

IN THE SPIRIT OF NATIONAL GREATNESS:
THE LONG SEARCH FOR NATIONAL ARCHITECTURE IN HUNGARY THROUGH
THE ANALYSIS OF THE BUDA PALACE, 1867-2024

by
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Vienna, 27 March 2025

Abstract

This dissertation investigates the political and cultural history of Buda Castle's reconstructions from the 1880s to the present, exposing how architecture has been weaponized to manufacture nationalist myths and manipulate historical memory. Conceived as a monumental symbol of Hungarian statehood after the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise, the Palace has served as a battleground for ideological struggles over national identity, power, and historical continuity. By adopting a framework informed by nationalism theory, historical revisionism, and *longue-durée* perspectives, this study critically assesses how successive regimes have used architecture to legitimize political authority while erasing inconvenient historical realities.

The analysis is structured around three pivotal periods. The first, spanning the late 19th and early 20th centuries, explores the construction of a national architectural idiom amid Hungary's constrained sovereignty within the Dual Monarchy. Parliamentary debates and contemporary media reveal a persistent struggle between aspirations for national autonomy and the realities of imperial subordination. The Palace's transformation under Alajos Hauszmann and the emergence of iconic landmarks like the Parliament illustrate how architecture was instrumentalized to forge a Hungarian self-image while remaining tethered to Habsburg authority. This period also set the stage for later revisionist appropriations of the Palace's history.

The second period examines the Palace's wartime destruction and its reconstruction under successive regimes, each imposing its own ideological imprint on the site. Regent Miklós Horthy's appropriation of national history selectively framed the Castle as a relic of feudal greatness, while the postwar Stalinist regime, reluctant to restore its political function, left its role undefined. The socialist era's engagement with the Buda Castle, particularly after 1956, redefined the site as a cultural and public space. This shift, while ideologically ambiguous, represented a democratization of historical space, challenging the Palace's earlier role as an

elite stronghold. The chapter situates these transformations within broader debates on socialist realism, modernist architectural interventions, and the regime's paradoxical relationship with national heritage.

The third period explores the post-1989 reinvention of Buda Castle, contrasting it with Berlin's Humboldt Forum as a comparative case study. While Berlin's debates over architectural compromise and historical accountability demonstrate a critical engagement with the past, Hungary's post-transition approach has largely evaded such reflection. The ongoing restoration of the Castle, particularly under the post-2010 government, aligns with broader trends of nationalist revisionism and spectacle-driven architecture. This chapter interrogates the role of historical reconstruction as a political tool, tracing how the selective reimagining of the past serves contemporary ideological agendas.

Far from a professional revival of historical heritage, Hungary's return to historicist architecture represents a calculated political strategy, designed to fabricate continuity with an imagined national past while suppressing histories that do not serve the dominant nationalist narrative. The spectacle of historical reconstruction is not merely an aesthetic project but an ideological statement, one that trades historical complexity for a sanitized, mythologized vision of national identity. Ultimately, this dissertation questions whether Hungary can escape the cycle of architectural revisionism and confront its past with intellectual honesty, or whether it will remain trapped in the mass reproduction of nostalgic falsehoods masquerading as heritage.

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The year 2017, when I began my doctoral education at Central European University, was marked by both hope and defiance. Many of us felt that the very existence of our institution was precariously balanced, and we held onto the belief that our efforts could help sustain it. The first time I met many of my colleagues was at a demonstration on April 4—before I even knew whether I had been accepted—but I immediately felt a sense of belonging. Those early years were defined by a powerful community spirit: a shared purpose, the determination to stand up for our university’s regional mission, and the aspiration to meet the high intellectual standards of our department. I was fortunate to be surrounded by individuals who quickly became my friends, allies, and partners in both academic and personal struggles. To this community, I am deeply grateful for providing a sense of security, boundless motivation, and the resolve to keep up the fight.

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Introduction and Methodology

The concept of national greatness has re-emerged as a central theme in public discourse, fueled by the renewed prominence of right-wing populist regimes. This dissertation delves into the deeper layers of references that seek to construct a proud and illustrious national history in Hungary. Since 2010—marking the start of uninterrupted right-wing governance—the Royal Palace in Buda has become a focal point of these efforts. The reconstruction projects in the Castle District aim to restore the royal and civic neighborhood to its 19th-century form, reflecting the Habsburg Dualist era. Accordingly, this study examines the political and architectural history of the Palace and its surroundings.

The Buda Castle district has been extensively documented by architectural and art historians,² preservationists,³ and architects.⁴ While its architectural history is well explored, its political history has not been the subject of equally rigorous academic inquiry. This dissertation aims to fill this gap by examining the evolution of national architecture over the past century and a half. The topic held particular political salience when I commenced my doctoral studies in 2017, as ongoing reconstructions in the Castle District dominated public discourse. These reconstructions represent a peculiar relationship to the factual and imagined history of the Palace and the nation itself—they are to turn around the flow of time through the

² Gábor Ujváry, “A Budai Királyi Palota a ‘Neobarokk Társadalomban,’” *Tanulmányok Budapest Múltjából* 29 (2001): 105–26; György Kókay, “Dokumentumok a Budai Vár 1945. Évi Ostromáról,” *Tanulmányok Budapest Múltjából* 26 (1997): 221–49; Ábel Takács, “40 éve költözött a Magyar Nemzeti Galéria a Budai Várpalotába,” Text, Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, November 16, 2015, https://mnl.gov.hu/mnl/ol/hirek/40_eve_koltozott_a_magyar_nemzeti_galeria_a_budai_varpalotaba; István Czágány, “A Budai Vár Vonatkozó Történetírás És Művészettudomány Története,” *Tanulmányok Budapest Múltjából* 22 (1988).

³ László Gerő, *A Helyreállított Budai vár* (Budapest: Műszaki könyvkiadó, 1980); László Gerő, “Műemlékvédelem És Városépítészeti,” *Magyar Műemlékvédelem 1949-1959* 1 (1960): 41–43; András Gerő and János Poór, eds., *Budapest: A History from Its Beginnings to 1998*, Atlantic Studies on Society in Change, no. 86 (Boulder, Colo.: Highland Lakes, N.J.: New York: Social Science Monographs; Atlantic Research and Publications; Distributed by Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁴ Lajos Hidas, “A Budapesti Történeti Múzeum Az Újjáépült Budavári Palotában,” *Magyar Építőipar* 17, no. 3 (1968); Endre Prakfalvi, “Adatok a Budavári Palotaegyüttes 1945 Utáni Építéstörténetéhez,” *Tanulmányok Budapest Múltjából* 29 (2001): 343–59.

reconstruction of buildings in the Castle District from the grand construction era of Dualism. The state-funded Hauszmann Program, named after the historicist architect Alajos Hauszmann, epitomizes this endeavor. It entails the comprehensive erasure of post–World War II modifications, as well as those from the Stalinist and socialist eras, in pursuit of an idealized, fictionalized historical image. This architectural undertaking, widely criticized by professionals for lacking scientific, economic, and cultural justification, raises significant concerns regarding its implications for national memory.⁵ Beyond its aesthetic dimensions, the program represents a deliberate effort to create and disseminate a collective delusion about national history. This dissertation examines the Hauszmann Program as a financially and culturally costly manifestation of historical revisionism, offering a critical analysis of its role in the politics of culture and memory.

The relationship between national architecture and dominant historical narratives remained a focal point throughout my research. The persistent relevance of this issue in public discourse is underscored by the adoption of a comprehensive policy on public construction in 2023, the final year of my doctoral studies. This policy, which mandates adherence to the nebulous principle of “bourgeois good taste,” was accompanied by numerous conferences and publications on the topic.⁶ It forms a critical element of the dissertation’s concluding chapter, providing essential insights into the phenomenon I term “nationalist spectacle architecture.” Concurrently, my research intersected with a growing academic interest in the modern

⁵ A group of architects founded a counter-committee, which evolved into the Group Twenty-two of Architects. In their manifesto they write: „As members of this group, we have decided to break the professional silence and put an end to the indifference of our profession regarding what is happening under the guise of ‘reconstruction’ in Buda Castle. [...] We protest against: The transformation of the Castle District into a symbol of power, the establishment of office workplaces, and the politically motivated spending on historical memory that will heavily burden future generations. [...] We propose: The full development of the Castle Wall Promenade on both its eastern and western sides (halting the demolition of the two-level promenade) and the review of the construction of a replica of the Habsburg Archduke’s Palace.” Original found at: “A Huszonkettes Építész Csoport,” October 26, 2021, <https://mek.oszk.hu/21900/21999/html/kepek/huszonkettesek.htm>.

⁶ One exemplary case is Donald Trump’s executive order on „beautiful architecture.” “Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture – The White House,” accessed November 29, 2023, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-promoting-beautiful-federal-civic-architecture/>.

entanglements of populism, nationalism, and neoliberalism, particularly as analyzed by political scientists.⁷

Throughout the six-and-a-half years of research, both the Castle District and the analytical framework of nationalism proved to be dynamic and evolving subjects. During this period, the Castle District underwent extensive reconstruction, while related projects with similar ideological and historiographical underpinnings proliferated across Budapest. These include the Imre Steindl Program, which seeks to restore Parliament Square to its 1944 appearance as the “main square of the nation,” and the Liget Project, which relocates cultural institutions from the Royal Palace to the City Park. By examining these interconnected initiatives, this dissertation situates the Buda Castle District within a broader context of nationalist architectural practices and memory politics in contemporary Hungary.

This dissertation was initially envisioned as a comparative analysis of the Berliner Schloss and the Buda Palace. However, the scope was narrowed for two primary reasons. First, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted my research activities in Berlin, rendering the comparative framework impractical. Second, I identified a significant gap in the scholarly literature on the Buda Castle, a gap I was keen to address in greater depth. While I acknowledge that this study would have benefited from a more robustly articulated comparative methodology, I hope it contributes to a deeper understanding of national architecture and its intricate relationship with the political histories of nationalism, enriching the broader discourse on past and present manifestations of this phenomenon in the region.

⁷ To name a few: Scheiring Gábor, “A neoliberalizmus nemzeti populista mutációja « MÉRCE,” *MÉRCE*, April 29, 2023, <https://merce.hu/2023/04/29/a-neoliberalizmus-nemzeti-populista-mutacioja/>; Anna Unger, “A választás mint rendszerkarakterisztikus intézmény,” *Fundamentum*, no. 2–3 (2018); Gábor Egrý: “*Challenges of History and Temptations of Autocracy: History, Memory, and Politics*,” 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYQhr0cIjwY>; Jan-Werner Müller, “Prussian Disneyland,” *London Review of Books*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n17/jan-werner-mueller/prussian-disneyland>. Apart from this literature CEU and the Democracy Institute has organized several workshops and conferences on the topic.

1. National Concepts, Narratives, and Identities

It might appear that modern political systems—especially those with autocratic aspirations that try hard to establish their own hegemonic order—have readily available answers to the question of national form. Favored neo-historicist architectural styles are commonly linked with 19th-century imperial regimes, enamored by Albert Speer's monumental-classicist Germania.⁸ Stalinism introduced socialist realism, which later evolved into “socialist modernism” under Nikita Khrushchev's consolidation of power.⁹ Although these styles are not inherently national in nature, they have often been appropriated as such. In fact, the quest for a truly national architectural form emerged several times in the 20th and 21st centuries, presenting itself as an ongoing process rather than a singular moment of discovery. This process has been both experimental and scientific (or pseudo-scientific) yet historically fictional, a dynamic that will be explored in detail across three distinct time periods in the dissertation. Upon examining this process, it becomes clear that its primary goal is not merely to define architectural form in aesthetic terms but to shape the nation in its desired political reality.

This political reality is forged through the use of national history as a legitimating tool, incorporating both desired and real historical continuities into official memory. The formation of this “political reality” is often driven by what Eric Hobsbawm termed the greatest sin of historians: anachronism. Similarly, the concept of national architecture is deeply entangled with dominant historical narratives and heavily reliant upon them. In this chapter, I seek to contextualize the phenomenon of reconstruction in the 2010s, which uncritically mimics 19th-

⁸ The Germania project was an ambitious architectural plan proposed by Adolf Hitler's chief architect and close associate, Albert Speer, during the Nazi era in Germany. The project aimed to transform Berlin into a grandiose capital of the Nazi regime, reflecting the perceived glory and power of the Third Reich. *Hitler's Berlin: abused city* (New Haven: Yale University press, 2012); Julia Hell, *The Conquest of Ruins: The Third Reich and the Fall of Rome* (Chicago London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019); Matthias Donath and Miriamne Fields, *Architecture in Berlin 1933 - 1945: A Guide through Nazi Berlin* (Berlin: Lukas-Verl, 2006).

⁹ An extensive analysis of the topic in *Chapter Two* (3.5). For an important source, see: John Fizer, “Some Observations on the Alleged Classicism of Socialist Realism,” *Studies in Soviet Thought* 15, no. 4 (December 1975): 327–37, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01046082>.

century historicism, by analyzing competing theoretical and historiographical understandings of the nation. The aim is to situate the current reconstruction efforts within a broader historiographical framework, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. Throughout the dissertation, I argue that various attempts to establish an ideal architectural language for the nation are inherently statements about the nation's imagined origins and desired future. At their core, these architectural endeavors reflect conceptual histories. The manner in which the nation is conceptualized and understood significantly influences how political regimes represent history and its legitimacy within the framework of national politics. While the primordialist conception of national history—the belief that nations precede the formation of the nation-state—has been largely refuted by scholars, it remains the dominant view in nation-building political regimes. Primordialism, as a form of anachronism, and despite its academic obsolescence, continues to shape national discourses, particularly in right-wing populist regimes. And yet, we can see that from the United States of America to Central-Eastern Europe, last time at the launching of the war by Russia in 2022, right-wing regimes tend to view the history of their nations through the lens of primordialist nationalist exceptionalism.

In this research, I investigate how the primordialist view takes over in versions of history favored by the political elites and how these views on history inform symbolic public architecture. I treat primordialism not merely as an analytical category but as an essential component of existing nationalist ideologies by its very own nature. As a tool in the creation of neoconservative–neoliberal – nationalist cultural hegemony, I take primordialism as an essential tool in the construction of national identity. I also argue that the architecture that follows from the conceptual framework of primordialist nationalism has failed to take root in the Hungarian context, despite the frantic architectural reconstructive activities. While such

architecture has indeed become a widespread product of late capitalism, it is also a reactionary response to the regional and global crises of the late 19th and 20th centuries.

The question of the architectural national form is intimately tied with the concept of the nation itself—the formation, constituents, and imagined future schemes of the nation define its representation as well. As we will see in the forthcoming research chapters, the question of what the national entails, both in terms of form and theory, has been at the center of such architectural projects as the reconstruction of the Buda Palace or many other projects in the East-Central European region (such as the Berliner Schloss, the Skopje 2014 Project, which will be briefly analyzed in the very last research chapter in short). The political systems under investigation—Dualism, the Horthy regime, the socialist period, and post-2010 reactionary authoritarianism—were all deeply concerned with achieving historical legitimacy, rooted in different nationalist tendencies and the acknowledgment of the inevitability of the national framework in political organization. One of the stepping stones of this research is the argument that national thinking, or to reference historian Ernst Gellner (1925-1995), “nationalist sentiment” is not the exclusive domain of political nationalism at all.

1.1 Primordialism: Dead or Alive?

Although the concept of the nation has not solely been the province of political nationalists, it has been primarily shaped by academic disciplines such as history, sociology, and anthropology. Sometimes, it happened to be the progressive wing of the intelligentsia that try to find the one legitimate national historical narrative. For historiography, the debate surrounding the origins of nations is thus methodological, characterized by varying analytical categories and assumptions. As the literature has extensively covered the distinct approaches

to nationalism¹⁰, I here would instead demonstrate the fallacies of the primordialist view preferred by contemporary nationalist political systems and offer the modernist view of nationalism as an analytical (and possibly political) alternative.

While historical sociologist Anthony D. Smith (1939-2016) himself distinguished between at least four theoretical schools regarding the birth of nations (primordialist, perennialist, modernist, and ethno-symbolic), it is the reliance on national myths that seems to connect the respective views. Smith defines a nation “as a named, human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy, and common legal rights and duties for all members.”¹¹ Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012)—following Gellner—goes beyond acknowledging the importance of myths and claims that nation as the inevitable political destiny for societal organization is itself a myth, a myth oftentimes reiterated by none other than historians.¹² For Hobsbawm, the nation and nationhood can only be analyzed and understood relative to the historical existence of the nation-state¹³ and the exact political aspirations to create the nation-state. A key argument in Hobsbawm’s work is that it is political nationalism that makes the nation, and it is the

¹⁰ To name a few: John Coakley, “‘Primordialism’ in Nationalism Studies: Theory or Ideology?: ‘Primordialism’ in Nationalism Studies,” *Nations and Nationalism* 24, no. 2 (April 2018): 327–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12349>; Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism*, 2nd ed (New York, NY: Holmes & Meier, 1983); John Breuilly, “Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*: A Symposium: Anderson Symposium,” *Nations and Nationalism* 22, no. 4 (October 2016): 625–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12236>; Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, 7. print (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003); Gerard Delanty and Krishan Kumar, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE, 2006); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. and extended ed., 2nd ed (London: Verso, 1991); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd Canto ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, 19th pr, Canto (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr, 2010).

¹¹ Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.

¹² In fact, however, the core concept of *myth* is rarely defined in the existing literature. While Smith puts the concept in the forefront by naming it in the title of his work, and similarly, Benedict Anderson in his renowned *Imagined Communities* frequently relies on a presupposed understanding of myths; the variability in which myths can manifest is lacking from the literature. Eric Hobsbawm’s term of the “invented tradition” defines best what the content and function of myths are - traditions being a “set of practices” often referencing, utilizing myths that serve as material to “establish continuity with a suitable historic past.” Thus, invented traditions will be of similar importance to this analysis to those of national myths.

¹³ Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 1992, chap. Introduction.

underlying nationalism in historians that maintains its archaic character in the realms of public history.

Primordialists and perennialists, on the other hand, explain the emergence of the nation in natural, socio-biological, or familiar-cultural terms. They argue that the nation is the extended version of natural kinship among humans, which oftentimes reflects real ethnic and biological relations.¹⁴ In this understanding, the essential elements of nation (and of nationalism through communal loyalty and belonging) existed before the emergence of nation-states and political nationalism, the latter two being organizational forms into which society inescapably develops. The perennialist explanation occupies a space between modernist and primordial views. As Hobsbawm explains, either through continuous existence, such as in the case of Greeks, the English, and Egyptians, or through recurrence, as in the case of the Irish or the Scots, nations have always existed, but they are not considered to be part of nature and are therefore neither organic nor inevitable.¹⁵ Both the perennialist and the primordial views lack reflections on the issue of the political usage of national thinking, the inconsistencies in both theory and practice of nationalism, or the socio-economic realities in which nationhood manifests itself for its citizens. The modernist view, in contrast, understands nations as a product of modernity and finds its historical congruence in the question of suffrage, electoral representation, institutional nationhood, and its roots in the Enlightenment. As Hobsbawm put it, “the democratization of politics, i.e., on the one hand, the growing extension of the (male) franchise, on the other the creation of the modern administrative, citizen-mobilizing and citizen-influencing state, both placed the question of the ‘nation,’ and the citizen’s feelings

¹⁴ Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, chap. introduction.

¹⁵ E. J. Hobsbawm, “The Government Perspective,” in *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd Canto ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

towards whatever he regarded as his ‘nation,’ ‘nationality,’ or other centers of loyalty, at the top of the political agenda.”¹⁶

First and foremost, the perennialist and primordialist explanations are often criticized for attributing an excessively long historical lineage to nations, a claim which contradicts the findings of positivist historical analysis. As such, several scholars regarded these views as anachronistic.¹⁷ Moreover, they are prone to fallacious reasoning, as they make three critical assumptions: 1) the homogeneity of the nation’s constitution; 2) the mutual understanding of nationhood shared by its constituents; and 3) the inevitability of a particular trajectory in societal organization. The extension of nation per se to pre-modern societal organization, according to Smith, Gellner, and Hobsbawm, is a form of nationalism itself.

Smith’s ethno-symbolic approach, which emphasizes the pre-modern origins of national belonging, merits further examination as it raises important methodological questions. Contrary to Hobsbawm’s notion of *invented traditions*, Smith challenges the idea that enduring traditions can be invented, focusing instead on the instrumentalization of myths, symbols, and rituals in the pursuit of political power and territorial claims. As such, Smith focuses on how a sense of collective history and culture can serve as a basis for political conflict between nations; certain myths, symbols, or rituals being instrumentalized to claim the right to territory and power over others.¹⁸ With a *long-durée* perspective on the formation of nationhood, Smith finds that other modernist views fail to consider the importance of collective choice in the path to nation formation, as well as “the neglect of the powerful affective dimensions of nations and nationalism.”¹⁹ I would like to highlight two of Smith’s most emphatic factors in nation formation: the pre-modern binding role of ethnicity (*ethnie*) and a shared collective memory in

¹⁶ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd Canto ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 83.

¹⁷ Coakley, “‘Primordialism’ in Nationalism Studies.”

¹⁸ Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, chap. The Problem of National Identity: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern?

¹⁹ Smith, 9.

which common myths, symbols, and rituals unite members of the community into a singular identity. Smith's modernist take on nations and nationalism entails analytical categories that allow him to go beyond the often-emptied concepts of "community" or "solidarity." Nevertheless, his acknowledgment of pre-modern ethnic groupings as proto-national organizations while emphasizing "common myths and historical memories" may be found contradictory.

As highlighted by Hobsbawm, not all communities with similar potential were allowed to form into nations, and similarly, most of the nations that came to be could share neither a single ethnicity nor similar historical memories. The ethno-symbolic view considers the romantic ideals of nationalism (dying for one's nation, for instance) a kind of human condition whose roots are to be found in the basis of ethnic kinship and its corresponding national identities nourished by modern myths. Smith finds the Marxist analysis deficient on the grounds that it does not consider the option of "collective choice" in nation formation. Hobsbawm, in contrast, writes that "the insistence on choice is insensitive [...] of the fact that self-identification is a complex issue" for humans. Another stance of Hobsbawm's—following Péter Hanák's argumentation—is that in the nation-forming era, too, "nationality appears most often as an aspect of the conflict between rich and poor, especially where the two belong to different nationalities."²⁰

Hungarian philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás (1948-2023) outlined another crucial aspect, which he saw as a fundamental fallacy, in the understanding of nationalism and the historical role of the nation-state. Tamás argues that it was not the Enlightenment concept of the nation that ultimately led to the demise of the emancipated, "bourgeois" nation-state, but

²⁰ Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 1992, 128. Liah Greenfeld reconciles these categories with a capitalist critique and a perennialist take on the origin of nations, claiming that capitalism and industrialization were not prerequisites for nationalism as capitalism can only emerge in egalitarian societies. On a sociological note, she argues that nationalism is not inevitable but contingent, referring to a set of ideas that form the framework of national identity, which has vast effects on the politico-economic system. More in: Greenfeld, *Nationalism*.

rather the rise of *ethnicism*.²¹ It was the *ethnie*, instead of the citizenry, that constituted the foundation of the exclusive, homogenous, protectionist nation-state. As Tamás highlighted, ethnicism stepped in place of the ‘universalist concept’ of the nation by as early as the 1920s, and infiltrated all post-1945 regimes, Stalinist, socialist, or capitalist as well.²² In Tamás’s theory, the practices of cultural hegemony-creation since the early 1800s, which are widely labeled as nationalist praxes, such as forcing the language of the ruling ethnicity on a nation that is linguistically (and ethnically) heterogeneous (like English over Gaelic, Spanish over Catalan, etc.), are in fact ethnicist practices. He also argued that the institutions whose task was to create a homogeneous national past were fictitious and propagandist—from the maintenance of borders to the writing of encyclopedias, from the curation of history and anthropology museums,²³ and as it is in the focus of this dissertation, to public architecture. This dissertation aligns with Tamás’s perspective that distinguishing between ethnicism and nationalism is crucial for avoiding historical oversimplifications. I concur with his view that a clear distinction is necessary in any attempt to understand the nuances of national identity formation. In light of this agreement, I have chosen to use the term “nationalism” to describe the historical continuity with Tamás’s notion of ethnicism, as modern nationalisms addressed in this research are largely driven by an ethnicist agenda.

Consequently, one of the most prominent tasks for the historian is to seek the extent to which certain axioms about the concept of nation rely on mythicized historical narratives (often at the expense of class narratives) and what relationship they cultivate with the question of *ethnie*. We shall also be reminded of Ernest Renan’s remark that a nation as a phenomenon

²¹ While Tamás had from the 1980s already been exploring the distinction between ethnicism and nationalism in works such as Gáspár Miklós Tamás, *Törzsi Fogalmak*, East-European Non-Fiction (Budapest: Atlantisz, 1999), he revised his theory on nationalism around the 2010s once again, nevertheless keeping this distinction as a foundational element in his work. I turn to his 2016 article to offer the most self-reflective piece on the topic by Tamás: Tamás Gáspár Miklós, “Ethnicism After Nationalism: The Roots of the New European Right,” *Socialist Register* 52 (2016), <https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/25593>.

²² Gáspár Miklós, “Ethnicism After Nationalism,” 119.

²³ Gáspár Miklós, 120–21.

always presupposes a past;²⁴ Eric Hobsbawm similarly outlined the role of the historian in the much-quoted analogy: “History is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the raw material for heroin addiction.”²⁵ A possible conclusion from this is that the nation, founded on the rocks of nationalism, always *presupposes* a hypothesized shared historical memory, regardless of whether it does or does not possess such shared memories in actuality. (In this regard, Smith’s previously analyzed argument can be justified in not specifying whether the shared memories of a nation are objectively true or not.)

We can see that there is consensus among historians that nationalist history is often, by definition, a repository of “suitable pasts” (in Hobsbawm’s terminology) that serve national identity formation. There is even room for accepting Hobsbawm’s principal argument that the idea of a nation is itself built on fiction. However, it is important to clarify some misunderstandings that have arisen from the acknowledgment of the fictional dimension of national history-making in postmodern nationalism theory. This entails the occasional misreading of Benedict Anderson’s determining work in *Imagined Communities*, as has also been problematized by John Breuilly.²⁶ However, a careful reading of Anderson’s work reveals that this view contradicts his core argument. While Anderson underscores the nation’s imaginative dimensions, he does not reduce it to mere fiction. Instead, he identifies three paradoxes that define nationalism: 1) its perceived antiquity for nationalists contrasted with its relative modernity from a historical perspective; 2) the universal applicability of nationality as a concept versus the diverse meanings it holds for different nations; and 3) the profound political mobilization nationalism enables, despite its relative “philosophical poverty.”²⁷ For Anderson, nationalism is therefore not of the ideological, but of the religious kind—another

²⁴ Analyzed in detail in: Delanty and Kumar, *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*, chap. Introduction.

²⁵ E. J. Hobsbawm, *On History* (New York: New Press, 1998), x.

²⁶ Breuilly, “Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*.”

²⁷ In Breuilly.

reason Anderson's choice of "imagined" is consistent if understood correctly. Anderson does argue, however, that the nationalist sentiment is fueled by the reiteration of collective traits that are in fact, imagined: the political community of the nation is imagined as a horizontal comradeship; the geographical boundaries strictly represent ethnic boundaries. It is indeed the element of the imagined, but not of the imaginary, which seems to be at the backbone of nationalist sentiment which, as Gellner ultimately puts it, "invents nations where they do not exist."²⁸

Eric Hobsbawm similarly contends that emphasizing national sentiment in collective organization often obscures historical moments of emancipation and class struggle—without undermining the achievements of civic emancipation, such as those realized through republicanism. The continuous production of convenient and ideologically suitable versions of the past is a crucial tool for fostering and sustaining national, rather than class-based, identities. While the primordialist perspective has been widely refuted in academic discourse, it remains useful in understanding how political nationalism functions, particularly when attention has shifted away from emancipatory concerns and toward issues of identity.

In this dissertation, the concept of national form is examined through the lens of national identity formation—an inherently political construct that relies on anachronistic and often primordialist interpretations of national history to achieve its aims.

²⁸ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. It could be claimed that the course of the 20th century proved that one of the most forceful myths of nationalism and nationality is the one that relies on the *ethnie*. Marx and Marxist theorists failed to predict the overwhelming power of the mythical *ethnie*--because of their focus on the transnational character of class struggle, one that would outweigh the appeals of ethnic exceptionalism. The world-system theories which arose from the uneven development approach proved this point and as such they continue to gain even more relevance as we approach the middle of 21st century capitalism.

1.2 The National Form in Architecture as a Crisis-Product

In accord with the very nature of modern nationalism (inherited ethnicism), the question of the national form in architecture has been an essential part of the modern nation-making effort.²⁹ As such, it can only be meaningfully understood in its political quality, similarly to the architectural and urban projects analyzed in this dissertation. These reconstructions, whether at the close of the 19th century or after 2010, are fundamentally tied to the Palace's role as the focal point of either an imperial nation or a modern republic. Its symbolic function is inseparable from the political context of its time.

When this research began in 2017, potential comparative cases included Berlin, Warsaw, and Skopje, with additional brief analyses of Prague and Dresden—four of which are capital cities. The focus on capital cities was not driven by cultural bias or a disregard for the significance of regional urban centers but was instead a reflection of the inherent anatomy of power representation concentrated in capitals. As urban design scholar Lawrence Vale has noted, capital cities inherently carry a symbolic mandate to embody and project governmental authority. Quoting anthropologist Clifford Geertz:

No matter how democratically the members of the elite are chosen (usually not very) or how deeply divided among themselves they may be (usually much more than outsiders imagine), they justify their existence and order their actions in terms of a collection of stories, ceremonies, insignia, formalities, and appurtenances that they have either inherited or, in more revolutionary situations, invented. It is these—crowns and coronations, limousines and conferences—that mark the center as center and give what goes on there its aura of being not merely important but in some odd fashion connected with the way the world is built. The gravity of high politics and the solemnity of high worship spring from liker impulses than might first appear.³⁰

²⁹ András Ferkai, "Nemzeti Építészet a Polgári Sajtó Tükrében I. Rész, 1920-1930.," *Építés-Építészettudomány*, 1989.

³⁰ Lawrence J. Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 2nd ed (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 41.

Vale goes on to argue that “if the activity of the center features a variety of rituals, nothing more directly ‘mark[s] the center as center’ or legitimizes a regime that claims to be democratically supported than the architecture and planning of the seat of government—the capitol.”

The historical construction of the national entity (the “us” versus “them”) goes therefore hand in hand with the construction of its symbolic nucleus, the governmental center, where it is funneled into “public statement[s] of collective identity.”³¹ It is also a logical consequence of the conceptualization of nation as an ethnic entity. The metaphorical capacity of public institutions’ architectural construction is extensively analyzed in Vale’s work; the chief quest being to understand how such aesthetic projects serve the sense of national belonging. Exemplifying the situation in the United States, he argues: “the buildings housing principal public institutions are unconsciously perceived as metonymous reinforcement for an idealized and stable democratic government, worthy of our tacit trust. Political scientist Murray Edelman, author of a seminal book on the subject of political symbolism, has argued that such buildings’ catalyze the common search for clarity, order and predictability in a threatening world.”³²

It is the sense of this threat that feeds nationalist language—as well as nationalist aesthetics. Indeed, the words of the government commissioner of the Buda Castle reconstructions (an archaic, administrative role created in 2018 with the anachronistic name that translates as “constable”), hit similar tones:

It is usually said at psychotherapy sessions that we must learn how to show solidarity toward ourselves, to really understand and accept our past, and to be proud of what’s worth being proud of. This holds true not only for individuals but for communities, too.

³¹ Vale, 102.

³² Vale, 33–34.

The nation is such a community. When we reconstruct the relics of the 20th-century golden era of the Buda Castle, we undergo the same therapeutic process”³³

These sentences reveal two significant points in attitude: first, that the nation is a community held together by a shared and homogenous set of traumas and accomplishments; second, that it is the prime objective of architecture to memorialize both, while healing the nation.

The suiting historical narrative for national identity construction is a monumental one: it almost always entails an element of the imperial. The Buda Castle, buildings in the City Park (Városliget), in the palaces of the country-side Hungarian nobility, in downtown Skopje, the instrumental style of reconstruction is an imperial neo-historicist one—by the claim that it is neo-classicism, the neo-baroque, neo-renaissance that represent the most suitable version of the nation which is in essence imperial. However, the point of reference is both stylistically and historically problematic.

As I will demonstrate in the forthcoming chapters, the concept of a distinct national form has been a subject of debate, rejection, and aspiration since the emergence of the modern nation-state. The deliberate construction of national identity became a central element of the political nation-building process, accompanied by specific demands to position selected nations as culturally and politically significant in relation to their counterparts. In the Hungarian context—the primary case study of this dissertation—this process involved a continuous quest to define a distinct “national character” in art and architecture, often framed against the backdrop of the Habsburg Monarchy.³⁴ As analyzed in the next research chapter, this entailed a widely accepted academic quest into the Eastern roots of the Hungarians in the

³³ Molnár-Bánffy Kata, “„Él magyar, áll Buda még!” – beszélgetés Fodor Gergely kormánybiztossal a megújuló Budavári Palotáról,” *Képmás*, August 15, 2021, <https://kepmas.hu/hu/el-magyar-all-buda-meg-beszelgetes-fodor-gergely-kormanybiztossal-megujulo-budavari-palotarol>.

³⁴ Papp Gábor György, “„Vezessük be minél előbb nemzeti hagyományainkat a modern világba,”” *Korall*, no. 62 (2015): 167–89.

first three decades of the 20th century. In comparison to countries that were imperial centers, such as England, France, or even Germany, during Habsburg rule and after the Compromise, the Hungarian national identity could only be created *vis-à-vis* its monarchical counter pole, Austria, embodied by its capital, Vienna. For many nations, the process of justifying their existence within this political framework was far from uniform and often fraught with challenges.

The ideals of romantic nationalism, combined with the disillusionment following the failed revolutions of 1848—particularly within the Habsburg Monarchy—fueled a growing demand for national distinction from the monarchy across various domains. This sentiment eventually culminated in the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise, which codified the give-and-take relationship between Hungary and Austria. Hungarian sovereignty, however limited, had to be presented to the public in an emphatic and visible way, making this not only an aesthetic endeavor but also an institutional one. Institutions such as the Hungarian Academy of Sciences became symbolic representations of national sovereignty and were expected to embody this role stylistically³⁵— as will be explored in the following chapter. During the Dualist regime, particularly in the late 19th century, Hungary witnessed a proliferation of artistic, scientific, and academic efforts to define the “true” national form. This pursuit peaked during the preparations for the 1886 Hungarian Millennium celebrations, marked by the construction of replicas and other symbolic gestures. However, as I will demonstrate, these efforts also coincided with growing discontent with the 1867 Compromise, reflected in experimental architectural movements like the bourgeois secession or Jugendstyl.

This historical trajectory reveals a cause-and-effect relationship. The unmet promises of national autonomy, the devastation of the Great War, and the territorial losses enshrined in the Treaty of Trianon—along with broader societal issues such as antisemitism and the rise of

³⁵ Papp.

fascism—elevated debates over nationhood and the national form to central prominence during the interwar period. This dissertation examines three major periods: 1) the late 19th and early 20th centuries, 2) the mid-20th century, and 3) the late 20th century through the 2010s. Each of these periods corresponds to moments of significant political and economic uncertainty, which I argue can be characterized as times of crisis. Such crises often undermined the legitimacy of political authority, necessitating a renewal of the symbolic frameworks that held the nation together—most prominently, national identity.

In this context, nationalism transformed into a distinctly modern phenomenon, embodied in the production and reinforcement of national identity. Murray Edelman's observation about the role of capitals becomes particularly relevant here: in times of uncertainty and crisis, symbols of order and stability become crucial for reinforcing the legitimacy of the prevailing political and social order. As Lawrence Vale extensively analyzes, these legitimizing efforts often employ an aesthetic language aimed at producing what he terms "respectful terror," underscoring the authority and permanence of the *status quo*.³⁶ Vale's argument is that modern capitols are often sampled on the classical image of the acropolis, in which the citadel's

heavy walls of hard-baked clay or solid stone would give to the ephemeral offices of state the assurance of stability and security, of unrelenting power and unshakeable authority. What we now call "monumental architecture" is first of all the expression of power, and that power exhibits itself in the assemblage of costly building materials and of all the resources of art, as well as in a command of all manner of sacred adjuncts, great lions and bulls and eagles, with whose mighty virtues the head of state identifies his own frailer abilities."³⁷

He, then, argues that this terrorizing effect has been emptied out by the effects of modernity and that "capitols of today continue to crown many a frail regime."

³⁶ Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 42.

³⁷ Vale, 42.

1.3 Conflicting Powers: National Identity and Capitalist Individualism

The classical citadel, once an undisputed symbol of authority, has been supplanted by notions of nationhood and national belonging. In modernity, the so-called national style has been carefully curated to symbolize national identity as it exists in each historical moment, serving as a representation of the nation-state in its entirety. Lawrence Vale critiques the top-down nature of these efforts, emphasizing that such stylized forms of national identity are crafted by elites and governing authorities rather than by the broader populace. This discrepancy between what is presented as embodying national identity and what is experienced by the people creates a significant tension. As Vale observes, “architecture and planning are often used as tools for promoting something called national identity, but many dimensions of this phenomenon remain unarticulated.”³⁸

The disjunction between elite-driven and popular visions of nationhood is often reflected in public dissatisfaction with architectural projects, as demonstrated in cases like Skopje (analyzed in the final chapter of this dissertation). However, this work focuses on another dimension of conflict within national identity formation: the tension between national urban experiences and their embeddedness in the global capitalist framework.

The first contradiction emerges from the dynamics of capitalist individualism, particularly as embodied in the late 19th-century metropolis. Urban life in this period became a focal point for early sociology, modern philosophy, and psychology, especially in critiques of industrial capitalism. Georg Simmel’s *Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903) offers a key analysis of this tension. For Simmel, a kind of psychotic individualism prevalent to the 20th-century *fin-de-siècle* is a reaction to the effects of mass-production in the metropolis—and it is a painful state for it can never be fully achieved. The seeking of individual worth and uniqueness is in a

³⁸ Vale, 103.

material and psychological contradiction with the anatomy of mass production; however, it is something that overarches the stages of capitalism up until today.

Historically, the production of space and identity become inseverable as modern identity is inherently spatial. In the early 20th century the metropolitan individual experiencing the neurosis of constant stimuli can but attain a *blasé* attitude: a detached and indifferent outlook designed as a form of self-preservation against the sensory overload of the city. Simmel's analysis relies on the argument that metropolitan life means the perpetual and unconscious participation in money economy, also taking up a position in the "effective division of labor."³⁹ Walter Benjamin's image of Paris, as the title goes, the "capital of the nineteenth century"⁴⁰ is similarly representative of the recognition that urban alienation is a phenomenon of industrial capitalism; at the heart of which lies the fetish of the individual. The creation of the collective, national identity (the manifestation of a supposed "collective good") therefore paradoxically coincided with the extreme pressures of capitalist individualization—both taking physical shape in the form of public architecture.

The second historical conflict between national identity and urban space is found in the means of space production. The critique of industrial capitalism is crucial to understand why the production of space, for our focus that of representation, cannot be on par with the promises of individualism (which is personal fulfillment, control over aspects of everyday life, etc.). Taking further Henri Lefebvre's argumentation that spatial practices can "determine both the representation of space and spaces of representation", economic geographer David Harvey argues that the production of space not only means the physical production of buildings or symbolic places, but that space itself takes part in its own reproduction.⁴¹ Harvey argues by the

³⁹ Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," *GEORG SIMMEL*, n.d.

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin and Rolf Tiedemann, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁴¹ Bodnár Judit et al., *Kritikai városkutatás*, Társadalomelméleti Könyvtár (Budapest: L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2013), 120.

Marxian claim that since knowledge is a productive force, the spaces of reproduction are, too, able to function as material productive forces. Harvey also claims that while the appropriation of space by individuals or classes might allow for acts of social solidarity, the effective power over space results in exclusionary practices and the creation of conflicting relations between the private and the public spheres—thus between classes.⁴² It is always the dialectic relationship between the practices of appropriation, control, production and reproduction that needs to be sufficiently understood in order to change ill spatial practices of society, says Harvey.^{43,44}

The reason why the issue of the commodification of space is foundational to this research lies in the acknowledgment that ownership and market capitalism takes effect in spaces of representation, too. When historicizing the royal, cultural, administrative functions of space, such conflicting practices can be observed with the main point of analysis for this research, the Buda Castle. What we see is that industrial capitalism, individualism, and the national aspirations of semi-imperial feudal societies seem to create a particularly conflicting dialectic of representation and power; this being codified in the urban tissue of the late-19th century. As the third point of conflict, allow me to delve into the question of commodification briefly to underline how nationalism essentially becomes a product of capitalism through the construction of national identity.

⁴² Bodnár et al., 123.

⁴³ Bodnár et al., 120.

⁴⁴ Harvey's "grid of spatial practices" offers some help in understanding the diversity of such dialectic practices and their function. Without occupying too much space here by theoretically immersing in the grid, what is of use for the focus of this research is Harvey's reading of representations of spaces and spaces of representation. According to the analysis, regional culture, geopolitics, and nationalism belong to the domain of perception or representations of space, meaning that these spaces are represented by the social category attached to them--echoing Ernst Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Benedict Anderson's understanding of nation as mainly a matter of representation. In this view, the spatiality of nation is first of foremost a perceived unit, created by nationalism. On the other hand, monumentality and constructed spaces of ritual, as well as organized spectacles belong to the domain of the space of representation--where the main function of space is merely to serve as a platform of symbolism. However, both nationalism and monumental ritual spaces belong to the practice of domination and control over space by the means of material resources.

As historian Péter Hanák (1921-1997) has argued, the concept of identity is an ambiguous one, which is often overridden “either by a *differentia specifica* distinguishing one community from others, or a conscious effort of assimilation within.” According to Hanák, national identity

not only entails cognitive elements but has emotional motives as well, like loyalty, passionate patriotism (*honszerelem*), and national pride; therefore it is a concept construed from multiple elements, not only entailing a sense of belonging but also connoting an active loyalty.⁴⁵

Drawing on French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1930-2002) argument, Hanák argues that microhistory and the shift from meta-narratives to smaller units of analysis in historiography has shown that the construction of identity is informed by several more factors than just working and class conditions, as often indicated by mainstream Marxist historiography. It is also construed upon the experience of belonging to a region, a religion, race, and gender. Hanák’s claim is that because of such microhistorical factors, national identity is inherently a question of self-representation. As he put it, “the definition of identity can thus be understood as an accomplishment of the struggle for representation, the object of which is always the ability of communities or individuals to make their uniqueness known to others or the state—therefore, the elaboration and passing of self-representation.”⁴⁶

While microhistorical approaches demonstrate that multiple identities can coexist within a single metahistorical framework, the dominant narratives of nationalism often insist on a singular, cohesive identity. As Gellner, Anderson, Hobsbawm, and Hanák have critically analyzed, these narratives typically portray a relatively homogenous community unified by a shared past, present, and collective aspirations for the future. In a 1997 essay, Hanák

⁴⁵ Péter Hanák, “A Nemzeti Identitás Konstrukciója És Problémái,” *Múlt És Jövő* 8–9, no. 1–4 (1997), https://adt.arcanum.com/en/view/MultEsJovo_1997/?pg=233&layout=s.

⁴⁶ Hanák.

specifically highlights the Central-Eastern European context, arguing that national identity has achieved hegemonic dominance in this region, often at the expense of acknowledging a pluralistic national body. This rejection of pluralism aligns with the ethnicist conception of the nation, a perspective that has historically led to devastating social consequences, such as those seen under fascist, Nazi, and Stalinist regimes. Nationalism, therefore, appears not to arise from a pre-existing, nuanced identity (as theorized by Smith and Hanák), but rather as a force that actively produces identity.

The long 19th and 20th centuries offer numerous examples of how national identity has been manipulated to serve as a catalyst for nationalist ideologies. This dissertation focuses on two critical aspects of this process. First, it examines the pursuit of historical continuity through the selective use of revisionism—a tool employed both to assert national representation and to navigate the habitual or enforced servility of political elites. Second, it investigates the relentless, and at times contradictory search for a cohesive system of national symbols capable of representing both the desire for autonomy and the realities of political subordination. These two dimensions are deeply interconnected, as this research will demonstrate.

While commodification occurs on both fronts, Hobsbawm contends that symbolic and historiographical nationalism are united through the creation of national myths and invented traditions—a concept explored in greater detail in the following subchapter.⁴⁷ These myths and traditions not only imbue nationalism with a ritualistic dimension, often expressed through performative acts, but also entwine national sentiment with economic value. In this sense, they function as mechanisms that continuously reinforce the relationship between the emotional and material dimensions of nationalism, ensuring its persistence and adaptability.

I rely in this dissertation on the argument that such myths and traditions fulfil their unifying and economic purpose through becoming a spectacle in the Debordian sense.

⁴⁷ Hobsbawm, *On History*, 9.

Sociologist Guy Debord in his seminal work *The Society of the Spectacle* gives an overview of modern capitalist society as one that is fixated on the spectacular in the most vernacular sense: “The society based on modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular, it is fundamentally spectaclist. In the spectacle — the visual reflection of the ruling economic order — goals are nothing, development is everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself.”⁴⁸ As Debord theorizes, the spectacle’s function, though imminently visual, is not simply to decorate; it exists as both a source and a product of industrial capitalism:

understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the result and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society’s unreality. In all its particular manifestations — news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment — the spectacle represents the dominant model of life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production. In both form and content the spectacle serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system. The spectacle also represents the constant presence of this justification since it monopolizes the majority of the time spent outside the production process.⁴⁹

The spectacle, as Debord describes, is both a product and a justification of capitalism, producing the very antagonisms that sustain its existence. In this way, the global system of capitalism functions as the ultimate spectacle. This chapter examines how processes such as the incorporation of national sentiment into the spectacle not only erase the emancipatory potential of Enlightenment nationalism but also suppress meaningful discourse on the origins and eventual dissolution of nations.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), para. 14.

⁴⁹ Debord, para. 6.

⁵⁰ To foreshadow a later, brief analysis, there are few better examples for the expression of spectaclist nationalism than the case of the *Skopje 2014* rebranding attempt. The project’s aim was to literally write a new aesthetic history for the Macedonian nation that suited both the post-Jugoslav independence narrative and a conservative-imperial one (vis-à-vis neighbors like Bulgaria). As Macedonian then-head of Foreign Affairs Committee Antonio Milošoski declared: “in different periods of history, our neighbours or empires decided on the structure,

A central argument of this research is that contemporary nationalist identity—intertwined with conservative political ideologies and cultural hegemony—relies heavily on the strategies of spectacle, resulting in what I term *nationalist spectacularism*. The spectacle has become an integral element of nationalist thinking across the political spectrum. What distinguishes contemporary political nationalism, however, is its operation within a late-capitalist framework, which complicates both the role of the spectacle and the position of the individual. Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* offers a compelling analysis of this late-capitalist condition. Fisher argues that capitalism’s most significant power lies in its infinite enclosure—it presents itself as an inescapable system. This dynamic is both hidden and visible: capitalist consumerism conceals its dominance behind promises of individualism, liberal democracy, human rights, and personal freedom, while its vast cultural footprint reveals its omnipresence. Fisher’s analysis parallels Debord’s concept of the spectacle, particularly in the way the system’s internal opposition (such as corporate anti-capitalist movements) ultimately reinforces its legitimacy.

Both capitalist realism and the spectacle equate the observer with the consumer, creating a framework in which everything is reduced to aesthetics, severed from explicit ideology. Fisher contends that within capitalist realism, belief has collapsed, replaced by a purely aesthetic dimension that eliminates abstraction and ideology. As he writes, “capitalist

constitution, city architecture—whether they were Ottomans, Serbs, Bulgarians or other bigger states. Now for the first time since independence, we’ve put our stamp on our capital city.” A completely new city center was constructed, mainly for public institutions—along with statues such as the one representing Alexander the Great. As I will demonstrate in a later chapter, the debate around the nationality of Alexander the Great serves acts of historical revisionism in Macedonia—the debate often hits academic notes regardless of the anachronistic use of the concept of nationality. For international sources see: Ivana Sidzimovska, “After Overthrowing Its Government and Changing Its Name, North Macedonia Faces up to the Urban Crisis in Skopje,” *The Calvert Journal*, accessed September 7, 2022, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/11141/after-overthrowing-its-government-and-changing-its-name-north-macedonia-faces-up-to-the-urban-crisis-in-skopje>; von Bojan Blazeovski, “The Birth of Skopje 2014: Reconstruction of the Parliament Building,” *Eastblog* (blog), April 11, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23110.16967>; Maja Babić, “Curating the Yugoslav Identity: The Reconstruction of Skopje,” notes on art in a global context - MOMA, August 1, 2018, <https://post.moma.org/curating-the-yugoslav-identity-the-reconstruction-of-skopje/>.

realism presents itself as a shield protecting us from the perils posed by belief itself.”⁵¹ In such a world, the individual is liberated from fanaticism and radicalism but also stripped of agency, relegated to the role of a passive observer.

The declarative nature of the spectacle—its lack of historical or epistemological ambiguity—intersects with nationalism in ways that are both spectacular and fantastical. Here, the spectacle transcends mere cultural production to become nationalism’s defining characteristic. Nationalism within the spectacle thus reduces identity, history, and politics to visual and aesthetic dimensions, further entrenching the power of late capitalism and its spectacular logic.

1.4 Main Methodological Standpoints

The most essential question of this research pertains to the different manifestations of nationalist thinking in power representation: how is national history conceptualized at different moments in the long 20th century and how is it imprinted into symbolic spaces? As a result, I investigate not the historical birth of nations, but how the narratives of nationhood become a key political question in the power representation of the distinct regimes of the 20th century—with a focus on Hungarian circumstances. Eric Hobsbawm’s statement is instrumental to this research, namely, that “reading the desires of the present into the past, or, in technical terms, anachronism, is the most common and convenient technique of creating a history satisfying the needs of what Benedict Anderson has called ‘imagined communities’ or collectives, which are by no means only national ones.”⁵²

I argue that the national form in architecture is first and foremost a historical, not an aesthetic question, meaning that any style can only become *national* if history allows; and that

⁵¹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books (Winchester, UK Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2009), chap. It’s easier to imagine the end of the world...

⁵² Hobsbawm, *On History*, 273.

by its nature, *nationalist* thought assigns architecture the messianic role of representing an anachronistic vision of national unity. Without historical consciousness, the national form can hardly be achieved. Conversely, as Italian architectural theorist Manfredo Tafuri (1935–1994) argued, radical transformations in culture and architecture are contingent upon radical social change—a proposition often disregarded by both architects and politicians across the periods studied in this research.⁵³ The production of national sentiment (not just in architecture) also means that national identity becomes one of the spectacles of capitalist societies. In this context, architects and designers function as producers of these sentiments. These national sentiments tend to emerge most strongly during periods of uncertainty, which, although often global in scope, elicit regionally specific responses. The political, economic, cultural situations that characterize the periods analyzed in this research are in the Koselleckian understanding *crises*,⁵⁴ as they represent social confrontations of capitalism that offered few alternatives and can be understood as both part of a recurring pattern (for instance of nationalist radicalization) and of rupture (the uniqueness of nationalist takeover in modernity).

In spaces of power representation, ideological reproduction is particularly conspicuous. However, the mass production of symbols carries inherent risks: as Debord observed, that of dogmatism, and as Fisher did, that of becoming the breeding ground of cynicism.⁵⁵ This study identifies a continuity between the consolidation efforts of the late 19th century—aimed at stabilizing a faltering political superstructure—and the reconstruction phenomena of the 2010s. The latter reflects the dual impact of postmodernism: its failure to fully deconstruct hierarchies

⁵³ In David Harvey, “Flexible Accumulation through Urbanization Reflections on ‘Post-Modernism’ in the American City,” *Perspecta* 26, no. Theater, Theatricality, and Architecture (1990): 268. Originally in: Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, 10. print (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

⁵⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, Reprint, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015).

⁵⁵ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, chap. What if you held a protest...

of form and its success in reducing form to endlessly replicable commodities.⁵⁶ This continuity underpins the hypothesis that symbols of nationalist sentiment codified in architectural spaces of representation have become mere reference points for constructing nationalist aesthetics in a ready-made manner. These symbols can be applied uncritically across historical contexts and geographic locations, such as Budapest and Skopje, with similar effects. The imperial connotations of neoclassical monumental architecture are thus transformed into spectacles of nationalist ideology for right-wing regimes without an empire.

In conclusion, this research is grounded in the following theoretical premises. 1) Concepts of national form in public architecture are heavily influenced by anachronisms propagated by nationalist ideology, which seeks to represent an idealized national unity throughout the long 20th century. 2) Efforts to establish a national form in Hungarian architecture have consistently emerged from periods of crisis. 3) Capital cities serve as prime sites for power representation due to the centralized nature of modern political authority. 4) Nationalist identity, in conjunction with conservative political ideology and cultural hegemony, relies extensively on spectacular tactics, thereby constructing a ready-made aesthetic language that is perceived as “national.”

2. On the Question of Methodology: Long-Durée Perspective and Historical Revisionism

While this dissertation engages with topics often addressed within the fields of art history, social sciences, and political science, its primary aim is to employ findings and, occasionally, terminology from these disciplines to emphasize two points. First, long historical processes can only be fully understood through an interdisciplinary approach. This study does not seek to

⁵⁶ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *Postmodern Debates*, ed. Simon Malpas (London: Macmillan Education UK, 2001), 22–36, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-04505-8_3.

contribute directly to the literature of these individual disciplines; rather, it aims to illustrate broader connections. Second, drawing on Eric Hobsbawm's argument, this work underscores the necessity of confronting nationalist historical narratives by "telling the truth about history."⁵⁷ The central concern of this dissertation lies in the way history writing has been blurred under the cultural hegemonic project of the Orbán regime, creating a fictional strengthening of Hungary's national and nationalist identity. Hungarian public life and historical self-narratives exhibit a deliberate misreading of history, reflecting Ernest Renan's assertion that modern nationalist movements either forget history or consciously distort it.

A defining feature of nationalist historiography, particularly in the context of Buda Castle Hill reconstructions at the close of the 19th century and after 2010, is an unwavering methodological allegiance to historical determinism. Deterministic and essentialist perspectives, which frame historical events as inevitable or desirable outcomes, are evident in the grand neo-styled Hauszmann reconstructions undertaken through the Hauszmann Program. These reconstructions embed the political, economic, and social conditions of the Dualist era into the physical landscape as well. Similarly, the Orbán regime situates itself in historical continuity with the Dualist era, the Horthy regime, and—at the same time—as the "true executor" of the 1989 democratic transition—understood in a peculiarly twisted way. Such determinist historical thinking was characteristic of the Stalinist Rákosi and the soft-socialist Kádár regimes as well, but as I will show, with an outcome on the Castle Hill that, as part of a process defined by both a small degree of historical self-reflection and much larger degree of hesitancy, counter-balanced the self-referential and *hyperrealistic* nature of the regimes' history writing. Therefore, I demonstrate the ways in which the symbolic center of the nation, its royal palace, and the surrounding neighborhood, was not determined to serve any *sui generis* function, in any form, at any point in its history. Rather, I aim to show that the concepts of the

⁵⁷ Hobsbawm, *On History*, 3.

form and function of such symbolic national spaces were affected (and not determined) by changing dominant political discourses on national belonging and autonomy—and as such, the Castle Hill does not represent “a Hungarian national form in architecture,” but much more interestingly, it represents physically and symbolically all systems’ theory of change in the conceptualization of *nation*.

That is why this dissertation departs from the point of view that especially architectural constructions whose main purpose is to represent and symbolize power dynamics can only be meaningfully analyzed from a *long-durée* perspective. Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel, *Annales* historians, introduced the concept of *longue durée*, which emphasizes the significance of the long-term historical perspective that examines historical developments over extended periods.⁵⁸ Braudel’s approach involves examining historical developments over extended periods, often spanning centuries or even millennia, to uncover underlying patterns and processes that may not be immediately apparent when focusing on shorter time frames. This method of historical analysis aims to reveal the deep-rooted causes of contemporary phenomena by tracing their evolution over extended periods, providing a more comprehensive understanding of human history.

Braudel’s concept of *longue durée* also acknowledges the interconnectedness of different regions and societies over time, highlighting the global dimensions of historical processes and exchanges, without which acknowledgment my argumentation would lead in the direction of nationalist exceptionalism. Furthermore, Braudel encourages a critical examination of historical writing, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and interrogating the methods and writing styles employed in historiography. I argue that while political science can fruitfully analyze ongoing processes or even make conclusions about past events, the

⁵⁸ Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, “History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée,” *Review* 32, no. 2 (2009), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40647704>.

historian's job is to highlight that historical truth is less about the uncovering of separate historical incidents than about the uncovering of historical complexities.

It follows from the dissertation's focus on long-term change and the complex processes of historical change that this investigation is not a quest on the history of revisionist thinking *per se*. Historical revisionism, as I understand it in the frame of this dissertation, is a sporadically recurring tool in the kit of hegemony-creating effort in the political systems analyzed in this research—thus, I have decided to focus on the processes and their architectural manifestations instead. Nevertheless, it is important to lay down the foundational approach towards the question of historical revisionism to provide a meaningful context for when historiography is committing to essentialist and nationalist trends. While there are certainly works that deal with revisionism as a largely homogenous phenomenon in history writing,⁵⁹ a look at the Central-Eastern European context shows that it is far from being a one-dimensional reinterpretation of history. Indeed, as Aviezer Tucker argues in the collection *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe*,⁶⁰ “revisionist historiography shares with revised historiography the revision of historical significance and system of values. However, revisionist historiography is distinct from revised historiography in being immune to the effects of new evidence.” Historical revisionism, according to his argument, always has a therapeutic function.⁶¹ As discussed in the subchapter **2.5.3 Secessionist Views on History**, this research highlights a significant distinction between historical revisionism in the interwar period (and

⁵⁹ James M. Banner, *The Ever-Changing Past: Why All History Is Revisionist History* (New Haven (Conn.): Yale University Press, 2021). Brenner asserts that all history is inherently revisionist, as the historian's role is to continually revise and reinterpret historical narratives. While this view of the term "revisionist" is widely accepted, Brenner's argument appears to differentiate between the general revisionist nature of historiography and the more extreme forms of historical revisionism practiced in the Soviet Union and other socialist states. However, this distinction itself reflects an ahistorical perspective on historiography, as revisionist approaches were central to scientific inquiry long before the stabilization of the Eastern Bloc, where such historiographical practices had been a focal point for approximately 40 years.

⁶⁰ The 2008 edited collection remains until today one of the most prominent collection on revisionism with a specific take on Central-Eastern Europe.

