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Communist monumental welcome signs and border marks in Romania

A cultural heritage at the margins

In Communist Romania, during the 1970's, coinciding with a new division of territory and the development of the public roads infrastructure in Romania, monumental welcome signs started to appear at the borders between the counties. This period is also marked by a distribution of power from the centre to local administrations within each county. However, this did not mean autonomy of counties per se; in fact this plan was to enforce more equal development throughout the Romanian territory. Amidst these changes, Communist welcome signs started to appear and still stand today, at the entrance of cities and counties alike, suggesting the length to which Communist ideology extended its influence in all matters respective to constructed space. My research aims to analyse these signs as part of a cultural heritage, to answer questions about their construction, functionality and conservations, but also to question the practice itself, both in the past and in the present, as this practice can be linked to Romanian traditional crafts and to socialist art and design in general.

From a theoretical point of view, my research focuses on newspapers, architecture magazines and geographical textbooks from Communist times and confronts them with theories from geographic performativity, cultural semiotics, place identity and territoriality. Actually I propose that their comparative analysis could yield an interesting perspective on the mobility culture of the epoch, from transportation patterns to informational exchange.

Within the effort to define this practice it is important to separate the signs that mark the entrance to cities from the signs that separate different counties. The city entrance was a point of control through the border police and welcome signs functioned as a form of control through the aesthetics of the Communist ideology that enforced an identity for the city. Welcome signs between counties function as border marks and they enforce a transition and a separation, confusing the administrative separation with a cultural differentiation between

neighbouring counties. Nevertheless in my research I try to look at all these welcome signs as a distinct, even if marginal category within Socialist design.

Today Communist architecture and design are generally met with a lot of suspicion and prejudice. This is due to the fact that public architecture is still linked in people's minds with the Communist ideology, but it's also due to the fact that a lot of Communist architecture in Romania is heavily marked by banality. The banality of these welcome signs can be explained by the fact that as a practice, the fashion of Communist welcome signs in Romania is an ideological import from the Soviet Union where similar objects can be found, and not an organic practice developed locally. Nevertheless they are linked to the local geographical performativity of the Communist party, which imposed itself as sovereign through its policies, actions and propaganda. The territorial division was heavily featured in the national and local newspapers from the proposal in 1968 to its implementation in the following years. Similarly publications of anthologies and atlases dedicated to the counties of Romania also started to appear throughout the 70's.

Should Communist welcome signs be identified as historical monuments, as milestones necessary for preserving a memory of the public space? While they are a mash-up of industrial symbols and Romanian folkloric motifs, they do manage to express the identity of a place within a specific time in history. In this capacity, they could be considered for preservation. This research also takes a step towards the preservation of these signs by compiling an archive of all the signs that still exist today in Romania.