on the *Prior* department store in Bratislava began with the demolition of 60,000 sqm of 19th and early 20th-century block structure housing in the historic core of the city. The resulting triangular lot was opened to a 1960 competition for a multipurpose complex of department store and hotel which was won by Slovak architect Ivan Matušik.

There was a great need for a department store; there was a severe lack of commercial retail space in Slovakia with only 197 m² of retail space per 1,000 people in contrast to the 371 sqm per 1,000 in the economically viable West.¹⁴ (Fig. 1)

¹² Moravčíková “Late Modernism in Slovakia,” 190.

¹³ Moravčíková and Dulla, *Architektúra Slovenska*, 83.

¹⁴ Miloslav Král, “Otvorenie OC PRIOR Bratislava 1968 Zákazník kontra predajne,” YouTube video, 27:25, last accessed 23 August 2017.

The proposed design was divided into three phases, beginning with a triangular department store, which opened on Kamenné Námestie on November 20th, 1968. In 1969, Matusík won the Dušan Jurkovič Prize, the most prestigious architectural award in Slovakia, for the completed section of the complex which was commended by the jury for the depth of its contribution to Slovak architectural development.¹⁵

In 1976 the three-sided prism *Prior* building was joined by a walkway into a secondary rectangular building as an already much-needed expansion for the department store. This narrow building was later attached to the Hotel Kyjev when it was finally completed in 1978. It was completely clad in striking mono-material travertine slabs which unified the multi-purpose complex.

Typological Characteristics in Košice

The design of the *Obchodný Dom Prior* in the eastern city of Košice was put to an architectural contest awarded to a young female architect from Brno, Růžena Žertová, from the Státním projektovém ústavu obchodu Brno (SPÚO).¹⁶ It opened on November 22nd, 1968 and its design, as a modern interpretation of its local context, was highly praised by famed Czech modernist architect Bohuslav Fuchs.¹⁷ Žertová was responsible for the design of a further two *Prior* locations in Pardubice and Ostrava. Aspects of both Matusík and Žertová's designs informed the *Prior* department store typology which was finalized in 1973 and applied to all ensuing constructions.¹⁸ While the buildings all varied in design, some elements persisted from the early iterations. The buildings presented an image of sophistication, modernity and prosperity through their characteristic abstraction, massive volumes and harmonious interiors. The sheer volume of the architecture, which dominated the historic city centers in which they were constructed, implied abundance and institutional significance. The Košice store rose to the same height as a neighboring functionalist building but towered imposingly over the remaining historic two to four-story buildings. Many regarded the building as insensitive to its surroundings, but others praised the tactful nature of its design in the context of the street. (Fig. 2)

One of the defining *Prior* typology characteristics, established by Žertová and Matusík, was the dramatic façade, a way to attract attention to the store since commercial practices such as advertising or marketing were fiercely criticized as being capitalist.¹⁹ In Košice, the optical façade featured a gentle geometric relief that was intended to echo the plaster relief found on nearby historic buildings.²⁰ The façade consisted of individual three-dimensional square terrazzo panels in two different reliefs organized to form a rising vertical pattern. Depending on the time of day, the façade transforms offering a playful illusion by appealing to shadow and light; that was the result of a collaboration between Žertová and Czech sculptor Jana Bartošová-Vilhanová who used cement from the state company Cementa Prešov from the regional town of Šarišské Lúky. The sculptural façade, cantilevered over the ground floor entrance and recessed on the fourth floor, made the building appear to float above the sidewalk, particularly at night, when the façade was illuminated by lights.

Aesthetic Appropriations

As the sole client and investor for architects, the regime appropriated the modernist sensibilities of the architects responsible for the monumental works of socialist Modernism in Slovakia. This compromised the positions of Slovak architects, whose designs were not tied up exclusively to the political demands of the regime. Rather, they felt they were a product of the paradoxical

15 The building was considered a wonderful expression of traditional craftsmanship and regional Slovak character. Moravčíková, "Modern Architecture," 182.

16 Brno State Planning Institute of Commerce.

17 Petr Klima, *Růžena Žertová: Architektka domů i věcí* (Prague: Vysoká škola uměleckopřmyslová V Praze, 2016), 18.

18 *Ibid.*, 19.

19 *Ibid.*, 18.