⁶¹ Aviezer Tucker, “Historiographic Revision and Revisionism The Evidential Difference,” in *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe after 1989* (Budapest: Central European university press, 2008), 3.

to some extent before 1914) and its contemporary manifestations. Historians with revisionist perspectives in the early 20th century frequently employed scientific methodologies to support their hypotheses, whereas today's revisionists often neglect—or worse, consciously reject—such rigor. Vladimir Petrović attributes this shift to the rise of relativism in the 1970s and 1980s, a connection that I further explore in the final chapter through the case of the Berliner Schloss reconstruction.⁶² In light of this, the strong conceptual linkage of postmodernism and its corresponding capitalist political economy cannot be spared. Gábor Gyáni's work, most recently the 2020 monograph *A történeti tudás*,⁶³ has been instrumental in revealing the role of historical revisionism in shaping national narratives and commemorative practices in Eastern Europe. Gyáni emphasizes how historical revisionism contributed to the symbolic breakdown of the communist system and facilitated new legitimization strategies in the wake of the collapse of prior mechanisms of legitimacy. His insights underscore how revisionist practices influence the portrayal of Eastern European histories and the reconstruction of national identities.

While at the core of the division between historical revisionism and the revisioning of history lies the methodology in approaching the concept of the historical fact, I wish to focus on the criticism towards relativizing tendencies in history writing.⁶⁴ If, as Michael Kopeček has put it, the change of regime in the Central-Eastern European region meant a “liberalization of historical studies”⁶⁵ and with the concurrent fall of several historical taboos, a surge in conflicting historical narratives, a similar surge in anti-evidential revisionism can also be

⁶² Vladimir Petrović, “From Revisionism to ‘Revisionism’ Legal Limits to Historical Interpretation,” in *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe after 1989* (Budapest: Central European university press, 2008), 20.

⁶³ Gábor Gyáni, *A történeti tudás*, Osiris társadalomtudományi könyvtár (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2020).

⁶⁴ Apor has argued this at the conference “The Historical Context of the Far-Right Revisionism,” in *Central European University*, 2023, <https://events.ceu.edu/2023-04-19/historical-context-far-right-revisionism>.

⁶⁵ Michal Kopeček, “In Search of ‘National Memory’ The Politics of History, Nostalgia and the Historiography of Communism in the Czech Republic and East Central Europe,” in *Past in the Making*, ed. Michal Kopeček (Central European University Press, 2008), 81, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9786155211423-006>.

observed with the rise of illiberal democracies today. In agreement with Péter Apor's take on the matter, this research is a testament that authoritarian and populist approaches to public history are reflections of vast democratic deficiencies. Besides the shortcomings of the right-wing populist, illiberal system, as Gábor Egry has put it, contemporary revisionism is part of the mass-production of historical narratives—a “vulgar postmodernism of *anything goes*.”⁶⁶

Because the primary function of revisionist history is to construct national narratives that operate independently of evidential boundaries, the scientific merit of such works becomes highly questionable. Both Gábor Gyáni and Gábor Egry critique this diminishing value by examining the merging of public and scientific historiography, where collective, individual, and often nationalist memories are *shaped* to align with overarching historical processes. This blurred boundary extends beyond the definable limits of fiction and reality to encompass the intersections of history and memory, historiography, and tradition.⁶⁷ Historical revisionism thus becomes a potent tool for proponents of identity politics, where the goal of reinforcing individual identities—whether based on race, nationality, gender, or other markers—is pursued by discarding collective structures such as class.⁶⁸ As Gyáni observes:

The undermined state of national identity that claims exclusivity, the resurgence of identity politics coupled with multiculturalism, and, not least, the disruptive impact of postmodern epistemological doubt all result in a distinct valorization of the formative power of memory over history.⁶⁹

The reconstructions on Buda Castle Hill during the periods analyzed in this dissertation serve as a technical realization of such revisionist experiments, embodying the application of these ideas in physical and symbolic forms.

⁶⁶ “The Historical Context of the Far-Right Revisionism.”

⁶⁷ Gyáni, *A történeti tudás*, 367.

⁶⁸ Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*; Hobsbawm, *On History*.

⁶⁹ Gyáni, *A történeti tudás*, 367.

3. Goals and Outline of Dissertation

The goals of this dissertation are as follows: 1) to give a meaningful analysis of how the question of nation and corresponding conceptualizations of the national form in architecture evolved throughout 19th and 20th century Hungary. Also, 2) to deliver a comprehensive study of Buda Castle Hill's history in the context of national self-narration, countering essentialist and nationalist historical arguments; and 3) to compile a detailed timeline and source list regarding the reconstruction of the Buda Palace (or Buda Castle, as its name has shifted) from the 1880s to the present day—a task that has yet to be undertaken comprehensively from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

Without setting it as an explicit goal in the lack of disciplinary investigation, I am also hopeful that I can add to the literature that argues for the complex and *concomitant historical, social, and political* analysis of architecture.⁷⁰

The outline of this dissertation, thus, follows a periodization whose endpoints, as foreshadowed in the previous section, are points of political, social, economic, or military crises. These are addressed in the following chapters: in *Chapter One. The Building of a Nation – The Short Entangled History of Politics and Architecture in the Long 19th Century through the Royal Palace*, I investigate the intertwined development of politics and architecture during Hungary's transformation into a modern nation and Budapest's evolution into a metropolis, focusing on the Royal Palace from the 1870s to 1944. This wide timeframe allows for a *longue-durée* perspective but necessitates a focus solely on Budapest and the Palace without comparative analysis. As the central reference point for subsequent historical narratives—particularly in relation to the reign of Maria Theresa—this period serves as a cornerstone for

⁷⁰ The literature is vast on the topic, to only name a few, I would like to highlight Gábor Gyáni, *A történelmi tudás, Osiris társadalomtudományi könyvtár* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2020).

understanding how later regimes, particularly after 1945, appropriated or reacted to earlier architectural and national symbolism.

In *Chapter Two: Destruction and Reconstruction in Castle Hill – A Story of Devastation, Potential, and Hesitation* I analyze the impact of wartime destruction on the cultural and architectural landscape of Castle Hill, as well as the dilemmas surrounding postwar reconstruction efforts. The chapter focuses on the Stalinist (1948–1956) and socialist Kádár (1956–1989) regimes, during which the concepts of nation and national belonging posed existential challenges to the legitimacy of the political system. This period is marked by ideological tensions: the challenge modernist architecture faced from Socialist Realism, the hesitation to reconcile symbols of feudal or fascist pasts, and ongoing struggles to define national aesthetics. Paradoxically, this era also saw Castle Hill and the Palace emerge as symbols of historically conscious urban preservation and democratized public spaces. The chapter explores these contradictions, highlighting the political system's ideological tendency to construct unreal, *hyperreal*, and imagined historical spaces, particularly through the public institutions established within the Palace during the 1970s.

In *Chapter Three. In the Spirit of Greatness: Two Palaces in Budapest and Berlin after 1989*, I connect this study to dilemmas contemporary to the writing of this dissertation while also providing a crucial comparative case study through the investigation of the Berliner Schloss (also known as the Prussian Palace). The Palace, which once symbolized imperial authority, was appropriated and its post-1945 ruins demolished by the German Democratic Republic before its imperial facades were reconstructed in 2020 to house a museum. This comparative case study highlights similarities and differences between the Berliner Schloss and Buda Palace, providing insights into contemporary challenges of understanding the national form in architecture, particularly within postmodernist frameworks of history.

These three main chapters collectively illustrate a cyclical process of historical recycling. The narrative begins with the formation of the nation as both a concept and a metaphysical space within the language of empire, proceeds through the forced historical continuities of nationhood under internationalist oppression, and culminates in the almost arbitrary use of imperial nation-making narratives in the era of unrestricted globalization and renewed struggles for deeply problematic national representation.

Chapter One. The Building of a Nation – The Short Entangled History of Politics and Architecture in the Long 19th Century through the Royal Palace

„We would want the history of the Royal Palace of Buda to have ended at the turn of the [19th] century,”—claimed the government commissioner responsible for overseeing the Hauszmann Program.⁷¹ This statement encapsulates a yearning to freeze historical time—a yearning that raises critical questions: What historiographical reference points and temporal frameworks shaped the pre-1945 function and architectural form of the Royal Palace? How do these factors illuminate the distinct political structures underpinning the early 20th-century and 2010s reconstructions? And how did these processes shape ideas of a national architectural form? This chapter seeks to address these questions by examining the role of the baroque as a recurring aesthetic and cultural concept in both periods.

I argue that in both eras, political elites harbored similar expectations for the Palace as a representation of political power, though these often clashed with the realities of national identity—or the frequent lack thereof—and the academic struggles to define a national architectural form. More specifically, this chapter asserts that the Buda Royal Palace has long served as a vehicle for representing political power in transition from feudal to civic systems. This symbolic function aligns with the concept of the “neo-baroque society,” which perpetuates idealized, often unrealistic portrayals of society aimed at preserving the status quo. Furthermore, I argue that shifting political attitudes toward the empire and its representative style—the baroque—left a lasting imprint on later understandings of what constitutes national style in architecture and public space.

The baroque and neo-baroque serve as critical focal points in this analysis because, while neither has been explicitly recognized as a “national style” in Hungarian applied arts,

⁷¹ Molnár-Bánffy, “„Él magyar, áll Buda még!” – beszélgetés Fodor Gergely kormánybiztossal a megújuló Budavári Palotáról.”

their liberal application—and often sharp criticism—has mirrored Hungary’s political oscillations between feudalism, absolutism, liberalism, and nationalism across the 19th and 20th centuries. Drawing on the works of Péter Hanák, Carl E. Schorske, Hermann Broch, Gábor Gyáni, and others, this chapter emphasizes the importance of cultural analysis of the Dualist Monarchy for understanding the *longue durée* processes that shaped later 20th-century architectural movements.

Similarly, during the formative decades of Dualist Hungary, the political goals of nation-building—sovereignty, economic autonomy, the elimination of feudalism, and the separation of church and state—were frequently undermined in practice, leading to ongoing challenges in defining the concept of “nation”. In turn, symbolic spaces such as the Royal Palace embodied dual functionalities in representing both the modern nation and its monarchical, feudal counterpart. At the heart of the “struggle for representation,” as in Hanák’s words, was the conflict between the monarchical and the tangible or desired Hungarian representations of national caliber (or the aspiration to create such). Analyzing the Palace’s reconstruction from the 1870s to 1905 reveals an ironic twist: the symbol of a new Dualist crown endured for only the final thirteen years of the regime it was meant to represent.

While the symbolism behind both reconstruction eras of the Royal Palace, as I will show, proves to be an asset in the creation of what Anderson has conceptualized as the “imagined community,” it also proves to incorporate historical narratives about the birth of the nation that are often laden with contradictions. The reconstructions initiated in the 2010s reveal a similarly fraught relationship with the national past, echoing the detachment from social realities that characterized the much-criticized neo-baroque elites of over a century earlier.

This chapter embarks on a comprehensive intellectual and political exploration of the national style in architecture, beginning with the baroque in the long 19th century and extending to the mid-20th century. It first examines (2.1) how the baroque was retrospectively

interpreted as a precursor to the dilemmas of national belonging and its semiotic foundations during the Dualist and interwar periods. Sections 2.2 and 2.3 then focus on the political discourse surrounding the Royal Palace's function and symbolism, particularly its role in the struggle for sovereignty and representation vis-à-vis Vienna. This analysis includes parliamentary debates and construction plans that invited broader academic discussions on Hungarian history and the potential for a national architectural style.

Section 2.4 examines the architectural competitions for key national projects, including the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Parliament building, and the Royal Palace, highlighting the contributions of figures like Imre Henszlmann, Miklós Ybl, Alajos Hauszmann, and Ödön Lechner, alongside the political elite. These debates culminated in a rich discourse on the national style, the institutional dimensions of which are explored in section 2.5. Finally, section 2.6 delves into the nostalgic, ahistorical practices of the Horthy regime, which both relied on 19th-century traditions of loyalty and authority and serve as a significant reference point for contemporary reconstructions.

1. The Baroque Attitude – Theory and Historiography

The history of the Buda Royal Palace is inherently tied in with the history of the Baroque as a concept. Architecturally speaking, the baroque Palace built during Maria Theresa's time is a substantial reference point in the scholarly and public assessment of the Palace. Nevertheless, as thoroughly analyzed by historian Péter Erdősi, the concept of the baroque itself did not take root in the Hungarian public language until the second decade of the 20th century.⁷² Yet, as historian Péter Erdősi meticulously demonstrates, the concept of the Baroque itself only entered Hungarian public discourse during the second decade of the 20th century. Erdősi's research

⁷² Péter Erdősi, "Barokk És Neobarokk," *Korall*, no. 23 (2006): 160.

reveals that Hungarian art largely dismissed the Baroque for much of its history. Art historian Ervin Ybl (1890–1965), echoing the sentiment of many of his contemporaries, dismissed the Hungarian Baroque as a pale shadow of its Western European counterparts. Ybl—no adversary of the Baroque as such—went so far as to argue that what little Baroque emerged in Hungary following the Ottoman occupation was essentially “Austrian intellectual property.”⁷³

In this regard, the Baroque was summarily excluded from Hungary’s protracted search for a national architectural style. And yet, somewhat paradoxically, the Buda Royal Palace received a baroque design under Maria Theresa’s rule. Interestingly, this was not the grand, imperial Baroque associated with Vienna but rather a civic Baroque, whose nuances will be explored in the forthcoming subchapter. Another layer of contradiction emerges in Erdősi’s account, which highlights the sudden intellectual reappraisal of the Baroque during the 1920s and 1930s—a time shaped profoundly by the aftermath of the First World War and the Treaty of Trianon (1920). Ironically, this newfound interest in the “missing heritage” of the Hungarian Baroque coincided with the flourishing of neo-styles and historicism, including the neo-Baroque.

Historicism, in this context, became the dominant aesthetic of the late Dualist period—it was not only a visual language of unification and universalization within the Habsburg Monarchy but also a method that managed, rather curiously, to revive a style that had never fully taken root or been properly appreciated. As Erdősi phrased: “It is thought-provoking as a phenomenon of the late-Dualist era that the neo-Baroque form resurrected by historicism already spreads when the ‘original’ baroque was still largely dismissed.”⁷⁴ Thus, what was once sidelined as inadequate and derivative came to occupy a central, albeit refracted, role in the architectural and cultural imagination of Hungary.

⁷³ Quoted in Erdősi, 161.

⁷⁴ Erdősi, 160.

I will analyze in this chapter the long lineage of dilemmas that were rooted already in the 18th-century appearance of the Palace, which enfolded after the Compromise of 1867 and eventually took on new meanings after the Great War.

2. The Baroque: Failure or Premeditated Success?

In the following paragraphs, I will rely on sources written during or after historical styles' resurrection—giving this an analysis a kind of double lens of hindsight. Two historians of the age, Gyula Szekfű (1883–1955) and Elemér Mályusz (1898–1989), researched why a style so prominent in the West could not thrive in the Hungarian context, which necessitated a self-reflective and novel analysis of national history. During this period, Hungarian historiography—paralleling broader international, particularly German, trends—shifted toward a cultural understanding of history. The Baroque era became a focal point of this cultural analysis, viewed through the prism of national identity and the influence of Habsburg imperial rule. At its core was a question of intellectual sovereignty: was there anything uniquely Hungarian about the Baroque, or was it merely an imported artifact of Habsburg Catholicism?

Interestingly, the exploration of the Baroque in Hungary first gained prominence not in historical or architectural studies but in literary history.⁷⁵ Erdősi references literary scholar János Horváth, whose 1924 synthesis of varying interpretations of the Baroque argued that Hungarian literature exhibited a marked exaggeration of mysticism and a “cult of the horrible” characteristic of the era. Antiquarianism, symbolized by the metaphorical “Baroque candelabrum,” alongside indulgent and superficially ornate prose, he argued, epitomized the literary value system of the Hungarian Baroque.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ This process in intellectual history can also be observed in the history of canonization of socialist realism, which I will discuss in the following main chapter.

⁷⁶ Erdősi, “Barokk És Neobarokk,” 163.

Szekfű and Mályusz both argued that the Baroque could historically take root after the recapturing of Hungary at the end of the 17th century, emblemizing that the harmonization (or consolidation) effort between the Habsburg empire and the Hungarian elites had failed. However, their perspectives diverged on the question of agency: Mályusz argued that, absent the Ottoman occupation, Hungarian elites—or, as Erdősi terms it, the “nation”—would have freely embraced the Baroque on their own terms. Instead, the Baroque, following the freedom movements of the 18th century, came to be viewed as unacceptably “Viennese,” clashing with the aspirations of Hungarian sovereignty.⁷⁷

However, both Mályusz and Szekfű agree that the aversion towards the Baroque was grounded on its function to demonstrate the persisting power of the catholic church over the Reformation movements. This singular characteristic, they argued, was enough to prevent the Baroque from ever becoming a truly “national” style—if one accepts that the concept of a political nation is a distinctly modern phenomenon. Mályusz and Szekfű, relentless in their pursuit of understanding the national question, both contended that the Baroque of the imperial court was little more than an extension of the Baroque of the church, largely disconnected from the realities of non-elite society.⁷⁸ Erdősi insightfully elaborates on Szekfű's interpretation of the Baroque, which was rooted in an idyllic notion of harmony between the ruling order and society at large. This harmony, he argued, was best exemplified in the relationship between Maria Theresa (1717–1780) and the Hungarian elites. According to Szekfű, the elites embraced the ruler with what he termed “baroque loyalty” to the idea of *Regnum Marianum*—the Kingdom of Mary⁷⁹—while Maria Theresa, in turn, placated tensions through emotionally

⁷⁷ The largest disagreement between Mályusz and Szekfű is nevertheless the different periodization of the baroque between the 18th and the 17th centuries, the main line of argumentation being that the style had already been implemented in the protestant era. In: Erdősi, “Barokk És Neobarokk.”

⁷⁸ Erdősi.

⁷⁹ *Regnum Marianum* refers to Hungary's historical self-identification as the “Realm of Mary,” rooted in the medieval tradition of King Saint Stephen (r. 1000–1038) offering the Holy Crown and the kingdom to the Virgin Mary. This theological and symbolic concept underscored Hungary's Catholic identity and loyalty to divine providence, particularly during Habsburg rule and periods of political crisis.

charged public spectacles and displays of flattering deference to Hungarian nationality. This reciprocal performance of loyalty and sovereignty reveals the Baroque's enduring significance as both a symbolic and practical tool of power, albeit one fundamentally rooted in imperial and ecclesiastical authority rather than a distinctly national ethos.

One illustrative example of this dynamic is the reconstruction of the Buda Royal Palace during the reign of Maria Theresa (1740–1780). Acting on the advice of her trusted confidant, the Hungarian-born Chief Justice Antal Grassalkovich (1694–1771), the Empress sanctioned the complete rebuilding of the Palace. The structure, heavily damaged during the battles for the recapture of Buda and further ravaged by the great fire of 1723, was to be reconstructed largely through public donations.⁸⁰ This ambitious project spanned more than two decades, culminating in 1770. Strikingly, Maria Theresa, who had no intention of using the Palace as a residence, opted for a design that eschewed the grandeur of imperial Baroque for a more austere, civic-Baroque aesthetic. The facades, marked by their restraint and functionality, stood in sharp contrast to the opulent, ornamented Baroque style of the imperial court in Vienna. True to her intentions, the Empress never set foot in the Palace, instead assigning it to serve civic and scholarly purposes: the sisters of the court were moved in, and the University of Nagyszombat was relocated to the building.⁸¹ The plans for the Palace—in essence, a center of

⁸⁰ Budapesti Történeti Múzeum, Péter Farbaky, and Péter Rostás, eds., *History of the Royal Palace of Buda: Exhibition Guide* (Budapest: Budapest History Museum-Castle Museum, 2015), 113.

⁸¹ The institution was the predecessor of Eötvös Loránd University, Péter Pázmány University, and Semmelweis University; founded by Péter Pázmány in the ambition to counterbalance the spread of the reformation.

scholarship—speak of the transition from the royal realms to the civic and scholarly ones.

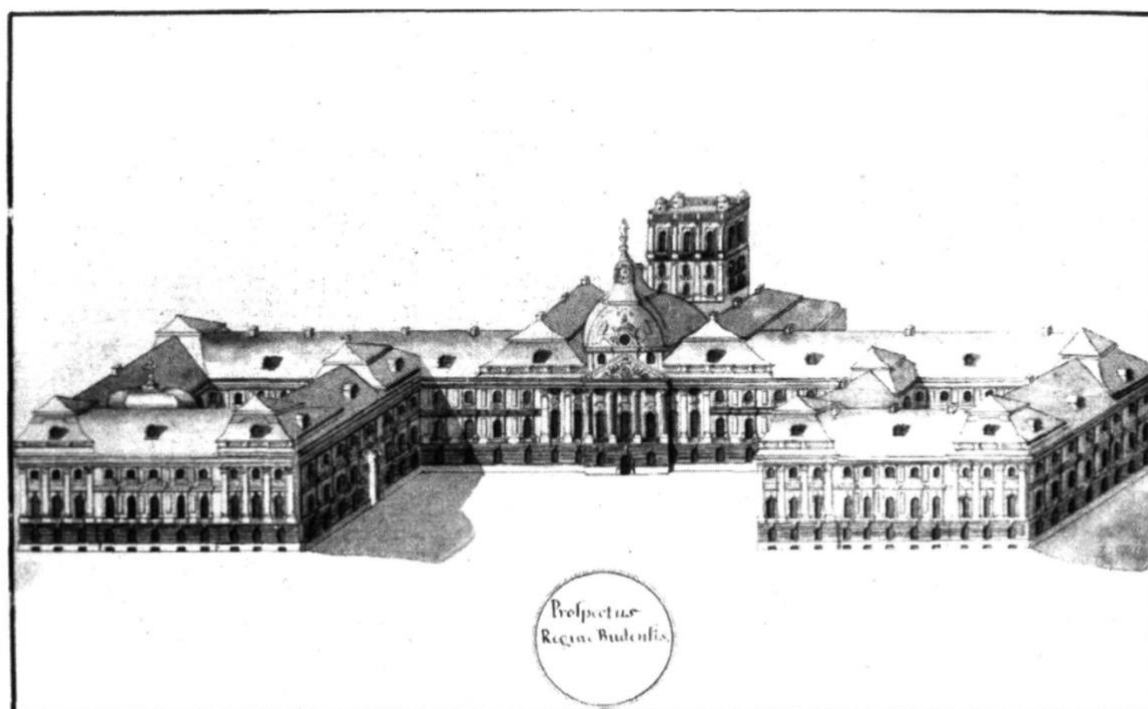


Figure 1. The Royal Palace of Buda after Maria Theresa's Reconstructions, Including the Astronomical Observatory. Source: Gy. Kelényi.

Although the Empress herself kept her distance from the Palace, she sought to mitigate potential tensions arising from this detachment. To this end, she ordered the transportation of the royal relics of St. Stephen from Ragusa to the Palace.^{82,83} These relics would become central to the emerging *Doctrine of the Holy Crown* (*Szent Korona-tan*), a principle that framed the Holy Crown of Hungary as a cornerstone of the nation-state's ideological and constitutional foundation.⁸⁴

⁸² Today's Dubrovnik

⁸³ Budapesti Történeti Múzeum, Farbaky, and Rostás, *History of the Royal Palace of Buda*, 60.

⁸⁴ A primary conceptualization of the unbreakable bond and relationship between Crown and State is theorist István Werbőczy's (1457-1541) *Tripartium*, based on references made in 13th-century scholar Simon Kézai's work. For more references on the *Szent-Korona-tan*, see Ferenc Eckhart, *A szentkorona-eszme története*, *Historia incognita* II. Jogtudomány 2 (Mariabesnyő-Gödöllő: Attraktor, 2003); Bódi Stefánia, "A Szent Korona-eszme különbségei Eckhart Ferenc, Timon Ákos és Bartoniek Emma felfogásában," *Polgári Szemle*, accessed February 1, 2023, <https://polgariszemle.hu/archivum/96-2015-junius-11-evfolyam-1-3-szam/toertenelemtudomany-jogtoertenet/669-a-szent-korona-eszme-kueloenbsegei-eckhart-ferenc-timon-akos-es-bartoniek-emma-felfogasaban>; Iván Bertényi, *A Magyar Korona Története*, Harmadik, bővített kiadás, Népszerű Történelem (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1986).

Meanwhile, the Viennese court, drawing inspiration from Versailles and Paris, adopted the Baroque not merely as an architectural style but as an all-encompassing way of life.⁸⁵ Urban development in Vienna bore the indelible influence of the Baroque, which, as Péter Hanák notes in his *The Garden and the Workshop* (1988), extended far beyond aesthetics: “The Baroque not only served as an urban and artistic style but also as an attitude, a sense and a way of life.”⁸⁶ He also writes that the court “served as the stage and scenery for public life, where everyone is in character, acting a role assigned or self-assigned.”⁸⁷ The Viennese elite, the court, and the nobility were strongly characterized and, in a sense, politically socialized on the fragile relationship between mere representation and actual governance—a state which, in retrospect, created a cultural milieu where reality and illusion are easily interchangeable. In this milieu, loyalty, servitude, and authoritarianism emerged as defining features of public life, finding their most vivid expression in Baroque forms of representation.

The tension between authority and loyalty continued to resonate throughout the 20th century, particularly in the work of Gyula Szekfű. In *Ötödik könyv* (1934), Szekfű delved into the authoritarian tendencies of Hungarian political culture, contending that the nation’s tradition of uncritical servility paved the way for its decline.⁸⁸ He argued that the illusionary stability forged between governance and society, coupled with a collective disregard for actual social realities, laid the foundation for the critique of Baroque and, by extension, its neo-Baroque revival. In Szekfű’s view, this dynamic was epitomized by the monumentalism of the neo-Baroque, which he saw as an emblem of this illusionary stability.

⁸⁵ Péter Hanák, Katalin Jalsovszky, and Emőke Tomsics, *A kert és a műhely*, 2nd-ik, bővített kiadás ed. (Budapest: Balassi kiadó, 1999), 15.

⁸⁶ Hanák, Jalsovszky, and Tomsics, 15.

⁸⁷ Péter Hanák, “1867 - Európai Térben És Időben,” *Beszélő* 2 (n.d.): 15.

⁸⁸ Contemporary historian László Németh agreed with Szekfű regarding the effects of the baroque but accused Szekfű of effectively participating in the creation of neo-baroque society by the glorification of authority, which appears in *Ötödik könyv* with capital initials (*tekintély* and *Tekintély* in Hungarian) Szekfű’s concept of the baroque was highly influence by his own political journey from conservatism.

Szekfű's take on the baroque and its resurrection was part of a more extensive, new explanation of national history, which received mixed reactions. The book (published in 1920) presented a controversial indictment of Hungarian liberalism and offered a reinterpretation—a revision—of Hungarian history. In *Ötödik könyv*, Szekfű argued that the liberal political and intellectual elite of Hungary, particularly during the 19th century, had failed to address the social and economic challenges facing the country. He criticized their emphasis on individualism and their neglect of the broader societal issues.⁸⁹

Allow me to contextualize the oeuvre for the sake of forecasting a critical element in the later assessment of the neo-baroque society as well. Szekfű contended that the failure to react to the crises of the late 19th century ultimately led to the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the unfavorable territorial settlements imposed on Hungary after World War I. However, the reception of *Három nemzedék* was polarized. Some academics and intellectuals praised Szekfű's work for his bold and provocative analysis. They saw it as a necessary critique of the prevailing liberal narrative and a call for a reassessment of Hungary's historical trajectory. Szekfű's work resonated with those who sought to understand the root causes of Hungary's political and social challenges.⁹⁰ However, there were also critics of Szekfű's work. Some accused him of oversimplifying complex historical processes and presenting a one-sided interpretation of events in an act of historical revisionism. They argued that his analysis neglected important factors and downplayed the contributions of liberal thinkers and politicians to Hungarian society and culture. Despite the controversies surrounding *Három nemzedék*, Szekfű's work had a lasting impact on Hungarian historiography as it sparked debates and discussions about the role of liberalism in Hungarian history and the

⁸⁹ Gyula Szekfű and Ferenc Glatz, *Három nemzedék és ami utána következik*, [Nachdr. d. Ausg.] Budapest, Király Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda, 1934, ÁKV-Maecenas reprint sorozat (Budapest: ÁKV-Maecenas, 1989).

⁹⁰ For more detail on the reception of Szekfű's theory see Bibó, *Válogatott tanulmányok. Köt. 4*, more specifically the chapter "Németh László Kelet-európai koncepciója és Szekfű Gyulával folytatott vitája". Also: Csunderlik, "A pojácától az ikonig: Szekfű Gyula Rákóczi -képének átváltozásai"; Andor, "Szekfű Gyula Örökségéről"; Hanák, "A Nemzeti Identitás Konstrukciója És Problémái."

country's political and social development.⁹¹ By situating the Baroque within this historical and intellectual framework, Szekfű highlighted how its aesthetic and cultural traditions embodied the tensions between representation and governance, stability and illusion, and liberalism and authoritarianism. These themes, as we shall see, also reverberated in the neo-Baroque revival and its legacy in Hungarian cultural and political thought.

The Royal Palace as a Baroque construction, therefore, demonstrates an atypical relationship to both the empire and its dominant baroque tendencies—which trait will accompany the perception of the Palace throughout the long 19th and 20th centuries, too. While Empress Maria Theresa sought to consolidate her authority by aligning with the Catholic Church and suppressing clerical reformation movements under her rule, she simultaneously endeavored to mollify the critical Hungarian elites through symbolic gestures of national recognition. Yet, the Royal Palace neither became a stronghold of royal power nor adopted the ornate imperial Baroque style typical of symbolic constructions in Vienna. In essence, while Vienna emerged as the epitome of imperial national belonging, Buda and its Palace did not. Péter Erdősi, drawing on the insights of Gyula Szekfű and Elemér Mályusz, highlights this deliberate symbolic withdrawal from imperial power dynamics, counterbalanced by the Hungarian elite's loyalty to an ostensibly benevolent monarch. Moreover, given its cultural functions and restrained architectural design, the Palace later became a touchstone for regimes that favored a more civic-oriented structure over Hauszmann's grandiose reconstruction.

The critique of historicist (neo-)Baroque styles thus was more than a mere reflection on aesthetics; it became integral to the discourse on national sovereignty by questioning the cultural practices associated with the Baroque. As historian Andrew Leach explains, the

⁹¹ Szekfű's ideas influenced subsequent generations of historians and shaped the discourse on Hungarian national identity and historical memory. It is worth noting that Szekfű's collaboration with Bálint Hóman on the book *Magyar történet* ("Hungarian History") in 1935 further added to the controversy surrounding his work. Hóman, a prominent historian and politician, later became associated with the far-right Arrow Cross Party during World War II.

Baroque, in retrospect, presented “nationalist values as much as it undermined them.”⁹² As Leach argues, “the baroque was architecture’s constant twentieth-century companion—often against the grain of historical fidelity or philosophical rigor, but regularly to remarkable effect.” The Baroque’s association with cultural (and political) decline reached its zenith with the rise of historicist styles, which were widely criticized for their fraught relationship with the past they sought to appropriate through acts of historical recycling. Competing interpretations of the past carried significant stakes in the nation-building endeavors of the 19th century, particularly in narratives that contested the status quo of the monarchical system vis-à-vis nationalist aspirations. After the consecutive wars of independence (Rákóczi’s uprising against Habsburg rule between 1703-1711 and the Hungarian Revolution of 1848) of the 18th and 19th centuries, the legitimacy of the Monarchy was increasingly contested, especially within the spaces of power representation.

3. *Classicism and National Romanticism*

The rise of nationalist sentiment and national romanticism in the 19th century found its most fitting architectural expression in classicism—a style that resonated with the ambitions of the burgeoning civil class of the mid-1800s. Classicism, with the Baroque briefly set aside, became *the* visual language of both national sovereignty and the imperial state. It is particularly telling that the National Museum, a building that exudes a monumental yet serene classicism, was inaugurated just one year before the 1848 Revolution.

Classicism in Hanák’s understanding encapsulated Pest’s evolution as a liberal city in the wake of national romanticism. As he writes in comparison to Vienna: “It makes a difference

⁹² Andrew Leach, “Considering the Baroque,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 74, no. 3 (September 1, 2015): 285–88, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2015.74.3.285>.

whether a young city is socialized on baroque illusionism, beauty, and ornamentation, or on the tolerant classicism of enlightenment and the humanist admiration of renaissance liberalism.”⁹³ However, it would be an exaggeration to claim that the city of Pest or Buda had been essentially imprinted by any of the dominating cultural trends—neither the baroque nor classicism truly defined the national style until the late 19th century. Even then, after the Compromise of 1867, the *Gründerzeit* ushered in not merely aesthetic trends catering to the nobility, such as parks for recreation, but it also created an opportunity to make a densely populated, industrialized city.⁹⁴ This contrast between Vienna and Pest is embodied in the metaphor for Hanák’s previously mentioned work *Garden and the Workshop*; Vienna was the garden, and Pest was the workshop. The relentless pace of construction and urbanization in Pest and Buda made the grand, ornamental demands of Baroque aesthetics untenable. Instead, Pest’s defining style became eclecticism.

In this context, the distinct roles of the Baroque in Vienna versus Pest-Buda underscore the symbolic gesture inherent in Maria Theresa’s modest, withdrawn Royal Palace. I contend that the Palace’s restrained Baroque design can be interpreted as a move toward imperial reconciliation. Its civic, subdued version of the Baroque symbolically differentiated the two capitals of the monarchy: the Palace did not overshadow Buda’s medieval character, nor did it stifle Pest’s rapid political and urban development. Crucially, it avoided entering into aesthetic or symbolic competition with Vienna’s grand Baroque landmarks.

Indeed, it was not until the Compromise that the modest palace seemed to underserve the needs of royal representation—a time of national modernization but also a need for strengthened imperial legitimacy. Unsurprisingly, it was after the crowning of Franz Joseph in

⁹³ Hanák, Jalsovszky, and Tomsics, *A kert és a műhely*, 16.

⁹⁴ For in-depth analyses on Buda and Pest’s evolution into a metropolis see works such as: Györgyi Barta, Krisztina Keresztély, and András Sipos, eds., *A Világváros Budapest Két Századfordulón* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2010); Thomas Bender, ed., *Budapest and New York: Studies in Metropolitan Transformation, 1870-1930* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1994); Judit Bodnár, *Fin de Millénaire Budapest: Metamorphoses of Urban Life, Globalization and Community*, v. 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

1867 that the Palace was imbued with a function it had not held since the reign of King Matthias—the humanist reformer king who had become a symbol of cultural and political flourishing during the Ottoman expansion. Yet, between 1867 and 1918, the Palace attained an unprecedented symbolic significance in modernity. I argue that this period placed the Palace at the forefront of symbolic politics, embedding it in an all-encompassing cultural project. Nevertheless, this grand mission ultimately failed, primarily due to the lack of a cohesive urban vision for the city and its spaces of power, compounded by the political and economic hardships of World War I.

4. *“In the Palace of Buda the King is the Host” – Parliamentary
Interpellations 1867-1905*

The theoretical arguments regarding the power of nationalist romanticism and the cultural gravitation towards ahistorical understandings of the nation can be traced in the debates around the reconstruction of the Palace and other spaces of political power representation. The imagined notions of the nation and its history in the decades following 1867 were heavily shaped by national political visions often linked to neo-baroque aesthetics. The neo-baroque lifestyle, for which the Royal Palace became a primary stage during the regency of Miklós Horthy (1 March 1920 - 16 October 1944), claimed historical and cultural continuity with the *belle-époque* of the construction years of the Dualist time with a strong sense of aristocratic nostalgia. This period, often referred to as the “peaceful years,” exemplifies how cultural and political elites idealized earlier decades as a time of stability and prosperity. I will demonstrate this effect in the upcoming paragraphs whilst arguing that both the Hauszmann reconstruction of the Palace between 1890 and 1905 and its post-war rehabilitation into public life were a reaction to crises of political and cultural legitimacy within the imperial frameworks.

The political, military, and social pressures on the Austrian Empire after 1848 imposed upon the absolutist emperor a slow and controlled implementation of national parliamentarism. This, on the Hungarian side, concluded in the Compromise, or as in its German contemporary appellation, in the *Ausgleich*.⁹⁵ The absolutist Habsburg regime was, on the one hand, under pressure as a result of the failed Austro-Prussian war and, on the other, because of the lasting distress about the resurgence of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, which could have meant the total collapse of the Empire.⁹⁶

The political reconciliation between the Hungarian constitutional government and the Austrian Monarchy had been a work in progress that defined the culture of politics, as much as the politics of culture, which is of interest here, indefinitely. The definitive nature of the era between 1867 and 1918 is not only due to its politically inspired character or simply the thriving of national romanticism but also the fact that it represented the most significant economic growth for Hungary in modern history. Budapest's population surged from 126,000 in 1851 to 880,000 in 1910, with its share of the national population rising from 2% to 4.8%.⁹⁷ After the unification of Pest, Buda, and Óbuda in 1873, the growth rate of Budapest was close, sometimes even surpassing the growth rates of Berlin and New York. This was true not only to the population rate but also in ethnic composition. The working class and the rising bourgeoisie comprised a large sum of the city's population: 28 percent of Hungarian workers resided in Budapest in 1910.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy: 1809 - 1918 ; a History of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary*, Reprinted, Penguin Books Penguin History (London: Penguin Books [u.a.], 1990); Ignác Romsics and Béla K. Király, eds., *Geopolitics in the Danube Region: Hungarian Reconciliation Efforts, 1848-1998*, Atlantic Studies on Society in Change, no. 97 (Budapest ; New York: Central European University Press, 1998).

⁹⁶ Ágnes Deák, "Miklos Wesselenyi on the Future of the Habsburg Empire and Hungary," in *Geopolitics in the Danube Region: Hungarian Reconciliation Efforts, 1848-1998*, ed. Ignác Romsics and Béla K. Király, Atlantic Studies on Society in Change, no. 97 (Budapest ; New York: Central European University Press, 1998), 21–41.

⁹⁷ Barta, Keresztély, and Sipos, *A Világváros Budapest Két Századfordulón*.

⁹⁸ Bender, *Budapest and New York*, 30.

Regardless of the rapid growth and growing autonomy of Budapest, the bilateral compromise between Vienna and Pest-Buda also meant a continuing loyalty, symbolic and material, to the King. In this chapter, I reveal a common area of massive urban investment and symbolic, ceremonial politics in the Dualist system that represents the duality of national autonomy and imperial constraints.

The Royal Palace, with its double function representing the nation and the emperor, the reconstructions after the 25th jubilee of Franz Joseph's reign in 1892, had a unique role in expressing such loyalties. I will demonstrate this by showcasing the debates about and around the Royal Palace. To do so, I have chosen to focus on discussions and interpellations in the Parliament (the National Assembly) with the acknowledgment that in contrast to debates even only a few decades later, which took place in newspapers and magazines, these expressions should be understood as reflections of neither public opinion nor those of the architectural professional circle.⁹⁹ Contrarily, they demonstrate the deeper political motivations behind the symbolic reconstruction of the Palace in tandem with the task of laying down the foundations of modern constitutional parliamentarism—which concerns seem to reverberate in the long 20th century.

While the cultural assertions of both the Horthy and the Orbán administrations were founded on a created historical continuity with the prospering years of the Dualist system, the road to the Compromise and the years thereafter show a much more complicated relationship between national belonging and the retrospective symbols of national prosperity than told by each regime's cultural mouthpieces. The decades between 1867 and 1910, though a time of relative economic prosperity, were also characterized by a desperate search for national identity

⁹⁹ Especially because of the existing limitations on expression of opinion. The relative lifting of total censorship of media outlets after 1861 hindered the expression of critical opinion, especially those on symbolic politics. Furthermore, media institutions such as professional magazines discussing public architecture would not come about until the last decade of the 19th century.

and its corresponding historical and ceremonial narratives *to face* the existing Austrian imperial master narratives of a subordinate but liberated nation.

There are two main issues along which the political elite of Dualism approached the Palace as the ultimate symbol of the Compromise: 1) the question of foreignness of the Habsburg court in combination with the issue of scale and expenses, and 2) whether the Palace expresses or represses national consciousness in its symbolism. In both themes, the Palace served as a platform to question the Hungarian administration's (and, therefore, the nation's) status in the Dualist system.

4.1 The Palace in Light of a Foreign Court

The question of foreignness received considerable attention in parliamentary interpellations, debates, and major media outlets throughout the entire Dualist era. In fact, the absence and presence of actual royal persons, especially the King and Queen, were central to discussions about the Palace since the advent of modernity, a concern that continues to this day.¹⁰⁰ Throughout this period, the various names for the Palace reflect different historical attitudes toward the nation and Empire. The term *Királyi Palota* (Royal Palace) refers to the Palace when it belonged to the royal court and symbolized the bond between Austria and Hungary. *Budavári Palota* (Buda Palace or the Castle of Buda) is typically used to describe the Palace's less monarchical history, referencing either the time of Maria Theresa or the period before. *Budai Vár* (Buda Castle), lastly, was adopted by the regime after 1945 to reinforce the Palace's non-monarchical image, invoking the Middle Ages. This last aspect will be explored further later.

¹⁰⁰ This will be demonstrated in the last chapter of in the dissertation.

Initially, the Dualist court's foreign character was to be mitigated already in the foundational lines of principle in the '67-ers group: the political conglomerate assigned with the preparation of the Compromise, led by Ferenc Deák (1803-1876) and the Deák-party. Law XII of 1867 implemented a separate article to sustain the Hungarian government's freedom to determine the degree to which the court is financed on the Hungarian side.¹⁰¹ This article symbolized the demand that the court, if funded by the Hungarians, should demonstrate a sufficient degree of *Hungarianness*.

The demand for a "more Hungarian" court occurred on the sides of both the government and the opposition and was made clear by distinct representatives of the political spectrum. Sándor Csiky, the radical and anti-Habsburg MP, a few months before the coronation of Franz Joseph I and Queen Elisabeth, argued that the King should

in completion of the Compromise, have himself coronated and make Buda his permanent residence, thus leaving behind the ominous political tradition of Austria of co-optation, and henceforth being a real constitutional King of Hungary. In such a case, he can rest assured that his crown, glory, and power will be secured by all true patriots who put aside the memory of their past sufferings for the sake of the common good while also guarding his authority and happiness through their life, wealth, health if needed.¹⁰²

Not long after the coronation, another dialogue occurred between Ferenc Deák and MP Imre Csengery (who later became Royal Minister of Defense). While Csengery was a loyal supporter

¹⁰¹ The 7th paragraph writes: „According to the Pragmatic Sanction, the monarch is indeed the same, as the crown of Hungary also belongs to the same ruler who reigns in other countries. However, this does not make it necessary for the expenses of the sovereign's court to be determined jointly. Such a joint agreement is not required by the goals set forth in the Pragmatic Sanction. It is much more in line with the constitutional autonomy of Hungary and the princely authority of the Hungarian king that the Hungarian Parliament, upon the proposal of the responsible Hungarian ministry, separately approves the expenses of the Hungarian king's court. The approval and allocation of the expenses of the court are not considered a shared matter.”

¹⁰² “Képviselőházi Irományok, 1865. VII. Kötet” (Országgyűlési Könyvtár, March 26, 1967). The original Hungarian reads for reference as: „Koronáztassa tehát meg ennek végbevitelével magát, jöjjön állandóan lakni Budára, és így elhagyva a vést árasztó régi hagyományos osztrák beolvasztási politikát, legyen valódi alkotmányos magyar király: ez esetben bizonyos lehet abban, hogy királyi trónja, fénye és hatalma megőrzéséért, megvédéséért, minden igaz honfi a múlt idők kinzó szenvedéseinek emlékét, a közjó érdekéből, keblében elfojtandja, s életét, vagyonát érte minden körülmények között föláldozandván, földi jóllétét és tekintélytel párosítandó boldogságát biztosítandja.”

of Deák, they disagreed whether the Austrian coat of arms should be placed on the Royal Palace. Csengery's objection to the installation of the Austrian black-yellow flag on the Buda Palace was referring to the article of *1847/8 XXL* claiming that all public buildings in Hungary must have the Hungarian flag on their front façade—a reference that held gravitas in the National Assembly, where MPs had been making efforts to consolidate the (broken or sustained) spirit of 1848 and the realities of a compromise. The article also became the ground for political accountability after the Compromise, not just legally but also as a cultural procedure, which started to manifest with the coronation ceremony in Pest and Buda. Deák's response to Csengery was historically grounded:

In this regard, allow me to rely on history. (...) Remember the ancient deeds and diplomas, old paintings and coins, for instance, those of King Matthias. Those also were decorated with the raven, which had never been part of the Hungarian coat of arms but that of the King's family. Therefore, I see no trespassing at all in a host's usage of their own familial coat of arms above their front door—and it should be of no doubt that in the Palace of Buda, the King is the host.¹⁰³

Indeed, the cultural conflict surrounding the Royal Palace, symbolizing the tension between Austria and Hungary, was a central aspect of the symbolic politics of the Dual Monarchy. Deák's argument addressed a more technical aspect of the issue, as the parcel of land on which the Palace stood legally belonged to the imperial royal Hofburg of Vienna. This was problematized in 1887 and 1890 by opposition MP Sándor Gosztonyi as a representational deficiency in the relationship between the court and the Hungarian administration. In 1890, debates in Parliament focused on the financial burden of the royal court, highlighting Hungary's ongoing financial commitment to an institution that represented loyalty to the imperial monarchy.

¹⁰³ “Képviselőházi Irományok, 1865. VIII. Kötet” (Országgyűlési Könyvtár, June 26, 1867).

Deák's comments from 1867 continued to spark debates as the opposition demanded that the financial administration of the court be a Hungarian public institution. Minister of Finance (and Prime Minister between 1892 and 1895) Sándor Wekerle argued against this proposal, which meant that the King and the court should be given the freedom to supervise their own spending without the necessity of an independent Hungarian court. He maintained that the King and the royal court should have the autonomy to manage their own finances, without requiring the Hungarian administration to oversee the court's expenditure in order "to secure that the spirit of the court is not in opposition to our constitutional institutions and that there are no contending tendencies thereof, and to make sure that the court is in harmony with our constitution under the obligations of Dualism."¹⁰⁴ Wekerle's stance was rooted in the belief that it was not the Hungarian government's responsibility to scrutinize royal spending but rather to ensure that the court's operations did not undermine Hungary's constitutional institutions or conflict with the obligations of Dualism.

In contrast to Deák and Wekerle's pragmatism, MP Gosztonyi, focused on the symbolic and problematized the imperial ownership of the Palace's parcel not only in the sense that it is Austrian instead of Hungarian but that the Palace, being officially named as "imperial-royal Hofburg," "neither belongs to the King nor the nation." His demand for the correction the ownership of the Palace was evidently grounded on the symbolic distancing from the imperial Austrian framework, a remnant from both the pre-1848 sentiments and the suffocating political milieu of the Absolutist era.

The question of the "foreignness" of the court, with the Palace serving as its symbolic center, was a recurring theme throughout the Dualist period, even before the reconstruction of the Palace between 1890 and 1905. The Parliamentary records show that the political elite regarded the reconstruction of the Palace as either a productive symbolic act of sealing the

¹⁰⁴ "Képviselőházi Irományok, 1887. XIX. Kötet" (Országgyűlési Könyvtár, July 11, 1889).

political aspects of the Compromise or as an excessive gesture that engraved submission to the King into the fabric of national symbolism. For the former argument, the questionable size of the Palace served as a pragmatic reason since the coronation of Franz Joseph.

Indeed, as previously described, the Palace built by the commission of Maria Theresa (though somewhat altered after the damages that occurred in the 1848 Revolution) was notoriously thought to be “too tight and small” for the growing representational needs of the Dualist Monarchy. The very first issue of *Magyarország és a Nagyvilág* [translated roughly as *Hungary and the Rest of the World*] in 1872 describes the new plans for the reconstruction of the Palace as a necessity, because “the current palace is tight and narrow, insufficient in all aspects for hosting the royal court, even for shorter visits. We can all agree that the necessary reconstructions might satisfy our enduring need that the permanent home to our royal highness be here in the country.”¹⁰⁵ Even relatively radical politicians such as Gábor Ugron, opposition MP, argued that an immense Palace must be built to accommodate the “very busy King” in his response to his fellow MP Ferenc Kossuth.¹⁰⁶ It is noteworthy that Ugron begins his reflections on Kossuth’s demand for a more Hungarian court by claiming that “almost every person in Hungary is a monarchist. There is almost no one who is not absolutely devoted to the Habsburgs. No other state in Europe can compare to the all-encompassing loyalty to the sovereign and his family of Hungarians.” The remark represents the state of political mind that historian István Bibó later criticized, namely, the conviction that the Compromise was unavoidable and the Dualist system was a given that could not be altered through political means.¹⁰⁷

Along with Bibó’s take on the illusions of Dualist autonomy, the framings of Baroque authority and loyalty by Németh, Mályusz, or Broch might also be helpful—more concretely

¹⁰⁵ “A Budai Uj Királyi Palota Tervezete.,” *Magyarország És a Nagyvilág*, 1872, 1 edition.

¹⁰⁶ “Képviselőházi Irományok, Kötet” (Országgyűlési Könyvtár, July 11, 1989).

¹⁰⁷ Bibó, *Válogatott tanulmányok. Köt. 4.*

that the baroque tradition of idealized authority transfers to the 20th century through the mimesis of the neo-baroque. Another explanation of why the Palace's extension seemed to be a sound resolution to the complaints on the court's Hungarianness is that it appeared to be a realistic political goal in times of shifting economic stability.

In 1880, ten years before the construction of the Palace began, a somewhat (and quite typically) pessimistic leading piece in *Politikai Ujdonságok* [*News in Politics*] articulates that the absence of a more significant royal residence, in fact, means that the court had no intention to make Budapest a center in the Monarchy. The piece demonstrates a degree of competitiveness between Vienna and Budapest:

Once, there were plans to expand the small Buda Palace. This was before the eastern war, but now no one talks about it. What people do talk about is that the Vienna Burg is being renovated and built into an even more glamorous royal place. The royal couple spends less and less time in Buda. The crown prince has become 'quite like a citizen of Prague.' Of course, this is not prognostic of anything, but the least one can deduct from this is still that we have not been selected to become a center in the Empire. Thus, if we look at the overall view and the essence [of the Empire's mechanisms], we should ask ourselves with slight disagreement of uneasiness: what is to come of it?¹⁰⁸

The article goes on to envision an imminent collapse of the Dualist system, which would be due to its inability to maintain peace among the separate nationalities. Today, we know that the situation was less catastrophic than implied in this piece on several accounts: the often-conflicted relationship between nations and ethnicities was kept at bay by vast diplomatic effort (and often, using force, which would eventually spout with the end of the Monarchy and Trianon, but not yet in the 19th century). Regarding the symbol, as demonstrated, the Palace reconstruction project was very much discussed around 1880, but indeed, the actual

¹⁰⁸ "Szemle.," *Politikai Ujdonságok*, 1880, August 9, 1880, 26 edition, https://adt.arcanum.com/en/view/PolitikaiUjdonsagok_1880/?pg=264&layout=s&query=eg%C3%A9szen+pr%C3%A1gaiv%C3%A1.

reconstructions began in 1890. This was also due to the economic crisis of 1873, from which recovery only began by 1879, probably making the first few years of growth still early for massive investments into the royal court. However, it was in 1870 already that the first reconstruction plans were filed, and the first tender was announced in 1871 along with the grand urban plans in the same year,¹⁰⁹ bringing to the table several great reconstruction plans. Architect István Linzbauer, who would lead the project until he died in 1880, was already planning to double the size of the Palace in 1871.¹¹⁰

The Vienna Burg was reconstructed at the time but maintained its original, baroque-influenced splendor. Rudolph's affection towards (and residence in) Prague also changed when he moved to Vienna after the birth of his daughter and his growing interest in Hungarian liberal politics until his death in 1889. Indeed, while there was extensive competition between the two capital cities, the physical and symbolic expansion of the Buda Palace represented both a growing national political-economic infrastructure and an accentuated position in relationship with the rest of the monarchy.¹¹¹

4.2 From Debating to the Foundation Stone: Millenium Celebrations and the Nation's New Traditions

The widespread understanding that Pest-Buda required a more refined tradition of power representation to achieve parity with Vienna significantly influenced discussions about the Dualist framework. As noted, one side of the debate demanded that the King visit Hungary more frequently and invest more resources into the country, particularly in Buda and the royal

¹⁰⁹ Carried out by the Fővárosi Közmunkák Tanácsa [Council of Public Works]

¹¹⁰ Farbaký Péter, "A Budai Királyi Palota a historizmus korában," *Tanulmányok Budapest Múltjából*, no. 29 (n.d.).

¹¹¹ Symbolic of this is Rudolph's involvement with anti-Hungarian forces. In the 1880s, with the rise of the anti-modernist and consequently anti-Hungarian movement, Rudolph himself represented Hungarian interests despite his dear and aversion towards national sentiments. More on this in: Virág Vér Eszter, "A traumatizáló Habsburg-család _ Rudolf trónörökös gyermekora (1858-1868)," n.d.

estates in Gödöllő. On the other side, calls for the construction of an immense palace that would rival Vienna's Hofburg highlighted a different perspective. While these demands reflected divergent attitudes regarding national autonomy and integration with the Empire—one advocating for a Hungary-centric royal court and the other leaning toward alignment with Austria—they converged on the issue of power representation. Such practices in national self-representation, or in “the struggle for representation,” meant the practical and analytical approach to the question of a genuinely unique federal form in architecture, too. I argue that the question of national form in architecture was a question of self-representation in the mass production of national narratives. I also argue henceforth that the aesthetic practices that (somewhat arbitrarily) defined the Hungarian nation-building decades between the 1860s and the 1900s eventually became part of the 20th-century mass production and accumulation of nationalist symbols.

Despite the political panic of some of the “48-ers,” (the political actors who remained loyal to the principles of 1848 Revolution) the 1880s could hardly be called a time of retreat from national identity construction; rather it was around this time that the cultural nation-building projects had seemed to come to fruition at last.¹¹² The growing tradition of popular exhibitions exemplifies this shift. The idea of a national history exhibition has been preceded by the Industrial Exhibitions organized by Lajos Kossuth prior to the 1848 Revolution but became more appealing after the Compromise had been politically sealed. The first national exhibition, based on the earlier Industrial Exhibitions organized by Kossuth, took place in 1885 in the *Városliget* [City Park].¹¹³ It was also a novelty in that it was a demonstration of

¹¹² László Tarr, *Az Ezredév*, Magyar tollózó (Budapest: Magvető könyvkiadó, 1979); “MAGYARORSZÁG TÖRTÉNETI EMLÉKEI AZ 1896. ÉVI EZREDEVES ORSZÁGOS KIÁLLÍTÁSON | A Magyar Nemzet Története | Kézikönyvtár,” accessed August 17, 2023, <https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/MagyarNemzetTortenete-a-magyar-nemzet-tortenete-9A23/magyarorszag-torteneti-emlekei-az-1896-evi-ezredeves-orszagos-kiallitason-8C3D/>; János Botos and Róbert Vértés, *Boldog Békeidők* (PolgArt Lap- és Könyvkiadó Kft., n.d.).

¹¹³ Botos and Vértés, *Boldog Békeidők*. Another precedent was organized already in 1842 by Kossuth, about which he published extensively. Kossuth idealized the role of exhibitions, also underlining his dedication to appeal to

dominating architectural trends. From the Baroque and Renaissance-styled buildings, the *Iparcsarnok* [*Industrial Hall*] became the most defining and symbolic of its age.¹¹⁴ With a presentation of possible architectural trends fit for national stylization, the 1885 exhibition was practically a rehearsal for the 1896 Millenium events.

The year of the Millennium Celebrations held profound political significance, shaping the symbolic narratives surrounding the reconstruction of Buda Palace. Firstly, it demarcated an exclusively national narrative on Hungarian history only four years after the coronation jubilee of Franz Joseph in 1892. This juxtaposition can be interpreted as an attempt to balance national and imperial politics within the Monarchy. Additionally, the celebrations introduced a novel approach to popularizing master narratives of national and ethnic history, thereby advancing Hungarian historical and anthropological scholarship. With the Millennium, Budapest's transformation into a modern metropolis—rivaling Vienna in the region—was seen as complete. Key projects such as Andrassy Avenue, the *Nagykörút* (Grand Boulevard), and other significant public works, including the Museum of Fine Arts and the Underground railway, were finalized, solidifying Budapest's status as a capital city.

The Millenium Celebrations, thus, had a dual effect. On one hand, they catalyzed substantial cultural investment in Budapest, fostering its evolution into a unified and modern metropolis, despite its relatively recent establishment as a single city in 1873. On the other hand, the celebrations canonized a national historical narrative that traced Hungary's origins and identity. This narrative was further solidified by the scholarly efforts of Sándor Szilágyi (1827–1899), head of the Hungarian Historical Society (*Magyar Történelmi Társulat*), whose publication *The History of the Hungarian Nation* (1896) was a milestone in the field. Unlike

the elites and the rising bourgeoisie. For further primary reference see Lajos Kossuth, “Kossuth Lajos És Első Magyar Iparműkiállítás 1842-Ben.,” *Természettudományi Közlöny* 26, no. 296 (1894).

¹¹⁴ It was here that the evolving workers' and communist movements organized a demonstration in solidarity with the 1917 Russian Revolution. It was damaged and eventually torn down after the siege of Budapest in 1944–45.

earlier historical works, this comprehensive collection extended beyond pre-modern history to include contemporary developments. Nevertheless, its emphasis on early Hungarian history, particularly the *Honfoglalás* (Conquest of the Carpathian Basin), reinforced the emerging master narrative of Hungary as a thousand-year-old, oppressed Christian nation.

This narrative, which had been gaining prominence since the early days of national romanticism in the 1830s, became central to Hungary's cultural self-perception. It echoed themes introduced in works such as Ferenc Kölcsey's *Hymn* (1823), later orchestrated by Ferenc Erkel in 1844—portraying Hungary as a small but resilient nation enduring suffering and oppression under the influence of neighboring empires. Such narratives shaped national identity and provided a dominant cultural reference point for self-assessment throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The myth of the thousand-year-old nation at the crux of imperial clashes was the backbone of the new national identity package, including several new, or in Eric Hobsbawm's definition, invented traditions. The celebration of the *Honfoglalás* culminated in the setting of the foundation stone of the new Buda Palace as part of the millennium celebrations.

Employing Anderson's theory, one can see how the Millennium celebrations, the creation of a shared medieval national past, and the physical construction of the symbols of this past were all part of a comprehensive intellectual project to construct the modern Hungarian nation. Anderson argues, bringing precisely the Hungarian example, that those communities are expected to form into nations that share a standard narrative of history—and ethnic minorities within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy were seen as incapable of doing so, being history-less.¹¹⁵ These ethnic groups appeared in the Millennium Celebrations program—in the form of being exhibited as anthropological peculiarities. The function of emblemizing such ethnic hierarchies was, following the imperial trends, to set up a narrative of Hungarian supremacy.

¹¹⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 102.

The visible, canonizable, theatrical, and also textual history telling of the nation was absolutely crucial in securing, after over forty years of waiting, the foundations of national identity construction. As we can see, this process was, above all, a task in public representation and performance. The “stagey quality” Anderson refers to when it comes to the imperial elite’s letting go of their past status and power; nevertheless, it served two functions in the 1880s.

One was, as Anderson writes, to mourn the empire by the “ruling classes, bourgeois certainly, but above all aristocratic” classes—the celebration of Franz Joseph’s coronation in 1867 and its jubilee in 1892 were primarily to codify the new political settlement, while paying tribute to the Monarch’s singular position through a series of old celebratory traditions that could be turned into new, often invented traditions. The other was to construct physical and symbolic spaces for the separate nation (not yet the masses or “the people”) where they could practice their loyalty to the national community.

