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Living Walls: Monumental Façade Decoration and Identity Discourses in the Former Second World

I. Material Focus

Three decades after the collapse of European socialism, monumental works of communist propaganda art continue to decorate the façades of public buildings in cities across the former Second World. Monumental façade decoration proliferated throughout the Eastern bloc during the second half of the 20th century alongside the implementation of urban redesign plans using modernist architecture and industrialised construction methods. Creation of these artworks was guided by socialist realism; fundamentally similar in terms of their ideological content, these works are nonetheless aesthetically diverse as they reference particular national reservoirs of historiography, academic arts, and folkloric traditions. Made from durable materials, façade decorations are integrated with the structure of the buildings they decorate, making them more permanent than other forms of visual propaganda which have progressively disappeared from the urban fabric during the transition away from socialism. The narrative meaning of these artworks, once precisely defined by state ideology, has transformed over time.

In Marxist-Leninist aesthetics, art was meant to be a concrete reflection of reality, but it was also meant to actively shape reality by raising the cultural level of the masses, educating them on the greatest achievements of the past and present to produce ideal citizens of the future. Socialist monumental propaganda was meant to shape reality by concretely narrating a fundamentally new model of identity towards which the masses beholding it should aspire. These state-defined models are discordant with postsocialist realities, yet they remain highly visible in the public realm and intersect the everyday routines of city residents. Given their rootedness in now-obsolete socialist ideology, monumental propaganda artworks have been subjects of public debate. Whereas some socialist-era façade decorations have fallen into neglect or have been covered over, others have been preserved or even restored.

II. Central Questions

What role have monumental façade decorations played in identity discourses in the former Second World, during and after socialism? Which references to national historical and cultural traditions do these works incorporate, what were their original meanings, and how have these meanings changed over time? What can these works tell us about the socialist city and its postsocialist afterlife?

III. Methodology and Arguments

In an attempt to answer these questions, I will conduct a comparative case study of selected façade decorations at prominent locations within the urban topography of politically important cities in Eastern bloc countries. A micro-history of each artwork will be retraced from its beginnings to its present-day status. Three levels of analysis will be applied: context analysis, the processes of creation in view of the political and social realities of the time; visual analysis, the narrative content and cultural references contained within the artworks; and spatial-temporal, the trajectory of these works since the collapse of the socialist order. Primary sources will be textual — Soviet journals on the theory and practice of art and architecture, newspaper publications and blog articles — and visual — photographs, sketches, maps, and social media content.

Across individual cases, general tendencies are apparent. First, the role of private development in postsocialist cities has been nontransparent, unpredictable, and often controversial. Second, as a reaction to top-down plans for redevelopment, there has been a trend of citizen interest and participation in urban design debates, mediated and organised via the internet, advocating for the conservation of socialist monumental art. Third, the ideological messages of socialist-era façade decorations tend to be retrospectively downplayed by conservation advocates, who see these works as aesthetic features of urban identity, not mere manifestations of propaganda.