20 *Ibid.*

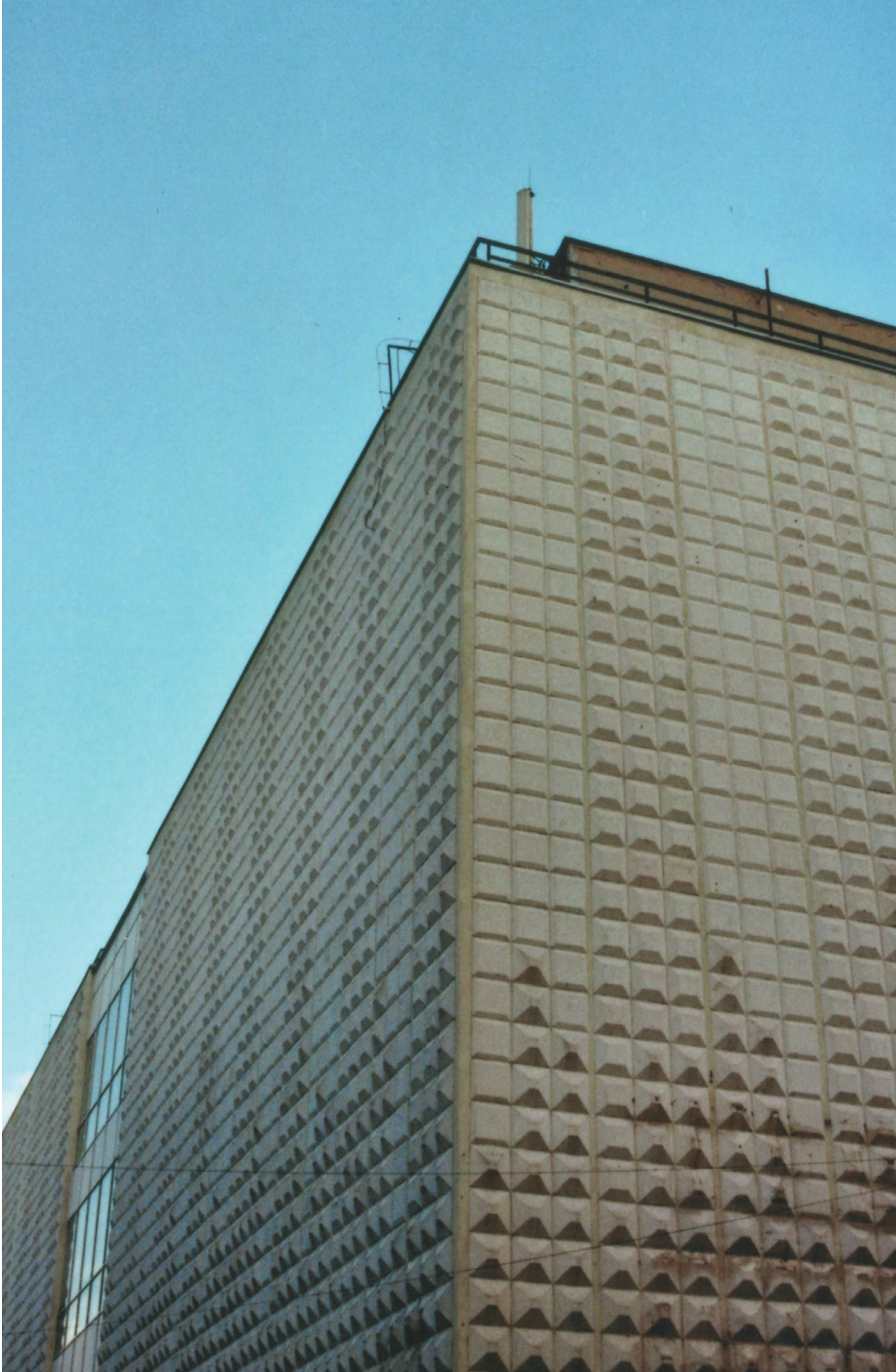


Fig. 2: Optical geometric relief pattern on the facade of the *Prior*



Fig. 3: *Prior* Bratislava in 2018

boom in artistic freedom during the time of ‘socialism with a human face’ in the 1960s which they channeled into their designs. However, in spite of pursuing their own aesthetic tastes, the architects were still operating and had “succeeded within the system, with which they cooperated and thereby supported.”²¹ The nexus of place and power lies in the unavoidable complicity of architects and urban designers with those who controlled the land and wielded the power and through their active participation in government patronage.²² As such, there is no autonomy or neutrality in architectural practice, as architecture is a literal manifestation of social configuration which cements the existing order, a building cannot be divorced from the power of the ideology which constructed it.

The Aesthetics of Undesirability

The aesthetic qualities of the *Prior* remain the most visible characteristic of their contention. The controversial *Prior* architecture is generally disliked or overlooked by the general public, something which notable Slovak architect Štefan Svetko, responsible for other monumental works from the same period, attributed to the lack of cultural awareness of the architectural legacy.²³ This can be boiled down to what Pierre Bourdieu exposes as Kant’s symbolic domination, in which a work of art only has meaning and interest for someone who is culturally competent and possesses an eye for this kind of aesthetic by virtue of their

21 Maruška Svašek, “Contacts: Social Dynamics in the Czechoslovak State-Socialist Art World,” *Contemporary European History* 11, 1 (2002): 77.