The Millennium Celebrations were the perfect platform to satisfy both needs. On the one hand, the construction of a monument emblemizing figures of national pride was issued by Prime Minister Sándor Wekerle in 1895 in the form of a national pantheon; on the other hand, the monument included the representation of Habsburg rulers.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Namely Ferdinand I, Leopold I, Charles III, Maria Theresa, and Franz Joseph. The statue of the latter represented the moment of coronation in 1867, Prime Minister Andrásy putting the crown on the Monarch’s head.



Figure 2. György Zala's Later Depiction of the Andrassy-statue at Kossuth Square. It shows the coronation of Franz Joseph with Gyula Andrassy depicted to place the Crown on the Monarch's head. Source: Budapest photo Collection, Fővárosi Szabó Ervin Könyvtár. 0244744

Similarly, while the Millennium Celebrations were marked by projects that emphasized national pride—such as the construction of the Vajdahunyad Castle replica—the reconstruction of the Royal Palace occupied an equally prominent, if not more heavily advertised, role. The text of the foundation stone demonstrates this kind of amalgamation of royal and national narratives of legitimacy:

Our beloved Hungary is celebrating the one-thousandth anniversary of the foundation of its state, upon which occasion we lay down this foundation stone, whereupon the home to us and our descendants shall stand, sanctified by the recent historical events. Infused with pride and joy in our hearts of the thousand-year-old history of this nation, we pray to God he shall bless our homeland and our servile nation. We pray that we shall be able to, in unison, work for the benefit, well-being, and happiness of this country and our nations with success from this Royal Home, which we build with the help of the Almighty God.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Translation of the author. The original reads in: Alajos Hauszmann, *A Magyar Királyi Vár*, 1912. „Kedvelt Magyarországnak állami életének ezredik évfordulóját ünnepli, midőn ezen alapkővet letesszük, hogy az elmúlt idők történeti eseményei által megszentelt eme helyen emelkedjék a Magunk és Utódaink fejedelmi otthona. Az

It is worth noting that the inscription on the foundation stone was written in Hungarian and issued on behalf of the King, with the attestation of key Hungarian government leaders. Among the signatories were prominent ministers, the Prime Minister, and Alajos Hauszmann, chief architect overseeing the reconstruction.¹¹⁸ During the celebrations, the newly renovated and expanded Banquet Hall of the Royal Palace—often criticized in earlier discussions for its limited scale—was also inaugurated, though its existence was ultimately short-lived due to further extensive reconstructions that would follow in later years.

The Millennium Monument, the series of celebrations and rituals, and the reconstruction of the Palace demonstrate that due to the political Compromise in which the thousand-year-old national narrative indeed became a master narrative, the very symbols of national history and belonging make complete sense within the Dualist political and cultural construction. As Péter Rostás writes in his essay on the interior construction of the Palace, the rooms and halls of the Palace were named and designed to serve both the national historical narratives and the imperial one.¹¹⁹ Another key element of the Millennium Celebrations and the laying of the Palace's foundation stone was the apparent ease with which leading architects, artists, and politicians embraced the creation of national symbols that were, even in their own time, replicas or deliberate imitations of structures associated with other real or imagined communities.

For this reason, the Royal Palace was, at this time already, difficult to interpret as a pure monument to Hungarian national greatness. Instead, its historicist reconstruction seems to have been the outcome of a conflictual nation-building effort that wished to express degrees of

ezeréves múlt magasztos örömétől lelkünkben áthatva, a jelen pillanatban is buzgón fohászkodunk Istenhez, árássza áldását Házunkra és hű magyar nem zetünkre, hogy egyesült erővel az ország javára és népeink boldogítására jövőben is sikeresen munkálkodván, királyi lakunkban, melyet a Mindenható segedelmével felépítendőök vagyunk és az országban állandóan jólét és megelégedés honoljon.”

¹¹⁸ It is in hindsight not surprising, though rather symptomatic of national politics, that no Croatian figure was invited to attest, except for the Ban of Croatia, Count Khuen-Héderváry Károly.

¹¹⁹ Péter Rostás, “A Budavári Palotában 1900 Körül Kialakított ‘Történelmi’ Dísztermek,” *Tanulmányok Budapest Múltjából*, no. 34 (2009).

autonomy and monarchical obedience at the same time. Hauszmann's own words testify to this argument from his own comprehensive publication on the new Palace from 1912:

it was our ambition with my colleagues that this prideful Castle, whose location is also unequaled, shall become the emblem of Hungarian culture and art in a way that is worthy of representing the Hungarian Holy Crown and our nation's fidelity to the throne. [...] May this royal house for many years be the actual, real home of our beloved king.¹²⁰

Parliamentary records also reveal that the state of the Palace was not seen by either side of the political aisle in complete agreement on what its most appropriate future would be like. The records demonstrate that the political compromise had to come with a cultural compromise as well, in which the symbols of national greatness (rituals, traditions, buildings, etc.) were always and at all times embedded in the larger imperial context, with a stable understanding of necessary symbolic and political submission.

5. The Times of Neo-styles: Imperialist Traditions and a Weak National Language of Form

Naturally, the legitimacy crisis of the Monarchy around the 1910s as well as the weakening of deep baroque loyalty came with a critical tone towards historicist imperial design, including the neo-styles. In order to understand this process, other prominent projects in power representation must be analyzed from the 1880s onwards. The duality of the imperial and the national, on the one hand, could be understood as a historical necessity within the *realpolitik* of the Compromise; on the other hand, it could lead to the conclusion that all architecture before WWI was unpatriotic.¹²¹ In the forthcoming paragraphs, I will demonstrate that the inability to

¹²⁰ Hauszmann, *A Magyar Királyi Vár*, 54.

¹²¹ For an informative study on this see, and I heavily rely on: Ferkai, "Nemzeti Építészet a Polgári Sajtó Tükrében I. Rész, 1920-1930." Here, Ferkai explains that the conservative nationalist thinking in architecture put the aesthetic heritage of the middle ages in its focus, which I shall discuss later on.

settle on a coherent national form was, in reality, the outcome of intellectual and institutional deficiencies of the late Dualist times that lasted well into the 20th century and became the reference point of post-war aristocratic nostalgia, which deficiency necessitates a new approach towards the Palace today as well.

The search for a distinctly national architectural style predates the specific case of the Royal Palace and is marked by two significant precedents. This pursuit of a Hungarian national form coincided with the institutional emergence of the nation itself, with one of the earliest experimental platforms being the construction of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Notably, this search did not initially center on the Buda Palace.¹²² The debates surrounding the design of the Academy Building, followed by the construction of the Parliament Building, reveal a series of complex dilemmas regarding national architectural identity. These discussions inevitably influenced the historicist reconstruction of the Royal Palace, which, although contemporaneous with modern styles such as the Secession, ultimately reflected a conservative aesthetic approach.

While many academics of the period acknowledged the absence of a historically Hungarian architectural style, the dominant question centered on which aesthetic could most effectively contribute to the formation of national identity through a sense of grandeur and authenticity. Another critical issue was whether a traditional, vernacular aesthetic rooted in folk architecture (“vulgar” forms) could serve as a meaningful counterpart to the imperial grand styles. In hindsight, it is evident that this latter possibility was not only dismissed but was actively hindered by influential figures within the architectural and academic establishment, such as Alajos Hauszmann himself. The following sections will explore these arguments in greater detail.

¹²² Here I rely on Papp’s thorough and extremely useful argumentation on the connection between the search of national form and the major tenders of the time such as that of the Országház and the building of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Papp, “„Vezessük be minél előbb nemzeti hagyományainkat a modern világba”.”

5.1 From the Gothic to the Eclectic National Spirit: The case of the Academy of Sciences

The debate surrounding the new building for the Hungarian Academy of Sciences marked one of the first moments when the intersection of architecture and emerging traditions of national identity came into focus. Architect and art historian Imre Henszlmann (1813–1888) provided some of the most influential commentary on the role of public architecture during this period. He argued: “We can expect each style to establish its core principle, and from that to assemble its own ratios and profiles by the directives of architectural purposefulness. [...] The second requirement necessitates a unique approach to style.”¹²³ Henszlmann’s perspective echoed the ideas of William Morris, the English architect and leader of the Arts and Crafts movement, who emphasized that architecture should be deeply rooted in local traditions, heritage, ways of life, and climate.¹²⁴ Both argued that the use of classical architectural traditions was unsuitable for modern needs.

Henszlmann, a proponent of Gothic-inspired architecture, advocated for the revival and adaptation of Gothic forms. He contended that in the absence of a uniquely Hungarian style, architects were compelled to borrow from existing styles, as had been the case historically: “Architects are forced to choose from the existing styles just as our predecessors did, as the greatest architects in the world had done before.” While acknowledging that the Hungarian national style is inexistent, he nevertheless advocated for the resurrection and appropriation of the Gothic based on the perceived deeply medieval character of Hungarian society. He argued that the Academy building design required a

¹²³ Papp.

¹²⁴ Andrea Elizabeth Donovan, *William Morris and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings*, Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory (New York: Routledge, 2008); “E.P. Thompson: William Morris (1959),” accessed September 10, 2023, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/thompson-ep/1959/william-morris.htm>; “William Morris - Collected Works,” accessed September 10, 2023, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/collected/>.

unique style, in which the building, in its monumentality, can leave a memento about our demeanors and conventions; in other words, to represent a Hungarian national style. [...] However, these national stylistic elements do not exist. They cannot exist, for the Hungarian nation settled here as a nomadic people and thus built their own house, church, and even their palace after foreign examples. We have continued the tradition of mimicry to this day; therefore, we cannot talk about an unpremeditated Hungarian style.¹²⁵

Although Henszlmann's views on architecture were forward-looking in their emphasis on practicality and environmental factors, his preference for the Gothic reflected a romantic and nostalgic view of Hungary's medieval past.



Figure 3. Imre Henszlmann's Design for the Academy of Sciences. Source: *Vasárnapi Újság* 8/37. 1861.09.15.

¹²⁵ Imre Henszlmann, "Magyar Tud. Akadémia," *Budapesti Szemle* 12, no. 38-40 / 40 (1861): 371. The original quotes in Hungarian for reference: „Minden stýltól joggal kívánjuk, hogy alapelvet állítson fel, s ebből, az építészeti célirányosság értelmében és a használt anyagok teljes tekintetbe vételével, szervileg fejtse ki arányait és idomait. (...) „Az érintett második vélemény sajátos stýlt kíván, mely az épület monumental voltában tanúságot hagyjon az utókorra életviszonyainkról és nézeteinkről, vagyis más szavakkal, mely nemzeti magyar stýl legyen. (...) Azonban nemzeti magyar építészeti elemek nem léteznek, nem létezhetnek, mert a magyar nemzet mint nomád nép telepedvén le hazánkban, házát, templomát és még későbbben palotáját is idegen minták után építé. Ezen kölcsönzést mai napig folytattuk és így rögtönzött magyar stýlról szó sem lehet. (...) „Kénytelen vagyunk tehát a meglevő stylek közül választani; mint ezt eddig őseink tették, mint ezt a világ legnagyobb építészeti, a Parthenonnak, Sz. Zsófiának és a középkor Dómjainak mesterei tették, akik mind nem találtak új stýlt, hanem az előtők már létezőket tovább kimívelték. Válaszszunk tehát mi is, de válaszszunk oly létező stýlt, amely célunknak legjobban megfelelhét.”

This outlook resonated with the broader nationalist sentiment of the time, which often idealized the medieval period as a simpler, more unified era. Such romantic nationalism also shaped aspects of the Millennial aesthetic. However, this medievalist nostalgia did not gain widespread traction in broader architectural discourse.

Henszlmann's commitment to the Gothic style was evident in his design proposal for the Academy building. However, the leadership of the Academy did not share his enthusiasm for the Gothic. Notable architects, including Miklós Ybl and Heinrich Ferstel, were invited to submit designs. While Henszlmann and Ferstel proposed neo-Gothic plans, Ybl submitted a neo-Renaissance design, though he later withdrew his submission. Ultimately, Friedrich August Stüler's Venetian neo-Renaissance design was chosen. The decision likely reflected the influence of prominent political figures, such as Emil Dessewffy, the Academy's president, who was an advocate for the neo-Renaissance style. This pattern of political patrons influencing architectural decisions would recur in later projects, including the reconstruction of the Royal Palace.

Despite widespread acknowledgment that there was no authentic Hungarian national style, concerns about "foreignness" and the importation of architectural styles heavily influenced the discourse. Henszlmann's Gothic design was ultimately rejected in favor of a more mainstream neo-Renaissance approach, described by historian Papp as "a building of first-class imported style, which follows in perfection the structure its architect had mastered elsewhere, with ornamentation coming from Berlin."¹²⁶ As Henszlmann himself had foreseen, this decision was shaped by political considerations. He noted that in Hungary's political climate, Gothic styles—associated with German origins—were often viewed with suspicion: "In the current political situation it can be respected that for the less educated observer [...] the style with pointed arches is by definition resented because it is seen as a German invention."

¹²⁶ Papp, "„Vezessük be minél előbb nemzeti hagyományainkat a modern világba”,” 172.

¹²⁷ However, the resistance to “Germanisms” in Hungarian architecture eventually subsided with the emergence of neo-Gothic and other neo-styles several decades later.

To demonstrate the generational differences between the two architects: by the time Alajos Hauszmann began his career, the eclecticism of the late 19th century had firmly taken hold, blending historicist and romanticist influences. While Henszlmann’s advocacy for Gothic architecture did not succeed in shaping the Academy building, his broader vision of architecture as a reflection of environmental, historical, and functional needs remained unparalleled among proponents of eclectic styles.

This raises the question: what principles could best represent the Hungarian national spirit in the 1860s? Many argue that the lack of consensus on an architectural style stemmed from a broader institutional indecision about how public architecture should symbolize the emerging national framework. Architect and author Jenő Rados (1895–1992) observed that this indecision resulted in oversized, eclectic constructions like the Parliament Building and the Buda Palace. Rather than creating a coherent national style that reflected the *Zeitgeist*, architects of the late 19th century often combined various genres and styles into eclectic designs. As Rados highlighted, it was the compilation of genres and styles in the form of eclecticism.”¹²⁸

Thus, to dissect the eclecticism of the 19th century is to uncover a cultural phenomenon masquerading as an architectural one. At its core, eclecticism wasn’t just a stylistic choice; it was a mirror reflecting the era’s contradictions. Rados disparaged it as a style devoid of conviction, one that built “from the outside inwards.” He lambasted its obsession with grand facades and opulent interiors, declaring that it prioritized spectacle over substance, resulting in

¹²⁷ Henszlmann, “Magyar Tud. Akadémia,” 374. Henszlmann also emphatically explained that in fact these “pointed arches” were not a German invention but are characteristic of French architectural practices as well.

¹²⁸ Jenő Rados, “IX. Eklektika, szecesszió, modern törekvések építészetünkben,” in *Magyar Építészet Történet*, 2nd ed. (Budapest: Műszaki könyvkiadó, 1971), 187–324.

what he called “unhealthy exaggeration of appearances and extreme inherent contradictions.”¹²⁹

Marcell Komor, a critic of his predecessor Hauszmann, offered a scathing postmortem of the era in 1914: “The second half of the last century,” he wrote, “was a failure for architecture’s broader development. They rifled through the styles of bygone eras with reckless abandon, exhausting centuries-old motifs in a matter of years, only to discard them like broken toys in favor of fresh playthings.”¹³⁰ The primary public architectural projects, as well as the general construction of the capital, were carried out in the spirit of eclecticism—as Rados noted, this frenzy of imitation and pastiche was a desperate attempt to compete, architecturally and symbolically, with Vienna.

Broch went even further, branding the decorative zeal of the 19th century as a cynical reflection of modern liberalism—ostensibly humane but inherently inauthentic. The compulsive use of plaster ornamentation imitating classical forms of stone or marble was, in Broch’s view, the general withdrawal from the real and the public acceptance of comfortable inauthenticity.¹³¹ Yet, as Rados countered, eclecticism was more than smoke and mirrors. It thrived as a practical response to the challenges of the *Gründerzeit*—a solution to the era’s urban demands, however flawed. Broch, with begrudging acknowledgment, conceded that it was a rational response to the defects of modernity.

Vienna and Budapest reveal two faces of eclecticism shaped by 1848’s seismic aftershocks. For Vienna, Broch argued, the revolution’s fallout bred hedonism and a skepticism that undercut the grandeur of its Baroque past, turning it into an anti-metropolis.¹³² While Broch does not explicitly say it is the foreseeable political reconciliation that triggered the general

¹²⁹ Rados, 288.

¹³⁰ Marcell Komor, “Hauszmann Alajos,” *Művészet* 13, no. 5 (1914).

¹³¹ For this, especially see the Introduction, and Chapter 4 of Hermann Broch and Györfy Miklós, *Hofmannsthal és kora: szecesszió vagy értékvesztés?* (Budapest: Helikon, 1988).

¹³² Broch and Györfy Miklós, 60.

sense of skepticism, he does emphasize that the shift from feudal relations, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the undeniable power shifts within the Monarchy ripped the Baroque Viennese metropolis from its grand, Baroque politics (as explained at the beginning of this chapter) and into the shallowness of eclectic modernity. In Hanák's words, "In the Vienna of the fin-de-siècle, the spirit became the garden of those who wished out of the world, and it so became the source of their lasting neurosis."¹³³

In contrast, Budapest wore eclecticism like an imperial costume tailored for a provincial stage. The city's dual identity—national and imperial—made eclecticism not merely a style but a political tool.¹³⁴ Being a Viennese import, eclecticism was also a non-confrontative, if successful, reconciliatory genre in the competition of capital cities. Thus, by the time the tenders or propositions for the Parliament (1882) and the Buda Palace (1871, 1891, 1896¹³⁵) were published, practicing in the eclectic style was already regarded as a possible route to finding an acceptable national form in architecture—at least for the established, more conservative figures in architecture as Hauszmann and Ybl. I will turn to the tenders that show professional competition (that of 1871 and the Parliament's in 1882) chronologically to demonstrate how they represent the previously mentioned shifts in cultural and political attitude.

5.2 *A question of Size: Royal Palace Tender*¹³⁶

The 1871 tender for the Royal Palace was a stage for addressing one of its most pressing challenges: size. Among the significant submissions was one by Mór Lehmann and István Linzbauer, which art historian Péter Farbaky highlights as a baroque-influenced design that

¹³³ Hanák, Jalsovszky, and Tomsics, *A kert és a műhely*, 16.

¹³⁴ Rados, "IX. Eklektika, szecesszió, modern törekvések építészetünkben."

¹³⁵ The first tender for the western extension and the banquet hall of the Palace was published in 1871; the one after Miklós Ybl's passing in 1891, and the last comprehensive one after the Millennium Celebrations in 1896.

¹³⁶ The analysis of these tenders has been thoroughly done by Péter Farbaky in "A Budai Királyi Palota a historizmus korában.", on which work I rely on throughout the argumentation.

presaged Hauszmann's later plans. This proposal expanded the Palace along its north-south axis while preserving the structure's calm, baroque proportions. It even included a dome to anchor the new central axis. Ironically, Linzbauer's submission earned no prize despite his role in organizing the tender alongside the Commission of Public Works.¹³⁷ Interestingly, Linzbauer's submission did not receive a prize, although Linzbauer was the first architect to be commissioned with the preparation of an initial design and the tender itself (together with the Commission of Public Works) a year earlier.

Another submission, which took third prize, proposed an entirely new structure to the north, near today's Sándor Palace. Farbaky notes the unsettling effect of this design, which positioned two palaces side by side like mismatched siblings. However, the process of selection that would become the eventual proposal in front of the King, which the Royal Court had to accept, took another nine years. There were two reasons for the lengthy period between planning and construction: 1) the economic crisis or *krach* in 1873, and 2) the labyrinthine politics of defining a national capital.

I wish not to expand too much on the root causes of the economic crisis, as it is rather explanatory in the prolongation of the Palace reconstructions. It is crucial, however, to highlight that the 1873 *krach*, originating in the Viennese stock market partially due to overproduction across the Monarchy, set a new age that some see as an end to free competition for market capitalism, and ushered in an era of state intervention.¹³⁸ This economic turbulence lent weight to parliamentary calls for stricter oversight of royal spending, further complicating the Palace's development.

¹³⁷ Farbaky, 241.

¹³⁸ Zoltán Fónagy and Gyula Kocsis, "Gazdaság és gazdálkodás," in *Kettős kötődés: Az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchia (1867-1918)* (Budapest: Enciklopédia Humana Egyesület, 2001), <https://mek.oszk.hu/01900/01905/html/index7.html>.

But 1873 was significant for another reason: the unification of Pest, Buda, and Óbuda into Budapest, a move emblematic of Hungary's rivalry with Vienna. As I've previously demonstrated, the early years of the Dual Monarchy saw Hungary's political elite transforming symbolic issues—like the Royal Palace—into battlegrounds for national representation.

A vivid example of this is the controversy over the statue of General Heinrich Hentzi, the Austrian general who defended Buda Castle during the 1848-49 Revolution. While not strictly a question of the national architectural style, the statue's case demonstrates a stance on public architecture that is of national(ist) character. Hentzi's legacy on the Austrian side was that of a military hero who did not surrender to the Hungarian rebels until his last breath in a battle in 1849—on the Hungarian side; it was that of the very symbol of anti-Hungarian sentiment and aggression against the fight for independence, demonstrated by the vast destruction of Pest (including the almost complete destruction of the Chain Bridge) ordered by Hentzi.¹³⁹ The inauguration of his memorial statue in 1852 by the direct order of the then-emperor Franz Joseph was done in a grand military ceremony, which some say was unprecedented in the Palace, and which ceremony Lajos Kossuth called the “abasement of the nation.”¹⁴⁰ Although the issue of the controversial statue had been raised already in the very month of the coronation in 1867 as part of an interpellation for the raise of benefits for families involved in the Revolution, Franz Joseph continued to send delegations to the statue to lay ceremonial wreaths.¹⁴¹ As historian Viktória Czaga argued, the statue, like “a sensitive barometer of the relationship [between Austria and Hungary], represented the conflicting

¹³⁹ A longer discussion of this case in: Rostás, “A Budavári Palotában 1900 Körül Kialakított ‘Történelmi’ Dísztermek.” The statue later was moved to

¹⁴⁰ Kossuth's word in Hungarian was „arculcsapás”, meaning „slap in the face”, essentially meaning humiliation. Viktória Czaga, “A harcos emlék - szoborsors Magyarországon (A Hentzi-emlékmű története),” *A Hadtörténeti Múzeum Értesítője - Acta Musei Militaris in Hungaria* 6 (2003): 92.

¹⁴¹ “Képviselőházi Irományok, 1865. VIII. Kötet.” (Országgyűlési Könyvtár, June 26, 1867).

character of the Dualist state order.”¹⁴² The statue remained next to the Palace despite this and was finally removed at the end of the Great War.

As this case and the parliamentary records of interpellations show, the symbolic layout of the Castle was a matter of concern from the outset of the Dualist system, becoming a tool for Hungary’s representational struggle. Due to the speed and discreet character of the reconstruction process in terms of both politics and architecture, by the time of its conclusion, the Palace remained a relatively conservative project with the imprint of established and less risk-taking architects such as Miklós Ybl.

Ybl’s position as primary architect was not conspicuous, though, from the beginning, despite his widespread appreciation. It was Baron Frigyes Podmaniczky, deputy director of the Commission of Public Works, who had enthusiastically managed the reconstruction plans for the Palace from 1873 for three decades and very much favored Ybl’s work. As Farbaky put it, Podmaniczky’s “trojan horse” into the neo-renaissance design, as well as Ybl’s commissioning, was the design and construction of the *Várkert* [Castle Garden]. Ybl was given the task of designing the *Várkert* in 1873, which would define the entire stylistic pace of the Palace, too. After the positive reception of these works, a final proposal was presented to the King in 1880, with a representation that Ervin Ybl (Farbaky’s main primary source, Miklós Ybl’s monographer) dedicated to Miklós Ybl—though bearing marks of the design hallmarked by Lehmann and Linzbauer. Here, we can also see a pace and ratio similar to these initial designs but with a more momentous neo-renaissance ornamentation and overall impression.

Despite the anticipation surrounding the project, construction did not begin until 1890, leaving Ybl only a few months to witness the initial progress before his death in January 1891. His successor, Alajos Hauszmann, a disciple and innovator of the historicist school Ybl had

¹⁴² Czaga, “A harcos emlék - szoborsors Magyarországon (A Hentzi-emlékmű története),” 79.

shaped, carried the project forward. The reception of Hauszmann's final design will be examined later in this chapter.

5.3. *The Return of the Gothic: The 1882 Parliament Building Tender*

As Dorottya Andrassy and more recently József Sisa have meticulously documented the history of the tender,¹⁴³ I will instead focus on the pertinent precursors to the Royal Palace reconstructions while underscoring the fluctuating attempts to conceptualize a national architectural form. Much like the Royal Palace, serious deliberations about providing the National Assembly with its own new building had already surfaced by 1830. Yet, akin to the Palace, numerous attempts were made before this ambition saw fruition—nearly five decades later.

The plans predating the 1880s were largely modest in scale and conceived for different locations than the current Parliament site.¹⁴⁴ That Miklós Ybl's design revived the idea of constructing a National Assembly building in 1861 only underscores his commanding influence at the time. Yet, in hindsight, it seems peculiar that the 1882 competition program did not impose strict stylistic requirements, instead leaving the door wide open to suggestions. The program stated: "The most suitable styles appear to be Byzantine, Romanesque, pointed arch (Gothic), or one of the varieties of the Renaissance. However, it should be noted that no particular style is excluded from the competition."¹⁴⁵ This openness, though ostensibly

¹⁴³ Dorottya Andrassy et al., *The Architectural History of the Hungarian Parliament Building*, Parliament Guide Books (Budapest: Directorate of Cultural Affairs of the Office of the Hungarian National Assembly, 2017).

¹⁴⁴ In 1839-1840, at the request of Joseph, Archduke of Hungary, architect Mihály Pollack created a design. However, the building, resembling the Renaissance palaces of Florence, never materialized. In 1844, a formal competition was announced, and at that time, the proposed location for the building was the present-day Erzsébet tér (Elisabeth Square). Despite receiving numerous submissions—42 to be exact—the events of the 1848 revolution and war of independence prevented the plans from being evaluated by the subsequent 1847-1848 National Assembly. Consequently, most of the designs were lost, and only a few survived, some of which were published concurrently in various places during the competition. It is unclear whether the publication of such plans also meant their inclusion in the competition.

¹⁴⁵ In: Eszter Gábor, *Az Ország Háza: Buda-Pesti országháza-tervek, 1784-1884 kiállítás a Szépművészeti Múzeumban a Magyar Országgyűlés, a Magyar Országos Levéltár és a Szépművészeti Múzeum rendezésében*,

accommodating, could reflect an implicit desire to experiment with creating a “national style,” at least on paper. The public, however, took a more critical stance, particularly regarding the stylistic choices in the winning design by Imre Steindl. As Sisa and Andrassy note, in 1883, the judging panel—which included architects Miklós Ybl, Gyula Pártos, Károly Hieronymi, and Béla Pilisi Ney—concluded that none of the designs submitted were acceptable without modifications. While the competition program feigned indifference to style, it is telling that the identities of the competitors remained anonymous to the committee until the final decision. Thus, the rejection of designs by renowned architects such as Albert Schickedanz and Vilmos Freund, Otto Wagner, and even Alajos Hauszmann must have rested solely on form and function—or so it was claimed.¹⁴⁶ Another troubling aspect of this “international competition” was that, in practice, it was skewed toward Hungarian architects, with advertisements appearing predominantly in Hungarian-language newspapers and magazines. Unsurprisingly, Otto Wagner was the lone foreign applicant.

Yet, despite the competition program acknowledging the absence of a national form, the evaluation process paradoxically waded into debates over national style. As with the Royal Palace, another contentious issue revolved around the financial strain such an extravagant project would impose. Regarding style, the submissions painted a fragmented picture of what the Parliament could signify, architecturally and politically.

A critic in *Az Építési Ipar* [The Construction Industry], quoted by both Sisa and Papp, commented extensively on the most prominent designs.¹⁴⁷ Alajos Hauszmann’s work was awarded but not invited for the final design. Hauszmann’s competition entry reflected a stable

2000. augusztus 18-tól december 31-ig, trans. Thomas J. DeKornfeld (Budapest: Szépművészeti Múzeum, 2000), 145.

¹⁴⁶ The entries submitted under the codenames “Alkotmány I.” and “Patres conscripti” received 19 votes each. These were the works of Imre Steindl and Alajos Hauszmann. In second place, with 16 votes each, were, assisted by the Hungarian architects Kallina Mór and Rezső Bernt. In: Andrassy et al., *The Architectural History of the Hungarian Parliament Building*.

¹⁴⁷ Ó s, “Az állandó Országház pályatervei (III.),” *Az Építési Ipar*, May 27, 1883. The author of this piece, writing under the initials ó-s, are suspected by Papp to be János Babula, architect and writer.

relationship with the historicism of the era. It was the only design that envisioned the central mass of the building perpendicular to the Danube's shoreline. Hauszmann's smaller-scale proposal included a dome-like structure reminiscent of the Royal Palace, reflecting a deliberate response to the Palace's evolving grandeur following Miklós Ybl's transformations after Linzbauer's death in 1880. Thus, Hauszmann (as well as the other competitors) was, as expected by the draft law as well, responding to the new scale envisioned for the Palace in their designs for the Parliament building.

Another intriguing design was prepared by Kálmán Gerster, who envisioned a neo-byzantine structure. The design did not receive an award, though it was given a fair review by the committee, arguing that “the Byzantine style is applied with appropriate consistency and delicate sensitivity, and the arrangement of the building is very fortunate, promising a beautiful and impressive silhouette.”¹⁴⁸ As Papp stipulates in a monograph on Gerster, the design's rejection may have been less about architectural merit and more about a poorly timed article in *Budapesti Hírlap*, which prematurely lauded the Byzantine submission and tied its Romanesque motifs to “Hungarianness.”. The article reads: “We support this design not only because this style is not as worn out as the others but mainly because it best aligns with Hungarian taste, and in its Romanesque motifs, there is something reminiscent of old Hungarian constructions, which can provide the most solid foundation for the Hungarian style.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ In: Gábor György Papp, “Gerster Kálmán (1850-1927) munkássága” (Budapest, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, 2007), <https://doktori.btk.elte.hu/art/papp/diss.pdf>.

¹⁴⁹ Papp, 28.



Figure 4. Hauszmann's Design in: *Építési Ipar*, VII. 1883. II.

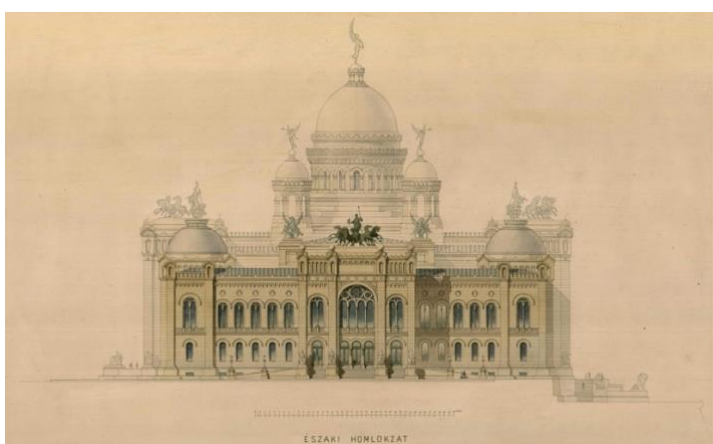


Figure 5. Gerster's Neo-Byzantine design. MNL. T 6. Gerster inheritance 28/4.

Despite early proclamations that stylistic considerations would not dominate the selection process, the final evaluation betrayed these intentions. The committee decision reads:

After thorough deliberation once again, it was decided that the permanent parliament building should be constructed in the Gothic (pointed arch) style. However, it was also determined that the internal arrangement, such as comfort, lighting, etc., should not be subordinate to the style. Furthermore, the exterior of the building should emphasize its effectiveness through mass, proportions, and appropriate height. Finally, any stylistic modifications concerning the strict Gothic style should be executed in the spirit of the Romanesque style.¹⁵⁰

The decision, as Papp and Sisa argue, was heavily influenced by Baron Gyula Andrassy, a staunch advocate of English parliamentary ideals and their Gothic architectural manifestations.

¹⁵⁰ Papp, „Vezessük be minél előbb nemzeti hagyományainkat a modern világba”, 10.



Figure 6. Steindl's Revised Plans. Országgyűlés Hivatala.

The final justification for the Gothic style, as articulated in the 1884 Law XIX, emphasized breaking the uniformity of the Renaissance-style edifices lining the Danube embankment. As the law states:

Taking into account the location and surroundings of the building plot and considering the historical past of our country and the ancient development of its constitution, and finally, also considering that the row of buildings on the Danube embankment in the capital, although consisting of magnificent and dignified palaces and houses, in its current form - precisely because it was almost entirely built in accordance with the forms of the modern (Renaissance) style, possesses an almost monotonous character, the introduction of a grand building in a romantic style will have the most beneficial effect on breaking this uniformity and revitalizing the appearance of the capital.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Tisza Kálmán, "1884. Évi XIX. Törvénycikk Indokolása - Az Állandó Országgház Építési Tervének Jóváhagyásáról És Az Építés Végrehajtásáról," Pub. L. No. 1884. XIX., § Képviselőházi Irományok 1881/84. XX. kötet, 788 (n.d.), netjogtar.hu.

The Gothic design undoubtedly pleased Andrassy, whose vision aligned with Westminster's Thames-side grandeur. Yet, it is curious to speculate how Ferenc Henszlmann, a fierce proponent of Gothic as a national style, would have reacted to the tender that so unceremoniously dismissed his designs for the Academy. As Sisa and Papp highlight, the Parliament's architectural discourse revealed two deeply entangled issues: the symbolic struggle for a national style and the political question of national sovereignty—or, more accurately, the illusion thereof.

The first issue—national sovereignty—manifested starkly in parliamentary debates. As records show, the discussions in May 1884 were rife with personal attacks, as opposition MPs questioned the legitimacy of spending an exorbitant 9.5 million forints (later justified as 11.5 million) on a building they felt symbolized false sovereignty. MP Ádám Lázár scathingly remarked:

The discussion of whether it is justified to build an ornate, commemorative parliament building, be it at present or later, taking into account the country's financial situation and the burden that can be borne by taxpayers, can only come into question when, above all, we have a genuine parliamentary life and when state autonomy has been achieved. Until then, building a parliamentary structure, while the parliamentary system in the literal sense has not been established, is nothing more than mere wasteful spending.¹⁵²

Doubts also arose regarding the realities of national autonomy, both politically and symbolically. The Parliament building, if it had to be built, was seen by several parliamentary representatives as needing to represent national self-determination. Consequently, at that time, both the public and MPs resented the idea of the Parliament building if it could only be understood as an appendage to the Millennium Celebrations of 1896. MP Orbán, for instance,

¹⁵² “Képviselőházi Napló, 1881. XVII. Kötet” (Országgyűlési Könyvtár, March 5, 1884).

lambasted the government for conflating the Parliament's purpose with a commemorative monument for the millennium, ominously declaring:

The government has gone beyond its mandate and intends to turn the newly built parliament building into a monument for the millennium, even though it was only authorized to prepare a design for a parliament building that could accommodate both houses of parliament.¹⁵³

In a somewhat ominous tone, the representative begins his speech by saying, "extravagant construction has always occurred in the decline of every era, both in the Byzantine and Roman periods, as well as during the time of Napoleon III." Therefore, project epitomized both the hollow façade of national sovereignty and a wasteful arms race with Vienna.

The competition (and its narrative) between Vienna and Budapest was woven into the discourse of the Parliament on several occasions and is also evident in the case of the Royal Palace. Perhaps the most striking detail, emphasized by Prime Minister Kálmán Tisza in his justification, was that the construction costs were estimated in relation to the material and labor costs per cubic meter of the Vienna City Hall. This was criticized by, among others, the author of the *Budapesti Hírlap*, who argued that it was merely a simple "imitation" of Vienna's Ringstrasse, and furthermore, it was being done on a national scale:

The fact that they did it in Vienna is not a good enough reason. Honestly, we are in a sorry state with our so-called "monumental buildings." No independence, no originality, just boundless extravagance. A dull imitation in both the design and construction of the Rings. One comes from grand Vienna to Budapest, the little Vienna, and from here goes to Szeged, the even smaller Vienna.¹⁵⁴

Also noteworthy is the observation that the final selection of Steindl's plan may have been influenced by Count Gyula Andrassy's pressure. As the title suggests, Andrassy (perhaps not in

¹⁵³ "Képviselőházi napló, 1881. XVII. kötet. 1884. április 26-május 18." (Budapest: Országgyűlési Könyvtár, n.d.).

¹⁵⁴ Unknown, "Az Új Országház," *Budapesti Hírlap*, March 15, 1884, IV/74 edition, Arcanum, <https://adt.arcanum.com/en/collection/BudapestiHirlap/>.

an unrelated fashion to his aristocratic lineage) saw the British parliamentary system as a model to follow not only in terms of the political aspects of the National Assembly but also in terms of its architectural image.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, the Thames-side façade of Westminster Palace, with its Gothic grandeur, could be equated to Steindl's work, which, although deviating from traditional Gothic principles by adding a dome in the center of the building mass, could present a similarly scaled creation in comparison to its London and Viennese counterparts.

The second issue is best represented by the devastating opinion of MP Lőrinc Mara regarding the plans, stating that the use of Gothic style is a direct blasphemy to the Hungarian public, as “our forefathers will not feel at home in the Gothic Parliament House.”¹⁵⁶ Although the majority of the architectural profession advocated for the creation of a national style and form, its possibility was rejected on mainstream scientific grounds. Steindl himself expressed his views on the national style as follows:

I did not want to create a new style for the new Parliament building because there is no trace of a national character in our architectural forms that can be applied in stone, and such a monumental building could not be handled with ephemeral details for centuries. Instead, I aimed to introduce a national and individual spirit modestly and cautiously into the splendid Middle Ages style, as art always absolutely requires.¹⁵⁷

We can see that the spirit I exemplified with Anderson's theory in the context of the Millennium Celebrations, which produced the nationalist narrative of national history (that nationhood is an inevitable and necessary historical consequence), also attempted to create a Hungarian Gothic tradition that fits into the universal language of national greatness—only they seem to have been “late and in vain.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Papp, “„Vezessük be minél előbb nemzeti hagyományainkat a modern világba”,” 10.

¹⁵⁶ Sisa József, “„Egy díszes, emlékszerű parlamentháznak felállítása csak akkor jöhetne kérdésbe, ha az önálló államiság kívívva lenne” – vita az Országház tervezése körül,” *Ujkor.hu* (blog), September 11, 2020, <https://ujkor.hu/content/vita-az-orszag haz-tervezese-korul>.

¹⁵⁷ in Papp, “„Vezessük be minél előbb nemzeti hagyományainkat a modern világba”,”

¹⁵⁸ To quote the author of this extremely critical piece. Unknown, “Az Uj Országház.”

The architectural and urban planning ideals championed by Henszlmann—and, to some extent, even Steindl—were sidelined in the quest to define a national architecture. The system of principles espoused by figures like Morris, emphasizing the intrinsic value of vernacular traditions, was neither rigorously analyzed nor given the space to influence Hungarian architecture meaningfully. Instead, what emerged was a reactionary adherence to imperial aesthetics, a default to familiar grandeur that echoed Vienna rather than breaking away from it. In retrospect, this missed opportunity seems to have sown the seeds of discontent: in this light the fleeting flourish of Secessionist ambitions at the turn of the century can almost be read as an architectural rebellion. Yet even these aspirations, delayed and constrained, were no match for the inertia that stifled Hungary’s modernist impulses. It was as though the nation’s architectural narrative—rooted in mimicry and tradition—was unable to pivot in time to embrace its own potential for innovation.

6. *“The Hungarian National Style is Not Something We Have Had, but Something That Is to Be.”*¹⁵⁹

The architectural elite’s search for a distinct national style was deeply entwined with its uncertainties, and Hauszmann’s final, realized design for the Royal Palace vividly embodies the tension between the nation and the imperial center. Hauszmann, an undisputed leader within the professional community, left a legacy that his students and followers upheld, adhering to his historicist, eclectic vision. The Palace itself, a product of its master’s iconic presence, mirrored the dual identity of the Hungarian national spirit. These intertwined dualities, embedded within the very fabric of the Palace, positioned it as both a confident assertion of Hungary’s individuality and a necessary accommodation of monarchical unity. Art historian

¹⁵⁹ Ödön Lechner, “Magyar Formanyelv Nem Volt, Hanem Lesz, Művészet, 1906,” *Művészet* 5, no. 1 (1906): 1–18.

Péter Rostás encapsulates this duality aptly: “The figure of Franz Joseph, and his reign from 1848, was marked by a constant ambivalence between national resistance and loyalty to the legitimate ruler, and the interior decoration of the palace reflects these considerations.”¹⁶⁰ Moving beyond the earlier analysis of neo-Baroque society, it is worth examining the reception of the Hauszmann Royal Palace in its own time and its posthumous reevaluation, particularly through the lens of how contemporaries assessed Hauszmann and his work.

The ceremonial reconstruction of the Palace, initiated as part of the Millennium celebrations, culminated in 1905. A glowing account from *Budapesti Hírlap* about the unveiling, overseen by master carpenter Endre Thék, captures the profound reverence surrounding Hauszmann’s role:

His Majesty could not have entrusted the construction to anyone more worthy than Hauszmann, who, with his artistic knowledge, can elevate a nation's neglected craftsmanship to the glory of the patron. Patriotism has given him vital strength, and his grateful attachment to the king harmonized with royal favor to bring together all the elements of the work so that it can no longer be said that foreign creations surround the king.¹⁶¹

This sentiment was already apparent in 1900, when the Saint Stephen’s Hall was unveiled with great ceremony.¹⁶² According to a report in *Budapesti Napló*, the King, spending a mere 15 minutes in the Saint-Stephen Hall—a showcase of Hungarian craftsmanship,—enthusiastically repeated that the hall was “very beautiful, [he was] utterly happy with it.”¹⁶³ According to the reportage, his sole concern was the transfer of these artworks to the 1900 Paris Exhibition, an issue he also raised while visiting the Museum of Applied Arts that same day.

Indeed, Hauszmann's genius was recognized in the elaboration of the facades and in his ability to bring together Hungarian master artisans and artists for interior design solutions.

¹⁶⁰ Rostás, “A Budavári Palotában 1900 Körül Kialakított ‘Történelmi’ Dísztermek.”

¹⁶¹ “Szent István terem.,” *Budapesti Hírlap* 20, no. 31–58 (February 22, 1900).

¹⁶² “A király Budapesten.,” *Budapesti Napló* 5, no. 31–58 (February 23, 1900); “Szent István terem.”

¹⁶³ “A király Budapesten.”

However, the Palace's role in artistic canonization became primarily an attempt to legitimize power in the given political circumstances—this dual function persisted as long as the Monarchy's political legitimacy endured.

In his 1912 book, Hauszmann reflects on the symbolic intent behind the interior spaces::

The historical past of the royal castle required us to immortalize the outstanding eras of our national existence. Thus, we had to express the eras of the Árpáds, the Hunyadis, and the Habsburgs, and we designed the rooms of St. Stephen, Hunyadi Mátyás, and the Habsburgs, each of which forms a center in the internal layout of the palace. These rooms were designed in the appropriate style of the respective era.¹⁶⁴

The dissonance between these symbolic gestures became the core of the architectural program, in István Rév's words,

with the Habsburg apotheosis relief, a reduced replica of the Mátyás statue from Kolozsvár by Fadrusz, the Savoy Horseman statue, the Habsburg staircase leading to the Holy Crown, the statue of Patriotism and Self-sacrifice, and the merging of the imperial and national wings of the building.¹⁶⁵

Although the dramatic expansion of the Palace's size was not Hauszmann's original vision, early documents reveal that the goal of achieving a monumental presence atop Castle Hill was always part of the plan.

For Hauszmann, national architecture did not equate to “folk” or “popular” forms. Rather, as demonstrated by his career-long commitment to historicism and exemplified in the Palace itself, he saw historical styles as the truest representation of a nation's identity. For Hauszmann, Hungarian history was best expressed through the disciplined study and reinterpretation of historical styles, as he wrote::

Only the artist who thoroughly knows the artworks created in the past, who has penetrated their spirit, and who possesses such a high degree of artistic maturity can assess the advantages and disadvantages of the old with a disciplined taste and

¹⁶⁴ Hauszmann, *A Magyar Királyi Vár*.

¹⁶⁵ Rév István, “Jobb, mint az eredeti I.,” *Magyarnarancs.hu*, March 28, 2015, <https://magyarnarancs.hu/publicisztika/jobbb-mint-az-eredeti-i-93943>.

purposefully embark on the path of modernity, who can truly create something new and enduring.¹⁶⁶

At this time, two opposing approaches to national architectural identity emerged. On one hand was Hauszmann's historicist philosophy; on the other was the burgeoning Hungarian Secessionist movement, which drew heavily on folklore and was championed by figures like Ödön Lechner. Their ideological and practical differences encapsulate the spirit of the era's national debate, framing the assessment of the Royal Palace in a context tinged with bitterness. The conflict between their visions has been well-documented, and while both men profoundly influenced the development of Hungarian national style, the divergence in their philosophies continues to provoke reflection on what it truly means to create a national architecture.

6.1 Old Schools and New Schools of the National Language of Form

Lechner's architectural principles for creating a Hungarian style included the rich and liberal use of motifs found in folk ornamentation. With this approach, he made a successful contribution to the emergence of Hungarian Secessionist aspirations, leading to the creation of striking landmarks in the capital, such as the Museum of Applied Arts (1896), the Geological Institute (1899), and the Hungarian Royal Post Savings Bank (1901) buildings. The most famous and most explicit example of Lechner's architectural philosophy is the motto of the competition design for the Museum of Applied Arts, which was named "Eastwards, Hungarian!" (1906)¹⁶⁷ Lechner's culturally and anthropologically guided openness to the East mixed Persian and Indian influences with the results of contemporary ethnographic research, perceiving it as the sole expression of modern national identity. Despite its innovation in ornamentation and materials like steel and concrete, Lechner's Secessionist style drew criticism

¹⁶⁶ "A király Budapestén."

¹⁶⁷ In Hungarian: „Keletre, Magyar!” Mentioned in larger context in Balázs Ablonczy, *Keletre, magyar! a magyar turanizmus története* (Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2016).

for its paradoxical ties to eclecticism, which it sought to oppose. As Rados notes, Secession represented “an endeavor emerging from the hopeless repetition of historical forms,” a sort of “anti-style,” focusing more on aesthetics than altering traditional design proportions or materials.¹⁶⁸ This is not to say that Lechner’s new tradition was not of great novelty in architecture. Not only did Lechner’s freedom in the use of ornamentation come with an academic search into folk history (even anthropology), but Secession was one of the first styles to experiment with steel and reinforced concrete.

The two rival movements, Secession and historicism, also clashed in the space of political representation. One of the ceremonial events of the Millennium Celebration, rich in folk and early Secession influences, was the inauguration of the Museum of Applied Arts, where Franz Joseph laid the foundation stone as well. The contemporary newspapers spoke highly of this event.¹⁶⁹ As previously mentioned, in the same year, the Royal Palace also received a ceremonial cornerstone laying—while the planning of the Palace was still in progress, the Museum building, too, was far from complete. In fact, during his visit in 1905, the King himself inquired several times of the delegation accompanying him, including Prime Minister Kálmán Széll, whether the building was finally finished.¹⁷⁰ It is striking to see how, along the lines of the Millennium Celebrations, it became apparent that the spaces of power representation remained in the realm of pure representation and did not spike revelational discussions on national identity.

From today’s vantage point, it seems almost baffling that the two masters of Hungarian architecture never joined forces on the Royal Palace, the very project meant to crystallize a Hungarian national style. Hauszmann’s staunch conservatism—remarkable given that he was

¹⁶⁸ Rados, “IX. Eklektika, szecesszió, modern törekvések építészetünkben,” 316.

¹⁶⁹ “MAGYARORSZÁG TÖRTÉNETI EMLÉKEI AZ 1896. ÉVI EZREDEVES ORSZÁGOS KIÁLLÍTÁSON | A Magyar Nemzet Története | Kézikönyvtár.”

¹⁷⁰ “Napi Hírek - Hauszmann Alajos ünneplése,” *Budapesti Hirlap*, April 17, 1905, 25/97-119 edition, Arcanum.

only two years younger than Lechner—played a central role in the collision between historicism and Secessionist ideals. Their rivalry wasn't merely personal; it reflected a deeper ideological chasm, a battle between two archetypes of the era. Hauszmann, the consummate loyalist to the Monarchy, built his legacy as a dutiful servant of the establishment. His writings and reminiscences are conspicuously devoid of anti-monarchist sentiment—a silence that makes sense when one considers how much his career depended on royal favor.¹⁷¹ As a non-native Hungarian citizen who had studied abroad (at the Berlin Bauakademie) but felt a connection to Hungarian culture as an artist, he followed a career path appropriate for the era. In his essay titled “A Few Words on Modern Architecture,” his tone is revealed not only concerning modern trends, including Secession but also in terms of his own position. He writes:

In all branches of the visual arts, a strong movement has started to change the old traditions; new ideas and elements seek to assert themselves to create art that corresponds to the modern era. We are in the midst of this movement—the waves are still surging high—and they obscure the goal ahead of our eyes! We cannot choose a definite direction yet—although many have come forward as guides—experts, and amateurs, but they themselves engage in fierce battles with each other, the outcome of which is still uncertain.¹⁷²

Here, Hauszmann subtly reveals a reluctance, if not outright refusal, to embrace the wave of new ideas. Instead, he presents himself as a cautious observer, standing on the shore while others braved the tumultuous seas of innovation.

Hauszmann's dismissal of the new architectural styles as the work of “voluntary guides” seems a thinly veiled reference to Lechner. In contrast, Hauszmann lauds the Italian Renaissance—a period he embodied in his work—as the golden age of architectural achievement, celebrated for its unparalleled contribution to the development of European cities, both in quality and scale. He echoes this sentiment in his defense of eclecticism, a position later

¹⁷¹ Alajos Hauszmann, *Hauszmann Alajos Naplója - Építész a Századfordulón* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1997).

¹⁷² Alajos Hauszmann, “Néhány szó a modern építészetről,” *Építő Ipar - Építő Művészet*, no. 12 (March 22, 1908).

articulated by Rados, emphasizing how the 19th century's architectural explosion cemented the movement as a legitimate style. As Hauszmann himself asserts:

It cannot be claimed, therefore, that the 19th century did not have architecture. Even though the masters used the forms of Italian monuments, their works cannot be considered mere copies. They are independent creations that breathed new spirit into the tasks of their time and reflected the era that gave birth to them. The tremendous development of our modern cities attests to this.

Yet, Hauszmann's defense of historicism and eclecticism sidesteps the pressing architectural questions of his time. He steers clear of contemporary debates about urban planning, such as the Garden City theory, already gaining traction in Europe by 1908. Nor does he engage with the national art movements exploring folk motifs or the infrastructural demands of industrialized societies that were reshaping Hungary. He remains conspicuously silent on issues like working-class housing and the demographic shifts that defined apartment-building architecture in the 19th century. Instead, his nostalgia surfaces in his critique of modern "sterile" interiors, which he contrasts unfavorably with the traditional stuccoed spaces of middle-class homes. Hauszmann's architectural worldview seems preoccupied with preserving status and tradition, particularly within the walls of the University, his intellectual sanctuary since the age of 25.¹⁷³

This reluctance to embrace modern trends manifested in his resistance to Lechner and Secessionist movements. As Papp explains, it is known that Lechner wanted to establish a master's school within the University where modern trends could find their place in architectural and engineering education. However, Hauszmann obstructed this effort. Even in his inaugural speech from five years earlier in 1903, Lechner is portrayed as an outsider attempting to experiment with style. Although Papp detects sensitivity in this speech regarding

¹⁷³ It's worth mentioning that in contrast to the sentiments of Hauszmann's writing, around the same time, the MÁVAG colony on the outskirts of Budapest was already being constructed, designed by the civil engineer Pál Lipták (1874-1926) and an exemplary workers' colony.

“reflection on polemics about architecture,”¹⁷⁴ in my opinion, Hauszmann consistently avoids engaging in complex, human-centered thinking about architecture, a line of thought that modern trends, including Secession, aimed to develop.¹⁷⁵ In both of Hauszmann's manifestations, he labels modern architectural thinking as “individualistic” rather than human-centered, which can be interpreted as either a misunderstanding or a deliberate distortion.

The critique of individualism makes complete sense when placed in the context of his institutional loyalties. As Papp observes, Hauszmann's attachment to the University shaped his views on the national style: “With a thorough study and development of historical styles in all directions, the guiding principle of architectural education at the University will continue to be the correct one in the future, for it establishes the limits of the artistic atmosphere within which everyone can breathe and gain clarity, in order to express their talent and individuality.”¹⁷⁶ This rigid adherence to tradition drew sharp criticism from some contemporaries. Art historian and critic Artúr Elek, writing posthumously in 1926, offers a biting assessment:

But the eclecticism of his style was reminiscent of America, the collection and somewhat haphazard accumulation of elements from different historical styles, and it is quite an organic entity. [The New York Café] made Alajos Hauszmann's name famous and popular, but it also showed the shortcomings of his talent. He was not an artist with a broad vision, not a comprehensive observer; he was a builder starting from details and often forgetting them in the details. The New York Palace today is the same massive

¹⁷⁴ Papp, “„Vezessük be minél előbb nemzeti hagyományainkat a modern világba”.”

¹⁷⁵ This is well represented in Hauszmann speech, where he said: “Unfortunately, both laypeople and experts, including scholars and critics, tend to see only the stylistic elements of a building if they slavishly imitate the known components of historical artistic periods. They are often taken aback when confronted with an independent creation that demonstrates progress and deviates from the established template. Such buildings usually provoke sharp criticism, as is the case with the new Parliament building. It is claimed that it is not a true Gothic work because domes, spacious monumental staircases, and halls with horizontal ceilings were not built in the Middle Ages. These elements belong to the Renaissance. However, this is a misconception. Steindl's main achievement lies precisely in his ability to transform and ‘Gothicize’ forms and structures in the spirit of the medieval style, even when they originate from a later era. In doing so, he contributed to the development of this style.” See transcript in: “A Műgyetem megnyitása,” *Budapesti Hírlap* 23, no. 255 (September 17, 1903): 5.

¹⁷⁶ Papp, “„Vezessük be minél előbb nemzeti hagyományainkat a modern világba”,” 17.

mole on the body of the Ring Road as it once was, but the personality that only its creator could have given it is missing.¹⁷⁷

Elek held similar views about the Royal Palace:

Ybl left only sketchy notes about the plans for the palace, and Hauszmann approached the design entirely on his own. The generation that can still recall the old palace, even if only as a childhood memory, can quickly assess the transformation that Hauszmann's new building represented. Hauszmann added another building from the same era to the modest, pleasantly proportioned Baroque palace and connected the two buildings with a high domed structure.

My earlier observations support the argument that Elek was mistaken in suggesting that Hauszmann single-handedly initiated the monumental transformation of the Royal Palace.¹⁷⁸

While Elek's criticism of Hauszmann as a derivative thinker who assembled "thought fragments of others" might seem harsh, it underscores Hauszmann's reluctance to engage with the politically charged architectural discourse of his time. In stark contrast, Lechner's architecture wove politics into its very fabric. His bold fusion of tradition and innovation reflected the tensions of a Hungary grappling with modernity. That two architects of nearly the same age diverged so drastically in their approaches underscores that this was not the fiery idealism of youth but a clash of deeply entrenched ideologies.

6.2 The Innovative Potential of Secession

¹⁷⁷ Artúr Elek, "Hauszmann Alajos (1847-1926)," *Nyugat Képzőművészeti Figyelő*, no. 16 (1926), <https://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00022/00401/12415.htm>.

¹⁷⁸ Elek considered Alajos Hauszmann's most outstanding work, as is commonly referred to by professionals, to be the building of the Courthouse. He writes about it as follows: "Among the greater tasks that he was allowed to undertake, the task of building the Courthouse best suited his character, or more accurately, his existing personality. Before this work, his contemporaries often mentioned the alleged German model of Wallot's parliamentary building in Berlin. However, the model did not have a significant influence on the Hungarian artist. Wallot was the opposite of Hauszmann: he saw the world as a mass and balanced the masses with grand proportionality. This is what Berlin's parliamentary building also shows. Whereas Hauszmann's palace is a pleasant and tasteful building without monumentality. Whereas Hauszmann's palace is a pleasant and tasteful building without monumentality. It is indeed Hauszmann's most harmonious creation." In: Elek.

Lechner's manifesto, which was likely a response to Hauszmann's 1903 inaugural lecture, begins with these affirmative sentences:

The Hungarian national style is not something we have had, but something that is to be. Because it must exist, this conviction guides my path, which has only one goal: to pave the way for the creation of a Hungarian architectural style. And while I am tirelessly striving, with the help of my ever-increasing comrades-in-arms, to achieve this ideal, I find strength not only in my patriotic enthusiasm but also in my artistic conviction. This is the point where art and politics meet.¹⁷⁹

The Eastern orientation of the Secession movement aligned with the era's broader fascination with Eastern-oriented national historical narratives. However, Lechner's pursuit of a folkloric architectural language, perhaps naively, stood in opposition to historical bias. As he wrote,

only the scholars and artists of the 18th and, even more so, the 19th century began to work with 'styles.' That is, with what was not theirs, not of their time, but belonged to others. Instead of art, they wanted to make history or, rather, undo it.¹⁸⁰

According to him, the separation of architectural styles from local folklore characteristics and needs was a form of forgery and imitation, creating an imposed, imagined historical tradition. He believed that earlier academic architects wanted to make the new artistic "homunculus" in the "retort of historical chemicals," in which the folk character would be lost: "if a foreigner walks through the streets of Budapest, he will find the style of every nation in the world, except the Hungarian national feature in our architecture."¹⁸¹

Whether the Secession movement genuinely spurred a renaissance of Hungarian culture in architecture remains debatable, but it is undeniable that Lechner's critiques exposed contradictions within the Dualist system and its attempts at cultural hegemony. He wrote::

It's interesting that our chauvinism, which waves its victorious flag in so many fields, encounters such resistance when promoting a Hungarian architectural style. From the Carpathians to the Adriatic, we insist on propagating national culture and expect

¹⁷⁹ Lechner, "Magyar Formanyelv Nem Volt, Hanem Lesz, Művészet, 1906."

¹⁸⁰ Lechner.

¹⁸¹ Lechner.

foreigners arriving with their flags in Fiume to feel, know, and acknowledge that they are stepping onto Hungarian soil. Yet in the whole of Fiume, you cannot find a single building, house, or window that declares to the foreigner: ‘Traveler, here begins Hungary!’¹⁸²

It's striking how Lechner's criticism delves into the essentially conflicting nature of the system. His political position did not align with the vision (or illusion) created in the symbolic spaces of the Dualist Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Lechner realized that *illusion* is simply not enough for the foundation of a national architectural style. As he writes, Hungary lacks the “self-conscious chauvinism” that elevated the national characteristics of neighboring countries to a pedestal. Instead, as Lechner sees it, the historical profession lines up arguments in favor of the Baroque style. Lechner humorously recalls an anecdote about an unnamed historian, likely Gyula Szekfű, who staunchly defended Baroque and, in Lechner’s view, resisted all modern impulses.

