Airplane Hangars and Triple Hills: Renovation, Demolition, and the Architectural Politics of Local Belonging at the Our Lady of Csíksomlyó Hungarian National Shrine

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IN THIS ISSUE

- The Parish Choir Movement and Generational Festivals in Romania’s Socialist Period
- Girls’ Education and Child Marriage in Central Africa Part II: The Republic of Congo
- Renovation, Demolition, and the Architectural Politics of Local Belonging at the Our Lady of Csíksomlyó Hungarian National Shrine
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INTRODUCTION: THE MATERIALITY OF POLITICAL OUTRAGE

In late 2019, the right-wing Hungarian online tabloid ripost.hu published a follow-up article about Pope Francis’s visit to the Hungarian national shrine, Our Lady of Csíksomlyó. “Scandal at Csíksomlyó,” the headline bellowed before describing how that summer Hungarians had left hundreds of spiteful comments on a Facebook post announcing renovations to the altar where the pope would celebrate Mass.1 The Franciscan Order of Transylvania, which oversees this shrine in one of Romania’s ethnic Hungarian enclaves, had published plans for a metal sheet roof to cover an outdoor altar designed by a famous architect, Imre Makovecz. The Vatican had requested the covering, even though it obscured Makovecz’s design, which evoked the “Triple Hill” motif found on Hungary’s official coat of arms (Figure 1, Figure 2). Facebook commentators had compared the addition to an airplane hangar and hoped that a storm would blow it away. One indignant online commentator asked, “To humiliate such a lovely, landscape-appropriate Hungarian symbol like this. How can they do such a thing?” The public fury continued when news broke that the Franciscan Order wanted to make the renovation permanent. In the words of a ripost.hu reporter, commenting on a new round of angry online responses, “This decision has outraged many Hungarian believers.”2

Over the last thirty years, according to historians Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, public debate has been determined increasingly by a new genre of political opinion media commentary. Indignation and moral offense as well as the tendency to


2 In Hungarian, “Ez sok magyar hívet felháborított.”
respond to specific events as the entry point into political debate have always existed in the media landscape, Berry and Sobieraj argue in their book *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility*. Recently, however, “this form of commentary has come into its own” as a new genre of political discourse they call outrage discourse. In the case of the Csíksomlyó altar, the original Facebook comments bear the hallmarks of outrage discourse’s rhetorical techniques, including fear mongering, use of overgeneralizations and sensationalism, ad hominem attacks, and ridiculing opponents. Later on, tabloids like *ripost.hu* exploited and extended the outrage in order to position their own media platforms and political patrons (Hungary’s governing right-wing Fidesz Party) in the role of heroic defender of national values against enemies.

While there are similarities between outrage discourse and right-wing Hungarian speech, the Facebook commentators’ indignation at the “humiliation” of Makovecz’s altar evokes anthropologist Kriszta Fehérváry’s argument that Hungary’s Cold War consumer culture has made politics in this country into a distinctively material endeavor. During the 1970s and ’80s Hungary’s semi-market economy

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made the country into the envy of the Eastern Bloc as state-socialist countries increasingly saw consumption as the vehicle of their victory over the West. The collapse of socialism in 1989 set in motion Hungarians’ “profound adjustment of identity” from socialist consumer paradise and Soviet satellite to aspiring member of a reconfigured Europe. The European Union presented itself as victor by embracing a neocolonial discourse about Western consumer culture, enacted by an influx of condescending visitors insisting that socialism had oppressed consumers by subjecting them to constant shortages of drab, gray, and monolithic consumer goods. Successive Hungarian governments responded by embracing the anti-socialist dissident “Organicist” design movement. Led by Imre Makovecz, the same architect who designed Csíksomlyó’s original outdoor altar, Organicism drew on national and local craft traditions and celebrated natural materials, countering


7 Fehérváry, Politics in Color and Concrete, 51.

8 Fehérváry, Politics in Color and Concrete, xi.

9 Organicism became, in Fehérváry’s words, “the official design ideology of the newly independent Hungarian nation-state. Fehérváry, Politics in Color and Concrete, 155. With its victory in 2010, Fidesz appointed Makovecz head of the Hungarian Academy of Arts with the agenda of promoting only those artists who represented the nation in a positive light. Fehérváry, Politics in Color and Concrete, 243.
socialism’s ideological embrace of internationalism, human domination of nature, and the goal of building a tabula rasa future.10