22 *Ibid*, 71.

23 Benjamin Konrad and Maik Novotny, “Eastern singularities,” in *Eastmodern: Architecture and Design of the 1960s and 1970s in Slovakia* (Vienna: Springer Vienna Architecture, 2007), 188.

education.²⁴ For Bourdieu, art reinforces the division between people who do or do not understand it. In architecture, this division is multiplied by the volume and durability of architecture which thrusts it into confrontation with the public. The structural form of the *Prior* has remained unchanged and “just like abstract art—remained hard to grasp for the majority of ordinary people.”²⁵

Present Dilapidation

As many of the *Prior* Bratislava’s most vital and distinctive aspects have not been sufficiently maintained, its aesthetic impact pales in contrast to the elegant and stimulating continuity of its original details visible in historic footage and photographs. In particular, the dilapidation of the travertine by both man-made and natural sources is one of the most flagrant causes of the aesthetic undesirability of the *Prior*. The tarnished travertine evinces the lack of care which also leads to the negative perception of the building. A dilapidated building calls for questioning and judgement from the public who are reminded of their mortality in its decay. The disintegration of a building over time can drastically affect perceptions and attitudes as to its architecture. (Fig. 3)

The choice of travertine from the Spiš region of Slovakia as the unifying cladding material for the complex by Matušík was both aesthetic and economic; as a domestic product, travertine was cheap and accessible in large quantities. Historically, it had been used in the construction of castles and churches since before the 12th century. The stones were cut by stonemasons using traditional tools to slabs of three and a half centimeters thick and were assembled on the building to display their pattern supervised by Matušík.²⁶ For this reason, the *Prior* in Bratislava was noted as an excellent execution of Slovak architectural vernacular that integrated the monumental architecture into the urban fabric of the city center.²⁷ It was, according to Matušík, possibly the largest application of travertine from a single region in a single location.²⁸ The sheer volume of travertine used on a singular building recalls the omnipotent power of the regime. Travertine was also selected for its durability and cleanability. However, the highly porous properties of the travertine cause color variations depending on weather conditions. Likewise, the porosity allows weeds and small plants to grow in crevices which cause cracks and contribute to its overall negligent appearance. Under its original conditions, the travertine appeared uniform, but its existing rough tonalities manifest as urban grime. The building is adorned with a proliferation of hanging advertisements which disturbs what was intended to be an endless layer of the light-colored rock. There is also plenty of graffiti and attempts to scrub it away have proved unsuccessful; the porous travertine soaks up the paint, leaving stains. The effect of the graffiti on the stone is not explicitly contributing to the official discourse against the building; its influence is implicit in that it contributes to the overall image of decay.

Socialist Modernism as an Ideological Instrument

Architecture is recognized as a material display of power, whose durability “testifies to the endurance of society, the superiority of its culture, and the strength of its institutions.”²⁹ As such, architecture is a “crucial instrument for expressing stability, significance and importance,” which aims to demonstrate “the power and stability of the national economy

24 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), 2-3.

25 Moravčíková, “Late Modernism in Slovakia,” 193.

26 Interview with Ivan Matušík in *Eastmodern: Architecture and Design of the 1960s and 1970s in Slovakia* (Vienna: Springer Vienna Architecture, 2007), 214.

27 Moravčíková, “Monumentality in Slovak architecture,” 56.

28 Ikony.tv. “IKONY - Štvorec vs. kruh.” Directed by Kristína Leidenfrostova. 2017. Bratislava: Vimeo. 13:00-13:05.

29 Marko Sančanin, “Pieces in the Crypt,” in *Between Walls and Windows: Architektur und Ideologie* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), 148.

not only to local but also to international audiences.³⁰ Nowhere is this more evident than in socialist architecture where the built form was an ideological apparatus, a form of propaganda, organized to construct and frame meanings while also establishing, reproducing and mediating power relations.³¹ Through architecture, socialist regimes were able to express their authority as the sole architectural client, investor and builder. The key to the relationship between architecture and power is that it is rarely questioned as an everyday object into which our daily routines are integrated and “the more the structures and representations of power can be embedded in the framework of everyday life, the less questionable they become and the more effectively they can work,”³² in distributing ideological messages.

These *Prior* buildings were built as a show of state power and economic vitality, as a grand gesture of communicative architecture to demonstrate the material and cultural conquests of the regime and cultivate a national culture. Furthermore, by constructing a department store, the regime sought to control by coercing people to rely on the state for their purchases. Yet, the interest of the Slovak public was being served and thus, compliance and confidence in the ability of the regime to govern, increased.