In his manifesto, Lechner clearly articulates the need to bridge comprehensive, interdisciplinary gaps through the establishment of a master school. He argued that Hungarian identity should be sought in the languages of history, fine arts, literature, and architecture. Yet, unlike Otto Wagner—who, despite initially submitting a neo-Renaissance design for the Parliament competition, became a champion of modernist Secessionist ambitions—Lechner was unable to institutionalize his artistic agenda. Hauszmann found it inconceivable that those modern(ist) aspirations that emerged against the architectural traditionalist circles and the establishment could be institutionalized. Thus, the question of the Hungarian national style indeed remained solely a stylistic problem, unable to “eliminate the clichés and ornamentation”¹⁸³ as Hauszmann himself would have perhaps liked. It could not rise above

¹⁸² Lechner.

¹⁸³ “A Műegyetem megnyitása.”

what Lechner referred to as “national chauvinism,” which was supposed to provide legitimacy to the political system.

In 1915, nearly a decade after Lechner’s writings, Otto Wagner visited Hungary and sparked controversy with his critique of national style in an article published in the prominent architectural journal *Vállalkozók Lapja*. Wagner provocatively asked on behalf of all Austrian architects:

Do the architectural works we have seen in Budapest bring to the forefront the question: Will there be and is it possible to have an artistic difference between Hungarian and Austrian architecture? Is it possible to have a national creative expression and style?”

Wagner argued that in the centers of a shared culture—be it artistic, fashion, or architectural—styles should remain uniform, differing only under the pressure of external forces. He doubted the feasibility of a Hungarian style, extending his skepticism to the concept of any national style.

Therefore, he does not consider it possible to create a Hungarian style, but he also does not believe in the possibility of any national style. Critic Oszkár Róbert, in a subsequent article following Wagner’s, where he modestly reports on Wagner’s modern Vienna home, speaks prophetically about the reception of Wagner’s ideas:

Indeed, many, especially among the older generation of architects, will consider Wagner’s non-national, progressive artistic theory worthless from an art ethics perspective. However, it is certain that in the heart of this flexible, energy-filled older man, a grand fire is burning that will bring about the future. Otto Wagner, the seventy-year-old, gentle-eyed, gray artist, is the most revolutionary figure in today’s architecture, full of cleverness and clear vision, yet also full of zeal and youth. The future is resonating within his soul.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Oszkár Róbert, “Wagner Ottónál,” *Vállalkozók Lapja* 36, no. 51 (December 22, 1915).

Wagner's thesis about the role of centers in shaping styles was appreciated by contemporary society, even though it also caused astonishment.¹⁸⁵ Academics like Béla Ney or Pál Ligeti shared the belief in the obsolescence of national sentiment. However, Wagner's theses on national style contradicted the political possibilities of the Dual Monarchy era. He wrote:

The style of a cultural state, and therefore its capital, is shaped by its climate, available building materials, core values, urban population's lifestyle, state power, prosperity reflected in its cities, and the artistic capabilities present in its metropolises.

While Hungary shared a similar climate and materials with Austria, the defining differences lay in social, economic, and political factors. By 1915, Vienna was on the cusp of revolutionary socialist movements, its intellectual life fueled by psychoanalysis and avant-garde trends. In contrast, Budapest wrestled with ethnic tensions, wartime disillusionment, and the double-edged legacy of both imperial dominance and national subjugation.

At the time of Wagner's writing, Vienna was beginning to experience the rise of powerful socialist movements and interest groups, which would later define the period of Red Vienna. Intellectual life in the city was largely shaped by progressive movements, including psychoanalysis and avant-garde modernism, though these trends often manifested in a neo-Baroque form as a reaction to the ongoing war. In contrast, Budapest during the same period was grappling with disillusionment towards the West, compounded by emerging ethnic conflicts, political instability, and a pervasive sense of lost national sovereignty alongside the waning stability of the imperial system. The contrast between the two cities, however, should not be interpreted as an endorsement of historical determinism or the perpetuation of a narrative of Hungarian backwardness. Rather, it is essential to recognize that Wagner's critique of national identity could only resonate within a context where the question of national sovereignty was not central to political discourse. In Hungary, the issue of developing a national

¹⁸⁵ András Ferkai extensively discusses the echoes of Wagner's statement in his essay, which I won't delve into here

architectural style remained premature; the notion of an international style was perceived not as a neutral artistic endeavor, but as a form of imperial suppression, juxtaposed against the backdrop of repressed national and ethnic aspirations and resistance from the conservative intellectual elite.¹⁸⁶

6.3 Secessionist Views on History

It was not merely Alajos Hauszmann's presumed narrow-mindedness or Lechner's withdrawal from professional circles that constrained Hungarian Secessionism, modernism, or broader explorations of a national style. Hungary's flirtation with modernism—an architectural approach both revolutionary and elemental—was stifled in no small part by the national chauvinism that relegated urban planning to symbolic gestures. This chauvinism, ironically, both inspired and confined Lechner's national-modern aspirations. To fully grasp this, it is essential to consider the Eastward ideological turn symbolized by Secession, which became enmeshed with the neo-Baroque society and, later, the Horthy era. Here, I draw on Balázs Ablonczy's monograph of the same title to unpack these dynamics.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ It is worth comparing, for the purpose of illustration, the writings about Wagner's Viennese home with those about Hauszmann's. Róbert writes about Wagner's home as follows: "Certain practical beauty permeates Wagner's house, and we found that it very much aligns with Wagner's artistic personality... Nowhere in the sumptuous decoration can we find any awkward parvenu features. It does not intend to dazzle with crowding or extravagant proportions... Our impression is that this house was created by a serene artistic soul who knew how to exploit the elementary, artistic possibilities of material and space, avoiding any audacious extravagance or forced pursuit of novelty." In contrast, in his writing, Hauszmann expresses his views on the architectural question of the home as follows: "The solution to the much-discussed issue of middle-class housing can be found in the family home because the desire to have one's own home is growing more and more, especially with the increasing affluence and higher culture of the middle class. [...] We elders, who have been active since the last third of the previous century and grew up practicing the styles of that era, desire that the interior of our house, our rooms or spaces, be equipped with certain familiar, noble comforts. We like subdued darker colors, wall coverings, perhaps carved wooden ceilings, ample comfortable furniture, and we only feel comfortable in an environment with objects that are connected to our memories or have some relation to our lives or family tradition. We cannot warm up to the modern apartment with its cold, angular white or glaringly colored walls, and its furniture, with few exceptions, is the product of a decorator's taste. These deliberately modern-style interior decorations say nothing, leave us cold, and their freezing effect is not diminished by the sometimes glaring and colorful painting. It is as if they deliberately seek coldness and approach the Biedermeier era, which once symbolized simplicity, the bourgeoisie, and the puritanism of modest demands.")

¹⁸⁷ Ablonczy, *Keletre, magyar! a magyar turanizmus története*.

Lechner's exclamational motto of “Eastward, Hungarian!” during the competition for the Museum of Applied Arts design, sparked enduring historical fantasies. Had it emerged after the Treaty of Trianon, it would have been a textbook case of historical irredentism.¹⁸⁸ Yet, narratives of Hungary’s Eastern, Turanian origins had already taken root centuries earlier, originating with Simon Kézai’s *Hun* origin theory in the 13th century. These narratives gained ideological prominence in the 19th century as nation-states emerged, balancing the ominous prophecy of Johann Gottfried Herder. As Ablonczy observes, Turanian genealogy served as a cultural counterweight to Herder's bleak prediction of Hungarian national extinction—what he termed the “slow elimination” of national culture.¹⁸⁹ This existential threat, paired with Hungary’s national dualism, created a peculiar historical schizophrenia: a compulsive pursuit of historical continuity alongside the grim specter of cultural annihilation.

Therefore, in double-bound dualist Hungary, the compulsive quest for historical continuity with traditions associated with the image of the liberal state that came with new nation-statehood was coupled with the grim fantasy of national death. In addition to Herder's prophecy, the *curse of Turan* also spread in the 19th century, painting an ominous picture of the ever-divided Hungarian nation. The Curse of Turan is often invoked to explain Hungary's historical struggles, including invasions by Mongols, Ottomans, and other foreign powers with the historically determined future of complete division and eventual disappearance of the

¹⁸⁸ For more on irredentism and revisionism, please see the *Introduction*, 1.4.

¹⁸⁹ Johann Gottfried Herder, an influential German philosopher and thinker, introduced the concept of cultural nationalism, emphasizing the unique cultural identity and language of different nations. This idea resonated strongly with Hungarians as they sought to preserve and assert their national identity, especially under the Habsburg Empire's dominion. In Hungary, Herder's ideas inspired a cultural awakening and a renewed appreciation for Hungarian language, folklore, and traditions. Hungarian intellectuals and leaders recognized the potential of language as a unifying force and a symbol of national pride. Lajos Kossuth, a key figure in the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, famously declared, “the language of a nation is its soul,” reflecting the deep-rooted influence of Herder's ideas. Herder's prophecy also played a crucial role in the 20th century when Hungary faced political and cultural challenges, including both World Wars and periods of foreign rule. Herder's legacy thus remained a source of inspiration and cultural resilience for the Hungarian people during times of adversity. The prophecy stated: “Da sind sie jetzt unter Slawen, Deutschen, Wlachen, und andern Völkern der geringere Teil des Landeseinwohner, und nach Jahrhunderten wird man vielleicht ihre Sprache kaum finden.” For an analysis of linguistic history, see Sándor Hites, “Kazinczy És a Nyelvhalál,” *Kisebbségkutatás* 18, no. 3 (2009), https://epa.oszk.hu/00400/00462/00043/1767.htm#_ftnref2.

nation.¹⁹⁰ Even in 1920, Miklós Horthy invoked the curse, framing Hungary's disunity as a self-destructive pathology:

There can be no room for division in this country anymore. Hungarian people may divide into parties based on their occupations, but never in a way that they tear each other apart, as they have done so far. Hungarian division even had a name: the Turanian curse. This Turanian curse must cease forever. There is no time for experimentation because we will die from it. Those who do not want to understand this must be forced to realize it."¹⁹¹

Even the aristocracy's self-mythology, which traced Hungarian nobility to Scythian roots, could not pacify the anxiety surrounding inevitable disunity.¹⁹² The Hungarian intellectual elite, haunted by Herder's prophecy and the Turanian curse, sought solace in "authentic" or fabricated linguistic kinships with the East.

Figures like Ármin Vámbéry, József Budenz, Pál Hunfalvy, and Ignác Goldziher—ironically, assimilated intellectuals with voluntarily adopted Hungarian identities—led this Eastern intellectual turn. As Ablonczy and Krisztián Ungváry highlight, this Eastern quest shaped linguistic and anthropological research, inspiring expeditions from Japan to Turkey in search of Hungary's supposed roots. Yet these efforts also gave rise to grand imperial fantasies. In this imagined order, Hungary positioned itself as the cultural and political nucleus of an Eastern empire, subordinating its "sympathy-based" neighbors while challenging Vienna's dominance.¹⁹³

This political fantasy of "love-based colonization" envisioned Hungary extending its influence across the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire, ultimately heralding Vienna's imperial decline. Ablonczy's work meticulously documents how such Balkan imperial aspirations

¹⁹⁰ The expression was likely popularized by Ferenc Herczeg, Ablonczy, *Keletre, magyar! a magyar turanizmus története*, 25–26.

¹⁹¹ "A kormányzó tiszántúli útja.," *Pesti Hírlap* 42, no. 90 (April 14, 1920).

¹⁹² This thought by originating from Werbőczy seems to have returned during the 2012 Constitutional Amendment, which gave birth to the Fundamental Law, which will be covered in the last research chapter of this dissertation.

¹⁹³ Ablonczy, *Keletre, magyar! a magyar turanizmus története*, 61.

infiltrated Hungary's intellectual life and politics, culminating in the formation of the Turanian Society. In 1916, Ignác Goldziher formulated that “everything in Budapest is about the East.”¹⁹⁴ Remarkably, between 1913 and 1944, every Hungarian Prime Minister was a member of this society, which claimed intellectual progress as its mission.

These Eastern fantasies also found fertile ground in architecture, particularly during the Millennial Celebrations, where Hungary's imperial aspirations were on full display. Bosnia-Herzegovina, occupied by the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1878, was showcased at the Millennium Exhibitions as a colonial success story, with its pavilion celebrating the empire's “civilizational achievements.” As contemporary sources suggest, while the press refrained from explicitly labeling Bosnia-Herzegovina a colony, its representation was steeped in imperial and colonial undertones.¹⁹⁵

Architects in the first decades of the 20th century were already interested in the East as both a potential birthplace of the ancient nation and as a region of cultural colonization. Ignác Alpár and Henszlmann both visited Turkey on commission from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Architect Károly Kós (1883-1977) spent two years in Istanbul, and he wrote his experiences into a monograph titled *Istanbul: City History and Architecture* in 1917—Kós's role in 20th-century vernacular architecture is indispensable. Instead of colonization in the East, cultural elements transferred into Hungarian art.

Orientalist motifs became integral to Hungary's national architecture, reflecting not just cultural curiosity but also imperial aspirations. Lechner's reflections on England's colonial adaptations illuminate this dynamic:

¹⁹⁴ Ablonczy, *Keletre, magyar! a magyar turanizmus története*.

¹⁹⁵ Bálint Varga, “Ausztia-Magyarország Elfoglalja Bosznia-Hercegovinát,” in *Magyarország Globális Története* (Budapest: Corvina kiadó, 2022), 31–34; Bálint Varga, “Az Ezredéves Kiállítás,” in *Magyarország Globális Története* (Budapest: Corvina kiadó, 2022), 54–57; “MAGYARORSZÁG TÖRTÉNETI EMLÉKEI AZ 1896. ÉVI EZREDEVES ORSZÁGOS KIÁLLÍTÁSON | A Magyar Nemzet Története | Kézikönyvtár”; Budapesti Történeti Múzeum, Farbaky, and Rostás, *History of the Royal Palace of Buda*.

if the English feel no shame in studying the culture of their colonies (which are, after all, at a far lower level of development), striving to adapt it and combine it with their own, then we Hungarians are all the more obliged to study the art of our people and to find more synthesis between it and our general European sense of culture.¹⁹⁶

For Lechner, the new art meant a combination of the international trend to reject the idea of a historically continuous and homogenous Europe and the creation of a distinctively national system of symbolic meaning. In Lechner's words, it is “to harmonize the primitive crudeness of Magyar folk art and the refinement of French culture.”

In light of this, despite the revolutionary and truly modernist efforts of the Secession movement, the outcome of Lechner's school was less innovative in national architecture than probably expected. Not at all due to the incompetence Hauszmann implicated but due to the movement's inability to institutionalize and thus refine its theoretical and practical *hinterland*. Both the Historicist and the Secessionist movements succumbed to, in Wagner's wording, chauvinistic responses to the national question in architecture.

7. *The "Beautifying Practices"¹⁹⁷ of the Neo-Baroque Society in the Royal Palace*

The Turanist threads woven into Secessionist ideology, the Balkans' imperial daydreams, and the Eastward aspirations for a reimagined Hungary all collided with the volatile, long-standing relationship with Serbia—an instability that ultimately triggered the First World War. The ensuing catastrophe—war devastation, the Austro-Hungarian Empire's collapse, the farcical Aster Revolution, the grotesque violence of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, and the crippling territorial losses of the Treaty of Trianon—birthed a peculiar brand of interwar conservatism. This conservative ethos of 1918-1944, oddly prescient of the neoliberal-conservative

¹⁹⁶ Lechner, “Magyar Formanyelv Nem Volt, Hanem Lesz, Művészet, 1906.”

¹⁹⁷ I am reusing Broch's term „beautifying practices” of Viennese neo-baroque society.

governments emerging post-2010, reshaped the relationship between Hungary's political elite and its citizenry. I argue that this dynamic—captured in events surrounding the Royal Palace—became a keystone of cultural memory, encapsulated in what might be termed the “nostalgia of nostalgia.” Interwar practices, far more than the watershed years of the Compromise, seeped into the spatial practices of the long 20th century. My aim here is not to provide an exhaustive chronology but rather to give a snapshot of events emblematic of the Horthy era's prevailing spirit.

What Hermann Broch labeled the “joyful apocalypses of Vienna” in his oft-cited work found an eerie parallel in Budapest's Castle District between the wars. To whitewash the memory of failed socialist and communist revolutions—not to mention the White Terror's grisly legacy—the cultural epoch of Miklós Horthy cloaked itself in a simulacrum of pre-war aristocratic and bourgeois idylls. Nostalgia, as mobilized by memory politics around the Regent, was anything but subtle. In 2019, former minister János Lázár laid a wreath at Horthy's grave in Kenderes, his rhetoric dripping with national romanticism.¹⁹⁸ This act echoed an earlier moment of symbolic reinvention: in 1919, Horthy's horseback entrance into Budapest signaled not just the end of the revolutionary left but a wholesale rewriting of post-war Hungary's political narrative. I will revisit this 2019 episode in the concluding chapter.

To grasp the conservative elite's agenda between 1919 and 1944, one must understand what they opposed. The Great War's senseless cruelty, the socioeconomic freefall that followed, and the accompanying social fragmentation galvanized anti-war political movements. By the mid-1910s, social democratic groups swelled in number and influence; by 1918, the Social Democratic Party boasted 721,000 members.¹⁹⁹ The October 30–31 revolution that same year

¹⁹⁸ More recently in 2023, upon the 30th anniversary of Horthy's reburial. See: Zoltán Haszán, “Lázár János szerint Horthy kivételes államfő, igaz magyar hazafi és hős katona volt,” 444, September 4, 2023, <https://444.hu/2023/09/04/lazar-janos-szerint-horthy-kiveteles-allamfo-igaz-magyar-hazafi-es-hos-katona-volt>.

¹⁹⁹ Péter Csunderlik, “Megalapítják a Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Pártot,” in *Magyarország Globális Története* (Budapest: Corvina kiadó, 2022), 52.

saw the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy crumble, ushering in a new government led by social democrat Mihály Károlyi.

The Castle again emerged as a stage for political transformation in 1918. Among the revolution's most tragic events was a clash when demonstrators, demanding Károlyi's premiership, marched on the Castle. Police fired into the crowd, an act the press decried as a brutal affront to revolutionary zeal.²⁰⁰ The left-leaning *Népszava* captured the outrage: "Our breath is taken away, and we find no words. We especially cannot find words for the senseless, shameful, and savage behavior of the police, which, within a few days, for the second time, has spilled the blood of innocent and defenseless people. Just last Friday evening, they rushed upon the crowd with wild, animal-like brutality in the Castle, and now, on Monday evening, they shot into the crowd, even causing loss of life." The article juxtaposed this despair with an enthusiastic report on the independent German socialists' meeting, underscoring a shared revolutionary fervor.

By November 11, 1918, King Charles IV, the last Habsburg monarch, had abdicated, signaling the monarchy's formal demise. The following day, plans for state offices to occupy the Royal Palace began to take shape.²⁰¹ In a radical step for the region, the Károlyi government even nationalized privately owned palaces to address the housing crisis—an initiative unparalleled until post–World War II efforts. On November 19, ministers conducted on-site inspections to repurpose the Palace as a governmental center. The notion that Orbán's administration invented this use for the Palace out of sheer Horthy nostalgia is, thus, historically myopic.

During the Hungarian Soviet Republic's brief and tumultuous rule, the Palace transitioned into a potent symbol of regime change. Though structurally untouched, its

²⁰⁰ "Hétfőn Megint Vér Folyt.," *Népszava*, October 29, 1918.

²⁰¹ "Garbai Elvtárs a Lakúsgy Rendezéséről.," *Népszava* 46, no. 266 (November 13, 1918).

symbolic weight shifted dramatically. During the May 1919 workers' holiday—the first of its kind in Hungary—a red cap was placed atop the Palace, veiling Hauszmann's Holy Crown in revolutionary fervor.²⁰² *Népszava* describes the scene as follows: "Up in the castle, the former palace of the Habsburgs looks down on us, its highest point is covered in red. Huge red surfaces rise on the Buda side of the Chain Bridge, and among the red structures with inscriptions placed under the bridge, statues of Marx and Engels gaze at us."²⁰³

The radical gesture of covering the Holy Crown marked a definitive rupture from monarchy and feudalism, declaring allegiance to republicanism. This act was diametrically opposed to Hauszmann's vision, penned just six years earlier, in which he claimed the Palace's reconstruction symbolized "our nation's devotion to the throne in a manner befitting the Hungarian Holy Crown." The republican act challenged the Holy Crown doctrine, which tethered state sovereignty to monarchy through legal and administrative continuity.²⁰⁴ During the Soviet Republic, another symbolic gesture of equal weight was the public opening of the Várkert [Castle Garden]. While some might dismiss such developments as opportunistic, it's worth recognizing that opening the Royal Palace to the people was more than mere symbolism. It marked a definitive break from feudal hierarchies and laid the groundwork for broader spatial democratization—a trend that would gain full momentum during the Kádár era.

²⁰² Péter Apor, *Az Elképzelt Köztársaság: A Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság Utóélete, 1945-1989*, Magyar Történelmi Emlékek. Értekezések (Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, 2014).

²⁰³ "Vörös diszekbe öltözött Budapest," *Népszava* 47, no. 105 (May 3, 1919).

²⁰⁴ The relationship between the Holy Crown and Hungarian sovereignty is partly related to the medieval Hungarian legal scholar, István Werbőczy, who summarized the principles of Hungarian law in his work "Tripartitum." The "Tripartitum" is a work written in 1517, and it's one of the most important medieval Hungarian legal works, having a significant impact on Hungarian legal development and thinking. István Werbőczy contributed to Hungarian legal traditions by linking the legal foundations of the Hungarian kingdom to the Holy Crown and the rights derived from it. According to the Holy Crown doctrine, the Holy Crown was not just a crown but also a legal symbol of the Hungarian kingdom, forming the legal basis of statehood. According to the "Tripartitum," the king could only enact laws and taxes above the Holy Crown with the approval of the National Assembly strengthening the principle of contemporaneous constitutionalism. Therefore, Werbőczy's work and the legal principles it contained were crucial in shaping the Hungarian legal system and understanding the legal foundations of statehood. The role of the Holy Crown doctrine and related legal concepts had a long-lasting impact on Hungarian legal and political thinking, and they remain important symbols in the identity and historical heritage of the Hungarian nation.

After the Republic's collapse, Horthy's entrance into Budapest capped the symbolic pendulum swing. His speech, steeped in anti-urban sentiment, decried the capital's revolutionary betrayal. *Népszava* chronicled the moment in an article titled "Budapest Cloaked in Red," quoting Horthy: "This city has denied its thousand-year-old past; this city has trampled upon its crown, its national colors, and dressed in red rags." Through these spatial and symbolic shifts, the Castle became a theater for competing visions of Hungary's identity—a locus where monarchy, republicanism, and nationalism battled for dominance in the cultural imagination."²⁰⁵

By the latter half of 1919, the Hungarian national community, battered by Romanian incursions and disillusioned by socialist and progressive forces, underwent a swift and profound transformation in its identity markers, historical outlook, and symbolic systems. The familiar routes of cultural elitism and political aristocracy quickly coalesced on the conservative side of the spectrum. Following Miklós Horthy's ascent to power in 1919, he formally took up residence in the Castle on April 1, 1920. In a manner akin to other regional conservative regimes resisting socialist reforms, Horthy's forces relied on the White Terror to crush the Hungarian Soviet Republic.²⁰⁶ To project stability amid a ravaged national landscape, Horthy's governance at the Castle was strategically paired with imagery invoking the grandeur

²⁰⁵ The transcript of the original speech can be found in open-source databases. Allow me to cite a transcript published in the Orbán government-friendly *Magyar Nemzet* in 2019 as a commemoration of the speech and Horthy's takeover of Budapest. The centenary of the speech, which is otherwise known as the speech about „Sinful Budapest”, coincided with the municipal elections in Budapest where opposition and progressive candidate for mayor won after 10 years of Fidesz's ruling of the capital. See: Gábor Baranyai, "Budapest vörös rongyokba öltözött," Budapest vörös rongyokba öltözött, November 16, 2019, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2019/11/budapest-voros-rongyokba-oltozott>.

²⁰⁶ Two similar examples: Russia, 1918-1919: The White Terror in Russia refers to a series of events that occurred during the Russian Civil War, from 1918 to 1919. It describes the violent actions and mass killings committed by the White Army in the context of the struggle between the Bolshevik Red Army and the White Army. During the White Terror, the White Army and allied groups often employed retaliatory violence against supporters of the communist revolution and individuals deemed "dangerous" or "mentally ill." Finland, 1918: During the Finnish Civil War, the White Army carried out mass killings and retaliatory actions known as the White Terror against members and supporters of the Red Army. More on the topic in: Krisztián Ungváry, *Horthy Miklós - a Kormányzó És Felelőssége 1920-1944* (Jaffa Kiadó, 2020); Apor, *Az Elképzelt Köztársaság*.

of the old nobility and the prewar political status quo—an effort that strikingly parallels what Mark Fisher might describe, in theoretical terms, as the spectacles of contemporary society.

Rather than a comprehensive account of Horthy's political tenure, this subchapter seeks to analyze the gestures that encapsulate the ethos of the era and its enduring memory politics. Historian Gábor Ujváry's analysis of the Palace during Horthy's residency provides an ideal entry point, striking a reverential tone that exemplifies the neo-baroque nostalgia for aristocracy, nationalism, and elitism that defined the period. Ujváry's central thesis aligns with this essay's argument: Horthy's persona and the Royal Palace itself became emblematic of the neo-baroque era's rise and fall. The cultural armament of this period—conceived and implemented by Kuno Klebelsberg—manifested in the symbolic use of Castle spaces, which included relocating Compromise-themed paintings, hosting knights' processions, and staging Miklós Day celebrations, many of which bordered on the quasi-religious (as elaborated in the footnote). These neo-baroque aesthetics, surrounding the figure of the Regent, vividly embodied the aristocratic nostalgia of the time, a sentiment reflected in Horthy's own autobiographical writings. Ujváry distills the Regent's daily life from these writings, as well as from Ráfaélné Zichy's *The Regent's Wife*, offering a striking portrait of an era steeped in nationalistic pageantry:

Every morning, he engaged in some physical activity and had breakfast in the company of his wife. They discussed the day's schedule, and then he glanced through the morning newspapers. Shortly before ten o'clock, he entered his study and rang the servant wing aide who arrived with the daily mail 'under his arm like a formidable package.' After reviewing it, one day, he met with the head of the cabinet office, and on another day, with the chief of the military office – both of their accommodations and offices were near the Regent's residence. Following this, he received those waiting for an audience from half-past eleven to half-past one. These hearings usually did not last longer than a quarter of an hour. At half past one, he had lunch with his wife and family and moved to the living room. Here, he engaged in detailed reading of newspapers and then rested until four in the afternoon. If he had the time, he walked along the Várkert promenade,

and if he had more time, he went on a smaller hunting trip to Visegrád or Gödöllő with his hunting party. From four in the afternoon, he discussed 'important national matters' with government members and other officials in his study. They had dinner before the performance if they went to the theater or the opera in the evening. If not, dinner was served at eight. Then came the 'quiet hours of family tranquility.' The Regent often played solitaire or read during this time, while the high-ranking lady usually engaged in handicrafts. Usually, they retired to bed around eleven o'clock. On Sunday afternoons, they often organized bridge parties as well. 'The schedule was kept from morning till night with minute precision,' and only extraordinary events could disrupt it.²⁰⁷

The Regent's bourgeois image, reminiscent of the belle-époque of Dualist times, legitimized his position in the kingdom without a king. This made the Regent the person to fulfill the old appeal that I presented in this chapter, namely that the country's highest leader would make the Royal Palace their home. This is underlined by Ferenc Herczeg's description of the Regent:

Undoubtedly, the governor today is the central force that balances Hungarian life. He is the diamond axis around which the thousand-year-old mechanism revolves. His authority unites the quarreling classes and parties into national unity. The working citizen sees in him the supreme guardian of order and security. Patriots hope for the fulfillment of national desires from him. Every soldier in the army adheres to their person until death. Even unbelievers are forced to believe in him, and the wavering ones are forced to reach an agreement. Without him, the Hungarian masses cannot imagine the present or the future.

In Ujváry's writing, Herczeg's portrayal of Horthy is left without criticism and thus supports the author's Horthy-positive stance somewhat incorrectly.

Miklós Horthy's persona in the press and in his own recollections is indeed an epochal imprint of the concept of Authority (with a capital 'A' as described by Szekfü). The evocation of his daily routine is quite reminiscent of those of the twentieth-century English royal family—

²⁰⁷ The quote is found in both the author's article and his monograph: Ujváry, "A Budai Királyi Palota a 'Neobarokk Társadalomban'"; Gábor Ujváry, *A Harmincharmadik Nemzedék: Politika, Kultúra És Történettudomány a "Neobarokk Társadalomban,"* Kodolányi János Főiskola Történeti Műhelyének Kiadványai 1 (Budapest: Ráció, 2010), 498–99.

or, even as one can read of the indifferent aristocracy in the work of the English prime minister and writer Benjamin Disraeli.²⁰⁸

Another representative account is Ella Megyery's 1937 travel guide titled *Budapesti notesz* [*Budapest Notebook*], which, while it does not mention Horthy himself, reflects the atmosphere of the Castle District as perceived in the interwar years. Megyery, a contributor to *Pesti Hírlap*, wrote several travel guides, and as a committed sympathizer of fascist movements, she lived and worked in emigration within far-right literary circles after the war. In the *Notesz*, she wrote:

If we continue to walk, we arrive in the Castle's nobly archaic, deserted little streets, one of Budapest's most secluded and aristocratic neighborhoods, where even the footsteps seem to echo more somberly and where it appears as if the people and morals of the Biedermeier era still lived behind locked arched gates. As if Wells' time machine were the funicular that whisks you away from noisy Pest to here, and centuries and centuries go back into the past, where aristocratic mansions line up side by side, where pristine family nests with historical names are snuggled together in silence.²⁰⁹

The Castle, based on the sources of the time and according to Ujváry as well, appears in a considerable volume of writings in a highly esteemed register. I argue that this high esteem can be historically interpreted as a memento of past times and conditions of the belle-époque. Megyery also captures the architectural complexity of the Castle, but she also attributes it to one of the sources of nostalgia: “On the solid, massive facades of the Castle, each ancient stone crest preserves tradition, the past, and that certain ‘Castle atmosphere,’ which is a bit of

²⁰⁸ Benjamin Disraeli, an indeed fascinating political character and the founding father of modern conservatism in England, often portrayed the aristocracy in his works with a mix of fascination and criticism. In his most important novels, *Sybil*, or *The Two Nations* (1845) and *Coningsby* (1844) Disraeli delved into the lives and intrigues of the British aristocracy. He highlighted the stark contrast between the privileged aristocrats and the suffering working-class population, emphasizing social and political disparities. Disraeli's portrayal of the aristocracy showcased their opulent lifestyles, declining political influence, and sometimes, their detachment from the struggles of the common people. Through his novels, Disraeli aimed to shed light on the need for social and political reform in Victorian England, calling attention to issues of class and inequality.

²⁰⁹ Ella Megyery, “Budapesti Notesz,” *Budapesti Negyed* 45, no. 3 (2004).

Nuremberg, a bit of San Miniato, a bit of the Baroque Old Vienna. Something is made out of everything, yet entirely different, a distinct color and atmosphere: Buda Castle.”

In his recollections, American General Harry Hill Bandholtz describes the Royal Palace and its staff as possessing a strange, archaic aura. Ujváry interprets this as the general’s struggle to reconcile with the “resurging Hungarian neo-baroque spirit.” It is likely that, as a diplomat involved in post-World War I peace negotiations, Bandholtz found it contradictory to witness a defeated, battered nation residing in such opulent surroundings. His account mentions that “the offices located in the Royal Palace are extremely luxurious,” adding, “The construction and furnishing of the wonderful building must have cost millions, with no effort or expense spared. The walls of all offices are adorned with the same covering as the room furniture, except for the wonderful ballrooms, which are made of solid marble and are indescribable.”²¹⁰

Ujváry’s analysis, however, overstates the Regent’s and the Palace’s centrality in public life. He claims, without specifying a timeline, that “while the Parliament was the venue for legislation, the direction of domestic and foreign policy was determined in the Palace—partly in the adjacent Sándor Palace.”²¹¹ While it is true that key ministries like the Ministry of Finance and the Hungarian Royal Ministry of Defense were located in the Castle District during the Hauszmann renovations, domestic political decisions were not consistently made in the Palace. In fact, during István Bethlen’s government (1921–1931), Horthy played a role comparable to that of a constitutional monarch, maintaining contact with the government but with limited political influence. Krisztián Ungváry notes, “As the head of state, the Regent primarily performed representative tasks, but Horthy considered it essential to have regular contact with the Prime Minister and individual ministers. Ministerial hearings generally took

²¹⁰ Ujváry, *A Harmincharmadik Nemzedék*, 497.

²¹¹ Ujváry, 504.

place once a month, and consultations with the Prime Minister occurred much more frequently.”²¹²

Horthy’s role can be understood in two ways: as a symbolic, representative monarch removed from daily governance or as a head of state who actively influenced government decisions. Ungváry argues for the latter interpretation, asserting that Horthy bore some responsibility for the government’s direction. Ungváry also highlights Horthy’s tendency to elevate antisemitic and racial protectionist politicians, which makes his relative political marginalization during the Bethlen era a fortunate circumstance for Hungary’s ethnic minorities. Bethlen’s government deliberately limited Horthy’s involvement in governance, largely due to the Regent’s far-right leanings and political ineptitude. Bethlen’s administration had little need for Horthy’s input, assigning him primarily ceremonial tasks such as swearing in prime ministers, granting honors, and hosting receptions—duties typical of a head of state and not reliant on Horthy’s personal abilities.²¹³

One of the significant oversights is his portrayal of the Palace in that “the peace of the Palace, the familiar rhythm of his life, and the idyllic image were only shattered by the Arrow Cross takeover and the siege of Budapest, within which the Castle served as the last refuge.”²¹⁴ The “peace of the Palace” could not exist, given that the power it symbolized was neither peaceful in its birth nor in its operation, despite the consolidation efforts (and successes) of Bethlen's era. The narrative of the peaceful governance of Horthy is already contradicted by a critical moment in Horthy's rise to power, which was the assassination of Béla Somogyi, the editor-in-chief of the left-wing newspaper *Népszava*, and his colleague Béla Bacsó in 1920. Both were killed because of their articles exposing the White Terror, which Horthy openly

²¹² Ungváry, *Horthy Miklós - a Kormányzó És Felelőssége 1920-1944*, 16.

²¹³ Ungváry Krisztián: *Ha Nem Akarunk Szégyenkezni Az Utókor Előtt, Aktivistának Kell Lennünk*, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWKNekakKzw>; Ungváry, *Horthy Miklós - a Kormányzó És Felelőssége 1920-1944*; Krisztián Ungváry and Imre Faragó, *Kiugrás a Történelemből: Horthy Miklós a Világpolitika Színpadán, Befejezetlen Múlt* (Budapest: Open Books, 2022).

²¹⁴ Ujváry, *A Harmincharmadik Nemzedék*, 508.

supported. Ungváry characterizes Horthy as an instigator of this violence, further undermining the image of peaceful governance.²¹⁵

The "kingless kingdom" of Horthy's era was also marked by growing antisemitism, institutionalized through policies like the *numerus clausus*, a 1920 law restricting Jewish university enrollment. Although the Bethlen government sought consolidation, the *numerus clausus* foreshadowed the 1938 anti-Jewish laws. During this period, antisemitic organizations like the Turanian Society and the Turul Alliance gained prominence, with the latter advocating for increasingly radical measures against Jewish citizens. The economic collapse of 1929 and the rise of the far-right Gömbös government further radicalized the political climate of the 1930s.²¹⁶

The interwar fascination with the Castle extended to idealized depictions of King Matthias's reign, a nostalgic reference point for cultural and economic prosperity. Architect Kálmán Lux's 1920 collection, *The Buda Castle in the Time of King Matthias*, exemplifies this historical obsession. Based on his earlier research from 1917, Lux recreated what he believed the Palace might have looked like during Matthias's reign.²¹⁷ While later findings have called his conclusions into question, Lux's work reflects the academic rigor and historical curiosity of the time, offering a counterpoint to the imperial historicism of Hauszmann's design. Despite the lack of structural changes to the Palace during the interwar period, its image was continually reimagined and scrutinized through the lens of historical inquiry.

²¹⁵ Ungváry, *Horthy Miklós - a Kormányzó És Felelőssége 1920-1944*, 16.

²¹⁶ Kuno Klebelsberg's cultural policy was built around the concept and function of cultural armament, as a cultural alleviation to the military armistice. In reality, the politically historically progressive positions, represented by figures such as Oszkár Jászi, who sought to implement socialist and democratic principles (and at the same time channel symbolic political issues represented by the Buda Castle into real politics), had no place in the politically and socially radicalizing context of the Horthy era. More in Péter Csunderlik, *A Galilei Kör története* (Napvilág Kiadó, 2022).

²¹⁷ Kálmán Lux, "A Budai Királyi Vár Képe I. Mátyás Korában.," *Magyar Mérnök És Építész Egylet Közlönye*. 51, no. 30 (1917): 273.



Figure 7. Kálmán Lux's *Interpretation of the Palace under King Matthias*, with the *Silhouette of the Contemporary Palace*.
 Source: Lux Kálmán. *A budai várpalota Mátyás király korában*. 1920. Hornyánszky. Építészfórum. Architextura.hu

8. Conclusions: From Invented Traditions to Modern Realities

The period covered in this extensive chapter (1867–1930s) stands as one of the most historically complex and contentious in the Royal Palace's history. What began as a modestly stylized Baroque palace, housing cultural institutions and a university, transformed into a monumental, historicist royal construction—conspicuously absent of an Emperor or King. This metamorphosis mirrored the political shifts that shaped Hungarian nationalism and the broader region. As demonstrated, the Palace's post-1867 reconstructions quickly became symbolic battlegrounds for national sovereignty. Throughout the chapter, I argued that the framing of the Palace's significance—whether in the media or the National Assembly—reflected a deeper and persistent crisis of national identity, often tied to unresolved questions of self-determination.

The Hauszmannian renovation, while presented as the architectural jewel of the Compromise, was far from universally celebrated. Its purpose was to craft a poised, compromise-laden symbolic space embodied by Emperor Franz Joseph, a space designed to

satisfy Hungarian national aspirations while affirming the Austrian side of the dualist monarchy.

This period was marked by a tense and often contradictory interplay between authority and servility, aptly reflected in the uneasy relationship between national architecture and the Baroque style. The discourse on national form became a key outlet for articulating these tensions, arguably more effectively than the political elite. The tender processes for the Academy of Sciences and the Parliament building vividly illustrate this dynamic. Imre Henszlmann's theoretical contributions to the Academy, inspired by William Morris's progressive ideas on architecture and design, reveal an often-overlooked attempt to define a Hungarian national style—one that was demanded in public discourse yet dismissed by many academics as nonexistent. Henszlmann's passion for Gothic architecture and his vision for a style rooted in local characteristics seem to have been ahead of their time. Gothic aesthetics and localized ideas of national identity gained prominence only after the decline of Classicism and national Romanticism during the 1896 Millennium Celebrations, particularly with the construction of the Parliament Building.

Parliamentary records reveal that Prime Ministers such as Gyula Andrássy, Kálmán Tisza, István Tisza, and Sándor Wekerle—alongside figures like Ferenc Deák—insisted that the Royal Palace be reconstructed to reflect the King's authority within the dualist framework. Others, including Ferenc Kossuth, Gábor Ugron, and Imre Csengery, argued instead for a design emphasizing Hungarian sovereignty, demanding the Palace embody national symbols and serve as the King's primary residence. Thus, debates over the Palace were less about architecture and more about the symbolic assertion of national sovereignty. Yet one common thread united these opposing camps: regardless of form, the Palace had to rival Vienna's spaces of power representation.

Therefore, this chapter aimed to show that the Royal Palace reconstructions were inextricably tied to the cultural projects of historical self-determination. As such, and because a new national narrative and identity were on the line, it can be concluded that the Palace was part of a more significant effort to create a national culture, which required the invention and mass-production of national traditions. The invention of tradition, as Hobsbawm argued, was an essential element in the creation of nations, as these invented traditions often emerge(d) rapidly over a short period and claim to have historical roots.²¹⁸ In Hobsbawm's conceptualization, these traditions are not organic or naturally evolved. Still, they are deliberately constructed to serve specific purposes, such as fostering social cohesion, promoting national identity, or legitimizing political or cultural ideologies. These invented traditions may include commemorations, symbols, or rituals that highlight the struggles, achievements, and values of the community they aim to represent, contributing to a sense of solidarity and collective identity.

This chapter has sought to demonstrate that the Royal Palace's reconstructions were deeply entwined with broader cultural efforts toward historical self-determination. These efforts were part of a larger mission to craft a national culture, which, as Hobsbawm observed, often necessitated the deliberate invention of traditions. Such traditions—be they commemorations, symbols, or rituals—were designed to foster social cohesion, promote national identity, and legitimize political ideologies. The Millennium Celebrations were a prime example of this process, serving as both a political statement and a demand for a nationalist yet imperial-leaning Hungarian politics. These celebrations introduced numerous invented traditions to support the narrative of a nationalist-imperial Hungary. Among these was the pursuit of a new Gothic architectural tradition, with MP Gyula Andrássy advocating for the Gothic style as an expression of national identity, inspired by Britain's Parliament (2.4.1.).

²¹⁸ Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

Similarly, the Eastern genesis narrative and the story of the *Honfoglalás* (Occupation of the Carpathian Basin) were integrated into this cultural project, forming the foundation for constructing the National Pantheon. In parallel, Hungary's imperial-national vision extended to its colonial aspirations, with the Bosnia-Herzegovinian occupation briefly entering the national narrative as a symbol of civilizational dominance.

This chapter also aimed to demonstrate that not only was the idea of a genuinely royal Palace part of an often failing master narrative (or, in Bibó's words, illusion) of national autonomy, but the discourse on national style also provided Hauszmann's contemporaries often criticized the Palace's design as outdated, reflecting its conflicting messages about Hungarian nationalism and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. By the time the Palace was completed in 1905, architectural trends had shifted toward more modern solutions, both for representative and civic constructions. The friction between Alajos Hauszmann and figures like Ödön Lechner or Otto Wagner epitomizes the transition from historicism to early 20th-century styles such as Secession and vulgar-popular architecture. In this sense, the Palace was an anachronism, representing a political system already receding into history and failing to align with contemporary architectural values.

Following the devastation of the Great War, the failed Aster Revolution, and the collapse of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, Miklós Horthy's conservative regime sought to project stability and nostalgia for the belle-époque. Under István Bethlen's leadership, the Palace played a central role in constructing the image of a peaceful, stable government that balanced modernity with aristocratic tradition. In subchapter 2.6, I argued that the "beautifying practices" of neo-Baroque culture, as described by Hermann Broch, functioned in Hungary as a façade, concealing the regime's instability, anti-Semitism, and ahistorical nature. The Royal Palace, with its neo-Baroque aesthetic, became a symbol of this nostalgia-driven political and cultural agenda.

Memoirs of Horthy and others reveal that the neo-Baroque aesthetic extended to cultural events and social gatherings at the Palace, where traditions were celebrated to reinforce the aristocracy's position. These occasions symbolized a yearning for a return to the old order, as Gyula Szekfű described in his analysis of neo-Baroque society (analyzed in sections 2.2 and 2.6). Szekfű argued that this society's defining feature was its attempt to revive traditions in a world irrevocably changed by the First World War and the collapse of the Monarchy.

One of my primary sources referencing the Palace and its relation to the neo-baroque was Gábor Ujváry's book and article: through its analysis, I aimed to demonstrate that not only was the culture of the neo-baroque society founded on a sense of nostalgia but that the uncritical approach to Miklós Horthy's political or individual person is the expression of a "nostalgia for a nostalgia."

In conclusion, I argue that the nation-building efforts of this era, centered on producing national symbols, exposed critical fault lines: the challenge of creating a cohesive national semiotic system, the search for a national architectural language, and the struggle to reconcile tensions between Hungary and its imperial counterpart, Vienna. Although professional circles acknowledged as early as 1896 that no distinct Hungarian national style existed, the illusion of its existence persists to this day. As explored in the final chapter, the 20th-century Royal Palace, while politically and historically misguided, was a central part of the mission to establish cultural hegemony. Ultimately, this mission faltered, as political leaders attempted to juggle the dual roles of representing their nation while remaining subservient to the Habsburg Empire.

Chapter Two: Destruction and Reconstruction in the Castle Hill - A Story of Devastation, Potential, and Hesitation

1. Introduction

Budapest stands as one of the most heavily devastated cities of the Second World War, bearing scars that testify to destruction unparalleled in its modern history. Between December 1944 and February 1945, the city saw 26% of its buildings reduced to rubble, alongside an astonishing 94% of its industrial infrastructure. The Danube's iconic bridges, once architectural marvels, were obliterated.²¹⁹ Historical analyses often refer to Budapest as "Hitler's fortress," a label that underscores its grim strategic significance. Nowhere was this more evident than on Castle Hill, both a literal and symbolic stronghold. Accessible to air strikes and serving as the final bastion of German forces, the Hill endured catastrophic damage: out of approximately 200 buildings, 42 were completely destroyed, 62 required renovation, and 32 demanded substantial reconstruction. Remarkably, only one building escaped unscathed—a stark reminder of the city's near-total devastation.²²⁰

While this destruction stemmed from a mix of disastrous decisions by Hungary's leadership and Hitler's intransigence, contemporary narratives, particularly in Hungary's right-wing cultural politics post-2010, have reframed the story. These accounts blame the systematic erasure of Budapest's historic architecture on the subsequent political regimes, particularly those of the Rákosi and Kádár eras. The charge is that the "communist leadership" deliberately demolished many of the ruined buildings after 1945 as part of a political purge, erasing symbols of Hungary's flourishing early 20th-century prosperity under Miklós Horthy's regime.²²¹ This

²¹⁹ Erzsébet Harrach, "The Reconstruction of the Buda Castle Hill after 1945," in *Rebuilding Europe's Bombed Cities*, ed. Jeffry M. Diefendorf (London: Macmillan, 1990), 155.

²²⁰ Harrach, 155.

²²¹ Molnár-Bánffy, "„Él magyar, áll Buda még!” – beszélgetés Fodor Gergely kormánybiztossal a megújuló Budavári Palotáról”; "Ilyen lesz az újjászülető Budavári Palota – Mostantól bárki megnézheti a terveket," pestbuda.hu, accessed January 12, 2023, https://pestbuda.hu/cikk/20221220_ilyen_lesz_az_ujjaszuleto_budavari_palota_mostantol_barki_megnezheti_a

narrative dovetails with portrayals of Horthy as a messianic figure, valiantly trying—and tragically failing—to save the nation from Nazi domination.

In the following pages, I challenge such reductive interpretations, demonstrating that the relationship between the Royal Palace and symbolic politics was far more intricate and contradictory than contemporary right-wing historians suggest. During Horthy’s final years, the Palace functioned as an “extended fortress,” eventually becoming a literal battlefield under Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Szálasi in late 1944. The contradictions in Hungary’s national self-determination during the 19th and early 20th centuries grew starker in the aftermath of the German occupation, the Holocaust, and the sieges—crises that left lasting scars on Budapest, especially Castle Hill.

I argue further that between 1945 and the 1980s, the Royal Palace and Castle Hill once again became emblematic reconstruction projects, revealing evolving attitudes toward Hungary’s urban identity. From 1948 to 1955, reconstruction efforts were cautious and indecisive, reflecting broader uncertainties. However, from 1955 onwards, a more definitive approach emerged, one that sought to consolidate the regime’s authority by reimagining the Palace as a democratized cultural space. Contrary to simplistic accusations, even the infamous Rákosi regime—known for its ideological rigidity and oppressive politics—displayed a more nuanced approach to the Palace’s historical significance than often credited. As I will show, the period’s forced pursuit of a “national style” thwarted the development of modernist architecture, foreclosing meaningful dialogue about its shortcomings, particularly its engagement with history.

This chapter offers a chronological examination of Castle Hill and the Royal Palace from 1944 to the 1980s. In subchapter 3.2, I explore the transformation of the Palace into a

terveket; “A háború után ideológiai rombolás dúlt a Várnegyedben,” June 19, 2021, https://pestbuda.hu/cikk/20210619_a_haboru_utani_ideologiai_rombolas_dult_a_varnegyedben.

literal fortress during the war's final days, tracing how these events shaped its postwar role. In subchapter 3.3, I analyze the immediate postwar urban renewal discourse, which, contrary to perceptions of helplessness, was rooted in a sense of potentiality. In subchapter 3.4, I reveal how Socialist Realism abruptly curtailed this discourse, replacing it with rigid ideological prescriptions. Lastly, I argue that the 1956 Revolution marked a turning point in the cultural and national discourse, ultimately allowing the Palace to fulfill Maria Theresa's original vision of a "Palace without a reign"—a space for culture rather than power.

To ground this analysis, I draw extensively on the works of Krisztián Ungváry, whose meticulous research in *The Siege of Budapest* and *Kitörés a történelemből* provides a rich foundation for the historical narrative that follows. These texts illuminate the siege's complexities, offering invaluable insights into the transformative events that reshaped both the capital and its symbolic heart.

2. *From Armistice to Siege - Approaching 'die Stunde Null'*

Chapter 2 opens with a contemporary reflection from the government commissioner for the reconstruction of the Buda Palace, asserting that its history "should have ended at the close of the 19th century." While this might sound like a curiously dramatic conclusion, it gains resonance when considering the Palace's trajectory leading up to the early 20th century. In the pages that follow, I examine the critical juncture when the so-called "peace of the Palace" shattered, beginning with Regent Miklós Horthy's departure from power. I argue that the political decisions leading to the devastating destruction of Budapest and Castle Hill were inextricably linked to the Royal Palace's fate—connections that are too often glossed over in historical narratives.

2.1 Horthy's Farewell

By mid-1944, the tensions over a looming military failure on the side of Germany grew exponentially, making necessary a strategic reconceptualization of Hungary's position in WWII by Horthy and the Sztójay-government. Because of a visible and foreseeable military and economic collapse (on top of the already existing social catastrophe of the Holocaust, often willingly overlooked by Horthy-favoring historians), the Regent sought to extricate Hungary from the war via an armistice with the Allies and the Soviet Union. While Krisztián Ungváry's masterful monograph thoroughly unpacks the details of this maneuver, what concerns us here are its catastrophic consequences for Budapest, Castle Hill, and the Royal Palace.²²²

The ill-fated armistice plot, launched from Horthy's residence in the Palace, proved as futile as it was poorly executed.²²³ Once German intelligence caught wind of the plan, it was only a matter of time before the Arrow Cross seized their opportunity to overthrow the Regent. The articles following the takeover on 16 October show a new (propaganda-written) narrative of the Regent's political persona, which was that of a Jew-friendly, Western-affiliated, Anglo-Saxon-influenced traitor. *Magyarság*, a Nazi newspaper, writes on the 17th:

The simultaneous impact of the most significant Anglo-Saxon terrorist attacks' bombs could not have caused greater consternation than Horthy's proclamation. Even those who would have otherwise welcomed or still wish for the Anglo-Saxons' victory were left frozen in their tracks. Horthy turned to the Bolsheviks for a ceasefire? To those Bolsheviks he had been the first to confront in all of Europe? Unbelievable! No one wanted to believe their ears, but later, when the radio broadcast the disgraceful proclamation for the third time, there could be no doubt that the head of state and his entourage had indeed committed the shameful betrayal.²²⁴

²²² Ungváry and Faragó, *Kiugrás a Történelemből*.

²²³ Miklós Horthy, *Emlékirataim*, ed. Andrea Bern (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 2019), 287.

²²⁴ "Horthy áruló proklamációja," *Magyarság* 25, no. 236 (October 17, 1944).

The 1944 article goes on to explain that the “betrayal” was carried out in collaboration and in favor of the Jews who,

when their protector, the Regent, issued the treacherous order on Sunday, in which he almost apologized for what had happened to the Jews and tried to deflect responsibility, they received the decision that favored them with jubilation and radiant faces. They were so sure of their victory that they arrogantly removed the yellow star from their clothes and homes without authorization. They grinned insolently in the faces of the Hungarians and made comments.

Insinuating an organic, bottom-up popular resistance to the armistice and the liberation of the Jewish population, we can read that “after the treacherous betrayal, people gritted their teeth as they reluctantly acknowledged the arrogance of the Jews, and a reaction slowly began to mature within them.” In comparison, just a few months earlier, *Képes Sport* greeted Horthy on his birthday with such overwhelmingly laudable words still channeling the neo-baroque attitude vastly analyzed in the previous chapter: “In the roar of airplanes, the explosion of bombs, amidst the raging battles of world history, today dawned a great day, the red-letter feast day written with hearts brimming with gratitude and love in the starry Hungarian night. The orphaned people of the Carpathian Basin warmly greet our Father, the Regent, with childlike affection on his birthday.”²²⁵ Naturally, the Regent was neither a protector of the Jewish population nor was his leadership strong enough to carry out the exit plot. The shift from effusive praise to outright condemnation reveals much about the fragile and volatile nature of Horthy’s position in 1944.

Despite the Arrow Cross's long-standing preparation for a coup, Horthy appeared startlingly unprepared for the fallout of his armistice gambit. In his memoir, *Emlékirataim* (*Memoir*), Horthy offers a telling—if unreliable—account of his role in these events. The

²²⁵ “Horthy Miklós születésnapján,” *Képes Sport* 6, no. 25 (June 20, 1944).

directive that came from the Palace demonstrates this²²⁶. However, it is essential to remember that Horthy's recollections are indeed recollections, not edited personal diaries, making them a largely unreliable historical source.²²⁷ What *Emlékirataim* [*Memoir*] does historicize is the Regent's retrospective understanding of his positions, responsibilities, and connection to other political figures of his time.

Similarly, Horthy and his family's dedication to the Palace shines through the piece, as it becomes even more tangible when the chances of a political collapse appear more likely. In *Memoir* Horthy speaks of the Palace as a natural background and physical context of his political position. As the crisis unfolded, his descriptions of the Palace took on an increasingly emotional tone, reflecting his struggle to reconcile its impending loss.

It is also a historical fact that Horthy spent most of his time in the Palace when the political situation became untenable. The central event of the announcement of the armistice is described as follows:

On October 14th, I decided to announce the imminent ceasefire to the nation through a radio broadcast on the following day, Sunday. Simultaneously, I informed Veessenmayer and requested that he come to me at noon on October 15th to share my decision. According to my plan, this would have been immediately followed by the broadcast of my proclamation; its text was ready and prepared in the Palace. I was fully aware that, in a sense, this would be a dramatic race. I considered what was self-evident, that the Germans would use all means to prevent Hungary from entering into a ceasefire, which was our only way out. Just like our Finnish brethren, we had been fighting against the

²²⁶ Horthy writes in his memoir on the unfolding of events in preparation for the 15th October announcement of Hungary's initiation to cut the deal: „In this situation, through our secret transmitter installed in the Palace, which my son Miklós and my wingman Tost operated, I sent the message to Moscow that the ceasefire should only take effect on October 20th. However, the Soviets were in a hurry because the Americans protested against negotiations with Hungary in Moscow without them, as Churchill and Eden were present there. Therefore, the Soviets wanted to establish facts on the ground. That's why the Russians insisted on October 16th, and in their radio message on the 14th, they set the final deadline for October 16th at 8 o'clock.” Horthy, *Emlékirataim*, 287.

²²⁷ Horthy reminds the reader of this fact in the introduction: “I did not keep a diary, and the official documents and personal notes I stored in my safe had to be partially destroyed and partially left behind in the Buda Castle in October 1944 when I was arrested. To some extent, I managed to compensate for their absence by requesting information from certain former colleagues who are still alive regarding specific details.” Horthy, 9.

imminent suppression by Bolshevism as long as our struggle held even the slightest hope.

Ungváry explains how the Regent and his son, Miklós Horthy Jr., lacked some crucial political skills to execute the maneuver of breaching any deal with Germany. It also seems from this paragraph that Horthy did not see the harmful potential of the German leadership and military to the extent it had already affected the nation in general. Ungváry postulates that the armistice deal in this form was, in fact, a grand naivety. I recognize the Regent's hesitancy, lack of skill, and political naivety in the way he, when describing the takeover of a Nazi regime responsible for the continuous mass murder of thousands, focuses in his recollections on relatively superficial aspects of the last days in Budapest, as a souvenir to the Palace.

Horthy writes as follows about Szálasi's coup:

While those who desired the ceasefire were plunged into deep despair due to the counter-order attributed to [Commander] Vörös, the Arrow Cross executed their "revolution." In the afternoon, the radio broadcast Szálasi's first speech, preceded by Hungarian and German military marches. Up in the Royal Palace, a pre-siege atmosphere prevailed.²²⁸

From Horthy's recollection, we also learn that departure from the Palace was made severely difficult as "the road junctions leading to the castle hill were secured with mines." The German Embassy, also within the castle grounds, inadvertently found itself under siege—a striking example of the unintended consequences of wartime chaos. By this point, following Horthy's proclamation and Miklós Horthy Jr.'s failure to secure an armistice deal with the Allies, the handover of the Palace was a foregone conclusion. "We didn't even remove our clothes; we just lay down for a short rest. In the late hours, General Vattay, the head of the military office, and

²²⁸ Horthy, 293.

Ambrózy, the head of the cabinet office, requested an audience. They reported Hitler's offer, in which he 'offered refuge' in case I resigned from my regent position and handed over the castle and power,"²²⁹ Horthy writes. The scene encapsulates the uneasy mix of coercion and farce that marked the end of Horthy's tenure. A symbolic seizure of the National Assembly and the Royal Palace followed swiftly, laying the groundwork for Ferenc Szálasi's unprecedented elevation. By November 2, the Assembly had passed a bill naming Szálasi as "nation leader," effectively consolidating the roles of Prime Minister and Regent into a single, authoritarian office—a political transformation conspicuously absent from Horthy's memoir.

By the time of coup, the Regent's son had already been kidnapped, and departure from the Palace was both abrupt and deeply humiliating. His vivid description of the chaotic scene merits extended quotation for its peculiar, almost theatrical atmosphere:

When I left the Royal Palace, I didn't take anything with me, so I felt it necessary to return there to pack the most essential items. [...] I was prepared to see the traces of the house 'search,' but what I witnessed exceeded all expectations. Skorzeny's men were napping on the silk damask furniture. They had broken into every cabinet and drawer. It was a scene of devastating looting. They took everything they considered valuable, from my wife's jewelry to the servants' savings. In this repulsive spectacle, there was even a comical sight. As I entered the bathroom to collect my toiletries, a soldier dressed in my bathrobe came out, obviously having just finished his bath. They looted the suites of my late son István and my captured son Miklós, just as they did with every other room. I instructed my former valet to pack my remaining clothes, underwear, and belongings. I was still in the bathroom, escorted by three guards armed with submachine guns, when Prime Minister Lakatos unexpectedly barged in. He had arrived at the Palace with Veessenmayer.²³⁰

It was in this absurdly charged setting that Horthy ultimately signed the statement appointing Ferenc Szálasi as prime minister. In his memoir, Horthy steadfastly frames this signature as the

²²⁹ Horthy, 193.

