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Socialist welcome signs and border marks: Hospitality, hostility and heritage in (post)-communist Romania

Welcome signs are generally considered a kind of "visiting card" for cities, cultural and historical sights, museum, tourist or industrial complex and recreation area. They can be found even within small business or at the entrance of people's homes. Signs that contain greetings, symbols of prosperity or warnings, dating back to ancient times, can still be found at entrances of houses in the city of Pompeii. Generally speaking though, the ubiquitous welcome signs today would seem to refer to hospitality more than to anything else and this attitude is still expressed on many levels of human interaction either through objects at thresholds, generated text on webpages or even through utterance at the beginning of speeches or conferences. The welcome sign can therefore become a powerful symbol, as hospitality is an important part of human interaction. Being a powerful symbol the meaning of welcome signs can be and has been overturned to fit into various contexts and to fulfil various needs. For example, today welcome sign are used increasingly for real-estate development which capitalise on their powerful symbolism in order to convince potential buyers. Webpages also feature a welcoming text that also prompts you to accept certain terms of use.
Welcome signs can be found today in many contexts, with both commercial and non-commercial purposes. In my research I have found numerous terms for these signs as well as numerous contexts in which they can exist. While a lot can be said about each context and each type of sign, I will now mainly focus on the signs that mark the borders of counties, cities and villages in post-socialist countries with a focus on Romania. Both in the socialist context and in the post-socialist context there is not much information related to these signs in Romania, only vaguely are signs and volumetric text ever references in architectural books, otherwise no explanation or description has been given for them, their meaning or function over time. Today it seems that this tradition is tolerated by not destroying most the old signs rather than taken further by the creation of new signs relevant today from an aesthetic and functional perspective. In Russia, for example, today these signs are part of architectural education in universities such as The University of Tomck which teaches a specific course dedicated to the history, the use and the typology of these signs. It would seem that in the

Romanian context, these signs were "borrowed" rather than incorporated into the local environment which would explain why they failed to become a relevant practice today. Looking back at the 20th century we can see that welcome signs and border marks were installed starting around the middle of the past century. This is credited to the political and economic stability of countries in Europe, USA and Russia which enabled the development of their transport system and international tourism. This is for example also the case for Romania, where the erecting of welcome signs coincided with accelerated industrialisation, construction projects, road infrastructure developments and territorial policies. However, looking closer at the Romanian context, it would seem that these signs were more than "visiting cards" as they contained not just traditional or local elements, but also the socialist heraldry and references to the newly developed industry. Introducing such new elements into the new welcome signs would seem to be not a reflection of local identity, but rather a reflection of a process of identity creation. It is precisely this process of identity creation that is both strange and hostile today, because with the fall of the communist regime as well as the fall of its industrial empire, the signs no longer seem to reflect the local identity anymore. However, this opposition is not specific only to the post-communist context. During the regime itself, opposition to these signs existed, not explicit or loud, but rather subtle and expressed by the author himself. It was this reaction to the new welcome sign of his hometown that prompted the artist David Olteanu, then working of the Factory of Ceramics in Sighisoara, to include in the new sign elements of archaic commemorative crosses which were marking the entrances to cities before. Not only was this a reference to a religious object, but it was also clashing with the intended novelty of the new sign. The artist managed to get his project approved as the commissioners were either unaware of the reference or did not really notice it. David Olteanu's work is an example of communist resistance as well as a work of art in itself, being made in his usual style of work; the welcome sign is not far away from one of his sculptures.

David Olteanu's welcome sign is but one example of the excellent design that could be included in such a structure. Throughout the country there are other welcome signs created by artists and engineers of a cultural significance that cannot be denied. It would seem that this complex phenomenon really needs to be given more attention and thanks to many online platforms and cultural institutions more attention is being given to socialist heritage and there is great hope that some of these signs will endure the test of time and for the practice itself to gain the respect it would deserve. Beyond nostalgic commitments, the public space is always worth taken into consideration and when properly looked at it can reveal surprising ideas.