The regime was also relying on seduction, another practice of power and one “which manipulates the interests and desires of the subject.”³³ With the *Prior*, the government was playing into and exploiting people’s desire for material culture. This illustrates the complexity of the relationship between public buildings and ideology as so “many interests crisscross in the production of built form and they are difficult to unravel.”³⁴

The built landscape is by far the most noticeable expression of political transformations which has resulted in making socialist architecture in the post-Soviet sphere the most gripping in modern Europe.³⁵ Political changes strongly affect perceptions of buildings that are representative of the former period. Many people simply “do not like a place because it is associated with some ominous moment in their lives” while for others this association leads them to “attribute an auspicious character to a place.”³⁶ This is due in part because the durability, high visibility and ideological symbolism of architecture make it part of a “vast cultural movement”³⁷ that is discussed and criticized beyond those who specialize in the field.

The *Prior* as a Barometer of Socialist Modernity

Aside from the architectural legacy of the *Prior*, its introduction into the Slovak market during the late 1960s was responsible for the dramatic shift towards a lifestyle of consumption previously unattainable. While the *Prior* may have begun as an ideological apparatus, it was the means and occasion by which the public expressed themselves and rejected the ideals of socialism which the *Prior* was advocating. In the department store, goods were suddenly within physical reach, “universal and more open to a wider range of people than anything which preceded it.”³⁸ Herein, Slovak consumption practices began to define them as a nation and as individuals, particularly by shopping at the *Prior*, where material culture most vividly demonstrated its ability to “materialize national identity in

30 Moravčíková, “Monumentality in Slovak Architecture,” 56

31 In the tradition of Louis Althusser (*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 1970) and Dovey (*Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*, 1999).

32 Dovey, *Framing Places*, 2.

33 *Ibid.*, 11.

34 *Ibid.*, 13.

35 Melanie van der Hoorn, *Indispensable Eyesores: An Anthropology of Undesired Buildings* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009).

36 Aldo Rossi and Peter Eisenman, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1982), 29.

37 Rossi and Eisenman, *The Architecture of the City*, 113.

38 Victor Buchli (ed.), *The Material Culture Reader* (Berg Oxford/New York, 2002), 7.

the creation of nationhood.³⁹ The acquisition of ordinary consumer goods at the *Prior* is a “barometer of socialist modernity, of changing modes of governance and regime-society relations, and of the development of the socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe into mass consumer societies.”⁴⁰ The *Prior* effectively altered the relationship between the regime and the public as material concessions made the public realize that, to some degree, they could exercise their own power over the regime. For Althusser, an ideological state apparatus can, in turn, become the site of rebellion against the ruling class. As material desires unflinchingly continued to surpass the supply, the *Prior* was a credible instigator of the Velvet Revolution.

Furthermore, using Maurice Halbwachs’ definition of history as “not a chronological sequence of events and dates, but whatever distinguishes one period from all others,”⁴¹ the opening of the *Prior* in Slovakia brought about “the consumption and gradual redefinition of luxury,” that was no longer limited to only “a privileged few but increasingly by the masses.”⁴² It effectively separated the period when shopping was a task performed out of sheer necessity, with varying degrees of difficulty due to lack of commercial spaces, chronic shortages and widespread consumption inequality,⁴³ from the period in which consumption became a leisurely experience within a space designed to fuel a culture of material desire.

Presently, the *Prior* is marred by the political disposition of the buildings, as a relic of the failures of socialism, rather than discussed as a credible contributor to dismantling socialism in Czechoslovakia.

Marketing Socialism Through Consumption

As a product of the liberal concessions made to the public following the Thaw and the subsequent period of ‘socialism with a human face’ in Czechoslovakia, the *Prior* was meant to address the discrepancy between the true nature of life under socialism and the known Western consumption experience. The need to appease mass discontent is “often cited as a major factor in the decision by socialist regimes to stabilize by expanding their offerings in consumer goods.”⁴⁴ The successive socialist consumption culture sought to legitimize and market socialism, much like the Khrushchev-era mass housing developments. The consequential “reorientation of the command economy toward the mass production and distribution of consumer goods,” helped build the “material and ideological conditions for relatively rapid growth in consumption and the production of socialist consumer culture,”⁴⁵ and led to the opening of the *Prior*.

Department stores were deemed the most rational forms of retail by the regime as a “centralized, concentrated, modern and “scientific” form that lent itself ready to top-down planning.”⁴⁶ By providing a space in which concessions to the consumer were indulged, the state could predict and control the public’s consumption desires, how they were answered

39 Ibid.

40 David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (eds.), *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 26.

41 Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 57.