²³⁰ Horthy, 298.

result of coercion, insisting that his refusal would have achieved nothing and possibly incurred greater losses. As he writes: “With the refusal of my signature, I can no longer help the situation. However, if I give the signature, perhaps I can save the life of my only son, Miklós.”²³¹ This justification raises as many questions as it answers. While Horthy had, at length, resisted German pressure—declaring to his advisors and even his niece that he would never yield—it is striking that, in this particular moment, he relented. Was it the pragmatic calculus of a father seeking to save his son, a mercy that so few enjoyed under the Nazis? Or was it the existential dilemma of a leader whose 25-year reign had been defined by the symbolic spaces of power—spaces now literally and politically looted before his eyes?

Horthy’s reasoning may reflect a choice between what he perceived as lesser evils. But it might also reveal the psychological toll of witnessing the physical and symbolic disintegration of the Royal Palace, the ultimate emblem of his authority. The indignity of the looting, combined with the impending loss of his son, seems to have pushed him into a corner from which even he could not retreat.²³²

2.2 *The Siege and the Outbreak*

Szálasi’s ascent to power began with an elaborate display of symbolism. Following custom, his first act as “Nation Leader” was to appear in the Royal Palace alongside the Holy Regalia and take the oath. The Nazi-aligned journal *Magyarság* captured the swearing-in ceremony with characteristic bombast: “Yes, in these difficult yet uplifting and truly 'historically significant' hours, we can only say this: a historic event unfolded on a Saturday at

²³¹ Horthy, 299.

²³² Horthy’s lack of sense of responsibility shows in how he remembers his departure journey from both the country and his position: “This was the saddest journey of my life. I stood at the helm of my country for almost a quarter of a century, during which it was constantly progressing until Hitler plunged Europe into war, and against our will, dragged Hungary into the vortex of war as well. Now I had to leave because I was pushed out by a usurper with the help of foreign violence, someone who introduced an unworthy rule to the Hungarian name.”+ Horthy, 300.

noon in the brilliant southern light of the white marble hall of the Buda Royal Palace. The Holy Crown, described in reverent tones, was framed as the ultimate embodiment of the *Szent-Koronatan* and the trials of the Hungarian nation. According to the article, all of Hungary's history—its bloodshed, triumphs, and defeats—culminated in this moment:

Why would I deny it? My eyes became misty when my gaze from the press gallery fell upon the deep red velvet, in which the pale golden light glistened on the Holy Crown. Oh, how much blood was shed for this sacred relic, which once touched the forehead of the nation-building Vajk, which carried the glory of King Louis the Great, which illuminated the path of Matthias the Just, whose pale light knew all the mysteries of the young King Louis II's tragic fate at the Battle of Mohács, and for which later Habsburg emperors competed! It was the same crown that fled with Kossuth, witnessed Emperor Franz Joseph's long and peaceful reign, and finally saw the destiny of the tragic Austrian Emperor and Hungarian King, Charles IV, in the wake of the First World War, and beyond this Habsburg destiny: - it bore the burden of Trianon, - with us, the nation! ... Yes, just a few more minutes, and then Ferenc Szálasi, introduced by the delegation, will appear in the white marble hall of the Royal Palace - the National Leader, turning towards the presiding officers of the upper house and the lower house, but facing the resplendent Holy Crown in the pale golden light!

While steeped in theatricality, the ceremony marked a grim turning point. Following Szálasi's oath, the Royal Palace and Castle Hill became militarized zones, vulnerable to the impending Soviet assault. Though Szálasi did not officially reside in the Palace, it became the stage for his ceremonial rule. At his first Council meeting after the oath, Szálasi barely addressed Hungary's deteriorating political situation. Instead, he turned to an oddly detached discussion about relations with Japan, a diplomatic irrelevance as the Soviet Army rapidly approached. By November 23, Hitler had ordered Budapest to be defended "from corner to corner," transforming the capital into a "fortress city" under siege.²³³

²³³ Krisztián Ungváry, *Budapest ostroma*, Nyolcadik, átdolgozott és bővített kiadás (Budapest: Corvina, 2021), 35.

Szálasi, known for his disdain toward Budapest's citizenry—dismissed as a *Großstadt-Mob* ("big-city mob")—opposed this militarization, but his objections carried no weight.²³⁴ Hitler's decision to declare Budapest a fortress on December 1, formalized by the Hungarian leadership on December 4, was not an act of vengeance for Horthy's failed defection. If anything, Hitler had more immediate leverage over Horthy, including the kidnapping of his son. Instead, the Reich's logic was brutally pragmatic: Hungary's economy, particularly its oil reserves, remained vital to the war effort. Wrecking Budapest entirely would have been self-defeating—at least in theory.



Figure 8. Ferenc Szálasi Arriving in the Castle. Front page of *Vasárnapi Újság* magazine, 1944.



Figure 9. Szálasi in Front of the Palace in Ruins. 1945. Fortepan 221160 / Gy. Laborcz

²³⁴ Ungváry, 34.

The siege that followed, lasting until Budapest's liberation on February 13, 1945, left the city in both physical and moral ruins. By Christmas 1944, the battle reached its peak intensity, and military morale, already teetering in November, disintegrated under the strain of daily desertions and suicides.²³⁵ German Ambassador Edmund Veesenmayer's earlier assessment—that “the Germans do not mind if Budapest is destroyed ten times, so long as Vienna could thereby be defended”—proved devastatingly accurate.”²³⁶

The human cost of this calculus is epitomized in a personal account published decades later by *Népszabadság*:

I also looked at the Castle, the Castle Garden. It was a pitiful, heart-wrenching sight. Much of the southern wing had collapsed, and the western and southern parts of the Krisztinaváros wing were still smoking. I was reminded of the 1686 siege of Buda fought against the Turks. When the former palace of Zsigmond and Mátyás was destroyed, a witness wrote about it: ‘The burnt Buda palace looks like a skull.’²³⁷

This reflection, written by László Zolnay—later a preeminent archaeologist on Castle Hill—captures the scale of the devastation. Zolnay's postwar work on the medieval history of the Palace would transform scholarly understanding of the site, though such scholarship could not undo the trauma of its destruction.

One of the bloodiest events of the Second World War, the break-out attempt by German and Hungarian soldiers, also unfolded in Buda and remains a contentious subject in the realm of memory politics to this day. As Zolnay accurately recalled, Castle Hill was the final stronghold on the German side before Soviet troops successfully encircled it by February 1945. With tensions mounting, German forces, along with some Hungarian soldiers who refrained

²³⁵ Ungváry, 35.

²³⁶ Quote in: Ungváry, 34.

²³⁷ László Zolnay, “Debrecenről februárig II.,” *Népszabadság* 43, no. 33 (February 9, 1985).

from resistance, initiated the break-out attempt on February 11. The planned route led from the Palace to the hills, but a combination of factors—starvation, freezing temperatures, depleted ammunition, and the steep, forested terrain—made this plan an unrealistic and doomed military undertaking.

Despite the dire circumstances, a sense of martyrdom persisted even in the face of almost certain death. Ungváry recounts the words of a lieutenant from one of the last groups to reach the Western frontline: “Suddenly I felt as if my legs had been torn off. [...] As my magazine was empty, I ordered my lieutenant, who was himself wounded in the arm, to shoot me so that I would not be captured. He shouted: ‘Only another 2,000 meters, Sir. We have got to make it.’”²³⁸

Out of 43,900 soldiers when the break-out attempt began on 11 February in the Castle, only 700 made it to the German frontline. Most of the 17,000 were killed only between Széll Kálmán Square (at the foot of the Castle) and Hűvösvölgy Valley, a few kilometers away. The western road from the Castle to the German frontline was a scene of uncontrolled massacre. By this time, the Buda Palace and most of the buildings on the Castle Hill had been destroyed or damaged. Indeed, as Ungváry puts it: “The history of the siege and the break-out can only be appreciated against the background of total-war psychosis.”²³⁹

It is essential to understand the futility of this military action not only to see the fact that by 1945, society (and cities, villages) had reached a complete “stunde null” but also to be reminded that it is this futility that is glorified in the history of the Castle Hill today as well. The day of the outbreak attempt is remembered by Fascist and Neo-Nazi groups and is “celebrated” in the Castle area every year as the *Tag der Ehre* or Day of Honor since 1997. The battle for Budapest is thus remembered through two diametrically opposed lenses. On one side,

²³⁸ In Hungarian in: Ungváry, *Budapest ostroma*, 212. And in translation to English: Krisztián Ungváry, *Battle for Budapest: One Hundred Days in World War II*, trans. Laduslaus Löb (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 199.

²³⁹ Ungváry, *Battle for Budapest*, 210.

a revisionist glorification of Nazi heroics persists, rooted in a nationalist narrative of martyrdom. On the other, a more sober perspective calls for acknowledging the futility and human cost of these events, rejecting the mythologization of destruction. The ruins of Castle Hill remain not just a historical site but a contested space where the politics of memory continue to be fiercely fought.²⁴⁰ The right-wing celebrations often invite Anti-Fascist demonstrations, which lead to a collision between the two groups. The year 2023, the year most of this dissertation was written, was one of the most gruesome years in such collisions.²⁴¹

3. “Reconstruction, Not Restoration!”²⁴²

3.1 After “die Stunde Null” - Plans for a Modern Budapest

The end of the siege finally arrived on 15 February. By then, only one building remained intact in the Castle District, and the scale of devastation was beyond what most people could fully comprehend—or perhaps ever would. Ungváry’s monograph includes quotes from personal interviews with survivors, one of which is from a civil servant. This testimony is particularly worth revisiting here, as it illustrates a significant shift in post-war attitudes:

I got to the Castle District, not a soul anywhere. I walked along Werbőczy Street [today Táncsics Mihály Street]. Nothing but bodies and ruins, supply carts and drays...I got to Szentháromság Square and looked at the Council in case I found somebody there. Deserted. I went up to the office. Everything turned upside down, and not a soul. I went down the stairs and turned right. In Szentháromság Street, a man was dragging himself before me with his head drooping. When I was level with him, I realized that he was István Bárcziházy Bárczy, the Prime Minister’s under-secretary of state. He lived in Úri

²⁴⁰ “‘Nem ünnepelni kell, hanem siratni az áldozatokat’ – miért lett a szélsőjobb a kitörés?,” *24.hu* (blog), February 13, 2023, <https://24.hu/belfold/2023/02/13/kitores-becsulet-napja-szelsojobb-ungvary-ostrom/>.

²⁴¹ In 2023, a person was wrongfully accused of lynching far-right activists, and was wrongfully imprisoned for 20 days. The author of this dissertation was subject of a negative campaign on the imprisonment.

²⁴² Pál Granasztói, “Nagy-Budapest Városrendezési Terve,” *Tér És Forma* 17, no. 11 (1945): 171–75.

Street. A broken man turned grey. When I got pretty close, he looked up. ‘Mr Undersecretary, where have you been?’ I asked. ‘Jóska,’ he said, ‘leave me alone...go and see for yourself if you can bear it...’ I walked to the Prime Minister’s Palace. The corner section of the beautiful Baroque building was in ruins...Opposite the gate in the courtyard was the coach house. I stepped in, and there was the carriage the King of Italy had used when he came on a state visit, smashed to pieces. Next to it are the stables. I decided to look; perhaps some horses were left alive. Two dead horses were lying on the floor, and not far from them, maybe one or two meters away, a dead man, face down. I was so shaken that I turned round and ran out without looking where I was going... When I was about twenty meters from the entrance to the temporary military hospital, I saw two German soldiers coming out. Without weapons or anything, just like that. When they saw me, they started running...towards Vérmező Meadow. They disappeared at the bottom of the steps, and I returned to Bécsi Gate. I saw some dead bodies here and there, but no Russians. In the deathly silence on my way home, I didn’t meet any Russians either. This time, I walked down Várfok Street...towards Moszkva Square [formerly Széll Kálmán Square]. I was in such a state that I only looked in front of my feet to ensure I didn’t stumble over a body. [...]²⁴³

Many photos document the scale of devastation.²⁴⁴ The route of the break-out attempt, coupled with the already catastrophic state of the Castle District, signified both monumental human and architectural losses. The interplay between these two types of destruction is an intrinsically modern experience, where the woundedness and demise of the urban fabric symbolize the human condition in wartime. A work that encapsulates this reciprocity between the urban and individual human experiences of war is W.G. Sebald’s *Lufkrieg und Literatur* (1999).²⁴⁵ While a thorough analysis of this book falls outside the scope of this chapter, several of its insights are essential for understanding both the war and the psychological aftermath that followed.

²⁴³ Ungváry, *Battle for Budapest*, 269.

²⁴⁴ I deliberately would like to turn the reader’s attention to those available at Fortepan, the most prominent open-source visual database in Hungary. There are around 200 photos in the database about the Castle District, much more that appeared in newspapers when publishing relaunched in the first months after liberation. Please see list of illustrations.

²⁴⁵ W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003).

One key aspect is the collective confrontation with *terra incognita*—a cityscape stripped of recognizable landmarks. Sebald quotes Stig Dagermann, a journalist for *Expressen*, who wrote in 1946 that after the carpet-bombing of the area between Hasselbrook and Landwehr, passengers on the train running through the area avoided looking out the window at the ruined landscape. This commentary on the experience of an unrecognizable cityscape is crucial for understanding the psychological posture of post-war urbanism. Another critical aspect is the collective sense of rootlessness that arose from the destruction of landscapes tied to individual origins and, by extension, national identity.

Sebald's central argument posits that German public life, down to the individual psyche, was rendered numb because literature addressing these experiences was long unavailable and often actively suppressed. A parallel can be drawn to post-war Budapest, where the collective psyche was similarly shaped by a combination of suppression and alienation from the devastation. This dual condition—on the one hand, preventing reconciliation, and on the other, leaving space for the emergence of a new psychological and urban landscape—hindered the latter's potential to ever fully materialize.

Nevertheless, the destruction also brought with it opportunities for reconstruction. The *FKT* [Council of Public Works] was reinstated after the war's conclusion and proposed a comprehensive reconstruction plan for the entire capital, paving the way for the *Greater Budapest* plan within five years.²⁴⁶ Its chair, József Fischer, recognized the potential for a modernized capital to emerge from the ruins. Fischer, known for his social democratic views, also served as the editor-in-chief of *Tér és Forma* [*Space and Form*], a journal that is a critical source for this research chapter. Not only did the journal feature the most prominent voices in the field, but it also served as the official outlet for the *FKT*. Fischer's leadership provided a

²⁴⁶ András Sipos, "Nagy-Budapest alternatívák 1945–1956," *Budapest Folyóirat*, 2010, <https://www.budapestfolyoirat.hu/2020/10/nagy-budapest-alternativak-1945-1956>.

pathway to institutionalize what had once seemed like radical ideas—that reconstruction should adhere to progressive, modernist principles.



Figure 10. "In the Name of Realization" - Headline in *Tér és Forma*, J. Fischer, 1945, p. 157.

Allow me to briefly outline the arguments for a city-wide modernist reconstruction to contextualize the discourse around rebuilding the Palace. The first post-war issue of *Tér és Forma*²⁴⁷ opens with the following proclamation:

Modern architecture has recognized and clarified its tasks in this field to a great extent and has clear visions of a better future. [...] Among the tasks that await us, the first in

²⁴⁷ The latter half of the 1920s marked a period of significant change and innovation in Hungarian architecture. During this time, there was a notable resurgence of the Hungarian style, as well as the emergence of Constructivist-Functionalist architecture. In 1928, the influential journal *Tér és Forma* was established under the editorship of Virgil Borbíró (Bierbauer), with the explicit purpose of promoting avant-garde architecture in Hungary.

chronological order is replacing shortages and restoring damages caused during the war. In the process, we aim to refrain from repeating or, if necessary, even restoring past mistakes. We would rather choose temporarily less favorable solutions than undertake the construction of excessive buildings that hinder future development due to momentary needs. We will build less but better instead of creating lasting buildings obstructing future progress.²⁴⁸

It is essential to highlight and remember the scale and degree of the task in front of the architectural profession. Those who believed in the modernist approach had been awaiting such an opening in front of progressive architecture, as overwhelming as it turned out to be, since the turn of the century. This is also demonstrated by the fact that the texts in the 1945 issue of the mentioned *Tér és Forma* had already been prepared for print in 1944, making every statement in it all the more relevant a year later. I have partially shown in the previous chapter the long wait for progressive architecture through a demonstrative case between Hauszmann and Lechner. However, Fischer and his circle represented a distinct approach, focusing not on national identity but on addressing modern housing and urban challenges through a radical break from past forms and functions. This perspective is evident in another editorial piece from the journal:

We will continue to lead the editing with the significant difference that, while in the past, we were in sharp opposition to the official standpoint and made it the subject of constant criticism, today, we represent the official viewpoint. This circumstance imposes a significant task on us. [...] Now, there are no excuses; we have to show where we stand in this new situation. The start is very unpromising, and it began with the most tragic paradox: those of us who mainly designed flat-roofed houses must now put canopies and tiles on 24,000 damaged roofs. We, who aimed to create new city districts by demolishing outdated urban areas and gradually building garden high-rises

²⁴⁸ József Fischer et al., “Az Építészet Háború Utáni Feladatai Magyarországon,” *Tér És Forma* 17, no. 11 (1945): 166–70.

in their place or by entirely dissolving the old areas, are now extending the life of every old house with usable apartments.²⁴⁹

This paradox—rebuilding what could be salvaged while laying the groundwork for a modern city—defined the challenges ahead. Fischer, a long-time advocate of architectural progression, shared this stage with others in his editorial circle, many of whom were members of the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) before the war. CIAM's primary purpose, organized by French architect icon Le Corbusier, was to reform the architectural praxis into a less elitist and academic one. The issues discussed at the congresses were also highly political (even if not politicized, as preferred by Le Corbusier²⁵⁰) – the primary concern of the Second CIAM Congress was the construction of small apartments to solve the housing crisis. The Hungarian participants, former Bauhaus student Farkas Molnár, Pál Ligeti, György Rácz, and others, formed a Hungarian division upon their return from the Congress. This group, called *CIRPAC*, greatly influenced the construction of apartment buildings in the 1930s in agreement with the modernist, socialist ideals of CIAM.²⁵¹ The political but not politicized principle pervades *Tér és Forma*'s issue after 1945.

Therefore, different degrees of relative radicalism had finally surfaced, this time not in opposition. Pál Granasztói, architect and author, writes in the 1945 issue of *Tér és Forma*: “Reconstruction, not restoration! This is the first and most important objective. Let's not restore

²⁴⁹ József Fischer, “A Realizáció Jegyében,” *Tér És Forma* 17, no. 11 (1945): 166–70.

²⁵⁰ One of the most controversial aspects of Le Corbusier's life is his involvement with Mussolini and the Vichy Government.

²⁵¹ Béla Kerékgyártó, “Modern Lakás – Modern Életforma: A Lakás Normatív Modelljeinek Változása 1890–1940 Között a Nemzetközi És a Magyar Építészetben,” *Korall* 58 (2014): 17–43. The Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) was founded in 1928, the same year as *Tér és Forma*. Pál Ligeti and Farkas Molnár became members of CIAM, joining the global discourse on modern architecture. However, the Hungarian members of CIAM faced challenges in realizing the organization's original ideas. Their social and political views often clashed with the authorities. Despite some degree of political undermining in the interwar years, the architects associated with CIAM managed to complete a few notable projects. They developed two building blocks in Köztársaság Square, resulting in the construction of one OTI-rented house in 1934, based on the plans of József Fischer, Pál Ligeti, Farkas Molnár, and Gábor Preisich. Additionally, they designed several independent rental and apartment buildings, including Farkas Molnár's houses on Lotz Károly Street (1933) and Pasaréti Road (1937), József Fischer's rental house on Bajza Street (1937), and Máté Major's Attila Road rental house (1934).

the old buildings that are often in poor condition. Let's not follow the policy of patching up and making do. Instead, let's begin as soon as possible and on a large scale with real reconstruction and construction. The primary requirement for this is the urban planning plan.”²⁵² Granasztói's vision for *Greater Budapest*, which would only materialize in 1950 with the unification of the capital and its surrounding towns, paired progressive urban planning with a strong emphasis on equality.²⁵³ He stated: “We must plan for the next generation, which, we believe, will be more affluent and carefree than ours. They will not know the ‘stráfkocsi’ (a freight carriage), hanging on trams, one-room apartments, or communal corridors but will be equal participants in all the achievements and blessings of our technological civilization and modern scientific knowledge, without distinctions of rank or class.”²⁵⁴ This optimism for a better, more equal society shaped the reconstruction discourse, with social democratic ideals countering the more radical communist perspectives. However, this theoretical debate was short-lived. With the Communist takeover in 1948, social democratic voices were silenced, followed soon after by those advocating for socialist modernist architecture. While this political shift will be contextualized in a later subchapter, it is worth noting that the brief, inspired years between 1945 and 1948 saw meaningful discussions about urban renewal.

Lastly, it is notable that both professional and popular language shifted during this period, moving from the term *Palota* (Palace) to *Vár* (Castle). This chapter retains the original differentiation as it appeared in the Hungarian sources.

3.2 *The Palace: A Sacred Place of Hesitation*

²⁵² Granasztói, “Nagy-Budapest Városrendezési Terve.”

²⁵³ Not immediately related to the Palace, but it is worth mentioning that the urban plans created by the FKT in 1945 listed elements that speak of a highly modern and progressive thinking not only in terms of architecture and design, but most emphatically about the entire organization of a metropolis. It lists plans for a walkable, neighborhood-segmented city, with very little traffic in the city center, and highly functional beltways.

²⁵⁴ Granasztói, “Nagy-Budapest Városrendezési Terve.”

The Castle District, specifically the Palace, became representative examples of the destruction in Budapest. This is not simply because of their preexisting symbolic functions but the sheer physical destruction these buildings suffered. Naturally, their destruction also represented the fall of the past regimes: the feudal, the Dualist, the Horthy regime, and the Nazi power at once.

I argue, however, that the reconstruction, and sometimes, demolition that followed the moments of *die Stunde Null* were not, contrary to the arguments made by right-wing historians today, part of a past-annihilating master plan. The discourse on the Castle District buildings and the Palace reconstructions best exemplifies this. I will exhibit the most critical arguments in the discussion.

3.2.1 Functions

There were three governmental provisions between 1949 and 1989 concerning the Palace's function, all within ten years. *Act XXV of 1949 § 49 (3)* sets out the reconstruction for administrative and governmental purposes. According to *Decree No. 10.157/1958. (IX. 7.)* of the Committee of Economy, the Palace must fulfill governmental and cultural functions. Decree 10.327/1959 (XII.30.) was passed a year later, laying down that the “Palace and its surroundings must be made into an educational and cultural center of the capital.”²⁵⁵ These provisions will demonstrate the shift from the idea of a governmental Palace to that of a cultural center throughout the 50s. In the 1945 issue of *Tér és Forma*, Fischer argued that in the FKT, “a unanimous view has emerged that the Castle should be returned to a purpose closely related to its original function, but in a manner befitting the character of the Castle. Specifically, it could serve as the head of state's residence and house cultural institutions. The highest level of government without customer traffic, such as the Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the diplomatic quarter, could find a fitting place in the Castle, restored with

²⁵⁵ Kókay, “Dokumentumok a Budai Vár 1945. Évi Ostromáról.”

appropriate care and historical accuracy.”²⁵⁶ In the first years of the Stalinist regime, however, there was quite some pressure, as well as some degree of confusion about the stylistic reconstruction of the Palace.²⁵⁷

Új Építészet published an analysis of the Castle Hill and its state in 1947, claiming that the Castle must have its original role, that of government, in a more modern fashion.²⁵⁸ Csemegi sees this role not so much in the historicity of the building but in its geographical location, arguing that it was given to the Castle Hill by nature. Such a sentimental evaluation of the site was not alien to other experts dealing with the Palace, either. The government commissioner of the Castle took up the task of creating an exhaustive list of damages in the Palace after the war. His report²⁵⁹ from 1946 is one of the most essential sources in analyzing the extent of the damage to objects and structural elements of the Palace. The report says the Palace was “declared a monument by the public even though other, similar constructions from the time were not considered monuments.” Besides the emphasis on the public’s relationship with the Castle and the Palace, the report engages in a nostalgic, sentimental view of the old Palace: “The industry of the most blooming age of this nation, which was immensely creative and was progressive, created something of such quality and value that no creation of today can match.”²⁶⁰ The sense of sentiment is familiar from the nostalgic tone surrounding Horthy’s persona since taking his position, let alone the deniability of the progressive character of the age. With less sentiment, the report of the FKT states a similar stance, claiming that although the authentic reconstructions are not a question of the national history of the urban landscape, the Castle should still be reconstructed faithfully to its pre-siege outlook. This report also recommends governmental functions to the Palace.

²⁵⁶ Fischer et al., “Az Építészet Háború Utáni Feladatai Magyarországon.”

²⁵⁷ The main source for the upcoming analysis is György Kókay’s collection of documents published in 1997. Kókay, “Dokumentumok a Budai Vár 1945. Évi Ostromáról.”

²⁵⁸ József Csemegi, Ifj., “A Várhegy Jövendő Sorsáról,” *Új Építészet* 2, no. 12 (1947).

²⁵⁹ Also in: Kókay, “Dokumentumok a Budai Vár 1945. Évi Ostromáról.”

²⁶⁰ Kókay, 294.

According to the available sources, experts in the early 1950s generally recommended a governmental center in the Palace, with the facades being reconstructed in their looks designed by Miklós Ybl and Alajos Hauszmann (more on the works of these architects in the corresponding chapter). During the “left-turn” (1948-51), more miniature reconstructions took place in the name of the corresponding decree in 1949 to protect the Palace as part of the city’s heritage. The decree sets out the establishment of a committee to uncover the state of the buildings and to protect them from further destruction. The same principles are reiterated in a document written by urban historian Ernő Gerő in 1952, also arguing for the original looks of the building, but “maybe the simplification of unnecessary ornamentation.” With much urgency, however, Gerő set a 2-year deadline for the experts and construction workers to finish all the reconstructions, meaning that by 1954, the entire project had to be completed. Of course, this was an impossible task.

Prakfalvi quotes in his extensive investigation of the post-1945 reconstructions of the Palace that Gerő already problematized in 1954 the difficulties in the construction process and that the leadership “must not withdraw from the decision” that the administration will move into the Castle. Gerő’s argument is founded on practicalities in that the potential to build underground facilities and safety chambers for the leadership is undeniable. Prakfalvi highlights that Gerő, despite his recommendations, brings in a counter recommendation made by Márton Horváth: “It is not appropriate to position our leadership in the Castle when the utmost priority is to raise the standard of living of the masses.”²⁶¹ Interestingly, Horváth mentioned the possibility, maybe out of sarcasm, of establishing a “children’s town” in the Castle.

²⁶¹ Prakfalvi, “Adatok a Budavári Palotaegyüttes 1945 Utáni Építéstörténetéhez,” 348.

However, the idea of an administrative center prevailed until 1956. Eventually, by 1958, Janáky, giving up on the plans for a neo-classical dome (resembling traits of socialist realism), still planned a complex with both cultural and administrative functions.²⁶²

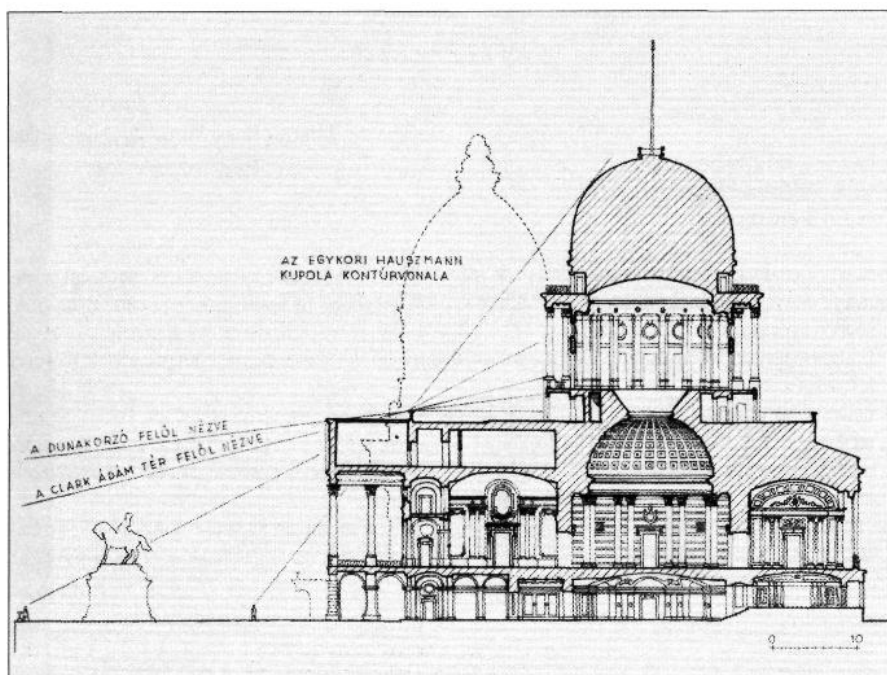
3.1.2 Form – “We Have to Make Peace with the Baroque”

A key point in each reconstruction plan until today is the question of the dome or cupola of the Palace. This we have witnessed already in the previous chapter when I demonstrated that the change from the castle-like baroque tower built by Maria Theresa to the monumental historicist-German Secessionist dome was a question of power representation—demarcating a competition line between the three domes of the city: that of the clerical (the Basilica), the secular (the Parliament), and of the monarchical (the Palace). Understandably, the dome was also a priority in the reconstruction of the Castle Hill in its entirety. As Farbaky highlights, the absence of a new dome was never considered. However, there were several different plans for the shape and size of the dome, out of which two competing versions are worth mentioning here.

One was designed by Janáky, Pázmándi, Flach, and Gerő—this was Janáky’s most preferred design, which Farbaky characterized as a “lost opportunity” for a unique Hungarian socialist realism practice. This comprised a much smaller dome than the earlier one, with a usable interior. This plan was aborted rather quickly, and by 1958, the dome was designed more similarly to the Hauszmannian shape and size.²⁶³

²⁶² Prakfalvi, 350.

²⁶³ Prakfalvi, 350.

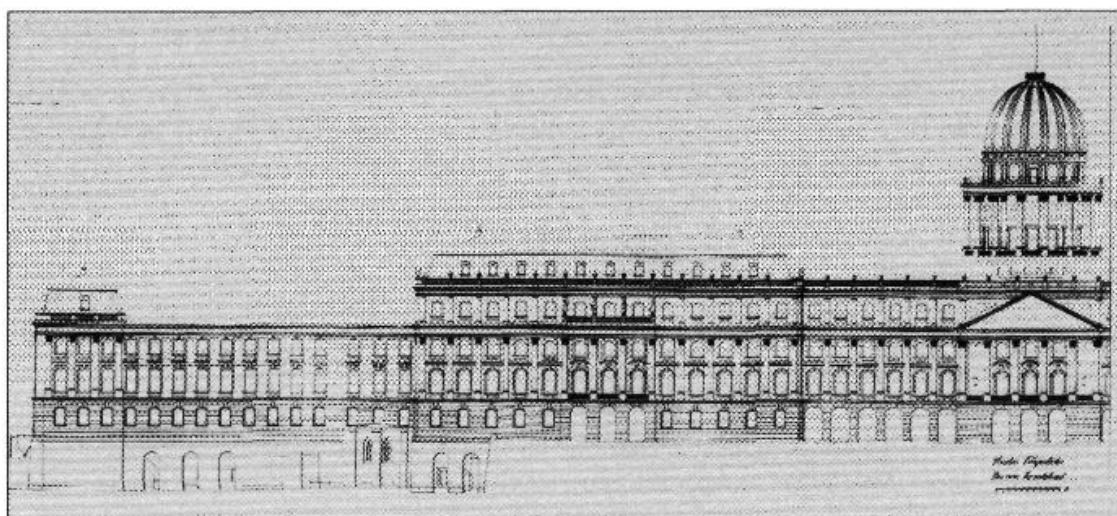


2.3.11. Janáky István-Pázmándi István-Flach János terve nyomán Kollányi Béla: A Budavári Palota átépítésének negyedik tervváltozata: a középszárnny keresztmetszete a kupola tengelyvonalában, 1952-1955. Eredeti: MOL, 276.f.53/291. melléklet.

Figure 11. The Design of the Dome 1952-1955. Original: MOL, 276.f.53/291. In: Farbaký.

As Prakfalvi writes, the new dome was somewhat oversized but competed with the dome of the Parliament again. It was finished by 1964 in the sixth round of reconstructions according to the new design prepared by Lajos Hidasi, István Németh, and Gyula Farkas Kis. In the same analysis, Farbaký brings in a notable quotation from a professional:

[The dome is] ... consciously eclectic in style," a redefinition of the grand precursors (the Florence Cathedral, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome) took place here, making it "worldly" in its purpose. The dome, as an architectural element of the "modern public building," had already lost its previous traditional iconological meaning, the glorification. The Buda dome became emblematic, and its new meaning, as part of the exhibitions, would be to pleasure viewing a "[historical] panorama" from the "highest point." The new dome of the palace is the "endpoint" in the practice of dome construction in Hungary; "climbing to the top," it can be determined that it was "undoubtedly built for us ordinary people!



Janák István: A budai várpalota oldalhomlokzata, 1958.
OMvH Tervtár, lt. sz.: 1279. (részlet).

Figure 12. Janák's Design from the Side, 1958. Original: OMvH Archives, no. 1279. In: Farbak.

A more extensive discussion was centered around the radical clarification of unnecessary ornamentation. As Jenő Rados (architect in charge of the reconstruction of the Ministry of Finance) wrote about the Castle Hill: “destruction of baroque and historicist buildings was made easier by the circumstances of the fascist war and the fact that most buildings were severely damaged.”²⁶⁴ For Rados and many of his colleagues, these buildings of historicism, the baroque, especially eclecticism, were indeed “disturbing elements” in the city texture—as they had been for many, even at the time of their initial construction.²⁶⁵

However, despite the urgency coming from the government, and despite the either sentimental or more objective recommendations of the experts, the government did not move to the Palace, and the significant reconstructions only took place in the second half of the 50s, as argued previously. In my view, besides the technical challenges arising from the fact that the Palace and the Castle Hill in their entirety had to be reconceptualized, the inaction surrounding the Palace was rooted in a paralytic state of the higher government, and especially of Mátyás

²⁶⁴ Jenő Rados, *Magyar Építőművészet* 1, no. 1 (1952): 20–23.

²⁶⁵ Please refer to chapter 2 for information on this.

Rákosi, who might have been somewhat intimidated by the historical, representative gravity of the project. I also conjure that part of Rákosi's retraction from the idea of moving into the Royal Palace had to do with the legacy of his predecessor, Miklós Horthy. To demonstrate this, I will analyze the remarks of Rákosi at the meetings in 1952 on the topic of the Palace and its future.

While Rákosi understood that the Palace had to be reconstructed in a similar form to its *fin-de-siecle* Hauszmann-design, he was also in conflict with the idea of authentic reconstruction. While he, as well as Gerő, speak of the “unnecessary ornamentation” and “kitsch” of eclecticism and says that “one shivers from the thought of mixing styles,”²⁶⁶ the main reason for Rákosi not to use the Palace as a site of government had more to do with the stance the Party wished to take on the role the nation in 19th and 20th-century affairs and thus about its history. He begins his speech on April 8, 1952 by saying:

The Palace was the representative building of a great power, a monarchy. The czar and the king wanted to show off their wealth to the people. [...] Wilhelm II was rather surprised, upon his first visit, to see that it was not built for the Hungarians only but also for the Austrian czar, so he came here many times to receive guests. On Sundays, they would show the Palace to the masses for 1 Forint to strengthen their religious admiration for the czar. The number of czars and kings has significantly decreased and will soon cease to exist. For us, the Parliament is just fine for representative functions, and we will reconstruct the Vigadó as well. [...] The Galilei Circle held its March 15 celebration here with 15,000 people.²⁶⁷

Rákosi never outright rejected the idea of a governmental Palace, but his historical framing suggests he found the prospect distasteful. He proposed a compromise: restoring the Palace's fin-de-siècle Hauszmannian façade while modernizing the interiors to accommodate government offices. Yet he was equally critical of the Central Architecture Studio's [*Központi Tervezőiroda, KÖZTI*] proposal, objecting to its excessive allocation of space: “It can't be that

²⁶⁶ Kókay, “Dokumentumok a Budai Vár 1945. Évi Ostromáról,” 329.

²⁶⁷ Kókay, 323.

there is 11,040 m² for offices on 440.000 m² of reconstructed space. We are investing the work of peasants, workers, and intellectuals into this construction; we better check what we're investing into. Such an extravagant construction cannot be done." The insistence on office spaces occupying most of the Palace was a primary political gesture—something that Rákosi probably thought would legitimize a “workers’ government” more than the insertion of socialist realism into the texture of the Castle Hill. Sources show that Rákosi was confident that the Palace could not become a tool to represent state power, even if it meant the reconstruction of “baroque, or Secessionist elements, which are, to say the least, a historical forgery.”²⁶⁸ Rákosi believed that the Secession and the Baroque were the styles of bourgeois architecture meant to maintain the status quo of the post-feudal aristocratic elites.²⁶⁹ He continues, “It is unsurprising that the neo-baroque dominated after 1919.”

The reference to 1919—meaning not only the dawn of neo-Baroque dominance but also the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic—underscores the ideological stakes. Rákosi was acutely aware that architecture could serve as a tool of historical legitimation. The Palace had to be reconstructed, but with careful control over what past it was allowed to invoke.

Ultimately, Rákosi never seriously entertained the idea of moving in. One suggestion placed his office in Building D, near the former Throne Hall—a position akin to Horthy’s old seat in the Sándor Palace. But unlike Stalin in the Kremlin, Rákosi saw no benefit in claiming this royalist space. As he argued during the same committee meeting: “In 1905, those poor peasants came here to spit on the Castle, saying that this is where our taxes go. I do not want to have the castle reconstructed and get the legitimate criticism that we did it out of some historical enthusiasm and with huge, unnecessary expenditure.”

²⁶⁸ Kókay, 329.

²⁶⁹ Here Rákosi refers to László Lyka’s take on the Baroque as the style of the counter-revolution as expressed in the journal *Arts [Művészetek]*.

If anything, he seemed more preoccupied with ensuring that no one could accuse him of replicating his predecessors. It was only after 1956 that the Party fully abandoned the Palace as a center of governance, culminating in the 1959 decree that solidified its role as a public cultural site.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Rákosi's search for an appropriate interweaving of the history of the Palace and the installation of a Stalinist regime is the lack of reflection on the Monarchy and the Horthy era. He claims that the original Palace "had some legitimacy, in a country of 21 million, being an accessory to the Monarchy of 50 million people. The class situation was such that they wanted to show their power. We cannot do that."²⁷⁰ Similarly, the fact that the Palace was once the residence of Miklós Horthy is never mentioned in these meetings.

For Mátyás Rákosi and his comrades, the quest for historical continuity was hardly aided by the archaeological excavations that had been underway since the earliest days of reconstruction. Indeed, the sheer volume of discoveries in the post-war years would come to constitute an entirely separate chapter in the historiography of Castle Hil.²⁷¹ Under the leadership of László Zolnay and Győző Gerő, these excavations unearthed enough material to prompt a serious reexamination of the Castle's 15th-century past—an outcome that was, at best, inconvenient for a regime eager to curate its own lineage. Rákosi, for his part, acknowledged the significance of these efforts only in passing, remarking with characteristic sarcasm: "I don't have to check the numbers to believe that Horthy didn't spend this much money on excavations over 25 years as we have so far." Ernő Gerő was no more enthusiastic, dismissing the archaeologists as little more than "history enthusiasts" prone to excessive concern with

²⁷⁰ See figure 8.

²⁷¹ Czagány, "A Budai Várra Vonatkozó Történetírás És Művészettudomány Története."

historical authenticity—a preoccupation clearly at odds with the state’s more pragmatic approach to the past.

Rákosi’s frustration was evident in his criticism of certain reconstruction choices, particularly the revival of two-story Schwab houses, which he derided as having been rebuilt “*without historical precedent.*” In his view, this was historical indulgence taken to an absurd extreme. What he truly needed was a carefully curated version of history—one that provided a seamless ideological bridge from the feudal past to the proletarian future. Instead, the excavations complicated the state’s narrative, forcing Rákosi into the awkward position of both rejecting Hungary’s pre-industrial history as irrelevant and yet needing to construct a historical trajectory that justified the present regime. The reconstruction of the Palace, then, was not merely an architectural dilemma but a political one: what aspects of the past were worth resurrecting, and which should be left buried?

Despite his apparent control over the Palace’s fate, records indicate that Rákosi never seriously entertained the idea of moving in. Yet while Rákosi made frequent references to the Kremlin as an ideal model, his reluctance to establish himself in the Castle had less to do with emulating Moscow and more with avoiding uncomfortable parallels with his most infamous predecessor, Miklós Horthy. In this sense, the Palace itself became a symbol of an unresolved ideological struggle: while socialist realism was reshaping much of Budapest’s urban fabric, the Castle’s deeply entrenched historical symbolism proved impervious to easy reinterpretation.

It was ultimately the events of 1956 that forced a decisive shift. The uprising and its aftermath underscored the need for a more open and publicly accessible use of space, leading to the final push for the so-called “democratization” of the Castle, as formalized in the 1959 decree. Ironically, the debates that had enabled socialist realism to flourish elsewhere in Budapest ultimately stalled at the very threshold of the Palace itself. The site’s historical weight

was too great, its meaning too loaded, to be seamlessly absorbed into the new ideological landscape. In the end, the Castle remained what it had always been: a contested space, where power—regardless of its political stripe—was forced to negotiate with history.

4. Neither Modernist nor Socialist Realist

If political pragmatism caused hesitation, ideological confusion compounded it. After the radical leftist turn of 1948, even within the system, there were serious doubts about how to reconcile the grand ideological ambitions of socialist architecture with the stubborn realities of the past. It's worth unpacking these theoretical considerations—not because they were particularly successful, but because their failure reveals a chronic historicist impulse: the compulsive urge to misinterpret the concepts, goals, and achievements of both socialist-modernist and socialist-realist architecture.

3.3.1 The Socialist Realist Method in Architecture – Historical Overview

Even though the Palace itself was never reconstructed in a socialist realist style, understanding the theoretical foundation of the movement is crucial. It wasn't just an aesthetic debate—it was a battleground over national identity, political legitimacy, and the fundamental principles of architecture. The basic dilemmas of socialist realist architecture, which had their roots in socialist realist literature, mirrored the most fundamental anxieties about national belonging in the new political regime.

“Socialist realism is socialist in content, and national in form.” This defining slogan, penned by Mikhail Tsapenko in 1940 in *Arkitektura i Sztroitelstvo*, was the ideological cornerstone of socialist architecture. Tsapenko, one of the Soviet Union's most zealous architectural ideologues, saw architecture as a front line in the ideological war against the

West.²⁷² However, Tsapenko's lengthy argumentation for this "new architecture" was more a collection of vague, ideologically driven instructions in sharp opposition to formalism and functionalism than a methodological guideline for architects.²⁷³ By 1949, he had refined this view into a forceful—if not particularly coherent—manifesto against formalism and functionalism. The problem? Tsapenko's grand vision for a "new architecture" was less a structured methodology than a haphazard collection of ideological directives.²⁷⁴

The concepts of function and form were intrinsically revised with the modernist (following Le Corbusier) and Bauhaus movements, and the consequential detachment of ornament from façade, of abundant decoration from place to be occupied by the people, has been taken up by artists and architects of early socialist realism.²⁷⁵ The coexistence of modernist tendencies and the traditionalists eventually came down to two opposing architectural directions: the so-called "cosmopolitans" and the socialist realist Academicians.²⁷⁶ With the 1932 competition for the Palace of the Soviets, the die has been cast for the absolute advantage of the Academicians. Boris Iofan's plan is one of the prime examples of the grandiosity of socialist realism until today.

It was at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers, held in Leningrad, that socialist realism became the accepted and proclaimed direction for all in the field of cultural production. Therefore, from being one of the tendencies of modernism, it became *the* method of architecture. From this point on, the ideal socialist society rests on the idea of socialist realism.

²⁷² As analyzed in depth in: Richard Anderson, *Russia: Modern Architectures in History* (Reaktion Books, 2015), n.p.

²⁷³ Highlighted both in: Anderson, *Russia*; and Anders Aman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe during the Stalin Era: An Aspect of Cold War History* (New York: MIT Press, 1992).

²⁷⁴ One example is Vladimir Tatlin's well-known design for the Monument of the Third International (1919), which was praised in the West by Dadaist artists due to its rejection of traditionality—a reason why Maiakovskii called it the "first monument without a beard." Tatlin's design was one art piece of the disillusioned but eager for revolution, war-struck generation of young artists who made up the Dadaist and constructivist movements later decried by socialist realists. See more on the topic in Anders Aman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe during the Stalin Era: An Aspect of Cold War History* (New York: MIT Press, 1992), 51.

²⁷⁵ Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus: 1919 - 1933* (Hong Kong: Taschen, 2011), 7.

²⁷⁶ Aman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe during the Stalin Era*, 1992, 52.

The Congress, organized by Maxim Gorkii, Karl Radek, Nikolai Bukharin, and Andrei Zhdanov, was meant to lay out the exact directives for the disciplines of visual arts, music, literature, and architecture in the hope that they would memorialize the ideal type of socialist society. This spirit of heroism and the revolutionary mindset shines through Zhdanov's—member of the Politburo and supervisor of the Cominform—description of the literary hero:

In our country, the chief heroes of literary works are the active builders of a new life: working men and women, collective farmers, engineers, members of the Komsomol, pioneers . . . Our literature is saturated with enthusiasm and heroism. It is optimistic but not through any zoological instinct. It is fundamentally optimistic because it is the literature of the rising class of the proletariat, the only progressive and advanced class.²⁷⁷

The Zhdanovshchina—the common name for the cultural policy formulated and enforced by Zhdanov—set out to outline a heroic, “fundamentally optimistic,” and thus inherently monumental method in producing culture and knowledge and claim it as the only legitimate method. Following up on Stalin's description of Soviet writers as “engineers of the human mind,” Zhdanov outlined the principle of literary socialist(ic) realism: “It means, above all, to know life, to depict it truthfully in works of art, to depict it not scholastically, not lifelessly, not just as ‘objective reality,’ but to depict real life in its revolutionary development.”²⁷⁸

In this wording, the Zhdanovshchina ultimately brought about the essence of Stalinist hermeneutics and epistemology: the problem of reality and truth and the (dis)connection between these two. Petre Petrov, professor of Russian literature, argues that it is the non-epistemological conception of truth upon which socialist realism rests and that it is only through the dialectical understanding of the concept of reality that we can fully understand socialist realism.²⁷⁹ Petrov also highlights the great significance of, in a dialectic manner,

²⁷⁷ Ludmilla B. Turkevich, “The Second Congress of Soviet Writers,” *Books Abroad* 30, no. 1 (1956): 31.

²⁷⁸ As in: Turkevich, “The Second Congress of Soviet Writers,” 1956.

²⁷⁹ Petre Petrov, “The Industry of Truing: Socialist Realism, Reality, Realization,” *Slavic Review* 70, no. 4 (2011): 873–92, <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.70.4.0873>.

recognizing dialectics of history as part of reality, even if that reality either refers to factuality or importance. Going beyond the traditional framework of “hidden” versus “real” historical events in a sharp criticism of Evgenii Dobrenko’s *The Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, Petrov argues that the ideological nature (and thus, historical embeddedness) of socialist realism does not mean that it meant to offer an alternative reality to “cover-up” for what is empirically accurate. Instead, Petrov argues that the historical process is part of the reality in which it existed in its own right but outside the traditional conceptualization of truth and reality—which Petrov calls a permutation. Indeed, in Zhdanov’s own words, “truthfulness and historical concreteness of artistic depiction must be combined with the task of ideological remolding and re-education and the toiling people in the spirit of Socialism. This method in fiction and literary criticism is called Socialistic Realism.”²⁸⁰ Others, in contrast, have argued that socialist realism was only allegedly tied to classicism, for it lacked the most essential element of classical thought: reason.²⁸¹

Fizer draws a stark contrast: “Classicism was a link in the historical evolution of human thought. Socialist realism is an artificial concoction of political dicta, a coercive interference with the stream of historical consciousness.”²⁸² His argument assumes that culture follows a linear, evolutionary path that naturally leads to classicism—specifically, Western classicist theory. His dramatic closing statement, that “whatever accomplishments Soviet literature has scored have been due to those creative forces of the human personality which defy and transcend any regimentation,”²⁸³ bespeaks a relatively ignorant as well as historically inaccurate depiction of the socialist realist method.²⁸⁴ While this perspective is historically

²⁸⁰ Ludmilla B. Turkevich, “The Second Congress of Soviet Writers,” *Books Abroad* 30, no. 1 (1956): 32.

²⁸¹ Fizer, “Some Observations on the Alleged Classicism of Socialist Realism.”

²⁸² Fizer, 335.

²⁸³ Fizer, 336.

²⁸⁴ Fizer is essentializing both the concept of culture, as well as the accomplishments of Soviet literature.

simplistic—if not outright inaccurate—it does share one key concern with Petrov’s argument: an emphasis on historicity.

Where Fizer sees socialist realism as a disruption of historical consciousness, Petrov interprets it as self-referential—an ideological project that defines its own reality. Zhdanov himself framed it as the “re-education” of the masses in the spirit of socialism. But socialist realism didn’t just emerge as a new artistic method; it was part of a much larger epistemological shift.²⁸⁵ Under Stalinism, truth was no longer tied to empirical knowledge (a point of contention with Heidegger’s philosophy, as Petrov argues). Instead, truth became a rhetorical device, a tool for enforcing revolutionary justice.²⁸⁶

It was also a straightforward task in architecture to “depict real life in its revolutionary development.” The monumentality of revolutionary thought, with a row of references to the French Revolution and the search for historical continuity, contributed to the eventual victory of the arcade of the socialist realist construction as the allegory of socialist utopia. This monumental vision wasn’t just a stylistic choice; it was the very essence of socialist utopian architecture.

²⁸⁵ One unique way to approach this topic is the analysis of show trials in light of avant-garde and ‘realist’ theater. In such an analysis, the show trials and confessions become part of a greater, textual structure. For such analyses see: Julie A. Cassiday, “Marble Columns and Jupiter Lights: Theatrical and Cinematic Modeling of Soviet Show Trials in the 1920s,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 42, no. 4 (1998): 640, <https://doi.org/10.2307/309781>; István Rév, “The Suggestion,” *Representations* 80, no. 1 (November 2002): 62–98, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2002.80.1.62>.

²⁸⁶ No other example demonstrates this better than Nikolai Bukharin’s trial in 1938. As mentioned earlier, Bukharin was an organizing member of the First Congress of Soviet Writers, where socialist realism was “launched.” His input was essential in outlining the method, which discarded some of the achievements of modernism and, to bring alive the stability and monumentality of classical thought, used Classicism as a reference point in theory and practice. Similarly, through Bukharin’s trial, Maurice Merleau-Ponty demonstrates the ambiguity of history in his *Humanism and Terror*. For Merleau-Ponty, this ambiguity lies in the understanding of past and present actions as not simply “precedents” in the legal term but as parts of the revolutionary vision, therefore, as part of the future: “Bourgeois justice adopts the past as its precedent; revolutionary justice adopts the future.”²⁸⁶ Reason, therefore, is not simply “lacking” from Stalinist justice and thus the worldview in which socialist realism comes to life, nor is it a trait that socialist realist artists failed to incorporate into their works. Instead of the classical form of historical reasoning, the Moscow trials present us with the domination of present, future, and past, which “only make sense between the revolutionaries [...] who are convinced that they are making history and who consequently see the present as past.” See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, trans. John O’Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 29.

Máté Major, editor of *Építés-Építészet* and a key figure in Hungarian socialist realism, once wrote: “Architecture must take monumental propaganda to the highest possible level.”²⁸⁷ While this very remark of Major’s bears historical significance if we look at how agents themselves (architects, designers, publishers) changed positions throughout the years of the Stalinist regime in Hungary, in this context, it captures the intersection of the (non)epistemological dimension of Stalinism and its monumentality.

Hungary, however, was not under the pressures of Stalinist propaganda and the directives of socialist realism until the late 1940s. Mikhail Tsapenko’s article outlining the essential characteristics of socialist utopian architecture was published in *Építés-Építészet* (the periodical whose importance will be discussed later in this chapter) in 1950, at the very peak of the debate that took place in Hungarian intellectual circles regarding the most effective ways to rebuild the ruined capital. Nevertheless, the question of what “socialist content” and “national form” meant had to be answered in terms of theory and practice.

In *Architecture and Ideology in Architecture in Eastern Europe*, historian Anders Aman looks at six countries in the former Eastern Bloc: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, the DDR, and Hungary, to outline the most relevant characteristics of the different trends in socialist realism. This seminal work allows us to look at the elemental concepts of socialist realism and compare them to how they operated in different historical and social contexts. Building on Tsapenko’s framework, Aman explores how national identity shaped socialist architecture. Ideological leaders provided vague instructions on how “socialist content” and “national form” should be expressed in materials, construction techniques, or ornamentation. As a result, socialist realism took distinct forms across countries. In Romania and Bulgaria, Byzantine and Turkish elements blended with classical segmentation; in the DDR, pan-German

²⁸⁷ Máté Major, “Az Építészet Dialektikája” 17, no. 1–2 (1955): 174.

classicism dominated; Poland leaned on Renaissance influences; and in Hungary, inspiration came from early 19th-century classicism and the Reform era.²⁸⁸

Unlike Western modernism, which emphasized universalism, socialist realism sought to root architecture in local traditions. Tsapenko writes: “The socialist realism of architecture covers the national sources of architecture and helps realize realist constructions. These constructions correspond well to socialist culture and technology, the intellectual and material involvement of the masses, and Stalin’s principle of concern for the masses.”²⁸⁹ The directive to depict life solely in its revolutionary development was fundamentally at odds with classical notions of truth and reality. Rather than concealing reality, socialist realism actively constructed a new one. This post-empirical dimension of Stalinist ideology intertwined not only with legal institutions but also with the very concept of justice itself, reinforcing an ongoing revolutionary narrative.

Architect Imre Perényi saw architecture’s ultimate purpose as conveying socialism’s “positive message” in the most fitting architectural language.²⁹⁰ Meanwhile, Tibor Weiner, chief architect of Sztálinváros (later Dunaújváros), argued that “it is the realist aspect of socialist realism that distinguishes it from all other methods in architecture.”²⁹¹ Yet, despite socialist realism’s revolutionary aims, it often relied on neoclassicism—an architectural form historically associated with stability and predictability. Neoclassicism’s adaptability allowed it to be infused with different national styles, making it both a transnational humanist ideal and a symbol of national identity. As Endre Prakfalvi put it, “the Hungarian character has found itself” within the conceptual framework of classicism.²⁹²

²⁸⁸ Aman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe during the Stalin Era*, 1992, 95–119.

²⁸⁹ Mikhail Tsapenko, “A Szocialista Realizmus a Szovjetunió Építészetiében,” *Építés-Építészet*, no. 2 (1950): 82–90.

²⁹⁰ Imre Perényi, “1951. a Fordulat Éve a Magyar Építőművészetben,” *Építés-Építészet* 3, no. 9–10 (1951): 475–83.

²⁹¹ Tibor Weiner, “Szocialista Realizmus,” *Építés-Építészet* 3, no. 10 (1951): 484–501.

²⁹² Endre Prakfalvi and Gábor Barka, *Szocreál: Budapest építészete 1945 és 1959 között*, A mi Budapestünk (Budapest: Városháza, 1999), 6.

3.3.2 The Great Debate of 1951

The emergence of a national architectural style after the devastation of the war was both desired and necessary for academics and the public alike. However, within the strict confines of socialist realism, discussions on the subject remained largely theoretical and politically constrained. While architecture could have been the subject of a rich discourse within a socialist society, the Soviet Union's anti-democratic structure stifled such dialogue. The following paragraphs explore the brief but dynamic debate on progressive architecture.

One of the key platforms for politically engaged architects was the radical yet short-lived journal *Új Építészet* [*New Architecture*] (1946-48), edited by Máté Major and architect and theoretician Imre Perényi. Major authored the first segment, a proclamation against apolitical architecture to “liberate architects from the intellectual prison – which shows itself as an ivory tower – a rotting society has built up.” In his words, “New architecture fundamentally differs from the old one. The old architecture created works of art and cared very little about man or human relations. New architecture, in contrast, derives from man and creates objects for use to satisfy all the intellectual and material needs of man.”²⁹³

Despite this ambitious vision, in practice, the “new architecture” proposed by Major and his colleagues closely resembled the modernist principles promoted by Fischer and other progressives. *Új Építészet* championed modernist solutions to the housing crisis and emphasized social equity in its ideals. The real point of contention was not architectural style itself but its political implications. According to Granasztói, architecture should be driven purely by functionalism rather than social ideology.²⁹⁴ Before socialist realism was officially imposed as the sole legitimate method, the debate centered on whether architects should

²⁹³ Máté Major, “A Magyar Építészekhez!,” *Új Építészet* 1, no. 1 (1946).

²⁹⁴ Endre Prakfalvi, Virág Hajdú, and Zoltán Fehérvári, eds., *Modern és szocreál – Építészet és tervezés Magyarországon 1945–1959*, n.d., 10.

incorporate ideological considerations into their designs or adhere to the Bauhaus's principle of universal functionalism.

However, because the “new architecture” did not fully sever ties with modernist ideals, it failed to fulfill its supposed role of “spreading the optimism of socialism.” The hesitation to abandon modernist achievements entirely set the stage for the pivotal 1951 debate that sought to cement socialist realism's dominance in architecture. True to the performative nature of socialist realist doctrine, this “debate” had all the elements of a show trial—defendant, plaintiff, judge, script, and a preordained verdict. It was, above all, an orchestrated condemnation of architectural modernism. The following sections examine the key moments of this trial.

Imre Perényi referred to 1951 as “the year of stylistic turn,” though this shift was far from an organic intellectual evolution like the “pictorial turn” or the “spatial turn.” The debate was organized by the Department of Agitation and Propaganda of the Party and set off by Perényi's article “The Western Decadent Tendency in Contemporary Architecture.”²⁹⁵ Perényi seemed—and proved—to be a well-chosen opponent of Major's; he had studied architecture in the Soviet Union and socialized on socialist realist architecture.²⁹⁶ Major's response to Perényi's article was titled “Confusion in our contemporary architecture” in defense of modernism.²⁹⁷ The conductor of the debate was the Minister of Culture and principal ideologue of the Party, József Révai, who invited the most important representatives of art and architecture. The most notable of these were philosopher György Lukács and painter and theoretician Aurél Bernáth. The show-trial nature of the event was evident to its participants as well. Major later recalled: “In the middle of the cathedra, Márton Horváth, the chair, was sitting. To his right, next to the window, was the ‘plaintiff’ Imre Perényi, and to his left was I,

²⁹⁵ In: Máté Major, Imre Perényi, and József Révai, *Vita építészetünk helyzetéről* (Magyar Képzőművészek és Iparművészek Szövetsége, 1951).