In her book, which ends with the right-wing Fidesz Party’s ascension to power in 2010, Fehérváry does not refer to outrage but rather to public expressions of “politicized emotions” like resentment and alienation.11 Hungarians directed these affective expressions especially at the coldness and sterility of socialist public spaces (and later the European Union’s built environment).12 The emergence of outrage at material cultures perceived to be “from outside” and “colonizing,” a form of public affective expression that has gained steam following the rise of the Hungarian right wing in 2010, sheds light on key questions in the study of political affects and the politics of material culture. How do political and religious intellectuals attach notions of threatened nationhood to some motifs (the Triple Hill) and threatening imperialness to others (an airplane hangar)? What moral stances do intellectuals adopt as they convey aesthetic forms into new social contexts and material media? How do actors use rhetorical strategies not only to present themselves as defenders of a national material culture but also to construct outrage itself as a national practice?

In this article, I address these questions by describing the transformations of the Triple Hill motif across three political and social contexts. First, I describe the role played by the Triple Hill shape in two political controversies in late-20th century Hungary. In the 1970s, the Hungarian socialist government censored a new Triple Hill-style coat of arms developed by the Kecskemé city administration. The second controversy took place in 1990 as Hungary’s first post-socialist parliament debated which coat of arms to adopt. In both cases, the designs foreshadowed Imre Makovecz’s Triple Hill-style altar and the meanings that outraged commentators gave to it as a symbol of national tradition and extension of local identity.

10 Fehérváry, Politics in Color and Concrete, 155-8. After the fall of the officially atheist state-socialist regime, the state was eager to fund new construction only new in public parks and squares but also in religious spaces like the Our Lady of Csíksomlyó shrine.
12 The word “outrage” does not appear in Fehlérváy’s book.
In the second section, I describe the process through which Imre Makovecz’s Triple Hill altar was constructed at Csíksomlyó. This story centers neither on Makovecz’s creative vision nor on this architectural work’s particular features. Rather, I describe the strategic creativity, what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls a “politics of value,” employed by various Transylvanian Hungarian entrepreneurial “go-betweens” who worked in religious and political institutions to bring this project to fruition.13 I also draw on recent studies of the politics of memory in Eastern Europe, including Hungarian political scientist Andrea Pető’s research showing how political coalition-building is mediated through interpretations of major historical events.14 My contribution is to excavate the perspectives of minor intellectuals in Hungary and Romania who helped revive the Triple Hill motif. I draw attention to the political and ideological forces that marginalize their now-forgotten interpretations of this aesthetic form. I join this focus on historical paths-not-taken to research on “the social life of things,” a phrase first coined by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. For Appadurai, political meanings and political practices become intertwined in material objects. Scholars should follow the things themselves as they traverse social, historical, and political cleavages, Appadurai insisted, because objects’ political meanings are inscribed in their changing forms, uses, and trajectories.15

Before summarizing my findings in the conclusion, I examine the outbreak of online outrage in the weeks leading up to Pope Francis’s visit to Csíksomlyó. As an ambiguously rooted political rhetorical style that itself appeared as commentary on the US-based Facebook website, I argue that outraged critics of the altar renovations were challenged to highlight their ethnic identity. I examine the context clues and rhetorical strategies that commenters used to make their outrage “Szekler” and “Hungarian.” There is growing evidence that outrage discourse is influencing

political discourse around the globe, including in Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{16} However, sustained analysis of the political uses of outrage has focused on North American and Western European contexts, sometimes leaving the impression that, as Berry and Sobieraj observe, “this kind of speech has deep roots in American media.”\textsuperscript{17} Such claims not only reduce the diversity and particularity of political cultures but also ignore the histories of empire and neo-colonialism that have yoked this diversity to various inequalities across the European space. Therefore, it remains a desideratum to demonstrate the rhetorical strategies through which outrage becomes a national style.

THE TRIPLE HILL RETURNS: LOCAL AND CITY INSIGNIA

In 1949, the Stalinist leader of the People’s Republic of Hungary, Ferenc Rákosi, banned use of the interwar era Hungarian coat of arms, which include the Triple Hill motif, as an ideologically objectionable irredentist symbol (Figure 3).\textsuperscript{18} Institutions that had supported historical research on coats of arms, like the Hungarian Heraldic and Genealogical Society, were liquidated as feudalistic and false fields of research. This branch of research was marginalized amid the new socialist government’s effort to monopolize ideological control of the production of professional knowledge.\textsuperscript{19} Use of this nationalist coat of arms was even

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more strictly controlled after it became a symbol of the country's 1956 anti-
communist revolution.  