42 Crowley and Reid, *Pleasures in Socialism*, 11.

43 Certain occupations, such as doctors and teachers, were often privy to receive material favors (bribes). Likewise, for those lucky to have an inside contact within the consumer goods industry, news of stock shipments was always first relayed to friends. Timeliness was of the essence for procurement. For those lacking the provision of services worthy of material bribes or the time to wait in queues, getting what you needed proved challenging. Svašek, “Contacts,” 80.

44 Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger (eds.), *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8.

45 Ibid., 14-15.

46 Patrick Hyder Patterson, “Risky Business: What Was Really Being Sold in the Department Stores of Socialist Eastern Europe?” in *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, eds. Bren, Paulina and Mary Neuburger, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 119.

and in which quantities.⁴⁷ The shortfall of consumer goods was exercised as a way to maintain control and power over the public.

Yearning for More

The most widely discussed aspect of socialist consumption was the deficit of goods utilized by the regime as an instrument of control and maintenance of power.⁴⁸ In the 'rational management' of consumption, products, including food, were used as a political commodity: "bananas were scarce as political idealism,"⁴⁹ and items were often only available for short periods of time, selling out rapidly as demand outstripped availability. Furthermore, the regime controlled what was considered necessity and luxury; items in either category were not static, but determined by shifts in production, discourse and economics.⁵⁰ Luxury did not automatically signal something beyond necessity, but anything which was consumed in a moment or condition outside of the party designations.

In the later decades of socialism, the state began to reflexively recognize that "the desire to possess fashionable clothes was legitimate,"⁵¹ and attempted to harness those desires in consideration that the "endorsement of domestic consumption would stabilize and preserve communist authority."⁵²

While some consumption concessions were offered by the *Prior*, the domestic market was not able to match the rapidly proliferating consumer desires. People were tired of domestic goods and hungered for Western products that were fueling the 'second economy.'⁵³ When faced with the burgeoning black market trade for Western goods, in the 1980s the Party simply expanded their Western offerings, which rarely lasted a day on the *Prior* shelves, in attempts to "co-opt and monopolize the black market."⁵⁴

The Slovak idiom "Podaj niekomu prst, schmatne ti celú ruku" [offer a finger and they grab the whole hand] describes the constantly increasing yearning for a greater amount and range of products resulted in the disappointment and disenchantment with the regime for continually failing to meet consumption demands. Increasingly, there was a push and pull between provision and expectation and as time passed, items which were once reserved for the elite became the necessities of modern urban life. The failure of socialism has been attributed to the material dissatisfaction of the public and the "late socialist regimes' inability to match goods to promises and reality to the aspirations they raised through their own pronouncements."⁵⁵

Within the space and conditions of the *Prior*, concessions to the consumer led to greater desires and the *Prior* "reinforced a consumerist culture of desire among ordinary socialist citizens, training them to demand abundance,"⁵⁶ and limitless choices, all wrapped up in an enjoyable shopping experience.

Maximizing on Merchandising

The *Prior* enabled the evolution of the socialist shopper by removing the "obligation on the consumer to be shopping for something in particular. Instead, it surrounded the consumer with

47 Susan E. Reid and David Crowley (eds.), *Style and Socialism. Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford/New York: Berg Publishers, 2000), 11.

48 *Ibid.*, 10.

49 Paulina Bren, "Women on the Verge of Desire," in *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*. Eds Paulina Bren and Mary Neuberger, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 186.

50 Crowley and Reid, *Pleasures in Socialism*, 17.

51 *Ibid.*, 21.

52 *Ibid.*, 12.

53 The black market.

54 Bren and Neuberger, *Communism Unwrapped*, 6.

55 Crowley and Reid, *Pleasures in Socialism*, 16.

56 Patterson, "Risky Business," 135.



Fig. 4: Original interior details of the Prior including the travertine flooring, hexagonal ceiling lights and custom designed merchandising fixtures

a world of possible goods and removed the counter as a boundary between the two.”⁵⁷ At the *Prior*, service moved from the traditional over the counter to self-service, sending shoppers on an “individual journey of discovery, evaluation and judgement.”⁵⁸

Furthermore, the architects bestowed a great deal of attention to “counteracting the unrefined quality of the industrial serial production and the scarcity of materials,”⁵⁹ by crafting intricate interiors to emphasize the quality of the consumption experience. The new open-plan retailing concept left the customer ostensibly free to browse, in the style of Westernized modes of consumption, which transformed the process of “seeking, encountering, examining, selecting, purchasing, using, displaying, and, not least, conferring meaning on goods and services.”⁶⁰ (Fig. 4)

Recognition of the implications of merchandising and its role in the success of the store led to attempts to create an engaging shopping experience and reinforce the idea “that shopping entails not only the joys of spontaneity and discovery, but also a satisfying encounter with novelty and innovation,”⁶¹ by way of the escalators, air conditioning and modern architecture. The store was designed to “fuel a shared system of values, ideas, preferences, and behaviours connected with consumption - a culture of desire, in other words.”⁶²

57 Dovey, *Framing Places*, 125.

58 Patterson, “Risky Business,” 129.

59 Konrad and Novotny, “Eastern Singularities,” 185.

60 Patterson, “Risky Business,” 118.

61 *Ibid.*, 128.