²⁹⁶ Moravánszky, “The Specificity of Architecture.”

²⁹⁷ Also in: Major, Perényi, and Révai, *Vita építészetünk helyzetéről*.

the defendant. Further left sat Minister József Révai, probably representing the ‘verdict.’”²⁹⁸ Two years after *Új Építészet* was shut down and a new journal *Építés-Építészet* took over the task of promoting socialist realist architecture, Major was out to defend the legitimacy of modernism: “I wanted to prevent the danger that was threatening architecture, and wanted to save ‘new architecture.’ But I should have foreseen that the situation was beyond hope.”²⁹⁹

Ultimately, the debate was much more about creating a sense of legitimacy for socialist realism and, thus, state power than about stylistic questions in architecture. Perényi, in his recollection of the debate, calls modernism a tendency that, besides its decadence, also “denies the past.”³⁰⁰ While the Bauhaus was admittedly an attempt to create an “ahistorical” architectural movement,³⁰¹ Perényi’s critique was less about history and more about a classicist *version* of the past.

This historical dimension was particularly evident in an awkward exchange between Lukács and Major. Lukács, a vocal opponent of modernist architecture, remarked: “Comrade Major has said about the usability of buildings that only those buildings that are physically truly usable can be good to be used by man, and only those buildings that are aesthetically perfect can be physically truly usable. In this sentence, we can find all the westernisms of Major’s stance and how closely he is tied with bourgeois decadence.” Lukács goes on to say that the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the artistic movement of new objectivity that arose from the opposition of expressionism, had the same practical principle in mind as Major, who wrongly states that beauty (or aesthetic value) can arise simply from function and the practice of use. He later adds the example of the “terribly ugly hotel whose bathroom is excellent” or “wonderful old houses that we, contemporary users, cannot dwell according to our needs.”³⁰²

²⁹⁸ Máté Major, *Tizenkét Nehéz Esztendő*, Lapis Angularis 3 (Budapest: Magyar Építészeti Múzeum, 2011), 235.

²⁹⁹ Major, 234.

³⁰⁰ Perényi, “1951. a Fordulat Éve a Magyar Építőművészetben.”

³⁰¹ Droste, *Bauhaus*, 9.

³⁰² Major, *Tizenkét Nehéz Esztendő*, 236.

Major's fundamental criticism of Lukács's remark (which he addressed on the second day of the debate) is what is of primary interest here: "Comrade Lukács, when he talks about the "terribly ugly" hotel and its excellent room and bathroom, or the usability of "beautiful old houses" compared to "our needs," seems to forget the essence of architecture in totality. He seems to observe these things by taking them out of their historical context, radically dividing the concepts of "beauty" and "usability" from one another."³⁰³

In this case, Major argued for a dialectic understanding of architecture and its history, focusing on the context rather than anachronistic comparisons, as Lukács did. However, the state wanted to see the debate in architecture based on the "restoration of the traditions of Hungarian national architecture" to establish a socialist realism.³⁰⁴ This objective was reinforced by high-ranking Party members Ernő Gerő and Mihály Farkas, both involved in the infamous show trial of László Rajk. Major's apprehension was justified when he heard the ominous statement: "Comrade Rákosi also followed the event with great curiosity."³⁰⁵

Fearing immediate arrest and execution like Rajk, Major later wrote: "Who is scared is prone to compromise."³⁰⁶ The next day, he resigned from his official position and embraced socialist realism.

Perényi later reflected on this turning point: "The fight against cosmopolitanism in our architecture began in 1949" and accused modernism of rejecting Hungary's architectural heritage, promoting illogical structural elements, and disregarding the environment."³⁰⁷ He wrote this when it was already clear that Major and his former modernist colleagues would not continue their mission to "save modernism" but yield to the instructions of socialist realism. The speed at which representatives of most art had to change their stance on socialist realism

³⁰³ Major, 237.

³⁰⁴ Major, 239.

³⁰⁵ Major, 242.

³⁰⁶ Major, 242.

³⁰⁷ Perényi, "1951. a Fordulat Éve a Magyar Építőművészetben."

and monumentality can be well demonstrated if we consider the reception of the National Assembly of Construction Workers (MÉMOSZ) building finished in 1950.³⁰⁸ The tender for the project was published in 1947, and the final project was the combined plan of Lajos Gádoros, Imre Perényi, Gábor Preisich, and György Szrogh's work.³⁰⁹ The laying of the cornerstone took place in 1948 in the presence of László Rajk, and the building was designed to encompass the greatness of socialist realism, hailed by the profession and the political sphere. By 1951, it was considered a "palace of extravagance" and an example of *Westernist*, reckless design.³¹⁰ It would be a bold speculation to claim that Rajk's role in the physical as well as symbolic foundation of the building (and the entire regime) had a direct relationship with the building's reception later on. What connects the two is that both the Rajk show trial and modernism only make sense through the non-epistemological and pan-temporal lens of socialist realist thought. Similarly to Bukharin, Rajk confessed to the nonsensical accusations. Architecture's role was to represent the pan-temporal aspect of state power, which modernism was not monumental enough to accomplish.

The final word in the trial of modernism, however, was not Révai's closing statements nor his or Perényi's summaries of the debate in *Építés-Építészet*. It was the First Congress of Hungarian Architects in 1951 with a no less monumental location than the National Museum. The Museum was designed by Mihály Pollack, master of Hungarian neoclassicism. Primary writes about his entrance to the congress: "Here, in the National Museum, the point is to recognize that this is the ideal type of our socialist architecture; it is its scale. We must create classicist tranquility, majesty in architecture, like those before us."³¹¹

³⁰⁸ See figure 7. MÉMOSZ

³⁰⁹ "MÉMOSZ-székház, Budapest 6," accessed March 14, 2020, <http://www.muemlekem.hu/muemlek/show/730>.

³¹⁰ József Révai, "Az Új Magyar Építészet Kérdései," *Építés-Építészet* 3, no. 9–10 (1951): 467–74.

³¹¹ Major, *Tizenkét Nehéz Esztendő*, 243.

The pressure to create a socialist realist hegemony in architecture costs the credibility of the method itself and the viability of modernism in the long run. Iván Kotsis mentioned previously that when designing the reconstruction of the Palace, it was constantly set back, as Prakfalvi explains in detail. This shines through in his argumentation from 1952, quoted by Prakfalvi:

In the middle of the Danube-facing front of the building, there is no emphasized focal point [...], the [architectural] center of gravity is within the two side masses, in the southern throne room and the northern dance hall masses. [...] The dome section in between is merely a linkage. The logical solution for the exterior facing the Danube is thus given: the two blocks emphasized in the floor plan should also be highlighted in the façade [...], and the linkage, the loggia, should play a similar role in the exterior. An obvious way to achieve this is to introduce the beautiful columned arcade, similar to the one designed by Hauszmann, by eliminating the artificial interruption under the dome section, with equal column alignments between the two main masses: the colonnade forms an excellent background for the equestrian statue of Eugene of Savoy standing on the axis of the central *cour d'honneur*. [...] This solution, in my opinion, is unassailable because it is organic and logical, and as such, it should be beautiful as well. [...] However, as he writes, it has been confidentially conveyed to me that my clear idea is purposeless and even dangerous to present in the current public sentiment [in 1952-53] with such a tasteful and Western concept.³¹²

³¹² Endre Prakfalvi, "Az 1953-as Városépítészeti Vita," *Budapesti Negyed* 3, no. 9 (1995): 348, <http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00003/00008/prakfal.htm#jegyz3>.

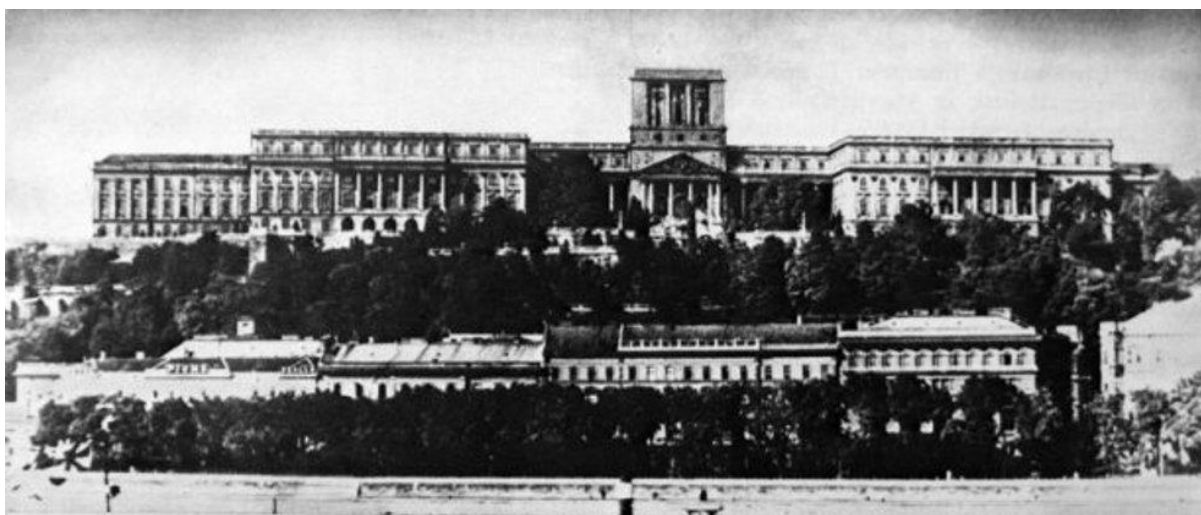


Figure. 13. Plans designed by Kotsis in 1950. In. Prakfalvi.

Kotsis's design pays homage to the faces of the Palace in Maria Theresa's time—with a distinct allusion to the Observatory. The allusion was not by chance, as it aligned with the methods of modernism by lending a scientific, functional look to a building that no longer serves its original function. Kotsis became unwanted by the University's leadership due to his lasting dedication to modernism. His criticism of the academy, as well as the new socialist modernist tendencies, made him a target of political attacks. While Kotsis was known as a progressive professor in the interwar period who allowed modernist voices to gain attention at the University, he was sidelined in the early 1950s. Prakfalvi quotes him, saying that "the true satire of the matter, however, only occurred later: the Bolshevik government began to persecute

modernist ideas in architecture and made "past architectural forms" an official style, in an Asian variation, no less."³¹³

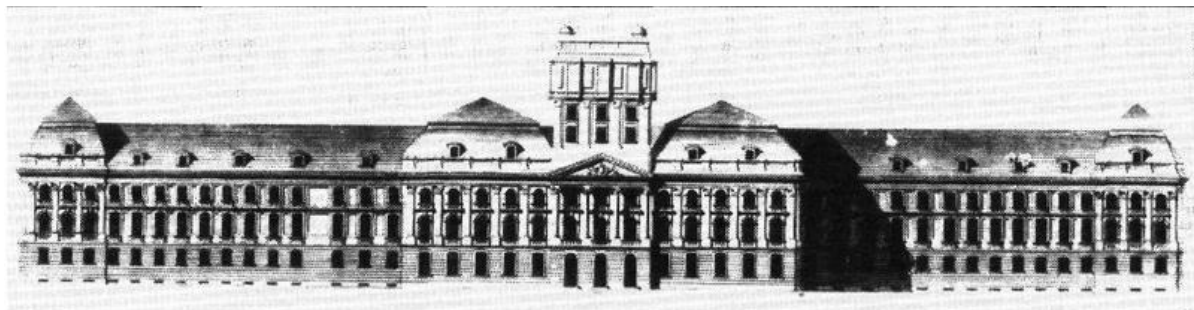


Figure 14. The Palace with the Observatory designed by Miksa Hell around 1780. Source: Gy. Kelényi, *A budai királyi palota építésének története a XVIII. században*.

5. After 1956 - The Democratization of Space in the Buda Castle and the Palace

After Stalin's death in 1953, Mikhail Khrushchev delivered a speech on the "new methods of Soviet construction industry," which in Hungary was published in the Party's newspaper, *Szabad Nép*.³¹⁴ The period between 1954 and 1956, that of relative de-politization of architectural praxis, was essentially a response to Khrushchev's proclamation that "there is no need for us to make civil houses look like churches or museums," or that "architects must know how to be economical with the money of the people". The grandiose ambitions of socialist realist architecture had become financially unsustainable, yet the ongoing housing crisis still demanded urgent solutions. As cost-efficiency took precedence over ornamentation and monumentality, socialist realism in architecture gradually disappeared across the Eastern Bloc.

³¹³ Endre Prakfalvi, Virág Hajdú, and Zoltán Fehérvári, *Modern és szocreál – Építészet és tervezés Magyarországon 1945–1959*, 348.

³¹⁴ "N. Sz. Hruscsov Elvtárs Beszéde - a Szovjet Építőipar Új Módszereiről Az Építkezések Minőségének Javításáról És Költségeinek Csökkentéséről," *Szabad Nép*, December 30, 1954.

However, the decline of socialist realism was not solely the result of Stalin's death or Khrushchev's famous condemnation of wasteful architecture—it was also shaped by the 1956 revolution. In its aftermath, the state was forced to reconsider the ideological foundations of socialist monumentality, shifting its focus to a more nationally conscious approach. By 1956, the pressures to adhere to socialist realist principles had completely dissipated. In the following pages, I will examine how the vision for the former Royal Palace evolved, transforming it into a symbolic space of national identity.

5.1 Museums and Institutions in the Palace

Hidasi's original vision of repurposing the Palace for cultural institutions finally became a reality after 1956. Since the 1956 Revolution laid the groundwork for a new, consolidating political regime, I argue that a redefined sense of national belonging could only emerge in its wake. The most significant transformations in the history of the Buda Palace and Castle District stemmed from institutional shifts in national politics. As the following examples will demonstrate, fostering a new sense of national identity and self-determination within the Eastern Bloc was not merely an ideological endeavor but, above all, an institutional one. This historical reality is now being distorted into the false claim that all reconstructions and developments between 1945 and 1990 were deliberate attempts to erase national traditions. In contrast, I contend that these efforts were aimed at establishing institutions where narratives of national identity and origin could be solidified—albeit in ways that, once again, conflicted with the historical and political constraints of Soviet influence.

A key example of this was the democratization of space within the former Royal Palace. The earlier hesitations of the Rákosi regime were abandoned after the rise of Kádár's leadership, allowing for a reassessment of the Palace's role based on institutional necessity—the need to create and expand cultural establishments. These new institutions played a crucial role in shaping historical narratives, this time centered on the evolution of revolutionary,

communist Hungary.³¹⁵ At the heart of these cultural initiatives was the historicization of the working class, the narrative of class struggle, and an assertion of national self-determination within the framework of the socialist state.

5.1.1 Workers' Movement's History Museum and the Budapest History Museum

During the 1960s renovation of Buda Castle, the decorative elements designed by Hauszmann—both inside and out—were largely stripped away, along with significant alterations to the building's structure. The northern wing was extended three window axes westward, the grand entrance facing Szent György Square was removed, and a new entryway was created on the side of the Hunyadi Courtyard. In 1974, the Hungarian Museum of the Workers' Movement took up residence in the transformed “A” building of Buda Castle³¹⁶. Previously, its predecessor—the Hungarian Institute of the Workers' Movement, along with its museum division, the Workers' Movement History Museum—had been in operation since 1948 in the area, though not within the Castle itself. The independent museum was formally established in 1957 following a decision by the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. Initially named the Museum of Contemporary History, this choice reflected the political sensitivities of the post-1956 period. The institution was first housed in the Teleki Palace on Castle Hill. By 1968, the museum relocated to Buda Castle, occupying the former Buda City Hall building at Szentháromság tér under the name Workers' Movement History Museum, a designation it retained from 1966 until 1989. It operated in the “A” building of Buda Palace throughout this period.³¹⁷

³¹⁵ The most comprehensive analysis of the historical continuity, forged or real, between the 1919 Soviet Republic and the Kádár regime is Péter Apor's work. See Apor, *Az Elképzelt Köztársaság*.

³¹⁶ This wing would later become the Ludwig Museum.

³¹⁷ A very informative interview with art historian Ilona Balog and her career in the Museum can be read at: “A Munkásmozgalmi, a Legújabbkori és a Nemzeti Múzeum Fényképtára – Stemlerné Balog Ilona pályájának „három” gyűjteménye,” MúzeumCafé, accessed October 26, 2023, <https://muzeumcafe.reblog.hu/a-munkasmozgalmi-a-legujabbkori-es-a-nemzeti-muzeum-fenykeptara>.

However, on January 25, 1990, the museum's inscription was physically removed from the Castle using a hammer and chisel, an event documented by the MTI news agency, which even recorded the locksmiths responsible for the task. By then, the institution had reverted to its former name, the Museum of Contemporary History, before eventually being merged into the Hungarian National Museum. Its collections were fully relocated by 1997, while parts of the "A" building were repurposed—first hosting the Ludwig Museum, which held its inaugural exhibition there in 1991 before moving to the Palace of Arts in 2005.



Figure 15. Letters of the Museum's Name are Being Removed in 1990. Photo: MTI, MTI-FOTO-909607, Tibor Rózsahegyí.

The Workers' Movement History Museum played a central role in forging historical continuity between the Kádár regime and earlier communist experiments, particularly the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1918-1919. This is evident in the 1959 inaugural issue of the *Yearbook of the Museum of Contemporary History*, where museum director Ede Gereelyes framed the museum as an ideological successor to the Museum of the Proletariat,

founded in 1919. His editorial asserts that the 1919 Republic was the first to formally recognize workers' and peasants' history as integral to Hungarian national identity—an area previously overlooked by academia:

The Hungarian Soviet Republic opened a new chapter in the history of Hungarian museums, a chapter that lasted for 133 days. Fresh air entered the walls of these highly significant and longstanding, yet academically burdened institutions. While some Hungarian museums had already gained international fame by then, the stagnation of the museum field was known to the best in the field long before. As closed scientific institutions, they had limited connections with the public, and their systems were characterized by obsolescence and archaism. (...) The collection of materials related to the history of the Hungarian people was largely focused on gathering personal relics of the ruling class. (...) Today, even from a distance of forty years, we must acknowledge with admiration the reforms introduced by the dictatorship of the proletariat in the museums. The purpose of this study is not to comprehensively explore the museum-related aspects of the cultural policy of the Soviet Republic. It merely aims to illustrate that the proletarian power was not satisfied with establishing the museum of the history of the working class but conducted a wide-ranging campaign to ensure that these institutions, collectively, would serve the interests of the entire nation and public education.³¹⁸

The overarching sentiment reinforced by the Kádár-regime about the Republic, indeed, was a sense of *unfinished business*. The insinuation of successful museological and cultural impact seems to be, at best, an exaggeration if we keep in mind that the Republic lasted a brief 133 days altogether.

However, any claims of substantial museological or cultural influence from this early period are, at best, overstated. The Kádár government, tasked with managing public dissatisfaction with Soviet rule, sought to contain political dissent by integrating it into controlled institutions. This necessitated a reframing of the 1956 Revolution as a reactionary,

³¹⁸ Ede Gerelyes, “Kommunista Proletár Múzeum 1919-Ben,” *Legújabbkori Történeti Múzeum Évkönyve* 1 (1959): 18–19.

fascist uprising. As historian Péter Apor notes: “While the new communist leadership sought to justify the suppression of democratic and independence aspirations by claiming the need to protect the country from counter-revolutionary danger, they attempted to establish the image of October 1956 on the basis of an alleged historical continuity with the short-lived Soviet Republic's fall in 1919 and the subsequent White Terror.”³¹⁹

This idea is vividly illustrated in Gerelyes’s writing, where he recounts the early history of the museum:

In the early days, the museum was initially housed at the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, and later, it was given the Wenckheim Palace, which is the current building of the Szabó Ervin Library. The museum was later ransacked by counter-revolutionaries, and only a fragment of its records and collections survived. A significant portion of these, along with documents related to its liquidation, were destroyed in the Széchenyi Library in 1945, and later in the National Archives in 1956. Very few of its former employees are still alive, and many fell victim to fascism. As a result, very few records related to the museum's work are available to us today.³²⁰

The imagery of a looted museum, symbolically slaughtered alongside its mission, is counterbalanced by the assertion that its successor institution carries forward the legacy of the proletariat. This notion of historical inheritance—where destruction is followed by rebirth—became a cornerstone of the Kádár regime’s legitimation strategy, particularly throughout the 1970s. Initially, this effort sought to establish ideological continuity with the 1919 Republic, but by the mid-1970s, these justifications appeared increasingly strained. I will examine this development in more depth in subchapter 3.6, *A Cultural Overview of the Kádár Regime*.

Lajos Hidasi’s 1968 reflections on the reconstruction of Buda Castle further highlight this institutional logic. As he wrote: “in connection with the reconstruction of Buda Castle, according to the government resolution, the former royal palace's southernmost wing, the so-called 'E' wing, was designated to provide a new home for the Budapest History Museum. This

³¹⁹ Apor, *Az Elképzelt Köztársaság*, 9.

³²⁰ Gerelyes, “Kommunista Proletár Múzeum 1919-Ben.”

idea was not born by chance but stemmed from the historical fact that in the 12th century, this part of the Castle Hill was the site of the very first settlement, and this wing was essentially the core of the former royal palace building.”³²¹.

It was here that the most significant archaeological finds unearthed by László Gerő and his team were preserved, reinforcing the site’s historical depth. The opening of the Budapest History Museum marked the culmination of Hidasi’s decades-long work, particularly his meticulous reconstruction plans for Castle Hill. This recognition was captured in a *Magyar Nemzet* feature article, which celebrated his efforts. The journalist, reflecting on his journey to interview Hidasi, wrote:

Three things came to my mind. The first is that I’m heading to the greatest venue where our history shows. Second, I am heading to a man for whom the reconstruction of this place is the most beautiful and grandest endeavor of his life. Finally, the third is that this sixty-four-year-old man, the former director and chief engineer of KÖZTI, spends one billion forints to build the Castle of Culture and Science in this little ‘Ruinland.’ One billion, a full billion. It cannot, therefore, be said that the people are any less generous than King Matthias was. We reached deep into our pockets as a people, just as Sigismund did when he built the world-famous Friss Palace in this place.³²²

The Budapest History Museum thus became something of a prototype for the broader reconstruction of the Palace’s facades. Hidasi argued that the simplified exteriors—reminiscent of the Maria Theresa era—were best suited for the Palace’s new cultural function. If we recall the discussion in the previous chapter regarding Maria Theresa’s political stance and her preference for a restrained, understated Baroque aesthetic, Hidasi’s vision appears to align with a deliberate attempt to harmonize the Palace’s historical and cultural roles. Inside, however,

³²¹ Hidasi, “A Budapesti Történeti Múzeum Az Újjáépült Budavári Palotában,” 176.

³²² Péter Ruffy, “Őszi Dél előtt a Budavári Palotában,” *Magyar Nemzet* 22, no. 215 (September 11, 1966): 10.

Hidasi proudly described the museum's interiors as strikingly modern—a synthesis of past and present.

5.1.2 Hungarian National Gallery

The establishment of the Hungarian National Gallery exemplifies the broader political strategy behind the creation of cultural institutions aimed at shaping new understandings of national belonging. Following the 1956 Revolution, the idea emerged that an independent institution with its own dedicated space was necessary to properly display the masterpieces of Hungarian art. This need was explicitly acknowledged in a government decree concerning the foundation of another museum, commemorating the Republic. The document underscores the ideological balance between acknowledging national sentiment and integrating it within the framework of socialism: “The foundation of this museum is justified by the fact that there is no museum to commemorate the history of the Hungarian Communist Party ever since October 1956.”³²³

Another major catalyst for the wave of decrees establishing new cultural institutions was the approaching anniversaries of the Republic. As part of this broader initiative, the long-anticipated Hungarian National Gallery was officially established, with its directive published in the *Művelődésügyi Közlöny* (*Cultural Gazette*) in 1957. The decree, authored by Deputy Minister Ernő Mihályfi, set the institutional groundwork for the museum:

The Hungarian National Gallery's mission is to ensure the enhanced integration of the works of old Hungarian fine arts and contemporary Hungarian artists into our country's intellectual life, to more comprehensively explore the national characteristics of our fine arts, to present its progressive endeavors, and to summarize the results of artistic creative work. It is necessary for the values of the Hungarian National Gallery to receive increasing public attention. With its nationwide activities and means of art education, the Hungarian

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National Gallery directly participates in deepening the sense of patriotism, promoting the intellectual upliftment of our people, and developing socialist consciousness.³²⁴

The gallery was formed through the merger of the Museum of Fine Arts' New Hungarian Picture Gallery, along with its modern sculpture, graphic art, and coin collections. The goal was to create an independent national museum dedicated exclusively to Hungarian fine arts. In October 1957, the Hungarian National Gallery was inaugurated, and its collection was largely drawn from the holdings of the Museum of Fine Arts.³²⁵

Pogány Ö. Gábor, the deputy director of the Museum of Fine Arts, was appointed as the director of the newly established institution. A brief debate ensued over where to house the gallery, ultimately leading to the selection of the former Courthouse building, constructed in 1896 and designed by Alajos Hauszmann. The building's traditional architectural elements and proportions were praised for their modernity, while simultaneously reflecting classical antiquity.³²⁶ The creation of a public national collection was seen as a significant cultural milestone, aligning Hungary with other nations that already had dedicated national galleries. Initially, the Hungarian National Gallery and the Workers' History Museum shared the Courthouse building until both institutions eventually moved into the Palace. In 1957, the Courthouse was divided into two parts: its southern wing housed the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party Historical Institute, while the northern wing became home to the new gallery.

By 1959, after much deliberation, it was decided that the Hungarian National Gallery would ultimately relocate to the B, C, and D buildings of Buda Castle once restoration work was completed. The adaptation of these buildings to meet the gallery's needs took place throughout

³²⁴ Ernő Mihályfi, "A művelődésügyi miniszter 43/1957. (M. K. 7.) M. M. számú utasítása a Magyar Nemzeti Galéria létesítéséről." (Művelődésügyi Közlöny, June 1, 1957).

³²⁵ Ábel, "40 éve költözött a Magyar Nemzeti Galéria a Budai Várpalotába."

³²⁶ Ábel.

1957 and into early 1958.³²⁷ However, between January and March 1957, there were disputes over the allocation of the space, with conflicting proposals for how it should be used. Antal Apró, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers, opposed the gallery's establishment and questioned whether the former Courthouse building was suitable for its needs. In contrast, Gyula Kállai, Minister of Culture, considered the placement of the gallery a matter of urgent national importance, instructing the Committee for Public Buildings (KÖZELBIZ) to expedite the allocation process. Pogány Ö. Gábor also personally petitioned Kállai in a series of letters, stressing the gallery's immense cultural significance. It is likely that János Kádár and Gyula Kállai played decisive roles in the final decision.

Once the building was deemed ready to house the collection, the relocation process began. On July 26, 1975, *Népszava* reported that the majority of the Hungarian National Gallery's collection had already been transferred to Buda Castle, with study storage materials being moved at the time and the transportation of older Hungarian artworks scheduled for the following week.³²⁸ The only part of the collection that remained temporarily in the building on Kossuth Lajos tér was the permanent exhibition of 19th-century painting, which awaited better conditions at the new location.

The Hungarian National Gallery officially opened its doors on October 5, 1957, with many in the museum field considering its placement final. In March 1958, a government resolution approved the name Hungarian National Gallery and recognized its status as a “national museum.”

However, in another government resolution in 1959, the B, C, and D buildings of the Buda Castle were designated as the museum's new home. Architectural study plans for this purpose

³²⁷“A Kúria épületétől a Városligetig: 65 éve nyílt meg a Magyar Nemzeti Galéria,” October 25, 2022, https://pestbuda.hu/cikk/20221025_a_kuria_epuletetol_a_varosligetig_65_eve_nyilt_meg_a_magyar_nemzeti_galeria.

³²⁸ “Befejezi a Költözködést a Magyar Nemzeti Galéria,” *Népszava*, July 26, 1975, Arcanum.com.

had already been completed in 1958. The decision not to move the gallery directly to the Castle District in 1957 may have been influenced by the fact that the restoration work on the Buda Castle largely began in the 1960s. In November 1957, Mihályfi Ernő designated the Castle District as the center of Hungarian culture, emphasizing the need to place cultural institutions, libraries, museums, scientific research institutes, and exhibition spaces in the Castle. The decision was based on the establishment of public collections in the Buda Castle, its accessibility, and its status as a tourist attraction.



Figure 16. 1975, *Opening of the Hungarian National Gallery*. MNG Archive Database, no: 155933³²⁹

The period between 1957 and 1975 is regarded as the "foundation" phase in the history of the Hungarian National Gallery. Despite facing criticism—particularly regarding the significant investment required to transform the royal palace into an exhibition space, as well

³²⁹ The opening of the Hungarian National Gallery on October 12, 1975. In the center is Gyula Kállai, the Chairman of the National Council of the Patriotic People's Front. In the foreground, wearing a polka-dot tie, is Pogány Ö., the director of the gallery and an art historian and art writer. On Fortepan.

as the functional compromises involved—it took 17 years before the gallery fully occupied its designated buildings in Buda Castle in 1975.

The first exhibition held in the palace marked the 125th anniversary of the Szolnok Painters' Colony, setting the stage for a series of large-scale exhibitions, including one dedicated to the history of the Soviet Republic. After the Ludwig Museum vacated its space, some of these exhibitions were relocated to the A building in 2005, which was subsequently integrated into the Hungarian National Gallery.

5.2 The Castle Hill as an Ensemble

Just as Ybl and Hauszmann envisioned monumental architecture extending across the entirety of Castle Hill, the post-1945 reconstructions also adopted a holistic approach. These efforts sought to consolidate modernist principles with the neo-historic styles already present in the district. Among the numerous examples reflecting this approach, a few are particularly relevant to the reconstructions initiated in 2014. The post-war rebuilding of Buda Castle was not merely about restoring a war-ravaged cityscape but also about establishing principles of heritage protection. This is well analyzed in Erzsébet Harrach's research, from which I will highlight key aspects.

As Harrach explains, the reconstruction of Buda Castle followed two primary directions: while the renovation of the main palace progressed at a slower pace, the revitalization of the residential area advanced more rapidly. However, the entire hill was regarded as a historical ensemble, and the reconstruction efforts were planned accordingly. A central dilemma emerged when determining how to rebuild the core of a city devastated by war—specifically, how to balance new construction with the preservation of historically significant fragments. This interplay between new and old structures has since become a defining feature of Castle Hill.

Following the siege and subsequent debris clearance, numerous medieval carvings were uncovered, revealing a richly detailed Gothic cityscape. Although the 1964 Venice Charter established international preservation standards, Buda Castle's reconstruction developed its own guiding principles in parallel with the ongoing restorations.³³⁰ The Charter aligned with post-war modernist principles and was subject to similar criticisms. Chief among them was the argument that it enshrined a deterministic view of modernist architecture, an issue also reflected in the reception of Buda Castle's reconstruction. However, the practice recommended by the Charter—integrating historical artifacts into new structures—characterized the approach taken on Castle Hill, contributing to the broad acceptance of the project.

One of the most significant challenges was filling the gaps between buildings in a way that complemented the townscape, which had evolved over centuries. As Harrach notes, structures built between 1945 and 1955 often reflected contemporary architectural trends but resulted in "neutral" facades that neither harmonized with the historical surroundings nor aligned with progressive architectural developments.

By the 1960s, construction in the Castle Hill residential district slowed, primarily due to economic constraints, but also because unresolved architectural questions persisted. However, unresolved fundamental questions also played a role. In 1961, the Budapest Institute for the Preservation of Historic Monuments convened a conference to address this issue.³³¹ The unanimous decision was that the missing buildings and vacant lots in the Castle Hill district

³³⁰ The 1964 Venice Charter, also known as the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, introduced principles of continuity and integrity for the protection of cultural heritage. It was adopted during the Second International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments in Venice. The charter has faced criticism for its emphasis on authenticity and its secularization of built heritage as well as its historical determinism. Alois Riegl, a prominent art historian, argued against the emphasis on material authenticity and advocated for a more flexible and interpretive approach to heritage preservation. For more on the Charta please see: Carolyn Ahmer, "Riegl's 'Modern Cult of Monuments' as a Theory Underpinning Practical Conservation and Restoration Work," *Journal of Architectural Conservation* 26, no. 2 (May 3, 2020): 150–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13556207.2020.1738727>.

³³¹ "Magyar Műemlékvédelem 1961-1962," *Magyar Műemlékvédelem – Az Országos Műemléki Felügyelőség Kiadványai* 3 (1962 1961): 37–60. and Jánosné Sedlmayr, "Új Beépítések a Budai Vár Részletes Rendezési Tervében," *Műemlékvédelem* 33, no. 4 (1989).

should be filled with modern buildings as quickly as possible. Decision-makers recognized that properties in this area would be more expensive than the city average. Aesthetic considerations were emphasized, with architects striving to design facades that expressed contemporary forms while ensuring their creations harmonized with the historic surroundings.

Records show that ultimately, all privately owned buildings were transferred to state ownership. Initially, reconstruction efforts were supervised by local building authorities, but in 1957, specialized oversight mechanisms were introduced for historic monuments. In the early phases, many buildings remained under private ownership. However, between 1946 and 1949, all properties in the area were nationalized, simplifying property management and allowing for centrally coordinated reconstruction efforts. Over time, scientific research and preparatory work conducted by official organizations became increasingly systematic and precise. Notably, archaeological excavations were consistently carried out by members of the same research teams. Initially, these tasks were handled by architects or art historians from the Budapest History Museum, who relied primarily on existing literature. It was only in 1962 that the practice of combining reconstruction with extensive interior modernization became standard. Since then, all architectural design work has been preceded by the systematic preparation of scientific documentation, drawing from archival sources, published research, and excavation findings.

5.2.1 Ministry of Finance and the Joseph Archduke's Palace

The former Ministry of Finance has long been a subject of debate, oscillating between admiration and criticism. Its transformation from a grand Baroque structure into a more restrained, modernist design was internationally praised—until the most recent reconstruction restored its original Baroque appearance. This history illustrates a broader argument: post-war reconstructions, often perceived as ideologically driven in hindsight, were in fact forward-

thinking examples of modernist architecture and heritage preservation, aligning with international practices.

As Fónagy explains,³³² the building complex bounded by Szentháromság Square, Hess András Square, Fortuna Street, Fortuna Court, and Országház Street was mostly acquired by the Jesuits after the siege of 1686. In 1747, they built their academy (college) opposite their monastery, which was considered the most beautiful school in Hungary at the time. From 1777 to 1926, the University Press also operated here. After the dissolution of the order, the theological faculty of the university briefly used the buildings, followed by the Royal Chamber, the government body responsible for financial administration in Hungary, from 1784 onwards. After the establishment of the civil state organization in 1848 and 1867, the Ministry of Finance replaced the Chamber in these buildings. The outdated and overcrowded buildings were demolished between 1901 and 1904, and a new palace was erected for financial administration according to the plans of Sándor Fellner, after the expropriation of several neighboring residential buildings.

Fellner's design aligned with Hauszmann's vision of grandeur. Fellner designed the main façade on Szentháromság Square in a late Gothic style to harmonize with Matthias Church, but he freely mixed English late Gothic elements with French late Baroque elements.³³³ Beneath the historicist exterior, the building featured cutting-edge construction techniques, including a nine-story reinforced concrete archive in the courtyard. However, the Ministry of Finance building also exemplified the architectural uncertainty of the turn of the century—its grand proportions stood out against the more modest, small-town scale of the surrounding residential area.

³³² Zoltán Fónagy, "Szentháromság Tér - Pénzügyminisztérium," accessed October 29, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220124104729/http://budavar.btk.mta.hu/hu/utcak-terek-epuletek/szentharomsag-ter/90-szentharomsag-ter-penzugyminiszterium.html>.

³³³ Fónagy; Jenő Rados, *Magyar Építészet Történet*, 2nd ed. (Budapest: Műszaki könyvkiadó, 1971), 410.

Severely damaged during the siege of Budapest, the building underwent a simplified restoration between 1948 and 1962 under the direction of Jenő Rados. However, a suitable function for the building could not be found. He removed many decorative elements and streamlined the interiors, yet a suitable function for the structure remained elusive. For decades, it served as a dormitory for the Technical University, playing an unexpected role in history: it became a center of student activism and one of the key sites of the 1956 revolution. Later, after 1968, its club became a legendary hub for Budapest's emerging beat and student culture. Until the most recent reconstruction beginning in 2020, parts of the building's rear wings housed sections of the state archive.³³⁴

Today, Rados's work is under intense scrutiny. The prevailing narrative favoring a "better past" has led to the glorification of Fellner's original design, despite substantial evidence—discussed extensively in the earlier research section—that such an idealized view is unsubstantiated. As Júlia Katona notes in her analysis of the Rados reconstruction: „The building of the Hungarian Royal Ministry of Finance, designed by Sándor Fellner, is of utmost significance from architectural, historical, and economic perspectives. Budapest reached its zenith during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy era (1867-1918), becoming a global city. Its present-day urban landscape, characterized by historicist and secessionist styles, was shaped in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, following the example of other European capitals like Vienna and Paris.”

By contrast, Rados, whose extensive research in architectural history demonstrated his nuanced understanding of historic structures, defended his approach as follows: “The rebuilding of the building, which was destroyed during the war until 1944 with its Secessionist Gothic style, twin towers, and overly ornamented five-story oriel, had to be approached in a way that it fittingly harmonizes with the historic surroundings of Buda with restrained

³³⁴ Fónagy, “Szentháromság Tér - Pénzügyminisztérium.”

simplicity and reduced height, without overshadowing the more modestly scaled Matthias Church.”³³⁵



Figure 17. The Ministry of Finance, in 1904. FSZEK Budapest Collection.

Another case worth briefly investigating is the Joseph Archduke Palace—alternatively the Teleki Palace. Its history, while distinct from that of the Ministry of Finance, follows a similar trajectory in terms of shifting architectural values and contested reconstruction efforts.

³³⁵ Rados, *Magyar Építészet Történet*, 410.

A 1966 article in *Magyar Nemzet* listed several reconstruction projects in Buda Castle, noting: “only two are being demolished: the former Ministry of Defense building and the former palace of Archduke Joseph, which, due to its alarming Secessionist ornamentation, the builders refer to as ‘Dracula's Castle.’ In place of the former Habsburg palace, they are constructing a promenade, but after 1973, this area will also be developed because a building is desired on this plot to enhance the city's beauty and elegance. On the site of the soon-to-be-demolished Ministry of Defense building, they intend to erect a statue, sculpture group, or monument, to separate the Dísz Square from the Szentgyörgy Square, creating an open-air spectacle.”³³⁶

Much like the Ministry of Finance, the Joseph Archduke Palace had a complex reception history. Originally built in 1805 for József Teleki in a late Baroque style, it functioned as an apartment building with a stable enclosing its U-shaped layout. Following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, it briefly served as the Ministry of the Interior before being converted into a residence for Archduke Joseph Habsburg. However, it was not until 1892 that the Archduke formally purchased the palace and commissioned its redesign to better suit his needs.³³⁷ This version, which appears in the plans known in 2020, was the work of architects Flóris Korb and Kálmán Giergl, both students of Alajos Hauszman.

Renowned for their highly ornamental historicist style, they designed the Klotild Palaces—two of the most monumental and decorative apartment buildings in central Budapest—for the Archduke’s family. Their redesign of the Joseph Archduke Palace incorporated neo-Baroque and neo-Renaissance elements, featuring two prominent towers and an opulent stable.³³⁸ After suffering war damage, the building was ultimately demolished in 1968, despite the existence of a detailed scientific documentation prepared in 1953 by art

³³⁶ Péter Ruffy, “Őszi Dél előtt a Budavári Palotában,” *Magyar Nemzet*, September 11, 1966, 22 edition, Arcanum.com.

³³⁷ For the history of the Palace, see Farbaký Péter, “A Sándor-Palota, a Teleki-Palota és az Udvari Istálló,” *Tanulmányok Budapest Múltjából* 31 (2003): 25.

³³⁸ Farbaký, 148.

historian István Czagány and his colleagues, which advocated for the reconstruction of its late Baroque elements according to the original Teleki Palace plans.³³⁹

Farbaky suggests that its demolition was at least partly politically motivated, though it also aligned with the prevailing anti-historicist stance of post-war architects and policymakers. Indeed, architect Gerő himself dismissed the palace as “distasteful and shouting,”³⁴⁰ echoing the broader rejection of ornate historicism in favor of modernist restraint.

Yet, even Fellner—whose work is now held in high regard—had initially made concessions to budget constraints, stating that his design refrained from the excessive ornamentation typically associated with Gothic Revival architecture.³⁴¹ This historical irony highlights how fluctuating architectural trends and ideological shifts shape the way we evaluate past reconstruction efforts. The ongoing debates over these buildings underscore the evolving nature of heritage preservation and the contested meanings assigned to different architectural styles over time.

6. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that the former Royal Palace has not only been subject to nostalgia—already evident during the Horthy era—but has also been shaped by a diverse range of visions for the future. The devastation of the war and siege provided new opportunities from an architectural and planning perspective; however, the deficiencies in historicity within memory politics after 1945 reveal a less optimistic reflection on why the complex was attributed particular functions in the original plans.

³³⁹ István Czagány, “Műemlékhelyreállítási Kérdések a Budavári Palota Újjáépítésénél,” *Művészettörténeti Értesítő* 16, no. 3 (1967).

³⁴⁰ Farbaky, “A Sándor-Palota, a Teleki-Palota és az Udvari Istálló,” 149.

³⁴¹ “Tanulmányok és prezentációk,” *TÉR6* (blog), accessed October 29, 2023, <https://ter6.hu/tanulmanyok/>.

The Horthy regime, often marked by contradictions, sometimes overestimated its global political power while, at other times, underestimated its own capacity for self-correction. Horthy's withdrawal into the Palace reflected an aristocratic lifestyle that was neither a traditional Hungarian practice—unlike British royal culture—nor an accurate representation of the nation's political reality. His memoirs exhibit a notable lack of self-reflection and an unwarranted confidence in his political standing—both of which I have found symbolically justified by his occupation of the Palace. This lack of self-awareness remains a prominent feature of government communication regarding the Buda Castle. A full quotation from the beginning of Chapter One encapsulates this perspective: “We would want the history of the Royal Palace of Buda to have ended at the turn of the [19th] century, but unfortunately the Second World War happened, declaring Budapest the fortress of Nazi Germany.”

I have also highlighted the destruction that occurred, particularly in the Castle Hill district, as a direct consequence of Budapest's strategic role as a battleground between German and Soviet forces. Given the immense responsibility borne by both the Horthy regime and the Arrow Cross leadership, the destruction in the Castle cannot simply be attributed to German and Soviet occupation alone. By referencing various sources, I underscore that the memory of the Palace and the district's historical significance has failed to explicitly acknowledge the role of Hungarian nationalist politics in its destruction.

Instead, contemporary discourse tends to shift the focus toward the so-called “politically motivated” purge of history conducted by the Rákosi and Kádár regimes. While I do not seek to defend the actions of these regimes, I argue that the Palace complex and surrounding area were reconstructed in line with modernist principles of preservation—an approach that did not equate to a desperate search for historical authenticity. The extensive documentation on socialist realism demonstrates that the Palace was reconstructed not because of the regime's ideological grip, but despite it.

The post-war reconstruction of the Palace and Castle Hill illustrates a rich and complex discourse on preservation and architecture. I find the role of *Tér és Forma* and its editorial board particularly remarkable in shaping this discussion. The publication successfully addressed topics such as spaces of political representation, housing crises, and technological advancements. However, the paradox of Socialist Realism—where classicist tendencies paradoxically sidelined modernism despite its academic appreciation—created challenges in appreciating its strengths, such as material quality and commitment to mass housing. Even more significant was the broader discussion on national architectural identity that Socialist Realism provoked.

Socialist Realism, despite its classical underpinnings, sought to create a space for international architecture while incorporating nationally inspired ornamentation as a localized strategy. It was the first architectural movement in Hungary to consciously inscribe the duality of international and national influences into its theoretical foundations. However, the lack of a consensus on a Hungarian national architectural identity, particularly in the post-war decades, prevented this synthesis from fully materializing within an internationally modern framework.

In the final subchapter, I analyzed how Castle Hill and the Palace complex were designated as cultural spaces in the 1960s. I argue that this decision represented a form of space democratization that emerged not as a deliberate initiative but as the result of decades of hesitation. My research questions were initially rooted in examining how long the Palace served a symbolic function that was largely disconnected from political realities—an issue that was partially resolved by restoring its appearance to that of Maria Theresa's era.

Significant efforts were invested in creating a traditional, nationally symbolic structure out of the underutilized Royal Palace in the 19th century. Similarly, immense efforts were later dedicated to transforming it into a cultural and scientific hub. While I maintain that the

reconstruction of the Palace was both a logical and ideological decision—rather than a wholesale rejection of traditional architecture—it is undeniable that the post-war communist regime’s historical narratives were fraught with contradictions. These contradictions have left a lasting imprint on contemporary interpretations of national identity and self-determination.

Anticipating the conclusions of this dissertation, I argue that Hungary’s persistent inability to address the complexities of national identity has hindered the theorization of a coherent national architectural form in academic discourse. Just as Dualist-era Hungary understood Budapest’s urban and architectural development in relation to Vienna, post-war Hungary continued to define itself in comparison to the Soviet bloc. For figures such as Gerő, the reference point for Palace reconstruction was the Kremlin’s renovation. However, a crucial aspect of the Palace’s restoration history is the adoption of the principle of “reconstruction, not renovation”—a concept that was eventually formalized by the Venice Charter of 1964.

Chapter Three. In the Spirit of Greatness: Two Palaces in Budapest and Berlin after 1989

1. Introduction

As the previous chapter has shown, the regimes of “lived socialism” did not so much reconcile historical contradictions as they did obscure them, papering over inconsistencies in historical narratives rather than resolving them. These buried tensions resurfaced with the political transformations of 1989–1990, setting the stage for the complex memory politics of the post-socialist era. This chapter explores the antecedents of the contemporary surge in historical reconstructions, focusing on select cases of right-wing populist regimes. By situating the phenomenon within a broader East-Central European framework, I challenge the assumption that Hungary’s post-2010 reconstruction frenzy is an isolated development. I argue that the largely uncritical restoration of historicist landmarks is more than a mere aesthetic or political gesture—it is, in part, the legacy of post-1989 discursive failures and a fundamental misreading of postmodernism as an intellectual paradigm. In the latter half of the chapter, I further contend that the revival of 19th-century national symbols is integral to Fidesz’s, the Hungarian ruling party’s broader strategy of establishing right-wing cultural hegemony. Ultimately, I conclude that without a historically informed consciousness, the mechanical reproduction of national symbols—particularly as part of the cultural mass production processes outlined in this dissertation’s introduction—renders the very concept of the nation devoid of its emancipatory and universalist potential.

2. Facadism in Comparison: Berliner Schloss as a Distorted Mirror to the Buda Palace

While the Castle Hill reconstructions are most frequently compared to those in Warsaw,³⁴² I propose instead the rebuilding of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin as a more revealing point of

³⁴² Lázár János, Fodor Gergely, *Építetők*

comparison. The history of the Forum and its predecessors diverges significantly from that of Buda Palace, yet where their trajectories intersect, they offer fresh insights into the mechanisms of power representation and the inherent challenges of constructing national history. This perspective sheds light on an often-overlooked dimension of the Hauszmann Program: the impact of debate on the ostensibly unquestionable primacy of authenticity in codifying national architectural form.

Berlin stands as a paradigmatic case in memory politics, its urban fabric shaped by some of the most widely analyzed attempts to grapple with the legacies of the Holocaust, National Socialism, and the German Democratic Republic. The city, once the capital of both the Third Reich and the socialist GDR, underwent a profound mnemonic and spatial transformation following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989—an event that, for Germany, was not merely symbolic but literal. In the wake of reunification, questions of memory politics became central to urban planning, with particular scrutiny directed at sites associated with the former socialist regime. More than 190 streets were renamed after 1990,³⁴³ and the reconstruction of the Prussian Berliner Schloss was envisioned as both an architectural restoration and an intentional erasure of the GDR's legacy, culminating in the controversial demolition of the Palast der Republik. Since the Palast's steel framework could not simply be torn down, its dismantling began only in 2006, making way for the resurrection of the old-new Schloss.

Today, the Schloss building hosts the Humboldt Forum, a museum, and a cultural center, one of the most visited sites in Berlin in 2023.³⁴⁴ Yet its reconstruction, far from being the product of a seamless social consensus or a reconciliatory historical vision, serves instead as a

³⁴³ The history of post-1989 street names in Berlin can be read in Maoz Maoz Azaryahu, "German Reunification and the Politics of Street Names: The Case of East Berlin," *Political Geography* 16, no. 6 (August 1997): 479–93, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298\(96\)00053-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298(96)00053-4).

³⁴⁴ "The Humboldt Forum Welcomed 1.7 Million Visitors in 2023" (Humboldt Forum, January 24, 2024), https://www.humboldtforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/20240118_PR_Programme_2024.pdf.

monument to the unresolved tensions of memory politics and historiography—wrapped, of course, in an aesthetically fashionable package. In the following subchapter, I argue that while both the Berliner Schloss and Buda Palace share complex, often contradictory histories as royal representational spaces, the Humboldt Forum ultimately embodies a far more inclusive intellectual and social project than the Buda Palace’s Hauszmann Program.

Three key aspects of the Schloss reconstruction necessitate comparison with Buda Palace: (1) both the Schloss and the Palast der Republik functioned—and continue to function—as potent political symbols; (2) as symbols, they reflect their respective regimes’ engagement with narratives of the national past; and (3) the debate over the Schloss’s Prussian revival was, and remains, an extended negotiation of conflicting national memories and identities, culminating in practices of historical reconciliation.

2.1 From Imperial to Ruin – The Prussian Berliner Schloss

Similarly to Hungary, the East German regime had an intensely dogmatic relationship with the past and its representation in symbolic space. As Marcus Colla explains in a precious theoretical work (building on the work of historians Andreas Schönle and Reinhart Koselleck), the ideological framework of the system hallmarked by Walter Ulbricht’s name could not incorporate the existence of ruins into the narrative of a progressive and forward-going socialist society. Quoting Schönle, Colla argues that for the German Democratic Republic, the stance was that “ruins disrupt utopia”³⁴⁵—they are not merely scars on the historical landscape but dangerous reminders of a past that refuses to conform to the regime’s self-narrative.

The history of the Humboldt Forum, then, is very much a history of ruins—both physical and metaphorical, each tied to the shifting legacies of past political regimes. The

³⁴⁵ Marcus Colla, “Rebuilding the Past: East German Preservationists as ‘Time Activists,’” *European Review of History* 28, no. 4 (2021): 484–506.

Forum was rebuilt partially but most remarkably as a reinvention of the Prussian Berliner Schloss. The palace was bombed in 1945 and entirely demolished in the first decade of the socialist regime. The Berliner Schloss, also known as the Berlin Palace or *Stadtschloss*, was, similarly to the Buda Palace, the ultimate representation of royal authority and power since the 15th century.³⁴⁶ Throughout its history, the Schloss remained entangled with the contradictions of Prussian militarism and its relentless assertion of authority. While it officially became the primary royal residence in the 17th and 18th centuries, some Hohenzollern monarchs famously avoided living there, underscoring the uneasy relationship between the building and its own intended function.³⁴⁷

Designed to project grandeur, the palace received its monumental Baroque façade from architects Andreas Schlüter and later Johann Friedrich Eosander von Göthe (1670–1729). Over time, successive rulers extended the complex, adding structures such as the Alter Palais (Old Palace) and the Neues Palais (New Palace). As historian Robert R. Taylor notes, the building itself was inextricably linked to the perception of royal authority, primarily because its construction was driven by the relentless ambition to immortalize Prussian King Frederick I (1657–1713). In Frederick I, two types of rulers combined: that of the Prussian ruler and “a typical monarch of the Baroque era.”³⁴⁸ In this case, the Baroque monarch meant the fascination with ornamented accessories to the ruling, an abundance of symbolisms, and a reliance on servility.

In contrast to Buda Palace, the Berliner Schloss was an actual royal residence—at least in theory. In practice, however, many members of the Hohenzollern dynasty spent little time there, a fact that Taylor attributes to the increasing presence of the bourgeoisie and proletariat in

³⁴⁶ Robert R. Taylor, *Hohenzollern Berlin: Construction and Reconstruction* (Port Credit, Ont., Canada: P.D. Meany Publishers, 1985), 14.

³⁴⁷ Taylor, 27.

³⁴⁸ Taylor, 16.

Berlin, whose growing influence made the royal family uneasy. Yet despite its intermittent use, the Schloss remained a powerful political symbol, extending its significance far beyond Prussia's borders. Its evolving design and continuous architectural expansion were part of an implicit imperial rivalry with other European capitals. Clear references to the Louvre and Versailles—particularly to the aesthetic preferences of Louis XIV—reveal a deliberate competition with the French monarchy.³⁴⁹ Yet for all its grand aspirations, the palace's material reality often failed to live up to its intended image. Frederick I refused to address its structural weaknesses, compelling the already economically strained provinces to finance its upkeep—decisions that contributed to the building's later controversial status in the public imagination. Over the centuries, successive rulers modified the complex, layering rococo and Renaissance elements atop Schlüter's Baroque foundation, making the Schloss not just an evolving architectural entity but a palimpsest of shifting political and aesthetic ideologies.

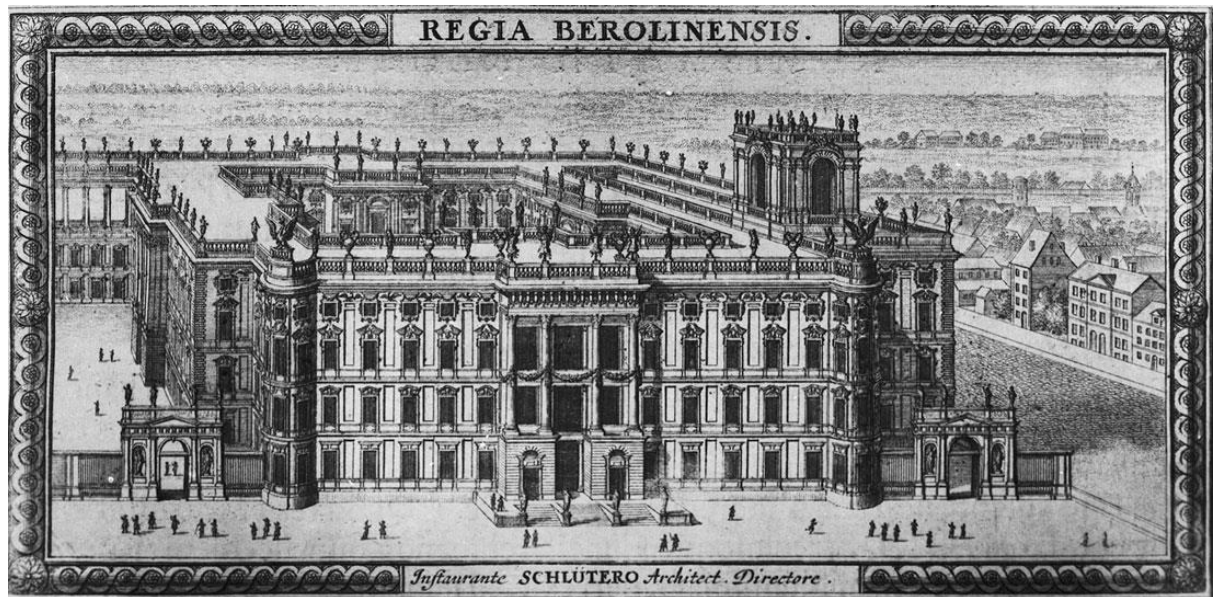


Figure 18. Schlüter's Baroque Palace. Source: berliner-stadtschloss.de

By the 19th century, the Berliner Schloss had reached the height of its architectural eclecticism—just as Vienna had, and as Budapest would somewhat later (see *Chapter One*). It

³⁴⁹ Taylor, 16.

was William I (1797–1888) who fully embraced the era’s imperial eclecticism, or as Robert R. Taylor wryly puts it, the king “tried to bring imperial splendor to the Schlüter building and succeeded in making impressive, if not always tasteful, additions.”³⁵⁰ William sought to redesign the palace in the Rococo style of Georg Wenzeslaus von Knobelsdorff (1699–1753), a devoted supporter of Frederick I, drawing inspiration from Knobelsdorff’s earlier work at Rheinsberg Schloss in the 1730s. The palace’s interiors underwent extensive remodeling, while the exterior was refined to exude a more polished elegance. As the generations of Hohenzollerns passed, the Schloss remained a potent symbol of Prussian power, its architecture continuously reshaped to reflect shifting political ambitions.

During the 19th century, Frederick William IV (1795–1861) commissioned the eminent architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841) to redesign the palace in a neoclassical style. Among the most striking additions was the domed central tower, which would become one of the palace’s defining features. These neo-Baroque and neoclassical expansions embodied a paradox: on one hand, they projected the image of authoritative rule; on the other, they revealed a growing preoccupation with modernity. This contradiction did not go unnoticed. Hermann Broch, in his sharp critique of the neo-Baroque age in *Hofmannsthal und Seine Zeit*, argued that the rise of this style marked the decline of “grand Baroque politics”—a shift from the grand narratives of power to the more superficial theatrics of individual rulers.”³⁵¹

William I’s more deliberate aim in reconstructing the palace was to reinforce the prominence of the royal dynasty, securing its position within the symbolic landscape of Prussian rule. As Taylor aptly observes, William’s approach to kingship was as much about spectacle as it was about governance: “Theatrical in his public gestures, bombastic and saber-rattling in his diplomacy, William acted his part almost too well on the Baroque stage which

³⁵⁰ Taylor, 21.

³⁵¹ Broch and Györfy Miklós, *Hofmannsthal és kora*, 5.

Frederick I had built. For better or worse, William's role was to reinforce the political symbolism of the Schloss emphatically.”³⁵² As imperial rivalries intensified, particularly between Austria and Prussia, the comparison between the Berliner Schloss and Vienna's Hofburg Palace became inevitable. Taylor cites a Prussian architect who, perhaps with a touch of national pride, noted: “As one looks at the Hofburg Palace in Vienna, that conglomeration of wings, pavilions, and courtyards, and compares it with the self-contained and thoroughly planned Palace in Berlin; one realizes that the contrast between both states could not be more strikingly characterized.”³⁵³ A similar dynamic, of course, shaped perceptions of Vienna and Budapest: while Vienna indulged in ever more elaborate splendor, Budapest was conceived as a more restrained yet still imposing imperial space. These distinctions left their mark on architectural interpretations of national form, particularly in the repeated return to Classicism in both Budapest and Berlin throughout the 20th century.