After 1956, Party First Secretary János Kádár, who took over after Rákosi was de-
posed, initiated a broad push to distance the state from the previous regime. One
sign of this de-Stalinization was the state’s new insignia: a shield with the national
colors topped by a red star. While in the 1970s Hungarians embraced national
and local craft traditions to decorate their homes’ interiors, Fehérváry states that
during this period the socialist state continued to evoke the ideology of building
socialism out of a tabula rasa by constructing public squares with concrete and steel
in generic and modern designs. The Kádár government’s insignia, which remained
in use until 1989, did signal a subtle sense of deference to historical precedent
(Figure 4). The post-1956 coat of arms, according to historian Lajos Rácz, “com-
plied with heraldry’s oldest rule,” which stated that for the sake of contrast metal
should not be placed upon metal, nor color upon color. The post-1989 state’s

20 Before the Soviet Union violently suppressed the uprising, student revolutionary leaders had
called for readopting a version of the old coat of arms. In Gombócz’s words, “In the fall of 1956,
one of the university students’ main acts was to replace hated and foreign symbols. They wanted
to replace it with the coat of arms without the crown. That is, the Kossuth coat of arms. Gombócz,
“Az Állami Szimbólumok Vátozásai a kelet-közép-európai áltokmányokban,” 23.
21 According to Trencsényi and Apor, “[T]he Kádár regime sought to generate an image of breaking
with Stalinist schematism.” Trencsényi and Apor, “Fine-Tuning the Polyphonic Past,” 33.
22 Gombóc observes that, “This coat of arms only aligned with the rules of heraldry to the extent that
it was in the shape of a shield in the national colors.” Gombócz, “Az Állami Szimbólumok Vátozásai
a kelet-közép-európai áltokmányokban,” 23.
adoption of vernacular Organicism and its ideological valorization of the past was neither a complete about-face nor an act of pure appropriation by the state to take over a practice of informal domestic design.

Balázs Trencsényi and Péter Apor write that, in Hungarian historical research, the 1970s was "a period of re-thematization: more and more topics, previously treated schematically, were allowed to come to the fore." As the liberalization of the Kádár regime was taking shape, historical research on coats of arms, a discipline that had been formerly marginalized as nationalist or irredentist, came to signal Hungary’s connections to “European” and “Western” historical traditions. Fortifying Hungary’s sense that it stood apart from the Eastern Bloc as an open and Western society, heraldic research was successfully reframed in an ideologically acceptable way. Coats of arms became a way to document the European context of Hungarian political phenomena and, on an institutional level, was shaped by knowledge transfers between Hungarian research institutions taking part in European academic joint ventures. Trencsényi and Apor observe that research about the aesthetics of pre-socialist political culture was no longer nationalist and irredentist but tolerated because it “came to place Hungary in a symbolic neighborhood that was more ‘respectable’ than the Eastern Bloc.”

Amid this effort to reframe the meaning of ideologically objectionable historical topics within the changing contours of Cold War international politics and the broader to shift to undo Stalinist cultural uniformity, the Kádár regime’s Council of Ministers began allowing city and local governments to develop new and distinctive coats of arms. A jury of professionals working in a state-controlled professional research institute, the Lectorate of Fine and Applied Arts, was to approve all final designs. Municipal administrations employed heraldic professionals and historians to provide expert advice. Their counsel focused on developing images that tied communities’ distinctive character to their productive industries, labor

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23 Trencsényi and Apor, “Fine-Tuning the Polyphonic Past,” 38.
movement participation, and contributions to socialist economic development.\textsuperscript{26} In 1975, historian Endre Castiglione collected them in a widely published miniature handbook, \textit{The Coats of Arms of Hungarian Cities (A magyar városok címerei)}, which featured images evoking mining, manufacturing, and other forms of industrial labor.\textsuperscript{27}

In the early 1970s, the Triple Hill motif reappeared briefly on Kecskemét city’s new coat of arms, but was removed following objections from county-level officials. The Kecskemét municipal government developed its new insignia from the city’s pre-World War II coat of arms, retaining a central motif of a white goat rising vertically from a base of three green-colored hills.\textsuperscript{28} Three years later, the Bács-Kiskun County’s central committee forbade all cities within the region from using local coats of arms until Kecskemét removed or altered its design.\textsuperscript{29} Prominent Hungarian poster artist and designer, Nándor Szilvásy, was working with the City Council to design the coat of arms. The final version used bold contrasting colors and the five hills were drawn with rough uneven lines, both hallmark features of the designer, Nándor Szilvásy, who had made a name as a poster artist using collage, expressionist forms, and abstraction to challenge the aesthetic dicta of strict socialist realism (Figure 5). The municipal government reinterpreted the shape in socialist terms as a symbol of Kecskemét’s distinctive local viticultural tradition.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{26} Pandula looks back in judgment on this development, writing, “This unjustified and incorrect practice was sharply criticized by representatives of the profession from the beginning.” This reflects the contemporary perspective of a right-wing intellectual, not the perspective of heraldry professionals working with the socialist regime at the time. See Attila Pandula, “Heraldika,” in \textit{Magyarország a XX. Században, Volume 5, Társadalomtudományok}, ed. István Kollega Tarsoly (Szekszárd: Babits Kiadó, 1996-2000), p. 325-6.