62 *Ibid.*, 119.

These retailing tactics originated in the West but their application into the sphere of the socialist consumption experience engendered their own rhythm and logic. Slovak officials adopted the methods and techniques of capitalist retailing practice, but the *Prior* was not preaching a culture of capitalist consumption; rather, at their core, they were “value-laden, culture-creating environments,”⁶³ that were advocating for the socialist cause. Since shopping contributed to economic prosperity, it was deemed an acceptable form of leisure through which the regime could capitalize on the public will to consume while, in turn, managing to “inculcate positive attitudes towards the socialist order.”⁶⁴ Department stores showcased the best of what socialism had to offer and its ability to provide consumers’ satisfaction with quantity and variety in a single location.

Desiring Distinction

The *Prior* afforded an opportunity for Slovaks to create an identity through consumption as it “opened the door to a social order in which the politics of affiliation and domination are increasingly expressed through arbitrary aggregations of possessions.”⁶⁵ Belongings in socialist Czechoslovakia, much as in the West, were markers of social distinction and the “arousal and frustration of consumer’s desire and East Europeans consequent resistance to their regimes lead them to build their social identities specifically through consumption. Acquiring objects conferred an identity that set one off from socialism.”⁶⁶

At its core, socialist “consumer culture” was not based on the market cult of differentiation,⁶⁷ and socialist production and distribution created a highly homogenized consumer culture; products were generally uniform and limited by shortages.⁶⁸ This induced a “particular emotional relationship with material things.”⁶⁹ The lack of availability and the monotonous choice caused most people to feel powerless in their consumption practices and in the expression of their individuality. Nevertheless, public demand and the consequent expansion of offerings over time at the *Prior* to include even Western-imported items turned the *Prior* into a site of rebellion.

The Desirable in the Undesirable of the *Prior*

Present Economics of Bratislava

Due to the looming threat of the potential redevelopment of the Kamenné Námestie, the *Prior* Bratislava has been under threat of demolition since 2006. There is a great urgency to establish the depth of its contributions to Slovak society, otherwise, it is fated to have its cultural and architectural value overlooked for the potential financial gains of the land on which it sits. This is undeniably the element which most jeopardizes its future, all while its potential demolition is publicly excused by its association to the regime.

Multinational grocery and merchandise retailer Tesco bought the store from American company K-Mart in 1996. On the of March 5th, 2018, Tesco announced they would sell the *Prior* building hoping to solve the ongoing financial problems in their United Kingdom home base. They cited that the continued successful operations of the store would require a large financial investment which they were unwilling to fund. Initially, there was a high likelihood that an

63 Ibid.

64 Crowley and Reid, *Pleasures in Socialism*, 31.

65 David Chaney, “The Department Store as a Cultural Form,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 1, 3 (1983): 30.

66 Reid and Crowley, *Style and Socialism*, 40.

67 Paul Betts, “The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture,” *The Journal of Modern History* 72, 3 (2000): 754.

68 Ina Merke, “Luxury in Socialism: An Absurd Proposition?” in *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, eds. Susan E. Reid and David Crowley (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 54.

69 Crowley and Reid, *Pleasures in Socialism*, 29.

offer submitted by Lordship Real Estate⁷⁰ would be accepted. In 2006, Lordship had initiated the first redevelopment scheme for the entire Kamenné námestie. Their proposed plan for redevelopment was signed by Tesco in 2014 and entailed the demolition of all the buildings with the intention of rebuilding on the lucrative central location. Lordship was interested in “acquiring the maximum use of the land,”⁷¹ by erecting offices, retail, parking and luxury flats.

In January 2019, it was announced that the development company SIRS from Žilina had purchased the *Prior* building and Tesco would continue to rent the space until long-term plans for a renewal were announced. What the future holds, as far as the cited “renewal” of the whole Kamenné námestie, remains unclear.

The redevelopment of the Kamenné námestie complex has been delayed, in part due to the efforts made by DOCOMOMO⁷² to list the entire complex as a heritage site. Their repeated proposals to the Monuments Board of Slovakia⁷³ have been met with hesitation due to the sizable area of historic inner-city housing that had been demolished to make room for the *Prior* department store. Conservationists believe the overall image of the town, which included the original historic buildings, was disturbed by the construction of the *Prior* complex.⁷⁴ They have continually refuted the heritage listing proposal and cite the buildings as having “brought chaos into the historical urban structure ... by their volumes and architectural forms,”⁷⁵ which damaged the desired historical aesthetic of Bratislava. This dismissal of the valuable architectural heritage of socialist modernist buildings in Slovakia leaves them in danger of being subject to redevelopment.