Much like Buda Palace and Castle Hill—though a century earlier—the Berliner Schloss eventually found itself criticized for its excessive neo-Baroque opulence. Schinkel's design, reflecting the period's obsession with ornamentation and intricate plasterwork, became a target for both aesthetic and political critique. Taylor attributes much of the disdain for the palace's chaotic façade to political bias, yet contemporary reactions were scathing: the Schloss was described as “commonplace and ugly,” “very unpretentious,” “neither elegant nor beautiful”—more a “citadel than a palace.”³⁵⁴ The echoes of such assessments can be found in critiques of Buda Palace, where its reconstructed grandeur was met with similar skepticism.

The fate of the struggling Prussian Empire, much like Hungary's, was sealed in 1918. Yet the Berliner Schloss played a more immediate role in the transition from monarchy to republic. It was from one of its very windows that socialist revolutionary Karl Liebknecht (1871–1919)

³⁵² Taylor, *Hohenzollern Berlin*, 22.

³⁵³ Taylor, 29.

³⁵⁴ Taylor, 29.

proclaimed the end of the monarchy, an event made all the more symbolic by the fact that the same balcony had been used to announce the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. As a red flag was hoisted above the terrace, discussions about the palace's future as public property gained momentum. Crowds flooded the courtyard, troops mingled with civilians, and machine guns were left unattended as the public quite literally occupied this once-exclusive symbol of imperial rule. Liebknecht, a leading figure in the Independent Socialist Party, declared that the palace now belonged to the German people and would be protected by the Workers' and Soldiers' Council of Berlin.³⁵⁵ Ironically, one of the few surviving sections of the palace's façade—repurposed after the bombings of 1945—became one of the most recognizable and celebrated remnants of the entire complex. In the end, however, the palace fell alongside the imperial regime it had so long represented, its final demise arriving with the fall of Berlin in 1945.



Figure 18. The Berliner Schloss in 1945, with U.S. President Harry S. Truman's car passing by. Source: Wikipedia / Harry S. Truman Library.

³⁵⁵ Taylor, 23.

2.2 From Ruin to Public - The Palast der Republik

The Second World War left the Berliner Schloss in ruins, bombed and gutted almost entirely by fire. The haunting images of its devastation have since become emblematic of the broader destruction wrought by the war. As discussed extensively in the previous chapter, and widely in the literature, the symbolism attached to these ruins diverged significantly between Budapest and Berlin. In Hungary, the damaged Buda Palace was memorialized alongside a narrative of national victimhood—framed as both a casualty of German occupation and a battleground for the Soviet forces. By contrast, the ruined Berliner Schloss evoked a deeper existential crisis within German society.

As I have demonstrated in earlier chapters, the construction of national spaces such as the Hungarian Parliament and the Buda Royal Palace often served as reactionary responses to ongoing social, economic, and political crises. However, they were also positioned as symbols of an *exit strategy* from those crises. Historian Andreas Huyssen makes a parallel observation about Germany, identifying an “obsession with new beginnings” as a recurring theme:

In retrospect, the insistence on new beginnings--on *Neuanfänge*, *Nullpunkte*, *tabula rasa*, *Wendepunkte*, and the like--appears a peculiarly German obsession that links such seemingly different imaginaries as those of 1945, 1968, and 1989. The diversity of new beginnings results not only from historical events and constellations but also from the absence of the kind of foundational narrative that Gaullist France created around the Resistance that the East German state produced with its dogma of anti-fascism. The paradox of the West German case is that every emphatic claim about a new beginning can also be read as a repetition.³⁵⁶

In this light, the German tendency toward *tabula rasa* is not only cyclical but also far from unique. However, while these repeated ruptures fostered robust public discourse on architecture and memory politics in Germany, the same cannot be said for Hungary. The extensive scholarship on Berlin’s inherent duality—its struggles with reconciliation and the interplay of

³⁵⁶ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003), 139.

competing nostalgias—offers valuable insights into the deficiencies of discourse surrounding the Buda Royal Palace and Hungary’s own experience of historical rupture.

While Hungary’s architectural and intellectual spheres were preoccupied with the ideological enforcement of Socialist Realism in the early 1950s—complete with its own state-manufactured opposition—Berlin witnessed a far more radical approach. East German leader Walter Ulbricht ordered what Hungary’s Mátyás Rákosi had carefully avoided with the Buda Palace: the outright demolition of the royal palace. Although preservationist voices called for its conservation, they were ultimately ignored.³⁵⁷ The Schloss was torn down, replaced by the *Palast der Republik*, a structure meant to embody the revolutionary spirit of socialism in its forward-looking design. As Claire Colomb notes, the East German government did not erase all imperial-monarchical landmarks; in hindsight, the Schloss’s destruction appears to have been something of a trade-off, possibly in exchange for preserving Sanssouci in Potsdam, where members of the Hohenzollern dynasty had once resided—ironically, in disdain for the Schloss itself.

Despite the thorough and often unforgiving clearance of rubble, certain remnants of the old Schloss were salvaged.³⁵⁸ Among them was Liebkecht’s balcony—the site where Karl Liebkecht had proclaimed the palace the property of the people and, more importantly, had declared the Socialist Republic in 1918. The preservation of this portal was partly a matter of historical serendipity, but also reflected a sensitivity to the legacy of revolutionary socialism. However, at the time, it was not yet a deliberate effort to establish a direct historical lineage

³⁵⁷ Claire Colomb, “Requiem for a Lost *Palast* . ‘Revanchist Urban Planning’ and ‘Burdened Landscapes’ of the German Democratic Republic in the New Berlin,” *Planning Perspectives* 22, no. 3 (July 2007): 289, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665430701379118>.

³⁵⁸ Taylor writes about the rubble clearance with a lot of emotion Taylor, *Hohenzollern Berlin*. „Building in the other parts of war-ravaged East Berlin was stopped so that men and equipment could be diverted to the work of destruction. Speed seemed essential, for the work went on in three shifts, both in the daytime and at night under floodlights. The Communist youth organization, the Free German Youth, contributed volunteer workers on the oddly named "Reconstruction Sundays." Nevertheless, it took four months to haul away the wreckage to the Trümmerberg (rubble-mountain) in the suburb of Friedrichsfelde.”

between the Ulbricht government and the early socialist movement. A decade later, the portal was repurposed as the entrance to the GDR's new *State Council* building, constructed directly across from the palace ruins. This placement signified a subtle yet calculated effort to integrate select elements of the Schloss's history into the socialist state's self-narration. According to the official records of the later Humboldt Forum, the GDR's modernist architectural vision was encapsulated in a telling statement about the portal's incorporation into the State Council building:

In response to our question of how the richly profiled portal will fit into the simple, straightforward lines of the State Council building, stonemason Alfred Milde answers: '...one must imagine a simple silver ring set with a precious gemstone.' It stated: 'The stone witness to those historic days has found the most dignified place on the facade of the future State Council building.'³⁵⁹

The decision to preserve the portal played a key role in the historical self-fashioning of the GDR, particularly in the years following Stalin's death. As I have demonstrated, Hungary experienced a similar phenomenon with the eager rediscovery of the short-lived Communist Republic of 1918–19. This revival served to establish a symbolic continuity between the early revolutionary socialists and the post-Stalinist consolidation of power. Likewise, the Liebknecht portal functioned as a bridge between the revolutionary declaration of 1918 and the state ideology of the GDR. With the later reconstruction of the Schloss, the portal was once again incorporated into the Humboldt Forum's façade—this time, as a replica. A comprehensive study on the connection between the palace and Liebknecht's legacy was recently published to mark the opening of the Humboldt Forum.³⁶⁰

Designed by Heinz Graffunder and Karl-Ernst Sfora, the *Palast der Republik* was completed in 1976. The architects envisioned it as a *Volkshaus*, or People's House,

³⁵⁹ "Liebknecht-Portal," Museumsportal Berlin, accessed November 3, 2023, <https://www.museumsportal-berlin.de/en/magazin/blickfange/liebknecht-portal/>.

³⁶⁰ Dominik Juhnke, Judith Prokasky, and Martin Sabrow, *Mythos der Revolution: Karl Liebknecht, das Berliner Schloss und der 9. November 1918*, 1. Auflage, Im Fokus, Band 1 (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2018).

accommodating a diverse range of public functions: two large auditoriums, art galleries, a theater, restaurants, a bowling alley, and even a discotheque. More than just a government building, the *Palast* became a vibrant cultural hub, earning a significant place in East Berlin's social fabric. Even as rumors surfaced that the building had also been used for state surveillance, its memory as a communal space persisted.³⁶¹



Figure 20. The Interior of the Palast der Republik in 1976. The main hall was often named as "Erichs Lampenladen." Source: *Der Spiegel* / Bildagentur für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte.

I argue that two factors primarily defined the *Palast's* popularity. First, its clubs, restaurants, and theaters projected an image of life in the Eastern Bloc that did not entirely exist—a vision of a prosperous, communal, and content socialist society. Upon its opening, even a West German television commentary acknowledged the building's appeal, praising its materials, design, and hospitality services.³⁶² However, the same report also noted the disparity between this showcase of socialist achievement and the lived reality of East German citizens, who might have wished for similar quality in their everyday surroundings. This dissonance was

³⁶¹ Judith Prokasky and Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss, eds., *Humboldt Forum - Geschichte des Ortes: Ausstellungsführer*, 1. Auflage (München London New York: Prestel, 2020).

³⁶² *Palace of the Republic Opens in East Berlin, April 23, 1976*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8eo3gfOvpg>.

not an anomaly but a fundamental characteristic of the system: the architectural spaces that represented power were widely understood as fictional constructs.

The second defining factor of the *Palast's* significance—especially after 1989—was its role in exposing the deep cultural, economic, and social divide between East and West. In this context, the debate over demolishing the *Palast* in favor of reconstructing the Schloss was, at its core, a debate between competing nostalgias. The *Palast* embodied the memory of a softened socialist regime and a lost alternative to the West, while the Schloss stood for an imperial past that had been both glorified and contested. The battle over which structure would dominate Berlin's skyline was, in essence, a struggle over historical memory and identity—a struggle that continues to shape the city's architectural and cultural landscape today.³⁶³

2.3 Competing nostalgias in Unified Berlin: The Victory of the Capitalist West

Costabile-Heming provides valuable theoretical insight into the debates surrounding the Schlossplatz³⁶⁴ arguing that these discussions should be understood as distinct efforts to establish “a shared national identity.”³⁶⁵ The struggle for consensus, she concludes, reflects a profound crisis in monument planning that emerged following Germany's reunification. One contributing factor to this crisis was the challenge of reconciling two opposing historical narratives: for both East and West Berliners, the ultimate symbol of power—and the reality it represented—was not easily accepted.

As analyzed by Costabile-Heming, Svetlana Boym, and Andreas Huyssen, many East Berliners viewed the *Palast der Republik* as an embodiment of their own lived experience of

³⁶³ Part of this phenomenon was the post-1989 rise of memory studies especially in relation with Berlin: the seminal works of Ladd, Huyssen and others were published in the long decade following unification as well.

³⁶⁴ Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, “The Reconstructed City Palace and Humboldt Forum in Berlin: Restoring Architectural Identity or Dist,” n.d., 15.

³⁶⁵ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

four decades of socialism. Its demolition, in their eyes, symbolized the imposition of a Western historical narrative, one that dismissed their past and imposed liberal-Western conclusions on urban history. In contrast, the mainstream argument against preserving the *Palast*—often voiced by West Germans—positioned it as a relic of Cold War architecture, a reminder of ideologically driven urban destruction. For many proponents of reconstruction, the imperial Schloss was envisioned as a new, consensual historical reference for unified Germany—one rooted in the pre-war classical tradition. Some critics argue that the entire debate was initiated by West Germans as an attempt to purge Eastern cities of their socialist landmarks.³⁶⁶ As Costabile-Heming underscores this perspective:

Nonetheless, there was a vast gulf between Easterners’ and Westerners’ memories and impressions of the Palast der Republik. East Germans typically privilege the cultural aspects of the Palast der Republik when they remember it. In contrast, for Westerners, the Palast der Republik is simply a symbol of the failed East German regime. Thus, it appears that the building’s demolition and subsequent replacement with the reconstructed Palace supports the critique that the reconstruction is an overt attempt by the West to represent visually the triumph of democracy over socialism.³⁶⁷

Following reunification, the *Palast* was closed due to high levels of asbestos contamination—an issue often associated with Eastern Bloc architecture, despite the material’s widespread use in postwar construction worldwide.³⁶⁸ Although the asbestos was later removed, the building was never assigned a clear new function. The removal of GDR insignia from the *Palast* became an iconic moment in the regime change, paralleling images of the Berlin Wall’s destruction. Stripped of its walls and decorations, the skeletal structure of the *Palast* was temporarily repurposed as a venue for concerts and public events until its final demolition in 2006.

³⁶⁶ Taylor, *Hohenzollern Berlin*; Naraelle Hohensee, “Building in Public: Critical Reconstruction and the Rebuilding of Berlin after 1990” (The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2016), https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/1508/.

³⁶⁷ Costabile-Heming, “The Reconstructed City Palace and Humboldt Forum in Berlin: Restoring Architectural Identity or Dist,” 449.

³⁶⁸ Despite its wide usage, asbestos became associated with Eastern-bloc architecture as a negative example.

Berlin's transformation into the capital of reunified Germany, replacing Bonn, was thus marked by friction between historical preservation, the reimagination of national identity, and the competing legacies of East and West. The new, unified German public had to navigate between the compressed realities³⁶⁹ of lived socialism and the Western capitalist tendency toward neutrality and compromise. As Michael Z. Wise explains, the post-war capital of Bonn, with its glass structures and a compulsive need to demonstrate democratic values in architecture, represented a "reassuring sign of discontinuity" from the Nazi past for West Germans.³⁷⁰

The *Palast der Republik* embodied a vast ideological divide, which warrants further analysis. As discussed in the previous chapter, public architecture in the East was characterized by Socialist Realist grandeur and monumentalism. Wise notes that East Germany's architectural policy sought to portray the Communist regime as the true guardian of German national heritage, in contrast to what it labeled the "cultural barbarism" and "cosmopolitanism" of Western capitalism. Architecture, he argues, became a tool of class struggle, defining socialist society in opposition to Western influence."³⁷¹

By the early 2000s, the historical interpretation of the *Palast der Republik* had crystallized into two competing narratives: one positioning its existence as a legacy of Stalin's victory over Hitler, the other framing its demolition as the triumph of Western capitalism over Eastern communism. The reconstruction of the Berliner Schloss symbolized the latter—a celebration of liberal progress, capitalism, and prosperity.

However, the debate over the Schloss was not merely about ideological triumph; it was also a discourse on competing nostalgias and approaches to history. The concept of "critical

³⁶⁹ István Rév, *Retroactive Justice: Prehistory of Post-Communism*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005), 4.

³⁷⁰ Michael Z. Wise, *Capital Dilemma: Germany's Search for a New Architecture of Democracy* (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 22–24.

³⁷¹ Wise, 39.

reconstruction" emerged as a dominant architectural philosophy in reunified Berlin, placing the tension between modernization and preservation at its core. As scholars such as Brian Ladd and Michael Z. Wise discuss, and Naraelle Hohensee examines in detail, critical reconstruction embodies a polarized debate within urban planning.³⁷² On one side, the “critical reconstructionists” advocate for returning Berlin to its pre-war coherence. They aim to rebuild and restore the city to its previous state, emphasizing continuity and preserving historical elements. On the other side, the “deconstructivists” argue for maintaining aspects of the city's fragmentation—claiming that its history of destruction and division should be acknowledged and incorporated into its urban fabric. The critical reconstruction approach is rooted in the desire to create a visually unified cityscape that reflects a stable national identity. The Berliner Schloss became a central subject among the proponents of this approach as a symbol of continuity and national heritage.³⁷³ They seek to create a city that resembles a pre-modern, proto-typical „European city.” This approach often involves integral reconstructions of historical buildings, aiming to recreate them as faithfully as possible.³⁷⁴

However, critical reconstruction has been criticized for its selective approach to memory and its disregard for the turbulent twentieth century.³⁷⁵ Critics argue that this approach overlooks the complexities and contradictions of Berlin's history, focusing only on a sanitized version of the past. They say that the city should embrace its fragmented and diverse nature, incorporating elements of destruction and division into its urban fabric. Hohensee argues that the long-term effect of critical reconstructionist urban planning accelerates gentrification and the corresponding growing social inequality between neighborhoods. As she puts it, the effect

³⁷² Hohensee, “Building in Public: Critical Reconstruction and the Rebuilding of Berlin after 1990.”

³⁷³ Didem Ekici, “The Surfaces of Memory in Berlin: Rebuilding the Schloß,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 61, no. 2 (November 2007): 2525–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1531-314X.2007.00147.x>.

³⁷⁴ Costabile-Heming, “The Reconstructed City Palace and Humboldt Forum in Berlin: Restoring Architectural Identity or Dist,” 102.

³⁷⁵ Ekici, “The Surfaces of Memory in Berlin,” 25.

is the gentrification of the GDR in general.³⁷⁶ The Berliner Schloss indeed received a unique role in the discussion on preservation, as it historically represented the imperial aspirations of Germany. In this light, it is reasonable that the critics of critical reconstructionism would argue that the approach favors a deeply imperial language of form when trying to compose a new wave of national architecture.³⁷⁷ Jan-Werner Müller’s quotation of publicist Jobst Siedler demonstrates this correlation as he argued that “Das Schloss lag nicht in Berlin. Berlin war das Schloss” [The Palace was not in Berlin. Berlin was the Palace].³⁷⁸

This statement underscores the notion that the Berliner Schloss was more than just a building—it was an architectural embodiment of Germany’s historical self-image. In this light, the reconstruction of the Schloss was not simply a project of historical restoration but a deliberate act of shaping national memory, underscoring the ongoing contestation of Berlin’s past, present, and future.

2.4 The Humboldt Forum: A Disneyland of Memory Politics

The Humboldt Forum was inaugurated in 2020, featuring partially reconstructed facades faithful to the final Prussian iteration, seamlessly merging with modern elements and an entirely contemporary interior. Today, it stands as one of Berlin’s most visited tourist attractions, drawing approximately 1.5 million visitors in its opening year alone.³⁷⁹ Its construction was not merely a top-down governmental-cultural initiative but was partially financed through private donations amounting to 105 million euros, emerging from a decade-

³⁷⁶ Hohensee, “Building in Public: Critical Reconstruction and the Rebuilding of Berlin after 1990,” 257.

³⁷⁷ Hohensee, 252.

³⁷⁸ Müller, “Prussian Disneyland.”

³⁷⁹ The Forum welcomed its three millionth visitor in July, 2023. “A Successful Opening Year – Taking Stock after 365 Days in the Humboldt Forum,” Humboldt Forum, accessed November 6, 2023, <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/presse/mitteilungen/a-successful-opening-year-taking-stock-after-365-days-in-the-humboldt-forum/>.

long public discourse.³⁸⁰ However, while the Forum encapsulates and reflects the complexities of this discourse, critics emphasize that its reconstruction must also be understood in the context of influential lobbying efforts that shaped the decision to rebuild the complex.³⁸¹

A key example of this influence dates back to 1993, when French public artist Catherine Feff launched an artistic project that covered the remnants of the GDR-era building's skeleton with a *trompe l'oeil* rendering of the former Schloss. This project was perceived by many as part of a broader conservative campaign emanating from the West, aimed at reshaping a cityscape with which East Berliners had long identified.³⁸² Feff's description of her project reflects an arguably oversimplified and ahistorical perspective, failing to acknowledge the intricate layers of post-1989 remembrance:

sérieusement endommagé en 1945, à la fin de la seconde guerre mondiale, le gouvernement communiste est-allemand dirigé par Walter Ulbricht, décida en 1950 la destruction complète du château, *pour que ce symbole de l'ancienne Prusse disparaisse à jamais*. L'idée de la reconstitution du château en trompe-l'oeil appartient aux historiens-architectes, Goerd Peschken et Frank Augustin, spécialistes de l'œuvre de Schlüter. Un homme d'affaire hambourgeois, Wilhelm von Boddien en orchestra magistralement la mise en oeuvre.³⁸³

Feff's framing of the Schloss's destruction as an ideological act of erasure appears to carry undertones of revanche, suggesting that the debate over preservation was not only about what to keep but also about competing narratives of destruction. This notion is echoed in historian

³⁸⁰ "Donation Facts |," accessed November 5, 2023, <https://berliner-schloss.de/en/donation-facts/>.

³⁸¹ Taylor, *Hohenzollern Berlin*; Müller, "Prussian Disneyland"; Hohensee, "Building in Public: Critical Reconstruction and the Rebuilding of Berlin after 1990"; Hannes Swoboda, ed., *Der Schlossplatz in Berlin: Bilanz einer Debatte*, 1. Aufl (Berlin: Bostelmann und Siebenhaar, 2002).

³⁸² Wise, *Capital Dilemma*, 115; Costabile-Heming, "The Reconstructed City Palace and Humboldt Forum in Berlin: Restoring Architectural Identity or Dist," 447.

³⁸³ Indentation by the author for emphasis. "'Berliner StadtSchloss' – Catherine Feff Studio," accessed November 6, 2023, https://catherinefeff-studio.com/index.php/portfolio_item/chantiers/1-photos-chateau-de-berlin/. In English: "Seriously damaged in 1945 at the end of World War II, the East German communist government led by Walter Ulbricht decided in 1950 to completely destroy the castle so that this symbol of old Prussia would disappear forever. The idea of the trompe-l'oeil reconstruction of the castle belongs to the historian-architects, Goerd Peschken and Frank Augustin, who are specialists in Schlüter's work. A Hamburg businessman, Wilhelm von Boddien, masterfully orchestrated its implementation."

Júlia Székely's dissertation, which examines the conceptual and physical construction of national heroes in Berlin and Budapest. Székely highlights that, in 1990, student organizations emerged to advocate for the preservation of GDR-era monuments, resisting calls for their demolition from Western artists, architects, and politicians. These groups expressed concerns about historical amnesia, arguing that erasing these structures would impede critical historical analysis and foster dangerous myths. As they stated: "Witnesses of history cannot be destroyed again as it happened after 1945, as removal and suppression leave a gap that disables historical analysis and enables dangerous myths. [...] Many motifs, symbols, and references give information about state ideology and everyday life in the GDR. Precisely because of this, the monuments are worth preserving."³⁸⁴



Figure 21. Students Protested against the Demolition of the Palast on the Stairs in 1990. Source: Rolf Zöllner / Der Spiegel.

³⁸⁴ Júlia Székely, "The Transfiguration of the Hero: Memory Politics of the Everyday in Berlin and Budapest" (Budapest, Central European University, 2016), 92, EDT Collection.

Feff's project also underscores another fundamental shift that the reconstruction of the Berliner Schloss embodied—the transformation of public ownership and usage in reunified Germany. The transition from a socialist system to a democratic market economy meant that public space increasingly became a question of real estate and profitability. Consequently, the fate of the Palast der Republik was not solely a matter of historical preservation but also of economic viability. As Jan-Werner Müller explains, the conservatism of “critical reconstruction” was, in many cases across Berlin—including at Alexanderplatz—met with the forces of corporate architecture:

It is a testament to Germans' satisfaction with their efforts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – coming to terms with the Nazi past – that they would tolerate the recreation of such an egregious symbol of royal power. In its lack of imagination, the project is reminiscent of the decision to fill the large void at Potsdamer Platz with bland corporate architecture, which Rem Koolhaas and many others decried at the time.³⁸⁵

2.4.1 The Postmodern Thought in Concrete

Above all, the Humboldt Forum is not merely a project defined by profitability. Like the Haussmann Program—though in different ways—it embodies an inherently postmodern concept. Without delving too deeply into postmodernist architecture, I wish to highlight two critical aspects that emerge in discussions of the Humboldt Forum: (1) postmodernism's relationship to spectacle and (2) its arbitrary stance on history and tradition. To do so, I will draw on the critiques of Fredric Jameson, an American literary critic and Marxist cultural theorist, as well as Jean Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum. Additionally, I will reference

³⁸⁵ Müller, “Prussian Disneyland.”

Mark Fisher's work, which argues that spectacle is not only a feature of modernism but also of postmodernism.³⁸⁶

Jameson identifies postmodernism as the cultural dominant of late capitalism, which he defines as the economic stage emerging in the late 1970s with neoliberal trends. He argues it is "only the reflex and the concomitant of yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself"³⁸⁷ instead of being the culture of a new social order as promised by capitalism. It is deeply intertwined with capitalist logic and profit, creating a cultural hegemony in which aesthetic reference points become interchangeable commodities, ultimately losing their cultural and historical significance.

As postmodernism coincided with globalization, consumerism, and the rise of multinational corporations, Jameson saw it as a cultural manifestation of these economic forces. Another key point in his critique is postmodernism's rejection of historical depth and continuity. He argued that postmodern art and culture often operate in a state of *pastiche*, where elements from various historical periods and styles are arbitrarily mixed without a coherent narrative. In his view, this reflects a broader cultural inability to engage meaningfully with history.

By its arbitrary character, postmodernism is marked by fragmentation and the absence of a central organizing principle. He saw this as a reflection of how contemporary society and culture had become decentralized and fragmented, with no grand narratives or overarching structures to provide coherence. With no organizing principle and the possibility of the endless repetition of aesthetic elements, postmodernism, according to Jameson, is a tool in the complete commodification of culture. Similarly to what Mark Fisher problematized in the 1990s, in the

³⁸⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 11. printing in paperback, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, The Body, in Theory (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

³⁸⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, xii.

culture of surface and spectacle, everything, including art and literature, could be commodified and turned into a product for mass consumption.

The Humboldt Forum exemplifies this phenomenon in a striking way. While its facades are openly replicas, they do not attempt to invoke a sense of authenticity. Instead, they blend seamlessly with the modern facades along the Spree, reinforcing an aesthetic of historical fluidity. If we take seriously the principles of the *society of the spectacle*, it is not difficult to see how the project perpetuates an endlessly interchangeable historical continuity. Jameson's critique captures this issue well:

This situation evidently determines what the architecture historians call "historicism," namely, the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion, and, in general, what Henri Lefebvre has called the increasing primacy of the "neo." This omnipresence of pastiche is not incompatible with a certain humor, however, nor is it innocent of all passion: it is at the least compatible with addiction with a whole historically original consumers' appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and "spectacles" (the term of the situationists). It is for such objects that we may reserve Plato's conception of the "simulacrum," the identical copy for which no original has ever existed. Appropriately enough, the culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced, a society of which Guy Debord has observed, in an extraordinary phrase, that in it "the image has become the final form of commodity reification."³⁸⁸

French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's concept of the *simulacrum* further illuminates this critique. According to Baudrillard, contemporary society has transitioned from representation to simulation, where images no longer reflect reality but instead replace it entirely. He identifies three orders of simulacra: 1) the kind that represents a faithful copy of an original. It maintains a connection to the real and can be seen as a reflection of reality. 2) The kind where the copy

³⁸⁸ Jameson, 18.

no longer has a direct connection to the real. It imitates a reality that doesn't exist, such as theme parks or fictional narratives. 3) The kind where the simulacra bears no relation to any reality. It is a simulation of a simulation, a hyperreal, as seen in certain aspects of contemporary culture, media, and consumer society. Baudrillard contended that simulations become more compelling and influential in a hyperreal society than the reality they imitate. Reality becomes a series of signs and symbols, and the distinction between reality and illusion vanishes.

However, it is not only the Forum's architecture that embodies this complex relationship with the past—it is also reflected in its institutional mission. As I will highlight in my conclusion, purely aesthetic solutions cannot adequately address the architectural dilemmas posed by history's dialectical nature. The spectacle of reconstructing the Berliner Schloss, despite emerging from a largely public and democratic discourse, now serves as a museum that presents peculiar narratives about history and culture. The broader pattern I wish to examine is how supposed grand narratives of justice—both historical and contemporary—dissolve within a marketable cultural institution in the age of spectacle.

As an intellectual and cultural project, the Humboldt Forum is not a critique of postmodernist thought but a product of it. The institution itself acknowledges this tension in its official mission statement:

The Humboldt Forum stands on a special historic site in the partly reconstructed Berlin Palace. Its reconstructed façades, dome inscription, and cross are a reminder of traditional power structures and their effects. Many of the exhibits displayed here are of colonial origin. Aware of this tension, the Humboldt Forum faces the resulting responsibility to undertake a critical examination of this site and its history with openness and reflection.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁹ “Mutual Understanding and Goals,” Humboldt Forum, accessed November 8, 2023, <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/about/mutual-understanding-and-goals/>. The resolution accepted by the Bundestag in 2002 only mentions a recommendation on the future functions of the building, constituting an institution of “cultural significance” through the integration of “art and cultures of the world.” See the analysis of the resolution in: Viola König, “Die Idee Des Humboldt-Forums Auf Dem Schlossplatz In Berlin,” *Paideuma* 54 (2008): 245–51.

The final result is a cultural center that aims to foster intercultural understanding and dialogue about the world's diverse cultures. However, since its opening in 2020, two major public debates have emerged. One centered on the issue of colonialism, particularly regarding the return of the Benin Bronzes to Nigeria. The other focused on accusations of *tokenism*³⁹⁰ in the curation of exhibitions.³⁹¹ As one critic put it:

Anyone who listens to the creators of the Humboldt Forum knows exactly what learning success they want to achieve with visitors to the house: everyone should recognize the 'equality of all cultures' and, even more, their 'equivalence.' The Humboldt Forum is a community college where you enter as a 'Eurocentric, white man' and come out as a politically correct world creature.³⁹²

The critic was referring to the permanent exhibition *Berlin Global*, which uses interactive elements where visitors pass through different doors based on their answers to social and political questions. At the end of the exhibition, each visitor receives a printed ticket summarizing their responses.³⁹³

³⁹⁰ "Woke culture" is a term used to describe a cultural and social movement that advocates for social justice, particularly in the areas of race, gender, and inequality. It encompasses a wide range of ideas, discussions, and initiatives. Some of the main works, writings, and concepts associated with woke culture include intersectionality, critical race theory, white fragility, etc. Its critique highlight the disruptive character of woke culture to critical dialogue—and often rationality thereof—by problematizing its tendency to overcorrect speech and scientific thinking for the sake of identity politics. Among others, critics of woke culture argue that it promotes cancel culture, lack of nuance and scientific understanding, alongside its tendency for harsh backlash. I recommend two works by political scientist Eszter Kováts for further read: Eszter Kováts, ed., *Culture Wars in Europe* (Illiberalism Studies Program, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.53483/MOLD8941>; Eszter Kováts, "Seeing through Orbán's Anti-'Woke' Smokescreen," July 3, 2023, <https://www.socialeurope.eu/seeing-through-orbans-anti-woke-smokescreen>.

³⁹¹ Rainer Haubrich, "Humboldt-Forum: Im Würgegriff der Wokeness - WELT," DIE WELT, March 25, 2021, <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article229106595/Humboldt-Forum-Im-Wuergegriff-der-Wokeness.html>.

³⁹² Haubrich. The original reads for the reader's information: Wer den Machern des Humboldt-Forums zuhört, weiß genau, welchen Lernerfolg sie bei den Besuchern des Hauses erzielen wollen: Jeder soll die „Gleichberechtigung aller Kulturen“ erkennen, mehr noch, ihre „Gleichwertigkeit“. Das Humboldt-Forum als Volkshochschule, in die man als „eurozentrischer, weißer Mann“ hineingeht und als politisch korrektes Weltwesen wieder herauskommt."

³⁹³ The post-colonial message of the exhibition is also highly problematic, if not counter-productive to the goal of learning about colonialism: the main message, to me, did not seem to reach deeper than arguing that colonialism was ultimately bad, and its criticism is good on face value. The simply moral standpoint in post-colonialist self-expression leads to the overuse of the term which thus becomes devoid of its historical meaning—hindering any historically conscious conclusions from being drawn in the long run.



Figure 22. A Gateway at the Berlin Global Exhibition. Berlin, Humboldt Forum, 2022 April 5. The author's photo.

While *Berlin Global* covers urban planning, popular culture, and collective memory, it exemplifies postmodern spectacle within the framework of capitalist realism. The visitor is not only confronted with the architectural and political conflicts of the Berliner Schloss but is also invited to engage in a performative dismantling of these conflicts—not through scientific inquiry, but through the optics of righteousness and political correctness. The decades-long debate over historical authenticity, East vs. West interests, urban preservation, and heritage is ultimately subsumed into a symbolic exercise of discussion and openness.

When the Humboldt Forum, the liberal-progressive cultural center in the facades of post-Cold War conservatism, is put under the microscope, one is reminded of Francis Fukuyama's theorization of the end of history—how the politics, culture, and ideology of the past will cease to progress after the end of the Cold War only to keep reproducing itself. Allow me to briefly explain his main arguments to highlight some aspects of criticism, as well as some agreement with the theory in an attempt to put into context the discourse surrounding the birth of the Humboldt Forum.

Francis Fukuyama's central argument in *The End of History and the Last Man*³⁹⁴ is that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War signified the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy as the final stage in humanity's ideological evolution. Drawing on Hegelian philosophy, particularly the concept of the "end of history," Fukuyama posits that liberal democracy represents the culmination of societal progress toward freedom and self-determination. According to him, with the fall of communism and fascism, liberal democracy emerged as the only viable ideological system, as its alternatives had proven unsustainable.

However, a major critique of Fukuyama's argument lies in its assumption that liberalism—particularly in its capitalist form—would prevent geopolitical conflicts or the resurgence of new ideological movements.³⁹⁵

In reality, capitalism has not only failed to eliminate global strife but has also facilitated the rise of anti-democratic alternatives such as illiberalism. Fukuyama further claimed that the "end of history" signified the conclusion of ideological struggles, reducing future conflicts to localized disputes without broader ideological significance. Critics argue that this prognosis ignored capitalism's inherent instability, assuming that liberal democracy would remain self-correcting and universally desired.³⁹⁶ Despite the speculative character of his work, the existence of the Humboldt Forum might prove that Fukuyama's theorization did hold some ground in how it conceptualized the political and intellectual costs of the fragmentation of historical narratives.

³⁹⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free press, 1992).

³⁹⁵ In short, Fukuyama's main argument in *The End of History* is that liberal democracy represents the endpoint of humanity's ideological development and the final form of government, following the collapse of alternative systems like communism and fascism. Fukuyama's thesis generated considerable debate and criticism, with many scholars and thinkers challenging his assertion that liberal democracy had triumphed conclusively. Critics have pointed to ongoing challenges to democracy, the resurgence of authoritarian regimes, and the complex and diverse nature of political ideologies and systems around the world.

³⁹⁶ More on this in: David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Harvey, "Flexible Accumulation through Urbanization Reflections on 'Post-Modernism' in the American City."

The Humboldt Forum, as an institution, serves as a potential validation of Fukuyama's ideas—it embodies the intellectual and political consequences of fragmented historical narratives, reinforcing rather than challenging them. One of the more compelling aspects of Fukuyama's theory is his argument that, in a post-historical world, ideological evolution would be replaced by a struggle for recognition—essentially, identity politics. While his belief in history's stagnation proved incorrect, his assertion that identity would become the central issue of global politics turned out to be highly relevant. He famously wrote:

The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period, there will be neither art of philosophy nor the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history. I can feel in myself and see in others around me a powerful nostalgia for when history existed. Such nostalgia will continue to fuel competition and conflict even in the post-historical world for some time. Even though I recognize its inevitability, I have the most ambivalent feelings about the civilization created in Europe since 1945, with its North Atlantic and Asian offshoots. Perhaps this prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will get history started once again.³⁹⁷

The Humboldt Forum exemplifies this contradiction. Rather than engaging in a meaningful dialogue with history, the institution recycles and repackages historical controversy, transforming it into a consumable spectacle of nostalgia. In doing so, it becomes a *simulacrum* of progress, discourse, and self-reflection—masking the very power structures it claims to critique.

Alternatively, one could interpret the Humboldt Forum as a missed opportunity. Architecturally, its fusion of historical and modern elements reflects an attempt to engage with

³⁹⁷ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 18.

history dynamically. Some argue that the building itself successfully embodies the tension between past and present, preserving historical memory while acknowledging contemporary realities. However, the cultural institutions housed within the Forum fall short in this mission. Instead of fostering genuine historical self-reflection, they reinforce the commodification of history, leaving fundamental questions of historical justice unresolved.

3. “*Fel, támadás*”³⁹⁸: *A Conservative Dream Comes True in the Hauszmann Program and the Reinvention of the Buda Castle Hill*

The political and cultural transition in Budapest brought about discussions similar to those in Berlin, particularly regarding symbolic actions taken after the regime change. As mentioned in the previous chapter, symbolic actions started immediately after the regime change. Such were removing institution names (such as the Workers’ History Museum letters), symbols (such as the Palast’s case), painting and toppling of statues, and the renaming of streets. Like Berlin, the latter took place most certainly under the first democratically elected government,³⁹⁹ though the process was partial and lacked official institutions of reconciliation. However, the two reconstructed palaces, the Schloss and the Buda Palace, have been part of very different discourses on historicity and national history in the past decades, no matter their vast similarities until the end of the 20th century. Although both were products of a politically conservative idea of historical continuity, the Schloss was a radical answer to a legitimate, widespread dilemma. The Buda Palace did so as a radical idea with no historical or urban planning dilemma. Moreover, the reinvention of the Buda Palace and Castle Hill was not part

³⁹⁸ The title refers to Viktor Orbán’s speech at the inauguration of the Várkert Bazár in 2014. Orbán chose a wordplay as the title of his speech, where the word „feltámadás”, meaning resurrection is separated into two words „fel” and „támadás”, which separately mean „up” and „attack”, referencing in the Castle Hill as a physical and metaphorical battle ground. See source at: *Várkert Bazár Átadás - Orbán Viktor ...*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKHwNIKUaus>.

³⁹⁹ “A Nagy Átnevezés,” Hungary’s got data, accessed November 9, 2023, http://hungarysgotdata.blog.hu/2015/12/06/a_nagy_atnevezes.

of any public or significant public debate, whose long-term consequences I shall investigate at the end of this chapter.

Castle Hill saw little change following the transition and suffered from underfunding and neglect throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, leaving its representative function largely dormant until the 2010s. However, in 2023, it now appears—particularly to critics—that the right-wing, illiberal Fidesz government has carefully orchestrated the site’s transformation into a new cultural and symbolic center of Hungarian national identity. While the intention to do so dates back to Viktor Orbán’s first government in 1998, I argue that today’s master narratives of nationhood and historical representation are the result of a longer period of political experimentation with nationalist themes. The following section will analyze how these experiments have shaped the government’s approach to reconstructing Castle Hill.

To understand the broader historical and political context, I make three interrelated arguments that illustrate key patterns in the nationalist historical production of right-wing regimes—highlighting the stark contrast between Budapest and Berlin:

- 1) The reconstruction of Castle Hill is not a unique or novel endeavor initiated by the ruling party; rather, it is the result of a long-standing conservative urban fantasy dating back to the transition, exacerbated by the neglect of liberal governments.
- 2) Instead of reflecting a predetermined historical necessity, as often claimed, the reconstruction project reveals the ruling system’s strategic theory of change.
 - 2/a. Unlike Berlin’s Schloss, where public debate was integral to decision-making, Budapest’s reconstruction lacked open discussion, contradicting government claims that it represents a moral or public consensus;
- 3) Right-wing intellectual circles have built their vision of national identity on a repetitive, uncritical recycling of historical symbols—symbols that are themselves products of mythmaking rather than objective historical continuity.

These points are essential for grasping the nature of post-transition conservatism and its relationship with nationhood, particularly the revival of national architectural forms as a means of ideological reinforcement. Rather than providing a chronological account of reconstruction plans, I aim to situate projects like the Hauszmann Program within their broader political and cultural framework, as I have done in previous chapters.

For Buda Palace and Castle Hill, the transition primarily resulted in a symbolic and institutional break from the socialist past, without major changes to their function or architectural appearance. Unlike the Berliner Schloss, which emerged through rigorous academic and memory-political debates, the reconstruction of Castle Hill's pre-war appearance was neither driven by scholarly research nor shaped by grassroots activism. The only early post-transition initiative of note was the first democratically elected government's plan to relocate the Prime Minister's office to Castle Hill.

One key reason why Buda Palace's function remained largely uncontested is that its post-war reconstruction had already been a broadly accepted, professional endeavor—exemplary in the context of post-war Europe. Thus, there was little bottom-up pressure for a return to its Hauszmannian form. Instead, post-1989 debates centered on the question of empty plots left undeveloped under socialism.⁴⁰⁰ This issue took on new significance under capitalism, with economic considerations driving discussions on urban development. While socialist-era planners acknowledged the site's limitations for mass tourism in the 1970s and 80s, large-scale tourism infrastructure was not a priority for professional circles in the first decade after the transition. Instead, attention focused on the completion of Dísz Square, widely considered the Palace's main entry point.

⁴⁰⁰ The urgent task of preparing the Castle Hill for a bigger influx of tourists in the coming years was outlined in 1989 already. See: Sedlmayr, "Új Beépítések a Budai Vár Részletes Rendezési Tervében."

One of the most debated elements of this area was the old Ministry of Defense building, which had been reduced from an imposing five-story palace with a grand dome to a much smaller historicist structure after the war. Various proposals emerged to repurpose the site, including plans to house the National Theater, Museum of Ethnography, or the Prime Minister's residence in a newly built structure behind the existing building. However, none of these plans materialized.⁴⁰¹

In 1993, architect and critic Aurél Budai observed that Castle Hill and its surrounding buildings tended to attract political attention only when someone sought a prestigious and monumental space for a specific purpose—otherwise, they were largely neglected.”⁴⁰² Reflecting on the site's uncertain future, he posed a critical question: What task lies ahead for us regarding the Castle? His answer was clear: rather than repeating past mistakes, efforts should focus on continuing what was interrupted in 1944. However, he dismissed the idea that reconstruction should necessarily mean rebuilding everything that was lost, arguing that constructing an entirely new architectural ensemble in historical styles would border on forgery.”⁴⁰³

Ultimately, the political and functional transformation of Castle Hill remained an unfulfilled ambition for Hungary's first post-transition conservative government. It was left to the successive Fidesz government to bring this nationalist vision to fruition—turning the site into a carefully curated symbol of their ideological project.

3.1 The Theory of Change of the Orbán-Regime through the Evolution of the Hauszmann Program

⁴⁰¹ Rita Csík and Péter Hamvay, “Kulturális Központtá Alakul 2012-Re a Budai Vár,” *Népszava* 132, no. 103 (April 4, 2004): 8; “A Budai Vár Újjáépítésének Befejezéséről,” Pub. L. No. 1047/2004, 2001/65 Magyar Közlöny 6782 (2004).

⁴⁰² Aurél Budai, “Mi Kell a Várnak?,” *Élet És Irodalom* 37, no. 35 (September 3, 1993): 14.

⁴⁰³ Budai.

The Orbán government in Hungary has strategically positioned architecture and urban planning as central instruments in the construction of national identity. The trajectory of the National Hauszmann Program offers a striking case study in how the regime has recalibrated its approach to historical memory, political symbolism, and cultural hegemony. Over time, the program has evolved from a set of discrete reconstruction projects into a comprehensive ideological framework, reflecting the government's broader ambition to cement right-wing populist, spectacle, and nationalist cultural dominance. To illustrate this process, I have categorized the program's development into two distinct temporal phases, spanning from 2010 to 2023, each marking a deepening of Fidesz's commitment to redefining the symbolic landscape of Hungary.

3.1.1 The First Phase 2010-2014: The Conceptual Foundations of Reconstruction

The first phase (2010–2014) coincided with the early years of Fidesz's uninterrupted rule and the consolidation of its cultural-political machinery. By 2011, the second Orbán government (2010–2014) had already designated Castle Hill as a potent symbol of national belonging, sovereignty, and pride.⁴⁰⁴ Opposition media were quick to seize on the monarchical overtones of this move, drawing satirical comparisons between Orbán's increasingly autocratic leadership and the royal connotations of Castle Hill—a critique that soon became a mainstay in political commentary, with some commentators wryly suggesting that the Prime Minister was, in effect, preparing for his own “coronation.”⁴⁰⁵ Allow me to give a timeline of events between 2010,

⁴⁰⁴ “A Várbazár Rekonstrukciójáról És a Budai Várnegyed Hosszútávú Fejlesztéséről, Valamint a Budavári Kertek Revitalizációjáról, a Budai Várnegyed És Környékének Közlekedési Problémáinak Rendezéséről,” Pub. L. No. 1375/2011. (XI.8), 2011/130 Magyar Közlöny (2011).

⁴⁰⁵ An example for such a farce is “Közeleg Orbán Viktor megkoronázása,” accessed November 28, 2023, <https://hirklikk.hu/kozelet/kozeleg-orban-viktor-megkoronazasa/338063>; [narancs.hu](https://www.narancs.hu). Still in 2023 a fake, ironic event was advertised on Facebook for the coronation of Viktor Orbán. “Már 13 ezren szeretnék megkoronázni Orbánt a Duna jegén,” [Magyarnarancs.hu](https://www.magyarnarancs.hu), June 25, 2022, <https://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/mar-13-ezren-szeretnek-megkoronazni-orbant-a-duna-jegen-250037>. But it is telling that already in 1999 it was Orbán and

the first time the Orbán government alluded to a governmental district in the Castle Hill, and 2023.

A decisive step in this symbolic transformation came in 2011, when Parliament passed a resolution mandating the relocation of governance functions away from the Parliament building⁴⁰⁶—a move that, at least in part, realized former Prime Minister Imre Antall’s vision of separating the executive from the legislative branch. While the full implementation of this policy would be deferred (perhaps awaiting the political security of a third Fidesz government), other reconstruction projects were already well underway, embedding a conservative-nationalist vision of public space into Hungary’s urban landscape. Among these projects were: 1) The redevelopment of Kossuth Square (2010–2014)—a project that systematically erased post-1945 monuments and memorials. 2) The erection of the German Occupation Memorial (2013)—a monument that controversially cast Hungary as a passive victim, equating its suffering under Nazi rule with that of the Holocaust’s actual victims. 3) The Liget Project (launched in 2011)—which sought to reinvent Városliget (City Park) as a cultural and museum district, further embedding Fidesz’s ideological vision into the capital’s built environment. Each of these projects drew fierce criticism from opposition media, albeit for different reasons. Yet, taken together, they signaled a broader governmental fixation on controlling the historical narrative—a tendency that would become a defining characteristic of Fidesz’s cultural policy.

Perhaps the most revealing example of this historical revisionism was the removal of post-1945 statues from Kossuth Square and their replacement with monuments that reasserted a pre-World War II nationalist narrative. The most emblematic of these changes was the

Fidesz that consistently thematized the issue of the Holy Crown’s location and the question of the Buda Castle. “A korona _ _ _ elhurcolása: _ _ _ Királyok _ _ _ könnye.” _ _ _ MagyarNarancs.hu, _ _ _ October _ _ _ 21, _ _ _ 1999, https://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/a_korona_elhurcolasa_kiralyok_konnye-60882; narancs.hu,

⁴⁰⁶ “Fodor Gergely várkapitány: A várnegyed sorsa minden magyar ügye,” *vasarnap.hu* (blog), February 23, 2019, <https://vasarnap.hu/2019/02/23/atnezni-fodor-gergely-varkapitany-a-varnegyed-sorsa-minden-magyar-ugye/>.

restoration of István Tisza's statue in 2014, replacing the Mihály Károlyi statue, which had stood in the square since 1975.

The symbolism of this exchange was unmistakable. Tisza, a staunch militarist and defender of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, had been assassinated in 1918—a moment that, in the government's retelling, heralded Hungary's political and moral collapse. Károlyi, by contrast, had led a social democratic government that marked the dissolution of the Dualist system and preceded the short-lived Hungarian Republic of 1919.⁴⁰⁷ The 2012 removal of Károlyi's statue can also be seen as part of the effort to rehabilitate Miklós Horthy's cultural-historical legacy, for it was precisely during Horthy's regency that Károlyi's image as a “scapegoat” was spread in public life with the apparent political motivation to set the social democratic agenda as the leading cause behind the calamities of the early Horthy regime.⁴⁰⁸

Another instance of the reiteration of the new historical narrative of the nation is PM Orbán's inauguration speech at the old-new statue of Tisza, where he welcomed “a new beginning” in the nation's history by “restoring the honor of the country” in the first four years of government. The Tisza statue and the square reconstruction represented this new beginning.⁴⁰⁹ Orbán's speech showcases a line of historical continuities that only make sense from a nationalist point of view not distant from the historical obsession with the *Neueanfang* in Berlin after the transition: “On April 22, 1934, a monument group was erected on Kossuth

⁴⁰⁷Krisztina Kincses, “Igazságtétel a Kossuth téren,” *Igazságtétel a Kossuth téren*, July 25, 2022, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2022/07/igazsagtetel-a-kossuth-teren>. On Károlyi and Tisza's relationship, the accusations of the assassination, please see Sándor Juhász Nagy, *A magyar októberi forradalom története* (Cserépfalvi Könyvkiadó, 1945).

⁴⁰⁸ Péter Csunderlik, “A ‘Vörös Gróf’ Mint Bűnbak - Károlyi Mihály Képe a Horthy-Kori Pamflet És Memoárirodalomban,” in *„Fejtágító” - Ünnepi Tanulmányok Pásztor Péter 80. Születésnapjára*, ed. Attila Seres (PTE BTK TTI MOSZT Kutatócsoport, 2022).

⁴⁰⁹ Zrt HVG Kiadó, “Orbán: új korszak kezdődik,” [hvg.hu](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20140609_Orban_uj_korszak_kezdodik), June 9, 2014, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20140609_Orban_uj_korszak_kezdodik.

Square in memory of István Tisza, but after 1945, this was toppled, just like the monarchy collapsed in 1918 when Tisza was shot.”

The strong undertone of political and moral collapse caused by the political *other*, and the corresponding continuity through political restitution is what became the mainstream historical stance of Fidesz in the first phase of the symbolic reconstruction phenomenon—which, as said before, embedded for the Hauszmann Program’s comprehensive program.

Another conceptual birthplace of the Hauszmann Program was established soon after the 2010 elections, when the second Fidesz government—now wielding a supermajority in Parliament—introduced the System of National Cooperation (Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere, hereafter referred to as NER).⁴¹⁰ More than just a policy framework, NER quickly became an essential institution for understanding the character of the Fidesz government, encapsulating its foundational values, political principles, historical narratives, and cultural ambitions. To appreciate its significance, a brief outline of its core characteristics is in order.

In terms of political philosophy, NER presents itself as a guiding doctrine, emphasizing national unity, conservative values, and a strong, fiscally disciplined state. In alignment with the methodological approach outlined in the introduction to this dissertation, it promotes a distinctly nationalist interpretation of Hungarian history and culture, portraying them as timeless and immutable. Economically, however, the Orbán government has pursued a neoliberal, market-oriented approach, one that remains eagerly engaged in global transactions, often at the expense of prioritizing the interests of Hungarian citizens.⁴¹¹ Despite this embrace of international capital, the government has maintained a staunchly nationalist posture,

⁴¹⁰ “Az Országgyűlés 1/2010. (VI. 16.) OGY Politikai Nyilatkozata a Nemzeti Együttműködésről,” June 14, 2010, https://2010-2014.kormany.hu/download/d/56/00000/politikai_nyilatkozat.pdf.

⁴¹¹ Scheiring, “A neoliberalizmus nemzeti populista mutációja « Mércé””; Gábor Scheiring, *The Retreat of Liberal Democracy: Authoritarian Capitalism and the Accumulative State in Hungary*, Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020).

routinely positioning itself in opposition to supranational institutions—most notably the European Union—and fostering a deep skepticism toward immigration.

It is not difficult to see how NER has successfully installed itself as the conceptual and institutional guardian of Hungarian identity, extending its reach into symbolic politics, historical memory, and spatial representation. Unlike in Berlin, where national symbolism remains largely confined to conservative discourse, the Hauszmann Program became an explicitly political project of NER, an architectural manifestation of conservative, nationalist, and illiberal state-building.

A particularly insightful analysis of NER's ideological underpinnings can be found in the 2020 edited volume *Brave New Hungary: Mapping the System of National Cooperation*. In this work, Balázs Trencsényi and János Mátyás Kovács characterize NER as a “realistic dystopia,” a phrase that nods both to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and political theorist John Rawls's concept of “real utopias.” They argue that “Orbán's new world is located in temporary suspense, even if it promises an escape from the adversities of history through envisioning an everlasting pro-Fidesz Gemeinschaft that is premodern and postmodern at the same time.”⁴¹² In other words, NER's ideological project is a paradoxical fusion of nostalgia and innovation, presenting itself as both a return to Hungary's national essence and a departure from the constraints of modern liberal democracy.

NER's testing ground was, without a doubt, the Castle District. Much like the 19th-century developments, the Várkert Bazár functioned as the Trojan horse of the entire Hauszmann Program, serving as both a pilot project and a symbolic proving ground for the historical conceptualizations of NER institutions.⁴¹³ This is underscored by the first

⁴¹² János Mátyás Kovács and Balázs Trencsényi, eds., *Brave New Hungary: Mapping the “System of National Cooperation”* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020), 380.

⁴¹³ Please see chapter 2: Farbaký explains that Ybl's Várkert was as such an experiment of historicist buildings in the Castle Hill area. Farbaký, “A Budai Királyi Palota a historizmus korában.”

government resolution of this kind (1375/2011 (XI.8))⁴¹⁴, which explicitly emphasized the significance of Várkert Bazár, a point reinforced by the fact that it was the first building completed on Castle Hill. Its reconstruction and staged openings—the first of which showcased a partially renovated yet empty building in 2014—were narrated as events of profound symbolic weight, playing a key role in identity construction. PM Viktor Orbán’s speech demonstrates a peculiar aspect of historical attitude, one for which the historiography of NER frequently receives the accusation of being revisionist.⁴¹⁵ The PM argued that the reconstruction represented that “the history of *Várkert Bazár* also shows that if there is a unified goal, there is a unified will, then Hungarians are capable of impressive achievements.”⁴¹⁶ Yet, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, the notion of a “unified Hungary” in the 19th and early 20th centuries was not only a political myth carefully constructed by contemporary leaders, but one that was consciously upheld by successive regimes, particularly the Horthy era, as a reactionary response to the profound social, political, and economic crises that marked the 20th century.

This historicist attitude, coupled with a renewed and largely uncritical portrayal of the Horthy regime, remains a defining characteristic of the historical narratives promoted by NER. While Orbán framed his government as one that “finally takes action” after decades of political inertia, his speech also underscored what he saw as a historical duty—the need to uphold a “strong capital” as embodied by the Várkert Bazár, for, as he put it, “without a strong capital, there is no strong country.” One particularly revealing shift in political rhetoric can be observed here: prior to the third Orbán government, anti-Budapest sentiments had not yet entered mainstream Fidesz discourse. However, after 2014, prominent party figures and allied media

⁴¹⁴ Please see the resolution in the archive list at: A Várbazár rekonstrukciójáról és a Budai Várnegyed hosszútávú fejlesztéséről, valamint a budavári kertek revitalizációjáról, a Budai Várnegyed és környékének közlekedési problémáinak rendezéséről.

⁴¹⁵ See other, more prominent instances such as the inauguration of a Horthy statue, the Trianon memorial, the Prime Minister’s habit of making irredentist statements about Zakarpattia, Vojvodina, Transilvania. I do not analyse these as they have been vastly analysed in popular media.

⁴¹⁶ *Várkert Bazár Átadás - Orbán Viktor ...*

outlets increasingly adopted a modernized version of Horthy's characteristic hostility toward Budapest, effectively integrating it into the party's broader ideological framework.

Another telling aspect of the 2011 Várkert resolution (1375/2011 (XI.8)) is that it effectively annulled a previous resolution on Castle Hill—the 2004 resolution (1047/2004 (V.14)), which carried considerable symbolic weight in the context of both Hungarian and European identity formation.⁴¹⁷ Unlike its 2011 successor, the 2004 resolution was not primarily concerned with the full-scale renovation of Castle Hill—a demand that had not yet been widely articulated—but rather focused on the reconstruction of the former Ministry of Defense, with the explicit aim of establishing a permanent exhibition dedicated to the “greatness of Hungarian culture.”⁴¹⁸

This resolution had a dual purpose: on the one hand, it sought to assert Hungary's national uniqueness, aligning with the broader struggle for symbolic representation—or, in Francis Fukuyama's terms, the “struggle for recognition.” On the other hand, it was deeply embedded in the political context of Hungary's recent accession to the European Union, occurring a mere 14 days after the country officially joined the EU. The resolution was thus quick to position Hungary's national and supranational identities as complementary rather than contradictory:

The former Ministry of Finance palace on Szentháromság Square, as the intellectual hub for the development of the new national strategy following EU accession, can be established as the venue for events, exhibitions, and discussions focusing on the future of the Hungarian nation as well as strategic and modernization issues related to its social, economic, and cultural advancement, including the possibility of hosting Hungarian-Hungarian forums and exploring its potential role as the House of Hungarian Culture within the framework of its new European connections.

⁴¹⁷ a Budai Vár újjáépítésének befejezéséről.

⁴¹⁸ The 2004 resolution, as I will delve into it later on in the chapter, was signed by the governing socialist party. The institution it set out to create in the renovated Ministry building, in retrospect, seems to have been planned to have similar functions to the current *House of Traditions*.

Indeed, for the Medgyessy-led Hungarian Socialist Party government (2002-2004), the finalization of the reconstruction of Castle Hill was narrated as the symbolic end to the 20th century. As the then-PM was quoted in *Népszava*: “On May 1, the 20th century concluded for Hungary, and it is the government's task to heal the wounds caused by the past century. It is time to heal not only the spiritual wounds but also the physical wounds inflicted by World War II. This includes completing the reconstruction of Buda Castle.”⁴¹⁹

It is thus evident that the 2011 resolution, which laid the groundwork for the Hauszmann Program, was not simply an attempt to rectify an alleged lack of political vision regarding spaces of power representation. Rather, it constituted a direct ideological countermeasure to the European-leaning cultural mission of previous leftist and liberal governments—a stance that has since become a hallmark of Fidesz’s cultural politics.

The first inauguration of Várkert Bazár on April 3, 2014, was also strategically timed, taking place a mere three days before the parliamentary elections—elections widely regarded as the first true test of the Orbán regime’s durability. Fidesz not only secured victory but also retained its parliamentary supermajority, a feat that cemented the party’s internal and external legitimacy.⁴²⁰ The unfinished Várkert Bazár thus served as a “Trojan horse,” transforming a half-completed architectural project into a symbolic space for political consolidation.

It was only after the 2014 elections that the third Orbán government formally committed to the institutionalization of the Buda Palace and Castle Hill reconstructions, with the explicit objective of relocating core administrative functions to these historic sites. In the same year, the government passed a resolution to move the Prime Minister’s Office to Buda Palace, solidifying its intention to redefine the spatial and symbolic landscape of state power. The

⁴¹⁹ Csík and Hamvay, “Kulturális Központtá Alakul 2012-Re a Budai Vár.”

⁴²⁰ For more on the significance of the elections and their effect I recommend the following works in political science: Anna, “A választás mint rendszerkarakterisztikus intézmény”; Scheiring, *The Retreat of Liberal Democracy*.

Hauszmann Program's official launch in May 2015—under the newly christened National Hauszmann Plan—marked the moment when these ambitions transitioned from rhetoric to reality.

The following section will dissect the key elements of this reconstruction phenomenon, focusing on the first and second phases of its implementation.