\textsuperscript{27} Endre Castiglione, \textit{A agyar városok címerei} (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könykiadó, 1975).

\textsuperscript{28} In Hungarian, the word for goat, kecske, is part of the city’s name, Kecskemét. János Kozics, \textit{Kecskemét címerei és zászlói} (Keresztény Ertelemiségiek Szövetsége: Kecskemét, 1996).

\textsuperscript{29} Kecskemet650.hu, “Kecskemét címerének története,” accessed May 3, 2022, \url{https://kecskemet650.hu/kecskemet-cimerenek-tortenete}.

\textsuperscript{30} Today, the heraldic historian István Bertényi, a member of the right-wing government-controlled Hungarian Academy of Sciences, uses his memory of this episode to distance himself from his involvement in the socialist-era government. See István Bertényi, \textit{A címentan reneszánsza. Tanulmányok} (Budapest: Argumentum, 2010).
The Triple Hill shape became attached to a widely held desire for national sovereignty in the years immediately following the collapse of socialism. Several anthropologists and historians of Hungary have described how in the early 1990s Hungarians participated in public funerals as a form of political performance, using the state-sponsored reburials of composer Béla Bartok and politician Imre Nagy to bring together diverse political factions in Hungarian society. Using subtle rhetorical and aesthetic strategies, the various political factions began to differentiate themselves from each other after they had muted their differences for the sake of opposing János Kádár’s Communist regime. The Triple Hill motif was prominent at these events—it was on flags beside Imre Nagy’s coffin, for example—but this shape was not as controversial as others on these pennants.

On one side of the coffin was the coat of arms used during Hungary’s 1848 revolution against the Habsburg Empire and its official Catholic Church. In the 1990s, left-wing supporters of a constitutional and secular republican government viewed the 1848 revolution as a touchstone and model. On the other, there was the same insignia but with a crown where the double cross intersected with the Triple Hill. The crown was associated with the imperial government of Hungary’s found-

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ing monarch, King Stephen (975-1038). Hungary’s post-socialist political conservatives hailed King Stephen, especially his close relationship with the Catholic Church hierarchy (Figure 6). A year later, the state crest was the topic of one of the Hungarian parliament’s first public debates. Representatives debated whether to adopt the coat of arms with King Stephen’s crown or the crownless “Kossuth” crest, named for the leader of the 1848 republican revolution Lajos Kossuth (Figure 7). The former insignia received an overwhelming vote in the new post-socialist parliament, but the Fidesz Party fraction voted for the republican Kossuth crest. At the time, according to historian Karl Benziger, Fidesz had not yet transformed itself into the conservative and Christian nationalist party that it is today. In fact, Fidesz’s fraction argued that the Kossuth crest was preferable to the King Stephen insignia because the latter’s association with Catholicism would be a violation of the principle of separating church and state, and also lead non-Catholics to feel excluded from the state.

While the crown signaled contradictory republican and imperial historical roots for Hungary’s government, the Triple Hill motif was present on both coats of arms and did not spark as much heated commentary as the crown.

THE TRIPLE HILL AT OUR LADY OF CSÍKSOMLYÓ

While the Kecskemét Triple Hill motif exemplified the growth of the Hungarian consumer economy and Hungarians’ openness to the West—designer Nándor Szilvásy became popular making tourism posters and was influenced by Western art movements like abstract expressionism and surrealism—today the Triple Hill

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33 Originally, the idea was to hold a referendum on the issue. Even the date was fixed for January 7, 1990, but the referendum never materialized.

image is associated with Organicism, a highly nationalistic aesthetic movement. The architect Imre Makovecz played a large role in fostering this blind spot in Hungary’s historical memory. In 1996, he completed Our Lady of Csíksomlyó’s Triple Hill-inspired commission, currently the most famous example of public architecture featuring this motif and, in the words of one journalist, “the most important Hungarian pilgrimage site’s most significant location.”