Younger generations are more liable to see the value of Socialist Modernism, free from the burden of its ideological roots, as architectural artefacts.⁷⁶ In contrast, the general public displays an absence of objectivity when confronted with remnants of the regime,⁷⁷ as well as a lack of appreciation for the architectural form.

Despite being overlooked for its architectural merits and cultural influence on top of enduring several changes of ownership, the *Prior* in Bratislava has retained its functionality and customer popularity post-revolution, operating with a busy and spacious supermarket on the underground level and retail areas on the upper floors. It remains to be seen how the most recent change of ownership will impact the use of the building.

Risking Reconstruction in Košice

The *Obchodný Dom Prior* Košice was sold to American retailer K-Mart in 1992. They, in turn, sold the building to Tesco in 1996 following financial troubles in their US base. Likewise, in early 2018, it was announced that Tesco was selling the building due to domestic financial troubles to Prešov development company MEDESPOL sro, who aspire to completely reconstruct the building. The planned reconstruction is set for the first months of 2019 and will affect the interior layout and design. The Tesco Košice abruptly closed ahead of renovations on April 15th, 2018.

70 Owners of the derelict former Hotel Kyjev building to which the department store is attached as well as several apartment blocks occupying the square.

71 Moravčíková, “Modern Architecture,” 183.

72 DOCOMOMO have already added the *Prior* complex to their register of works of modernist architecture.

73 Submissions in 2005, 2007 and 2017.

74 Official comment of the PÚSR (Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic) on May 6, 2013 regarded their rejection of the addition of the *Prior*/ Hotel Kyjev Complex to the list of National Cultural Monument. Archival Information from the Department of Architecture at the Institute of Construction and Architecture, Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava, SK.

75 Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic rejection of the proposal to list five architectural works as cultural monuments, 18th July, 2008.

76 Moravčíková, “Monumentality in Slovak Architecture,” 62-63.

77 Konrad and Novotny, “Eastern Singularities,” 188.

This puts the landmark façade in a precarious situation, facing possible reconstruction. Since it stands within the historic cultural monument zone, the developers should be forced to preserve it. According to the company, they are communicating with the heritage authority on instructions regarding the preservation of the façade.⁷⁸ However, in a country riddled with corruption, concerns over its preservation are not unwarranted. Petr Klíma, the author of a book devoted to the works and life of the architect Růžena Žertová, has drawn attention to the importance of the iconic façade, which is emblazoned in the minds of every Košice and eastern Slovak inhabitant.⁷⁹ Worried citizens have voiced concerns over parting with this integral and beloved piece which was part of their city fabric for the last 50 years. Furthermore, it remained highly valued as a valuable central supermarket.

Concurrently to the Tesco era of the *Prior* coming to a close, a burgeoning discourse has opened up around the legacy, quality and value of architecture, which now faces unknown refurbishment.

The *Prior* Stores as Victims of Post-Communist Revisionism

The form of the *Prior* is still absorbed by the regime and regarded as iconic for the experience of capitalist absurdity while living under socialism. Perceptions of it as an ideological relic remain in part due to collective memory, strengthened by the lingering availability of first-hand recollections within the community.

The demolition of the *Prior* department stores and likewise other examples of Socialist Modernism could be interpreted as a form of post-Communist revisionism where the painful memories of the past regime are being suppressed in favor of narratives which better comply with current economic and political leadership. Local and national political powers wield the capacity to affect architecture as demonstrated in the interplay between power and architecture. As such, politics control what is remembered and what is forgotten. The deliberate erasure of memory can also be tied to interest groups and entrepreneurs, as in the case of the *Prior*, where entrepreneurs are permitted to decide which parts of the historical narrative will be maintained in Slovakia.

Architecture holds a place in the collective national narrative and, by means of transforming architecture, the collective memory is also changed. The social nature of collective memory means it is dependent on a context for it to become embedded in social circles through its incorporation into rituals, whether formal or informal. Collective memory is space-sensitive, meaning that the ability to remember is associated with the place in which the memory was built. Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, in “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” argue that spatial rituals specific to a society and epoch lend identity to that group from which it “derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity.”⁸⁰ Spatial memory is inherent to recalling the routines and rituals which define us as a group in that “each aspect, each detail, of this place has a meaning intelligible only to members of the group.”⁸¹ Space corresponds to aspects of the stable structure and daily lives of those who participate in it by forging “habits related to a specific physical setting,”⁸² which are remarkably equipped to resist change, so long as the corresponding space remains. These spatial habits are “constitutive of who you are.”⁸³

78 Interview with Matúšom Chomom from AZOR s.r.o, speaking on behalf of the investor on *Radio Košice*, Téma 16.4.2018 *Obchodný dom Prior* (Tesco).

