

## **Cultural Diplomacy and Architectural Conservation in State-Socialist Hungary**

Final Report for Visegrad Scholarship

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### **Research Subject Summary**

My project at OSA focused on the relationship between the state-socialist government and monument conservation in Hungary between the late-1940s and 1970s and approached the topic from two angles. From the late-1950s onwards, Budapest was the location of an increasing number of monument protection conferences, and Hungarian professionals also travelled to such meetings abroad. I aimed to map the control state-power exerted over these international exchanges, not exclusively between participants from countries of the Eastern Bloc, and to what extent they were orchestrated and monitored from behind the façade of hospitality and openness. Secondly, I sought to understand the official discourse on architectural monument activities: their position within or in relation to socialist ideology and the ways in which they underlined the goals of the government.

The findings of this project will be incorporated into my ongoing PhD dissertation which traces the developing theories on modern architecture in historic cities at international conferences between the mid-1940s and mid-1970s from Eastern-Central European, and particularly Hungarian perspectives. The III. ICOMOS General Assembly held in Budapest in 1972 is central for my research as it focused on modern architecture in historic ensembles and monuments. I am interested in tracing how discourses on post-war reconstruction, modernization, urbanization, and the protection of historic built environments intersected leading up to this event, the actors who shaped these discussions and how the geopolitical background of the Cold War conditioned these meetings.

### **Research Methodology**

The top-down approach to researching international cooperation in architectural monument conservation would start with organizational and/or political centers, such as Paris and Moscow, and then move onto describing the peripheries within their realm of influence based on the framework of these centers. In contrast, I am constructing my narrative from Hungarian perspectives, and letting them be the window into international theoretical developments. Mapping the Hungarian context and contributions promotes a more inclusive knowledge by making hitherto lesser-known perspectives visible in Anglophone academic research. Studying how the institutional and political-ideological framework restricted, tolerated, or

encouraged international exchanges on monument conservation in Hungary during the Cold War is important as it demonstrates that looking at different national perspectives and illuminating actors obscured by historiography need not be inward-looking, nationalistic, and divisive. Instead, it can be a way to reveal previous international cooperative endeavors – many of which were instrumental for the foundation of both national and international heritage management organizations operating today. It also promotes a deeper understanding of the historical conceptions of monuments, which then allows further reflection as to what extent these conceptions are still instrumental at present.

I have devised three conceptual categories to guide my systematic sorting through the archival materials at OSA: events, actors, and ideology. The III. ICOMOS General Assembly was a high-profile international event with government officials amongst its patrons and attended by leading professionals from across the globe. How were this and other similar events covered in the media at the time? Are there any background reports that perhaps tell a different story? I also wanted to see what information I could find on the main actors of these conferences, the architects and art historians who most frequently travelled abroad as delegates and had key roles in organizing the meetings hosted in the country, such as Dezső Dercsényi, László Gerő, Pál Granasztói, Miklós Horler and Ferenc Merényi. How were the frequent travels and connections of these people beyond state-socialist countries perceived? Zooming out, I was interested in situating monument conservation within socialist ideology more broadly. Most historical monuments were vestiges of feudal and capitalist past and safeguarding them posed some apparent contradictions with the centrally propagated rise of the working class. How were historic monuments ideologically contextualized, or rather, re-contextualized under the state-socialist government?

### **Archival Materials**

Although my intended timeframe was the late-1940s-1970s, most materials in the topic were from the mid-1950s onwards, with only a few newspaper articles from the early-1950s. I found many relevant newspaper clippings about monument conservation conferences in the thematic folders on UNESCO<sup>1</sup>, congresses in Hungary<sup>2</sup> and monuments<sup>3</sup>. The high coverage of the 1972 ICOMOS conference in Hungarian popular press and Hungarian radio<sup>4</sup> showed that it was considered a prominent event at the time beyond professional circles, but the lack of its mention in situation reports and the absence of any other analysis by the Radio Free Europe Research Institute suggests that it was not perceived as such an extraordinary event

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<sup>1</sup> HU OSA 300-40-1-294 and HU OSA 300-40-1-295.

<sup>2</sup> HU OSA 300-40-1-609.

<sup>3</sup> HU OSA 300-40-1-1243 and HU OSA 300-40-1-1244.

<sup>4</sup> HU OSA 300-40-8-218 and HU OSA 300-40-8-219.

internationally. Hungarian newspapers portrayed Budapest as a congress superpower, having hosted several hundred international meetings from a wide range of disciplines annually during the 1960s and 1970s. The conference boom was not only a Hungarian phenomenon, the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) was founded in 1962 to advance and coordinate standards in organization internationally.<sup>5</sup> In this context, it is understandable that a conference in 1972, even if it was attended by professionals from over 30 countries globally, was simply seen as one of many similar preceding events by RFE. While most Hungarian daily and weekly newspapers are available in a digitalized format on Arcanum<sup>6</sup>, I still benefited from the systematic categorization of the materials at OSA. The thematic folders broadened my usually narrow and specific research keywords, thanks to which I was able to locate some conferences in Budapest that had not been on my radar previously, such as UNESCO's 72<sup>nd</sup> Executive Board Session in May 1966 and the XXII. Congress of the International Committee for Art History (CIHA) in September 1969, and ascertain Hungary's active involvement in UNESCO activities from the mid-1950s.