Date of initiation	Description	Inauguration or project phase	Gov. Resolution no.
2010	The political declaration of the National Cooperation by the National Assembly 1/2010. (June 16.) OGY.		1/2010. (VI.16.)
2011	The new constitution, the Hungarian Fundamental Law is adopted alongside the National Credo.		2011.04.25
	Government resolution is passed on the rehabilitation of the Várkert and Buda Castle Hill district. A 25-year long plan is for the entire district's rehabilitation is initiated in the resolution.	Not yet part of the Hauszmann Program.	1375/2011 (XI.8.)
	National Assembly made a decision regarding the transformation of Kossuth Lajos Square surrounding the Parliament building through Resolution No. 61/2011 (July 13). The reconstruction works were encompassed by the Steindl Imre Program (SIP). The square reconstruction, which took place between 2012 and 2014, resulted in the renewal of nearly seven and a half hectares of land and the introduction of new functionalities.	Steindl Imre Program	61/2011 (VII. 13.)
	Declaration of the classification of administrative matters related to the implementation of investments associated with the reconstruction of the Várkert Bazár and the Royal Gardens of Buda as a matter of national economic importance.	Key Government Investment	311/2011 (XII.23.)
2012	Declaration of the classification of administrative matters related to the investment program at Kossuth Lajos Square in Budapest's	Key Government Investment, SIP	100/2012. (V. 16.)

	5th district as a matter of special importance, and designation of the competent authorities in the proceedings.		
2013	Declaration of the classification of administrative matters related to certain investments within the Liget Budapest project as a matter of special importance and designation of the competent authorities in the proceedings.	Key Government Investment, Liget Budapest Project	546/2013. (XII. 30.)
	Decree on declaring the administrative authority proceedings necessary for the realization of the memorial erected in memory of the German occupation of Hungary in the 5th district of Budapest as a matter of national economic importance, and on the designation of the competent authorities in the proceedings.	Key Government Investment, German Occupation Memorial	565/2013. (XII. 31.)
2014	Inauguration of the Várkert Bazár		
	Installation of the Hauszmann Committee		
2014-2016	László L. Simon is the minister responsible for the reconstruction of the Castle Hill		
2014-2015	As part of the National Hauszmann Plan, Government Resolution 1837/2014 (XII. 29.) was adopted, concerning the reconstruction of the former riding hall related to the Buda Castle. Another resolution, 1066/2015 (II. 23.), deals with the reconstruction of the Főőrségi building designed by Hauszmann Alajos and the reconstruction of the Stöckl stairs connecting it with the courtyard of Buda Castle. The renovation of Buda Castle itself is a significant part of the renewal concept, and its works began in 2016.	According to the original plans, the first phase of the National Hauszmann program would have been realized between 2016 and 2018, costing 55-60 billion forints. The second phase was planned for 2019-2024. However, information on the official website later suggests a later implementation, with the first phase between 2019-2021 and the second phase between 2021-2024.	
	Relocation of OSZK and MNG: To facilitate the relocation of the Prime Minister's Office and the implementation of the plan, several institutions were moved out of the castle. In 2014, the National Dance Theater was relocated, followed by several institutions of the Hungarian		

	Academy of Sciences in 2017. According to plans, the Széchenyi Library and the National Gallery were also supposed to move elsewhere. The relocation of the Széchenyi Library only reached the planning stage by 2021. The National Gallery was supposed to receive a new building as part of the Liget project, but construction had not even started. The construction of the New National Gallery stalled multiple times, despite various versions previously receiving approval. Finally, in late 2022, they accepted the building plans with further modifications. The estimated cost of relocating the National Gallery, initially planned at 26 billion, had already risen to 76 billion forints by 2020.		
2014-2018	In February 2018, it was revealed that the transformation of the chosen new location for the Ministry of National Economy – a recently renovated building – would cost 35-38 billion forints and take an expected 2.5 years. The decision in 2015 did not include a cost estimate during the preparation phase. Instead of the Ministry of National Economy, which became the Ministry of Finance again from 2018, they spent 70 billion forints on the renovation of its old-new building by June 2023, and the building had not been handed over by the summer of 2023.	Key Government Investments	410/2015 (XII.15) , 30/2016 (II.25) , 336/2016 (XI.11), 225/2018 (XI.29)
2016	Resolution to plan the necessary resources for the implementation of investments, including the establishment of an accessible transportation axis between Palota Road, Csikós Courtyard, and Hunyadi Courtyard, the construction of a service stable building connected to the Riding Hall, the reconstruction of the ramp between Csikós Courtyard and Hunyadi Courtyard, the reconstruction of Karakas Pasa Tower, the restoration of the original state of the Buzogány Tower and the associated drawbridge, and the construction of a new underground garage beneath the western gardens. The funds should		1120/2016. (III. 10.)

	be planned in collaboration with the Minister of National Economy during the planning of the central budget for the year 2017, based on a detailed cost and schedule plan, and should be allocated to the chapter of the Prime Minister's Office. The National Assembly joyfully accepts the legacy of Otto Habsburg and deems it important to appropriately place and present the legacy in a dignified manner.		
2016	László L. Simon is dismissed, János Lázár takes over as responsible Minister the duties related to the Hauszmann Program, alongside Zsolt Virág		
	Three members withdraw from the Hauszmann Committee with an open letter to L. Simon		
2018	Decree on the modification of certain government regulations related to the protection of the distinguished urban landscape - Amendment of Government Decree No. 100/2012 (V. 16.) on declaring certain administrative authority proceedings related to the investment program in Kossuth Lajos Square in the 5th district of Budapest as matters of significant importance and on the designation of the competent authorities in the proceedings	Key Government Investment - SIP	145/2018. (VIII. 13.)
2019	The Government declares, from the perspective of national economic importance, the administrative authority proceedings listed in Annex 1, which concern the properties located within the administrative area of the 5th district of Budapest, with cadastral numbers 24666 (Academy Street), 24694 (Zoltán Street), 24696, 24697, 24708 (Garibaldi Street), 24710/2, 24710/4, 24711, 24712, 24713 (Nádor Street), 24715 (Zoltán Street), 24718, 24719 (Vécsey Street), 24725 (Honvéd Street), 24834/1 (Martyrs' Square), 24834/2 (Báthory Street), 24859 (Kálmán Imre Street), 24876 (Szemere Street), 24881, 24890, 24891, 24892 (Alkotmány Street), 24893 (Kossuth Lajos Square), 24894 (Parliament), 24897/1 (Antall József Senior Quay), 24897/2, 24898, 24899,	Key Government Investment - SIP	85/2019. (IV. 23.)

	24914 (Szalay Street), 24917, 24956/2, 24965/2 (Falk Miksa Street), 24957, 24971/2 (Honvéd Street), 24973/2 (Szemere Street), 24986, 24987, 24988, 24989/2 (Balassi Bálint Street), 25007, 25122/4, 25122/6, 24747/1 (Szabadság Square), and affecting the land parcels formed after the completion of land consolidation procedures, which are related to the investment program (hereinafter together: investment). f) Surface development of Alkotmány Street (property with cadastral number 24892) and the construction of the National Cohesion Memorial, associated with the investment.		
	Extension of investment to surrounding buildings	SIP	197/2020. (V. 12.)
	The Government declares, from the perspective of national economic importance, the administrative authority proceedings in the Castle and the Ministry of Finance. This includes the facade and roof reconstruction based on the original architectural appearance - Fellner Sándor's 1903 plans - for the properties formed according to the final decision made in the land consolidation procedures, aimed at restoring the original architecture. Additionally, it involves the reconstruction of demolished risalits in the Szentháromság tér (cadastral number 6531) and Fortuna köz (cadastral number 6592) areas, along with the creation of new plans to ensure modern working conditions and the integration of necessary safety and transportation systems into a single building complex.	Key Governmental Investment – Hauszmann Program and the Ministry of Finance	396/2020. (VIII. 12.)
	Gergely Fodor becomes the responsible Minister for the National Hauszmann Program and the reconstruction of the Citadel		
2021	Inauguration of the Saint Stephen Hall	Second phase - Hauszmann Program	2021 August
2022	János Lázár is appointed Minister of Construction and Infrastructure		
2023	Parliament accepts the National Architecture Policy and the National Construction Act.		

3.1.2 The Second Phase 2014-2023: National Architecture Policies and the Shift to Anti-Budapest Sentiment through the Buda-analogy

The second temporal category begins with the third Orbán-government (2014-2018) and is characterized by the newly legitimized system's comprehensive efforts in the creation of hegemony. It is after 2014 that the history-writing of the right-wing populist Orbán regime grew from being a testing ground for, using the PM's terminology, a new cultural beginning, into an entire system of legally codified statements on history and architecture. I would like to highlight two processes in this period that demonstrate a stabilization of the right-wing cultural efforts and which showcase a spectacle, postmodern and highly revisionist attitude towards history writing, for which the focus is the Castle Hill. The first procession was the proposal of government resolution no. 1567/2015. (IX. 4.): a comprehensive modification of the construction industry with a policy resolution in a book format titled *National Architecture Policy*. This proposal paved the way for the Construction Act of 2023.⁴²¹ Two, the positioning of the Castle Hill and *Royal Palace* reconstructions antithetical to the rest of the city after 2019, resurrecting the anti-Budapest sentiments reminiscent of the Horthy regime.

The *National Architecture Policy [NEP]* can be regarded as the first document coming from the Fidesz government that signals its vast cultural commitment not only to the realm of history, such as in the case of the House of Terror⁴²² but to architecture as well. Its evolution

⁴²¹ János Lázár, *Nemzeti Építészeti politika* (Miniszterelnökség, 2015), <http://epiteszetpolitika.hu/>.

⁴²² The House of Terror is a frequented case study in the field of critical memory politics. A crucial edited collection on the topic with an East-European focus is Oksana Sarkisova et al., eds., *Past for the Eyes: East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008); for a revealing article on the House of Terror see: Thomas Fuller and International Herald Tribune, "Stark History / Some See a Stunt : Memory Becomes Battleground in Budapest's House of Terror," *The New York Times*, August 2, 2002, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/02/news/stark-history-some-see-a-stunt-memory-becomes-battleground-in-budapests.html>.

into the grand Construction Act of 2023⁴²³ demarcates a change in the general attitude towards spaces of representation, preservation, and the question of the capital. The NEP document reads as an attempt to fill the gap of the inexistent national architectural consensus, even if it comes with marrying folk architecture and the mix of European styles.⁴²⁴ It advocates for creating best practices in the construction industry in which “national self-consciousness” can strive. The document envisions a rather progressive, transparent, technologically observant, national, and modern culture of construction that reaches “European standards” and “is consistent with national endeavors.”⁴²⁵ Besides setting the aim of creating smart cities in Hungarian settlements that are sustainable, walkable, and publicly funded, a separate subchapter is dedicated to the issue of transparency and public communication. It reads:

The effective implementation of the National Architecture Policy calls for more efficient communication between the parties concerned, which could be facilitated through a wide-ranging social dialogue. Architecture should become an integral part of public thinking throughout society.⁴²⁶

In the same year, three members of the Hauszmann Committee, which comprised 18 professionals whose mandate was to provide professional advice on the Castle Hill reconstructions, wrote an open letter to Minister Lázár, objecting to a lack of functional discourse and debate, arguing that the Committee is part of a media stunt without significant influence on the outcome of the project—all this on the side of a number of corruption scandals around the Minister responsible, László L. Simon.⁴²⁷ The three members also argued against the uncritical historical reconstruction of the buildings that had been bombed or pulled down.

⁴²³ János Lázár, “2023/ LXIX. Az Állami Építési Beruházások Rendjéről,” Pub. L. No. LXIX, accessed November 24, 2023, <https://njt.hu/jogszabaly/2023-69-00-00>.

⁴²⁴ János Lázár, *Nemzeti Építészeti politika* (Miniszterelnökség, 2015), <http://epiteszpolitika.hu/>.

⁴²⁵ Lázár, *Nemzeti Építészeti politika*, 65.

⁴²⁶ Lázár, 133.

⁴²⁷ Építészforum, “Nyílt Levél Lázár Jánoshoz,” *Építészforum* (blog), accessed November 24, 2023, <https://epiteszforum.hu/nyilt-level-lazar-janoshoz>.

The decision to move the Prime Minister's Office to the Castle had also already been made in 2014, as a governmental priority investment; therefore, any objection was already done in vain.

In 2016, the three opposing members of the Committee quit alongside another open letter listing similar objections.⁴²⁸ While the Committee's dissolution did not affect the project's progress, I argue that its original role was not marginal in creating a new national symbol system. PM Orbán opened the Committee in 2014 with a speech that echoed the spirit of the new beginning characteristic of these years, saying that the Committee is similar to a council of war "where we discuss how to take back the castle."⁴²⁹ The likening of the committee, which is a democratic function, to a war council speaks of a particular perspective on history in which the national interest cannot be anything else than what I previously described as a moral duty of restitution—even if it is not a consensual process. I argue that in 2014, the government and the persons around the culture production of NER were still willing to create institutions that, through their sheer existence, would have subverted the accusations of autocracy in an, by that time, outspokenly illiberal regime.

From the beginning, the Hauszmann Program's main legitimization narrative was centered around the argument that the "communists destroyed the Castle Hill,"⁴³⁰ so the Hauszmannian facades need to be fully restored. The Committee's members to withdraw⁴³¹ emphatically highlighted the paradox which come under investigation in the first chapter of this dissertation as well:

In its essence, we consider the reconstruction of the late 19th century and early 20th century, characterized by the detrimental spirit of late historicism leading into World

⁴²⁸ Orbán Viktor Beszéde a Hauszmann Bizottság Ülésén, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1P4nFCPeuw>.

⁴²⁹ Orbán Viktor Beszéde a Hauszmann Bizottság Ülésén.

⁴³⁰ Molnár-Bánffy, "„Él magyar, áll Buda még!” – beszélgetés Fodor Gergely kormánybiztossal a megújuló Budavári Palotáról"; Fodor Gergely, "NHP," Nemzeti Hauszmann Program, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://nemzetihauszmannprogram.hu/program>; "Fodor Gergely várkapitány."

⁴³¹ Architect Zsófia Csomay, who has organized demonstrations in the Castle, and has been an outspoken advocate for preservation in the Castle District; art historian Pál Lővei; and architect, former Chief Architect at the Municipality of Budapest.

War I, as well as the meaninglessness of the Horthy era's backdrops with occasionally absurd architectural solutions, requiring billions and trillions, to be highly detrimental. It is a direct offense against the nation to reimagine the Castle District and the entire cultural and scientific utilization of the Castle Palace, serving the whole nation, through the displacement and sabotage of cultural and scientific institutions, and the planned installation of governmental functions unsuitable for these spaces.⁴³²

Referring to dissatisfaction with the castle investments, and amidst a row of corruption allegations, László L. Simon was dismissed from his position as the State Secretary responsible for cultural heritage protection and major cultural investments in June 2016. It was János Lázár, Minister of the Prime Minister's Office to take over the responsibilities of L. Simon, appearing in the position of a competent handler of issues revolving around the castle.⁴³³ The corruption scandal around L. Simon seemed to be mediated with a counter-attack response from Lázár, arguing that parts of the Hauszmann Plan had already been proposed initially by PM Ferenc Gyurcsány. The argument was that it was, first, Prime Minister Gyurcsány to propose the idea in 2009 that the entire household of the Prime Minister's Office should move to the castle for representational purposes. According to sources previously mentioned,⁴³⁴ that year, 9 billion forints were allocated for this purpose, but the elections the following year prevented the government from following up on the proposal. My sources, neither the list of Government Resolutions, nor the media reported such a precise proposal—in fact, two dates, 2004 and 2009 circulated in media as a reference point. The 2004 resolution, which I sourced earlier, was signed by PM Medgyessy to propose “the finalization of the post-war reconstructions” of Szent György tér only. In addition, the government resolution also calls for the collaboration of both

⁴³² <https://www.epiteszforum.hu>, “A Hauszmann Testület Három Tagjának Lemondása,” <https://www.epiteszforum.hu>, accessed November 14, 2023, <https://epiteszforum.hu/a-hauszmann-testulet-harom-tagjanak-lemondasa>.

⁴³³ Bence Horváth, “Lázár szerint Orbán nem is igazán akarna a Budai Várba költözni, csak nincs nagyon más választása,” 444, April 28, 2016, <https://444.hu/2016/04/28/lazar-szerint-orban-nem-is-igazan-akarna-a-budai-varba-koltozni-csak-nincs-nagyon-mas-valasztasa>.

⁴³⁴ a Budai Vár újjáépítésének befejezéséről.

the (then right-wing) local municipality, the Capital, and the government officials, as well as “the restoration of the former building of the Hungarian Ministry of Defense, serving as the permanent venue for an exhibition symbolizing the European achievements and network of Hungarian culture, until 2006.” This resolution does not in any way list or even insinuate the entire reconstruction of the Castle Hill and/or the relocation of the Prime Minister’s Office to the Castle. Quite the contrary, it establishes already in the first paragraph that the Castle must remain a center of culture.

The Castle Hill reconstructions departed, therefore, from a standpoint where the cultural functions were no longer acceptable for to the anti-communist identification of the system—a merging of issues that, as I have shown in the previous chapter, do not belong together at all. The historical continuity most accessible for NER and the government was the one set with the *belle époque* and the Horthy-regime’s years.⁴³⁵ The architectural legacy of these reference points, as I also displayed in the first chapter of this dissertation, is characterized by the often-confused ideas on what national architecture should comprise and what its functions can really be in culture. However, this architectural legacy is also one that is deeply impacted by myths of national unity, sovereignty, and cultural and economic greatness.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁵ This is well justified by the lasting insistence on the glorification of politicians during Horthy’s regime and the radical positioning of Hungary as a victim of the German occupation with no regard to the historical complexities and objective responsibilities of Horthy. There are two main characters in public life whose work is built around such historical justification: historians Mária Schmidt and Márton Békés. Schmidt’s oeuvre is filled with methodologically problematic essays, books, exhibitions that insinuate that the Orbán government is has a reparational function and his political empire is in historical continuity with the legacy of 1948 (War of Independence), 1867 (Compromise), 1956 (Revolution), and 1989 (transition).

⁴³⁶ “Régi tévedéseket öntenek betonba – a vári építkezések új hulláma | Válasz Online,” accessed October 29, 2023, <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2023/02/03/budai-var-kulugyminiszterium-honved-foparancsnoksag-jozsef-fohercegi-palota-szent-gyorgy-ter-disz-rekonstrukciol-visszaepites-hauszmann-program/>.



Figure 23. The Construction of the former Ministry of Defense in 2023. valaszonline.hu

The Construction Act of 2023, the successor of the *NEP* policy, is a document that exhibits a strong institutional commitment to these early-20th-century myths of nationhood. The very first sentence, with a declaration of intent, underlines this argument:

The National Assembly, acknowledging that a key national goal in development is the promotion of state construction investments *reflecting the community-building power of local traditions and embodying bourgeois*⁴³⁷ *good taste*, driven by the intention that, in harmony with our built environment as a cultural treasure of the nation—the efficiency of the preparation and implementation of state construction investments increases in line with our interests in preserving it, [...] a law is hereby enacted.⁴³⁸

It is noteworthy that the language in which the question of architectural style is presented here is close to the emotion-evoking language of populist rhetoric by its emphasis on *taste*, something that is in a personal register rather than style, which is a term of professional undertone. While the Act does not specify the architectural styles preferred in the advancement

⁴³⁷ Civil, as a translation of „polgári,” in this sense should be understood as a synonym for „bourgeois”.

⁴³⁸ Lázár, 2023/ LXIX. az állami építési beruházások rendjéről, 1.

of *bourgeois good taste*, minister Lázár's own political communication clarifies what trends must be cultivated and followed. He mentioned at a conference in 2022:

I would like us to build differently and with a focus on quality in Hungary. We want to close a chapter that has been a transitional period after 40 years of communism and where a new era prioritizing quality would begin. However, it is not a secret that we have architectural role models. We believe in Kós, Lechner, and Makovecz, and the architecture we represent is built on tradition, harmonized with the landscape, and embracing traditional values, and is equally important to the modernists. We aim to give a place and role to values, especially local ones.”⁴³⁹

According to the minister, the aim of the new act in the name of good taste is necessary for “Hungary to step on a new civilizational level.” Károly Kós and Ödön Lechner are without a doubt two of the most prominent Hungarian architects of the 20th century, as discussed in the first chapter as well. However, as I have shown, Lechner was most specifically criticized for Secession's overdecoration, insistence on traditional scaling, disregard for the advancement of technologies and new perspectives in scale and function provided by modernism, and its failure to actually canonize Hungarian style into mainstream architecture—mostly because of the issues which constituted the criticism against his work. While not being able to solidify Hungarian architecture as a distinguishable genre, Lechner was also consciously isolated within the profession by Hauszmann's traditionalist thinking about the course of architecture.⁴⁴⁰ The mentioning of these architects in the policy is, despite this, left without further explanation: it is not known what their specific endorsement over others will truly mean for the professionals of architecture and urban planning—especially given that Imre Makovecz (1935-2011), most known for the establishment of Hungarian organic architecture, also began

⁴³⁹ *A Polgári Jó Ízlést Akarjuk Érvényesíteni. Jót, Jobban És Jobb Ízléssel Szeretnénk Építeni.*, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/lazarjanosfidesz/videos/916895589724748/>.

⁴⁴⁰ Another intriguing aspect of Lázár's list of architectural role-models is the referencing of Imre Makovecz (1935-2011). The award-winning Makovecz is known for his Hungarian folk-influenced highly postmodernist architecture, but it is less often mentioned that he began his career as a modernist architect.

his career experimenting with tendencies such as brutalism, a tendency that is rather far from what the conservative Minister would most likely label as part of “bourgeois taste.” The simultaneous mentioning of these particular architects demonstrates the likely absence of a consistent vision about architecture history and the national style.



Figure 24. Makovecz's Early Work in Sárospatak—not yet part of his organic architectural oeuvre. Source: makovecz.hu

Lázár's political rhetoric, beyond its persistent insistence on matters of taste, has been deeply entangled in a forced conflict between Budapest and the rest of the country. His anti-Budapest sentiments intensified following the 2019 municipal elections, in which Fidesz-backed mayor István Tarlós was unseated by progressive challenger Gergely Karácsony. After this political setback, both Lázár and Orbán adopted an increasingly pronounced anti-Budapest stance—or rather, a rhetoric that equates true patriotism with unwavering loyalty to the countryside, while portraying Budapest as a stronghold of anti-patriotic sentiment.⁴⁴¹ This

⁴⁴¹ János Lázár, “A jövő patrióta, vidékpárti, de nem Budapest-ellenes,” *Mandiner*, December 26, 2022, <https://mandiner.hu/hirek/2022/12/kozelet-lazar-janos-vidék>.

framing has frequently been linked to Miklós Horthy's enduring legacy of anti-Budapest rhetoric.⁴⁴²

Since 2016, the Hauszmann Program's legitimizing narrative has relied on two fundamental claims: 1) that the symbols of national greatness were deliberately erased by the "communists" in an effort to fracture the unity of the Hungarian nation, and 2) that the proper function of Castle Hill is an administrative one, a matter about which there has allegedly been long-standing consensus.

These assertions have been consistently reiterated by János Lázár and other government-affiliated ministers.⁴⁴³ As of autumn 2023, significant milestones in the program have already been completed, including the establishment of the Prime Minister's Office in the Carmelite Monastery, the renovation of Szent István Hall (2021) and the Royal Guard building (2020), the reconstruction of the Riding Hall (2020) and the Stöckl stairs (2020), as well as the later decision to rebuild the previously mentioned "Dracula's Castle," the József Archduke Palace. Additionally, the structural works of the Ministry of Finance have been finalized. The second phase of the Hauszmann Program is also well underway, encompassing the reconstruction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense. Since 2015, an additional 340 billion forints have been allocated to ensure the program's completion.⁴⁴⁴

Examining the first thirteen years of NER, it becomes evident that the Hauszmann Program has undergone multiple shifts in its approach to historical narration. According to

⁴⁴² Zrt HVG Kiadó, "Lázár János egy Antall József-interjúval reagált a Horthy-botránnyra," hvg.hu, September 6, 2023, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20230906_Lazar_Janos_egy_Antall_Jozsefinterjuval_reagalt_a_Horthybotrannya; Zrt HVG Kiadó, "Orbán Horthy Miklóst méltatta," hvg.hu, June 21, 2017, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20170621_Orban_Nemzeti_identitasra_epulo_kulturpolitika_kell.

⁴⁴³ From January 1, 2019, the Castle Captaincy Nonprofit Ltd. oversees the implementation of the government development program affecting the Buda Castle Hill. In April 2019, Fodor Gergely was appointed as government commissioner for government investments in the Buda Castle Quarter, and he is also the director of the Castle Captaincy Nonprofit Ltd.

⁴⁴⁴ "53 milliárd forint sem lett elég a József főhercegi palotára és mélygarázsára | atlatszo.hu," September 20, 2023, <https://atlatszo.hu/kozpenz/2023/09/20/53-milliard-forint-sem-lett-eleg-a-jozsef-fohercegi-palotara-es-melygarazsara/>.

current government official Gergely Fodor, the administration remains “determined to rebuild the buildings that have been torn down – and to recreate the spirit of the times of great growth.”⁴⁴⁵ Initially, the program’s purpose was twofold: first, to showcase the party’s ability to govern effectively while compensating for the alleged failures of past regimes—both the post-war socialist governments and the post-transition liberal administrations. Second, to cultivate the impression of a restored era of prosperity, all while establishing a carefully curated historical continuity with a selectively idealized past.

The program ultimately serves as a statement of the system’s commitment to nationalist traditionalism, providing a platform for the canonization of Hungarian architecture in a manner deemed appropriate to “bourgeois taste”—a term that remains conveniently vague, both in its historical and contemporary meanings. At the same time, the program also embodies the system’s broader inclination to blur the lines between the real and the imagined past. By openly embracing the notion that the objective is to recreate rather than to create anew, the program reveals its deeper ideological aim: the crafting of a historical narrative in which continuity is carefully manufactured, and the past is not merely commemorated but actively reassembled to suit present political imperatives.

3.2 The National Form as a Product of Cultural Warfare

Another way to interpret the series of actions surrounding the Hauszmann Program is through the lens of the ongoing mass production of national symbolism. At its core, I argue, this process is based on a simplistic and uncritical method of historical recycling—an inherently postmodern approach to history as a phenomenological problem, one that ultimately leads to

⁴⁴⁵ Endre Sal, “Történelmi Léptékű Fejlesztés a Várban | Mandiner,” accessed November 17, 2020, https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20201008_tortenelmi_lepteku_fejlesztos_a_varban#. Author’s own translation

an inescapable revisionism. One aspect of NER that is often overlooked by opposition media is the regime's relentless effort to establish cultural hegemony through the continuous (re)production of national language and symbolism. While the opposition tends to expend its energy on normative debates—often within the confines of elitist echo chambers—far less attention is devoted to understanding the intellectual mechanisms driving the system, which, by the time of writing this dissertation, has become inescapable in many academic fields. I contend that the right-wing nationalist regime has successfully employed architectural spectacle as a short-term political tool, yet it has failed to meaningfully address the fundamental question raised by Ödön Lechner—the realization of a truly Hungarian national form.

From the timeline I have outlined, it is evident that the Palace and Castle Hill have received far more attention in the past thirteen years than under the preceding liberal and post-socialist governments. Yet, these reconstructions have ignited a series of professional debates, exposing a range of dilemmas concerning national history and national architecture. I would like to highlight a few of these critical issues.

One of the central questions in the Palace's reconstruction is the tension between historical authenticity and historical nostalgia. Architectural authenticity is typically evaluated through the lens of established preservation principles, such as those articulated in the previously referenced Venice Charter. The most significant post-war reconstructions have generally adhered to these guidelines or, at the very least, have incorporated strong symbolic references to post-war modernism. By contrast, the Imre Steindl and Hauszmann Programs seem to approach authenticity in a less dialectical, less nuanced manner. Their insistence on “original” forms and shapes fosters an experience of living nostalgia rather than offering a meaningful commentary on the relationship between past and present. However, this conflation of authenticity with nostalgia carries significant risks when it comes to the construction of national identity.

First, it stems from the ideological premise that everything that occurred after 1945 amounted to an assault on the nation's urban and cultural fabric—a claim that, as I have demonstrated, is historically untenable. This logic also suggests that historical rupture points, particularly 1944 and 1989, can be seamlessly linked, as if they represent a homogenous historical process and a singular collective experience—one that, with a “new beginning,” can be neatly erased from memory. From this perspective, the Hauszmann Program might seem to affirm Fukuyama's end-of-history thesis, as it functions, in a quintessentially postmodern manner, as a mere repetition of historical impressions rather than the creation of a new historical trajectory. Yet, herein lies the paradox of the system: while it forges a novel political order—an illiberal regime—it does so without an original or, in another sense, an authentic architectural language of its own.

Second, precisely because of this failure to develop its own formal language, the system falls back on an uncritical (and therefore superficial) mass production of national symbols. This practice, I argue, amounts to a form of nationalist spectacle—a reliance on visual grandeur that signifies national greatness, not through genuine historical consciousness, but through a nostalgia that exploits both the real discontents of capitalist society and the artificial memory politics bound to the question of authenticity.

If we take Walter Benjamin's theorization of authenticity seriously—where authenticity is understood not as a mere replication of the past but as a singular, self-defining originality—then the consequences of this lack of originality for national identity become immediately apparent. In his seminal essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin argues that the aura of authenticity, intrinsic to a unique work of art, is inevitably diminished in an age dominated by mass reproduction, such as photography and film.⁴⁴⁶ The same principle applies here: the Hungarian government's attempts to reforge a

⁴⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Penguin UK, 2008).

sense of national unity through architectural reconstruction ultimately undermine their own intent. By mechanically reproducing a version of the past rather than engaging with the present, the regime risks turning its nationalist project into an elaborate stage set—one that evokes historical greatness but remains, in essence, a hollow imitation.

According to Walter Benjamin, the reproduction of art detaches the work from its original context, diminishing its aura and leading to a transformation in how art is perceived. His reflections on nostalgia are closely linked to his broader critique of modernity's impact on cultural production. He explores nostalgia as a longing for an idealized past, shaped by a sense of loss and a desire for authenticity. This intersects with his analysis of the commodification of art and the ways in which industrialization and mass production contribute to a yearning for an authentic, pre-modern past. Through the constant reproduction and dissemination of cultural images, this longing is both reinforced and manipulated.

As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, the endless dissemination of reproduced images is not just a cultural issue but a political one—especially when it involves national imagery. When the category of the nation is used to distract from deeper structural issues of class, gender, and race—factors that would otherwise shape a modern approach to public architecture—it results in the (re)production of national symbols that, on their own, hold little inherent meaning. Instead, nostalgia is placed at the center of cultural discourse, becoming a tactic of nationalist spectacle that replaces genuine historical self-awareness with revisionism. However, for nostalgia to remain politically effective, it must be continuously renewed. This is achieved through the repeated invocation of past injustices inflicted upon the urban landscape and the perpetuation of a so-called “war on symbols,” a narrative frequently employed by NER intellectuals.

Contemporary historian Márton Békés represents this issue most prominently in popular media. His principal argument, that “recognizing the hegemony of culture and

establishing hegemony within it is essential to achieve final political victory,”⁴⁴⁷ is a right-wing conservative application of Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s (1891-1937) theory of cultural hegemony. Gramsci’s work is centered around the recognition that the political representation of workers and the masses must have a proactive responsibility in the cultivation of culture for the masses—a cultural context that not simply surrounds the masses but is their own creation.⁴⁴⁸ Békés argues in his book *Cultural Warfare*:

Generally known levels of the spheres of power, such as state authority – often perceived as an abstract apparatus – along with the political power that operates it and the social order it guarantees, are merely at the forefront of a much more intricate, layered, and complex form of rule. Covering the entire domain of community life, this can be called cultural power. Whoever gains hegemony in the latter may sooner or later play a leading role in most or even all of the former three more tangible forms of power. It is not just that political power can be exercised without cultural approval and authorization only temporarily (and even so, only for a brief period and especially neither effectively nor validly), but also that rule, or at least the obstruction of the sitting administration, is possible even without palpable political power. This takes place simply through the hegemony of culture – and hegemony established within culture!⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁷ Márton Békés, *Cultural Warfare - The Theory and Practice of Cultural Power*, trans. Ferenc Sullivan (Közép- és Kelet-európai Történelem és Társadalom Kutatásáért Alapítvány, 2022), 7.

⁴⁴⁸ Gramsci argued that political power is not solely exercised through coercion or force but is also maintained and legitimized through cultural means. Cultural hegemony, as Gramsci conceptualized it, refers to the dominance of a particular set of cultural values, beliefs, and norms that serve the interests of the ruling class.

Gramsci contended that the ruling class establishes its dominance not only through economic and political control but also by shaping and controlling the cultural institutions and ideas disseminated in society. In his view, the ruling class exercises its influence by promoting its own worldview as the norm, thereby shaping the beliefs and values of the broader population. This cultural dominance, according to Gramsci, creates a sense of consent among the subordinated classes, making them more likely to accept the social order and the status quo.

For Gramsci, cultural hegemony is a form of soft power that operates through institutions such as education, media, religion, and other cultural apparatuses. By influencing the prevailing ideas and cultural narratives, the ruling class can maintain its dominance without relying solely on coercion. Gramsci's ideas on cultural hegemony have had a significant impact on cultural studies, sociology, and political theory. His work has been influential in understanding how power operates beyond just the political and economic realms, emphasizing the importance of cultural and ideological dimensions in shaping social structures. My recommended sources on Gramsci's theory are Antonio Gramsci and Antonio Gramsci, *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916 - 1935*, ed. David Anthony Forgacs, 1. ed (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2000); Kate A. F. Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought* (Oxford University Press, 1987), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198275435.001.0001>.

⁴⁴⁹ Békés, *Cultural Warfare - The Theory and Practice of Cultural Power*, 8.

Hegemony in Békés's borrowed theorization is indeed a means to make power more resilient to challengers: "in other words, the change to a new cultural era seals the change that has already taken place in a political system. Without a change of cultural era, any change of political regime will remain incomplete and easily reversible."⁴⁵⁰ In the "struggle for hegemony" for Békés the essential argument to internalize is that revolution does not need to be liberal or emancipatory if it comes from a conservative understanding of the *Zeitgeist*.⁴⁵¹

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's characterization of the Hauszmann Committee's work as a "council of war" aligns closely with Békés's interpretation of cultural conflict. Unlike the Prussian Berliner Schloss in Berlin—another product of conservative lobbying for post-transition national symbolism—the reconstruction of Buda Castle Hill represents an even more rigid commitment to this cultural struggle. Just as military conflicts emerge during periods of political crisis, so too do cultural wars—a framing that right-wing hegemony has deliberately cultivated as part of its self-narrative.

To some extent, this sense of crisis is justified. The progressive-liberal governments prior to 2010 failed to fully articulate or implement their own vision of cultural hegemony,⁴⁵² partially because of what Péter György defined in his book as the thinning of cultural value in the new postmodern capitalist economy.⁴⁵³ In other words, the post-transition political elite did not perceive it as their responsibility to construct a coherent cultural hegemony based on their core values—values that could have offered an alternative to the already deteriorating

⁴⁵⁰ Békés, 10.

⁴⁵¹ Most emphatically at Békés, 113.

⁴⁵² Except for former Budapest Mayor Gábor Demszky's comprehensive liberal approach to municipal leadership, which is in depth explained in a collaborative work Pallai Katalin et al., *Budapest-modell: egy liberális várospolitikai kísérlet* (Budapest: Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative: Open Society Institute, 2003). This partially deals with the cultural responsibilities of political leadership, however, does not theorize the long-term relationship between of economic policy and culture.

⁴⁵³ Péter György and Zsolt Durkó, *Utánzatok Városa, Budapest* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi Könyvkiadó, 1993).

neoliberal cultural dominance of the West. Békés, in his own way, makes a similar observation.⁴⁵⁴

While Békés's argument for a conservative cultural revolution provides an interesting contribution to right-wing thought, his reliance on revolutionary rhetoric and his attempt to reinterpret leftist theorists—his chapter titled “Gramsci from the Right” being a prime example—inevitably overlooks the very critique of political economy that underpins their work. Mark Fisher, as mentioned before, argues that capitalism, particularly in its radical neoliberal form, necessarily leads to a culture dominated by empty signifiers. In this light, the idea that anti-capitalist critical theory could be repurposed as a justification for an explicitly capitalist nationalist regime is inherently paradoxical.

Thus, the approach to cultural hegemony as a phenomenological problem, relying on an eclectic use of historical reference points, is less of a revolutionary vision than a symptom of the failures of capitalist nationalism. The attempt to establish a distinctly Hungarian national architecture by reviving the *spirit of past national greatness* creates a dangerous illusion—one in which the old, ambiguous symbols of prosperity are rebranded as vessels for an imagined national identity. These recreated symbols of national greatness, however, function not as genuine cultural anchors, but as mere spectacles—representations of a representation, endlessly recycled in the pursuit of political legitimacy.

⁴⁵⁴ Békés, *Cultural Warfare - The Theory and Practice of Cultural Power*, 24. “The goal of post-1989 global liberal hegemony was to create an idealess, post-ideological standstill. In terms of the economy, this meant the lack of an alternative to the neoliberal school (TINA = There Is No Alternative), while in culture, it resulted in the emergence of an unquestionable liberal canon. Evidently, the dominant idea was that of the ruling class. The so-called “progressive forces” consisted of two components: representatives of multinational interests on the one hand and torchbearers of multicultural values on the other.”

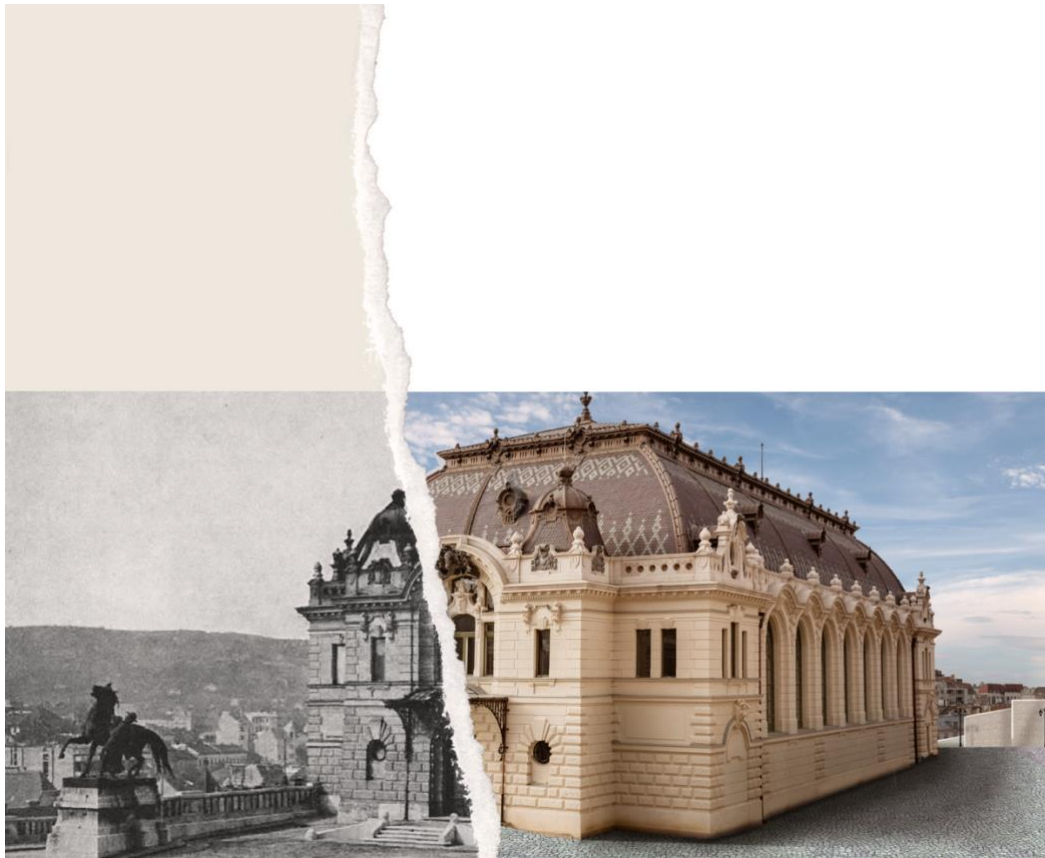


Figure 25. The Old and the Virtual Stable House according to a Rendered Image. Source: NHP.hu

4. Conclusions

In this chapter, I aimed to demonstrate that post-1989 debates on reconstructing spaces of power representation are complex and multi-layered. I have shown that in both Berlin and Budapest, the mainstream post-socialist discourse was shaped by how previous regimes perceived their own historical continuities. In Berlin, the discourse was expansive but often steered by Western conservative lobbying—yet remained accessible to civil groups, academics, and professionals. In contrast, Budapest saw little discussion about the new functions and forms of former spaces of power, creating an intellectual vacuum that enabled the rise of radical conservative projects.

By analyzing the Berliner Schloss—whose Baroque and neo-Baroque origins are similar to those of Buda Palace—I have demonstrated that in 1945, the Stalinist leaderships of

both countries faced comparable dilemmas regarding their royal palaces. However, they reached different conclusions. Walter Ulbricht ordered the demolition of the Berliner Schloss and the construction of the Palast der Republik, which, in my analysis, became a symbol of a regime marked by compressed realities. Meanwhile, Mátyás Rákosi adopted a more hesitant stance regarding Buda Castle. Despite professional recommendations to repurpose the site for government administration, Rákosi refused to move into a former royal palace, preferring to maintain the Party's historical image of peasant lineage.

Historical sources indicate that the Palast der Republik quickly became a showcase of an egalitarian yet prosperous socialist society. Despite its role in this fictional representation, it gained considerable popularity among East Germans. In contrast, Buda Castle took on a function more authentic to the post-Stalinist regime, becoming a center of culture that housed public institutions accessible to the masses. From the perspective of socialist spatial politics, this made the Buda Castle project far more successful than the Palast der Republik, as its use was not dictated by profit-driven considerations or the capitalist structuring of labor and leisure but rather by cultural engagement, knowledge production, and public ownership.

This chapter has focused on the theoretical challenges that have shaped post-1989 approaches to reconstruction, history, and culture. I have demonstrated that following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the impact of public discourse—or its absence—became increasingly apparent, with lasting effects still visible today. I argued that the reconstruction of Buda Castle had been a long-standing conservative ambition since Hungary's first democratically elected government but was dismissed as a serious intellectual endeavor by subsequent liberal governments.

In the latter part of the chapter, I further demonstrated that projects such as the Hauszmann and Steindl Programs, as well as the Liget Project, are integral to the ongoing construction of cultural hegemony. These initiatives are framed within the broader cultural

warfare between the political left and right. I also examined how Fidesz and its affiliated institutions deploy historical narratives to shape national self-perception. Over time, the party's approach to history has undergone significant shifts, which are reflected in its evolving portrayal of Buda Castle Hill's past.

The government has strategically used architectural projects as a means of cultural and political legitimization, reinforcing a strong national identity and fostering a sense of pride and belonging among Hungarians. This strategy aligns with a broader political agenda aimed at reinventing and reinforcing national identity through architecture and urban development. The emphasis on architecture as a vehicle for national identity reflects a global trend in which the built environment serves as both a cultural expression and a potent symbol of national pride and sovereignty. However, this approach is based on a deliberate misinterpretation of history on two key fronts.

First, it constructs an artificial continuity between the Dualist period and the Horthy era, portraying them as two successive periods of unwavering commitment to national interests and economic progress. As I demonstrated in Chapters One and Two, this is historically inaccurate. The Dualist era faced substantial constraints on both autonomous economic growth—given Hungary's dependence on Austria within the Monarchy—and political liberalization. Budapest's transformation into a grand capital was a direct result of the 1867 Compromise, and its Gründerzeit-era expansion was fueled by the economic boom of the late 19th century. Thus, the conservative Horthy era cannot be seen as a direct continuation of Dualism, not only because of Regent Horthy's ambiguous political role (which contrasted with the clearly defined authority of the Monarch) but also because such a reading of history would dismiss events such as the anti-military movements, the Aster Revolution, and the Republic of 1919 as mere anomalies rather than significant ruptures in the nation's historical trajectory.

Second, NER officials deliberately distort history by falsely claiming that the achievements of the Dualist period were purely Hungarian accomplishments. In reality, many of Hungary's grand national symbols emerged from competition between Vienna and Budapest, and their conceptualization depended on the stability of Austrian-Hungarian relations. By erasing this interdependence, the government constructs an illusion of national self-sufficiency that is historically unfounded.

For this reason, the buildings reconstructed under the Hauszmann Program are not merely repetitions of the historical distortions of the 1867 Compromise, as described by István Bibó. They serve as monuments to the foundational and multi-layered falsities of the system that commissioned them. The post-war Royal Palace—shaped by preservation principles established by Hungarian professionals, who sought to balance historical continuity with modernization—will be replaced by an imitation of its predecessor, an overtly Habsburg construction. This raises an important question: What does “national” truly mean to Hungary's right-wing conservative cultural elite? If the government's architectural vision is based on historical misrepresentation, then the Hauszmann Program, much like North Macedonia's Skopje 2014 project, is fundamentally anti-innovative. It rejects historical progression in favor of a static, mythologized past.

The effort to establish a distinctly Hungarian tradition of national architecture by reviving past symbols of greatness requires critical reevaluation, both in practice and in theory. The spectacle tactics promoted by right-wing theorists offer an empty promise when it comes to fostering a genuine sense of national identity—much like their 19th-century predecessors, but with potentially greater consequences. The key question remains: How long will mass-produced symbols of national belonging retain their cultural and political power? And will the coming decades see the emergence of an architecture that is not only historically self-aware but also capable of addressing the challenges of the 21st century?

Conclusions – Can National Architecture Exist Without the Spectacle?

Over the past decade, a surge in historical reconstructions adopting classicist or historicist styles has taken root, not only in Budapest and Berlin but in other parts of Europe as well. Nowhere was this phenomenon more pronounced than in Skopje, where, between 2010 and 2014, an audacious campaign of urban reinvention took place under the banner of the "Skopje 2014 Project." Orchestrated by the nationalist-populist government—often accused of autocratic tendencies—this endeavor sought to furnish the Macedonian capital with a “proud past,” one that conveniently aligned with the historical imagination of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski in the wake of Yugoslavia’s dissolution.⁴⁵⁵ A veritable orgy of neo-classicist buildings, statues, and monuments materialized at an astonishing pace, reconstructing an urban identity that had never quite existed in such a form. Taxpayers bore the brunt of the costs, while the economic crisis of 2012 raged on undeterred—a historical irony that seems lost on those who argue that monumental architecture provides national salvation.⁴⁵⁶ Critics have pointed out that the project, far from revitalizing public space, has in fact commodified and falsified it, feeding a distorted vision of a nationhood that owes more to fantasy than historical legitimacy.⁴⁵⁷ The comparison to the Buda Castle Hill reconstructions, hurriedly erected during the COVID-19 pandemic, is not incidental—both projects share the same ideological imperative: to conjure an idealized past while glossing over present crises.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁵ “The Makeover That’s Divided a Nation,” *BBC News*, August 30, 2014, sec. Magazine, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-28951171>.

⁴⁵⁶ “Skopje 2014 Forges Ahead Despite Macedonian Crisis,” *Balkan Story* (blog), June 7, 2012, <https://balkanstory.wordpress.com/2012/06/07/skopje-2014-forges-ahead-despite-macedonian-crisis/>.

⁴⁵⁷ “The Makeover That’s Divided a Nation.”

⁴⁵⁸ “Skopje 2014 Forges Ahead Despite Macedonian Crisis.”



Figure 26. *The Skopje 2014 Construction.* Deian Vladov.

The Skopje 2014 Project exemplifies nationalist architecture as pure spectacle, an extravagant mise-en-scène in which the facades of historical continuity are erected to serve the interests of contemporary power.⁴⁵⁹ The project's underlying logic mirrors that of right-wing architectural revisionism elsewhere, particularly in Hungary, where history is framed as a battleground between the national past and the undesired modernisms of the post-1945 period. In Skopje, this conflict was embodied in the rejection of the city's post-earthquake reconstruction under the aegis of Kenzo Tange, a luminary of brutalist and metabolist architecture.⁴⁶⁰ What was once celebrated globally as an avant-garde exercise in urban renewal was now cast aside in favor of pastiche—a longing for imperial grandeur, delivered through the medium of kitsch.

⁴⁵⁹ Babić, "Curating the Yugoslav Identity."

⁴⁶⁰ Babić; Kenzo Tange and Udo Kultermann, eds., *Kenzo Tange: 1946 - 1969 ; Architecture and Urban Design* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1970).



Figure 27. Left: Tange's Post Office building in Skopje. Wikipedia.

Figure 28. Right: Kenzo Tange's Skopje City Master Plan 0033 01. Wikipedia.

This phenomenon is not confined to Eastern Europe. The former U.S. President Donald Trump similarly attempted to canonize classicism as the architectural language of state power, issuing the executive order “On Promoting Beautiful Federal Public Architecture.”⁴⁶¹ This decree sought to impose a single stylistic doctrine upon Washington D.C., one purportedly rooted in the aesthetic preferences of the Founding Fathers. With the renewed Trump presidency the Republican appetite for architectural nationalism endures, demonstrating that the struggle over built heritage is, at its core, a struggle over ideological dominion.⁴⁶²

This dissertation has repeatedly underscored the fundamental entanglement of architecture and politics. As Manfredo Tafuri incisively argued in *Architecture and Utopia*, the built environment is never neutral; it is both a reflection of and an instrument for the ideological ambitions of its patrons.⁴⁶³ The interconnected character of power representation and architecture is well described in Lawrence Vale’s monograph on the role of capitals in power

⁴⁶¹ “Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture – The White House.”

⁴⁶² “Republicans Want to Mandate a Single Style of Architecture in Washington,” POLITICO, July 7, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/07/07/trump-conservative-federal-building-architecture-00104985>.

⁴⁶³ Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*.

representation.⁴⁶⁴ It seems that the desire to represent society in its “most revolutionary development,” as outlined by socialist realists, seems to prevail in architectural practices. My conclusions rest on three foundational arguments: 1) nationalist architecture is deeply enmeshed in ideological anachronisms; 2) national narratives often exist in tension with historical self-awareness; and 3) nationalist spectacles, bound to conservative political ideology, manufacture a revisionist aesthetic.

National architecture, therefore, is not merely political but profoundly historical—a site where myth and materiality collide. Aldo Rossi’s seminal work on architectural continuity and rupture highlights how buildings serve as repositories of memory, but also as canvases for historical revisionism.⁴⁶⁵ The nationalist impulse to erect a singular “national style” is invariably an exercise in selective memory, one that disregards the messy, hybrid nature of architectural history in favor of a sanitized, ethnically homogeneous aesthetic.

This is clearly illustrated by the cases of the Buda Palace and the Berliner Schloss, where historicist reconstructions privilege the baroque and neo-classical over the modern and the vernacular, all in the name of national grandeur. The strategy is not new; it has been a fixture of nation-building efforts since the late 18th century, with classicism serving as a visual shorthand for imperial legitimacy. What is new, however, is the context of its contemporary resurgence: a post-Soviet, post-liberal landscape in which authoritarian nostalgia finds fertile ground.

The primordialist view has had a lasting role in the service of nationalist hegemony creation and its historical revisionist tendency—it continues to do so. In the late 19th century, the primordial understanding of nation was engraved into architectural practices through the referencing of architectural styles that did not take root in Hungary—for this, I have brought

⁴⁶⁴ Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*.

⁴⁶⁵ Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, 16. print, Oppositions Books (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

the example of the Gothic, favored by late-19th century architects to be the national style in a symbolic gesture to counterbalance the rising sense of belatedness in Hungarian parliamentary politics. The comparative cases of the Parliament or the Academy of Sciences show that the reconstruction of Dualist Buda was embedded in a more extensive debate that had characterized Hungarian politics for five decades. The discussion was not simply a question of national sovereignty or autonomy. Still, it was one whose resolution would have meant the creation of the Hungarian nation both in the past and present to the 1840s—ultimately, the creation of the ethnic nation with a homogenous language of form in architecture. The creation of this language of form failed, but the ethnicist attitude to nationalism remained—at the expense of the inherently emancipatory dimension of national representation.

The resurgence of primordialist approaches to history and national architecture—a direct echo of the ethnicist nationalism of the mid-19th century—has been steadily gaining momentum since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. I argue that this revival of traditionalist historical narratives and their architectural counterparts is the product of two primary factors: (1) the absence of a compelling, alternative vision that could have taken root after 1989, and (2) the unresolved tension surrounding Hungary’s national past, particularly regarding Stalinism and the lived experience of socialism.

The latter point finds a striking parallel in the case of Berlin’s Palast der Republik, where the interplay of competing nostalgias—East and West—was symptomatic of divergent historical continuities after 1989. The post-socialist confrontation in Berlin revolved around the tension between socialist and imperial legacies, with the unresolved reckoning with the former proving more politically charged than any residual fear of embracing the latter. In Budapest, however, the socialist architectural past was not met with overt contestation; instead, it was quietly dismantled. The ease with which Viktor Orbán’s right-wing populist government repurposed the internationally lauded preservation and spatial democratization policies of the

Buda Castle from the 1970s onward—recasting them as symptoms of socialist architectural vandalism—reveals deeper political and societal shortcomings beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Nonetheless, it is imperative to recognize the brief but consequential roles of socialist realism and its successor, socialist modernism, in shaping a historically self-aware interpretation of the Palace's history. The ideological contradictions inherent in socialist realism rendered it ill-suited to address the complexities of the Buda Palace, a structure steeped in royal, imperial, and dualist symbolism. A critical engagement with the socialist period further clarifies a fundamental historical truth: the Palace was not predestined for any single function between 1945 and 1989; rather, its cultural role emerged from a broader uncertainty about how to reconcile the Castle Hill's conflicting historical legacies.

This dissertation has demonstrated that the question of national architecture—of a federal form—is anything but self-evident. Ödön Lechner's assertion that “the Hungarian national style is not something we have had, but something that is to be” has reverberated throughout the last 150 years of architectural discourse and politics alike. I began this study by engaging with the following theoretical premises: (1) the notion of national form in public architecture is deeply entrenched in anachronisms, which nationalist ideology strategically deploys to construct an artificial sense of unity across the long 20th century; (2) there exists an inherent conflict between the mass production of national narratives and a historically self-aware engagement with the past; and (3) nationalist identity—particularly when intertwined with conservative political ideology and cultural hegemony—relies heavily on spectacles, crafting a prefabricated language of national aesthetics rooted in revisionist mythology.

Accordingly, I conclude that the contemporary replication of symbols of national grandeur stems from the misguided conviction that Hungarian national architecture once had a distinct, historically coherent form in its so-called golden ages of sovereignty and prosperity.

Both claims are demonstrably false: no distinct Hungarian national style ever solidified, and the very historical periods to which the current historiography nostalgically refers—the Dualist era and the Horthy regime—cannot be uncritically romanticized as times of national greatness.

The Buda Palace reconstructions, then, should be understood as a revisionist reenactment of a project that has already failed once before. If nationalism is to retain its universalist appeal and avoid ethnicist exclusivity—a distinction I introduced in the *Introduction*—then this attempt to fabricate Hungarianness through imperial architectural tropes is as hollow now as it was in the 1860s. The Hauszmann Program’s sweeping efforts to reconstruct the entire district, replete with monumental historicist facades, do not invite historical reflection; rather, they declare—without nuance or interrogation—that if Hungarianness failed to materialize in the past, it must be willed into existence in the present.

Guy Debord’s critique remains as relevant as ever: “The spectacle is dogmatic, yet it is incapable of arriving at any solid dogma. Nothing stands still for it.” The spectator’s role is not to comprehend or critically engage with the spectacle but to passively accept its doctrine. The Buda Castle reconstructions, in this sense, fulfill a fundamentally spectacle function, with the notable irony that they are themselves a reconstitution of an already spectacle and dogmatic paradigm—one borrowed wholesale from the nation-building fantasies of the late 19th century. As I argued in the *Introduction*, the neo-historicist facades of the 2010s stand as imperial emblems for an autocratic right-wing regime that lacks an empire.

Allow me to conclude by invoking Hungarian philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás, whose impassioned critique encapsulates the very issues this dissertation has sought to interrogate:

The Danube, the islands (of which we use only one, as much as our wits allow), the Buda hills: these are not creations of our national culture. The three old, provincial German towns (Pest, Buda, "Buda") had a few endearing, tasteful, modest buildings. Then came the imperial and royal paradox, the pseudo-imperial arrogance of a

subordinate, dependent province with the dreadful Parliament building, the unbearable Matthias Church, the laughable Fisherman's Bastion, the repulsive Millennium Memorial, the imitating Palace of Fine Arts and the Gallery, the so-so Secession (although the Chain Bridge is wonderful). Since then, professionals destined for more honorable tasks have been painstakingly restoring the plaster ornaments that were ridiculed in their own time. At the behest of French-German-speaking aristocrats, the *madjarosch* [*Magyarsich*] style was envisioned by Austrian-Moravian burghers based on Munich imprints, and the actual capitals (Bratislava, Cluj: Austrian Baroque, Eastern German Gothic) disappeared from national consciousness; foreign influences dominated, and the city just kept building. Of course, the nobles built their most beautiful palaces in the capital. — In Vienna.⁴⁶⁶

Failing to meet even the most rudimentary standards of architectural innovation and entirely devoid of the necessary intellectual self-reflection on national history, the Hauszmann Program is less a restoration project than an anti-product—an anti-*objet d'art*, if you will. Acknowledging the long series of misadventures in the quest for an overarching Hungarian national form in architecture—alongside the persistent failure to position the Castle and Palace within a just political framework—one finds that only the decades between 1945 and 1989, ironically, achieved a semblance of coherence, largely through the socialist mission of cultural democratization. Nevertheless, let us end on a note of cautious optimism.

The reconstructions of Buda Castle and the Berliner Schloss stand as glaring monuments to historical revisionism masquerading as national revival, their very existence testifying to missed opportunities for genuine historical introspection. The contrast with the Humboldt Forum could not be starker: where Berlin's project engaged in a contested yet productive debate on history's role in shaping the present, Budapest's equivalent evades

⁴⁶⁶ Miklós Tamás Gáspár, "Honügyért lelkesülők!," *Magyarnarancs.hu*, April 8, 2014, <https://magyarnarancs.hu/publicisztika/tamas-gaspar-miklos-honugyert-lelkesulok-89253>.

reflection altogether. The Buda Castle District remains, to this day, a squandered chance to engage meaningfully with Hungary's post-transition political reality.

But here is the thing about political deception: while effective in the short term, it is an unreliable adhesive for nation-building. The freshly adorned facades of make-believe may endure for decades, but architecture is not destiny—it serves only as a stage for function and interpretation, both of which are subject to change. As I argued in the *Introduction*, the concept of a national architectural form is, at its core, a historical rather than an aesthetic question. No style can claim the mantle of national identity unless history itself permits it. The emergence of new, more inclusive, and intellectually rigorous projects is not only possible but inevitable. And perhaps, in the end, historical revisionism will serve a purpose after all—not as a foundation for mythmaking, but as a cautionary relic of the narratives we must strive to transcend.

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