79 The potential loss of the facade was a leading topic of discussion on the April 16th, 2018 *Radio Košice* program about the *Obchodný dom Prior* (Tesco).

80 Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 126.

81 Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 3.

82 *Ibid.*, 2.

83 Dylan Trigg, *Memory of a Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), 9.



Fig. 5: A later example of the bold and progressive design of the Prior in Prešov. Designed by state project architects Fedor Minárik and František Kalesný, it was completed in 1987. The building was demolished in February 2018 to make way for a new shopping center

By effectively removing traces of the architecture from this period, demolition could be described as a manipulation of memory and a revision of history. If we destroy permanent phenomena, we are erasing the link to this epoch, as collective memories will not be embedded into the historical discourse of the nation and thus, have the chance to transcend from collective memory into history. The recent past is at risk in the displacement of the forms of the city.

The generations who experienced socialism are ageing, fading into the background whether as perpetrators, passive bystanders or victims. Architecture acts as a tangible intermediary, as a connector, between history and the individual experience. Its role is to link the process of individual recollections to collective memory and onwards to history, heritage and identity.

Conclusion

The image of the *Prior* department stores in Slovakia is one of undesirability. Their neglected, diminished or demolished forms see them faced with the same tribulations as their socialist modernist counterparts, whose persistent redevelopment and eradication by those in power, whether by political or economic circumstances, points to a tangled web of undesirable aspects which create an inhospitable ground for the recognition of these edifices as cultural monuments.

They represent a complex issue of perceptions; as a crowning point in Slovak architectural history, the *Prior* buildings represent unique works of architecture which managed to evoke the traditions of both interwar functionalism and older historic detailing by using a combination of local building materials and industrialized serial production. Their collective contribution to Slovak architectural development is recognized as progressive in design and technology. They have been among the focal points of interest groups of socialist modernist architecture who seek to legitimize their status in the larger context of Slovak monumental heritage.

However, perceptions of socialist modernist architecture are still “deeply influenced by the ideological context of its construction, the grief over the demolished original construction and the inability to accept modern architecture as a legitimate part of architectural history.”⁸⁴

My research has illustrated that the political nature of the *Prior* department store architecture as an ideological apparatus has been largely reduced and oversimplified; it was within their spatial practices that the necessary conditions for the 1989 Velvet Revolution were created, while “it is no accident that all the major social revolutions which we all know but well and in sufficient detail — the 1789 French Revolution, the 1917 Russian Revolution, and the 1949 Chinese Revolution — were preceded by a long class struggle that unfolded not only around the Ideological State Apparatuses in place, but also in these ideological apparatuses.”⁸⁵

The *Prior* department stores altered the relationship between the socialist regime and the people who realized that they wielded some degree of power through consumption over the regime who had made concessions to the public in the provision of a space for consumption practices. They were ideologically motivated constructions but nonetheless, their existence prompted the conditions for revolt against the limitations of socialism. Presently, their ideological undesirability is used as mere justification for economically driven reconstruction, demolition and refurbishment. Likewise, the aesthetics of their undesirability excuses action against the *Prior* buildings, as their negligent appearance lacks curb appeal.

Despite a rising appreciation for socialist modernism abroad, in Slovakia, we witness the problematic division between people who understand the aesthetics of the buildings and those who do not. The division is only increased by the volume and durability of the controversial buildings which confronts the community with both their materiality and symbolic meaning. The single greatest threat the *Prior* buildings face is global capitalism; likewise, it is a menace to the preservation of all architectural vernacular, as capitalism advances in the creation of spaces which serve economic interests, rather than the public.⁸⁶ Entrepreneurs who have acquired the buildings strive towards rapid profit rather than fostering the unique architectural identity of these buildings.

The *Prior*, despite lacking official listed status, are already unintentional monuments, able to “recall a specific moment or complex of moments from the past,”⁸⁷ vividly illustrating both the remnants of a difficult period, yet also, the sweetness of the brief freedoms of the Prague Spring and the peaceful revolution in 1989. The broader lack of recognition of Socialist Modernism demands a greater critique of the process of heritage preservation and how these architectural gaps could be reassembled into a different historical narrative in the future.

84 Moravčíková, “Modern Architecture,” 183.

85 Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. (1971): 159.

86 Edward W. Said, “Invention, Memory, and Place,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, 2 (2000): 180.

87 Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origins,” *Oppositions* 25, Fall (1982): 21-51, translated by Forster and Ghirardo (original edition *Der moderne Denkmalkultus, seine Wesen und seine Entstehung*, Vienna, 1903).

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