Being aware of RFE's own agenda, I was not surprised to find the most data on ministers and architects with strong ties to the socialist party, such as Máté Major and Imre Perényi in the biographical files.<sup>7</sup> Visits to Moscow were given more importance by the researchers at RFE than visits to capitalist countries as demonstrated by the markings on the newspaper clippings and some summary reports. Besides political allegiance and important positions held in the government, writing activity was another key factor determining the information I found on people. Dezső Dercsényi and Pál Granasztói were both prolific authors of many articles in Hungarian newspapers, thus their files were comparatively more substantial than those of other art historians or architects like Miklós Horler and Ferenc Merényi, even though Horler and Merényi also frequently attended conferences abroad, Merényi even had close connections to the party.<sup>8</sup>

Monument conservation was under the Ministry of Building Affairs in Hungary during the period of my research, yet there was virtually no information on monuments in the folders related to the ministry itself, or construction industry and building activities more broadly. I have also looked through boxes on cultural and public education policies, expecting to find some mention of the cultural and artistic aspects of monuments, given the important role assigned to art by the socialist government in public education, but was not successful in this investigation either. Subject files on ideology<sup>9</sup> also frequently mentioned arts and culture but without the specific

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<sup>5</sup> István Hetényi, 'Konferencia-Rendezés. Több Idegenforgalmi Bevétel', *Figyelő*, 22 August 1973, 2.

<sup>6</sup> <https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/>

<sup>7</sup> HU OSA 300-40-5-115; HU OSA 300-40-6-21 and HU OSA 300-40-6-23.

<sup>8</sup> HU OSA 300-40-5-34; HU OSA 300-40-5-54; HU OSA 300-40-6-4 and HU OSA 300-40-6-10.

<sup>9</sup> HU OSA 300-40-1-488 and HU OSA 300-40-1-489.

reference to architectural monuments. The ideological positioning of monument protection I have managed to find in popular media most often came not from ministers or leading political authors, but from professionals within the field of monument conservation.<sup>10</sup> This was a fascinating insight as it made me reconsider my former conception of top-down directives for monument conservation and deliberate a new hypothesis whether there was a kind of ideological lobbying by the profession towards ministries and public opinion to convince them of the relevance and importance of protecting historic monuments. Additionally, several sources analyzed and argued for the economic benefit of monuments together with the high number of international conferences Budapest was increasingly hosting.<sup>11</sup> These articles were interesting as they provided a view behind the scenes of conference organization by revealing some of the orchestrating motives to the public, albeit in Hungarian daily and weekly papers which limited the reach of such information.

Beyond my devised research topic and categories for research, I have also collected information on foreign-language scientific book publishing in Hungary<sup>12</sup> and the work of Kultúra Külkereskedelmi Vállalat<sup>13</sup> [Culture Foreign Trade Company] between 1956 and 1975 in distributing these books abroad and importing foreign-language books from other, often not only socialist countries. Next to international conferences and study trips abroad, the international exchange of journals and books had had an instrumental role in ideas transfer in architecture and monument conservation, and this is an area I would like to explore in more detail in the future.

## Research Results

Overall, my two-month stay at the OSA as a Visegrad Fellow has proven very useful as I have come away with new insights for my research topic – an adjusted conception of the 1972 ICOMOS conference in the context of other similar conferences, the ideological positioning of monument protection from within the profession and the perceived economic benefits of monument conservation and conference hosting at the time. I will need to do some further research in the National Archives of Hungary and the Archives of the Hungarian Museum of Architecture and Monument Protection Documentation Center to be able to assess the extent to which the conferences were controlled and monitored from behind the scenes and test my hypothesis about the ideologization of monument conservation.

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<sup>10</sup> See for example: Dezső Dercsényi, 'A Műemlékvédelem Közügye!', *Magyar Nemzet*, 11 September 1966, 4.

<sup>11</sup> See for example: Mihály Horváth, 'Feltárt múlt – mai haszon' *Figyelő*, 24 May 1967, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> HU OSA 300-5-40-9; HU OSA 300-40-1-623 and HU OSA 300-40-1-760.

<sup>13</sup> HU OSA 300-40-1-760.

## **Materials Consulted**

### **HU OSA 298 Records of the Free Europe Committee**

#### HU OSA 298-3 Free Europe Press

HU OSA 298-3-2 Free Europe Publications

Boxes 5, 14

### **HU OSA 300 Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute**

#### HU OSA 300-5 Analytic Research Department

HU OSA 300-5-40 Records of Aurél Breznai: Subject Files

Boxes 8, 9, 11, 13, 14

#### HU OSA 300-40 Hungarian Unit

HU OSA 300-40-1 Subject Files

Boxes 294, 295, 482, 488, 489, 520, 524, 609, 619, 620, 623, 624, 625, 628, 629, 630, 676, 760, 1243, 1244, 1248

HU OSA 300-40-3 Subject Card Files

Boxes 1, 2, 3, 6, 18, 27, 28, 29, 37

HU OSA 300-40-5 Biographical Files

Boxes 22, 27, 34, 48, 52, 54, 71, 76, 95, 104, 115, 154, 158, 166, 178, 199

HU OSA 300-40-6 Biographical Card Files

Boxes 4, 9, 10, 13, 21, 23

HU OSA 300-40-8 Monitoring

Boxes 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 245

#### HU OSA 300-120 Western Press Archives

HU OSA 300-120-1 Biographical Files [Aalto – Zywulska]

Box 60

### **HU OSA 335 Mária Heller Research Documentation**

#### HU OSA 335-0-1 Annotations of Intellectual Debates and Datasheets of Researchers

Boxes 6, 7, 8