Despite being celebrated as a founding example of Triple Hill architecture, Makovecz visited the site only once in his life. Fifteen years after his shrine was finished, he finally went to the Our Lady of Csíksomlyó shrine, which is nearly twelve hours by train from Budapest where Makovecz lived and worked. Yet as Arjun Appadurai observes efforts to convey commodities into unfamiliar patterns of circulation are often destabilized by ignorance or structurally mediated discontinuities of knowledge.

The terms of Appadurai’s analysis of ignorance’s role in the strategic politics of value are more apt to North American and Western European societies where cultural production is mediated through the market. In post-socialist Hungary, state and nationalist ideology mediated the work of conveying the Triple Hill motif into new patterns of circulation. Go-betweens did not mediate Transylvanian Hungarians’ ignorance of consumer desire, but rather their ignorance of state ideologies and political relationships in Hungary. On the other side, Makovecz himself was unfamiliar with the politics of cultural production at Csíksomlyó when began work on the project in 1996; he had never visited Romania and had little direct knowledge of Transylvania’s Catholic Church and Franciscan Order, and their relationships with Romanian government institutions that permitted new construction projects.

Makovecz was dependent on local actors to execute the Triple Hill altar, and not just on the local craft experts whom the architect was famous for using to build his projects. While journalists often mention the stone and wood carvers who executed Makovecz’s plans, they also celebrate three key figures who helped Makovecz navigate the bureaucratic process required to execute the project: a Transylvanian

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diocesan priest, Father Pál; local architect, Ernő Bogos; and a leader in the Franciscan Order, Father Albert Bartók. In the process of marshaling financial resources from Hungary and utilizing their knowledge of the Romanian state bureaucracy, they also marginalized a third local figure, Father Márk József. Just as importantly, they marginalized a particular vision for the ongoing Szekler cultural revival. Between 1990 and 1992, annual attendance at the shrine’s Pentecost pilgrimage event grew from ten thousand to several hundred thousand. The two priests in residence at Csíksomlyó initially welcomed pilgrims at the church’s front doors, registering each group throughout the day with a break for the main pilgrimage Mass at noon.\(^{37}\) In 1993, The Franciscan Order, consulting with Transylvania’s Catholic bishop, decided to move the noon Mass to an open-air amphitheater above the shrine church. In the weeks before the 1993 pilgrimage event, Father József used a tractor to go back and forth to the amphitheater, carrying materials of wood and metal that he used to build a small altar.\(^{38}\)

In an interview I conducted with Father József, he recalled not only the decision to relocate the pilgrimage Mass but also his effort to build an altar for celebrating the Mass. “We decided to hold the pilgrimage up on the hill,” he explained, “because the attendees didn’t fit in the church. We built a small altar dais, a small house, and placed it so that the attendees would be able to see. And then when they arrived, we told people to go out there.”

While Father József uses the same neutral term, “altar dais” (oltáremelvény), in a 2010 post to his personal blog, speaking in 1993 to a Hungarian ethnologist, Father József gave the structure a different name, kaliba (Figure 8).

A kaliba is a small house that Szekler farmers build on outlying hay meadows so that, in the time before mechanized transportation, they did not have to spend valuable time walking back to a village home during busy haymaking season. With the rise of village tourism, the kaliba has become a valuable symbol of rural authenticity and Szekler cultural identity. Speaking to a Hungarian ethnologist in 1993,


Father József was pleased to compare his altar to a kaliba. “We have recently built a small altar,” he told the researcher, “Some have called it a kaliba. It looks just like a kaliba. It’s got a nice view [just like a kaliba]. [I placed it there because] it has such a nice view of the entire area.”

To Father Pál, who became involved in the project as a go-between with Hungarian government funders, the early altar was not only impractical but also undignified. He has never publicly tied Father József’s structure to Szekler culture by calling it kaliba. In a 2007 newspaper article, he recalled the decision to hold the 1993 pilgrimage in the open-air amphitheater but complained about Father József’s structure. “For two years, we celebrated Mass underneath umbrellas,” he grumbled, “We felt that we should have some kind of more serious structure, which would convey a kind of respect.”


40 He had already risen to prominence by founding an orphanage network that combated ethnic assimilation by keeping Hungarian children out of the Romanian state orphanage system.

important “go-between,” began the process by raising the idea of a Triple Hill-shaped altar in a meeting with Makovecz. Father Pál also instructed Makovecz to make the altar dais multifunctional. At the time, he was also in discussions with a Hungarian composer to organize a performance of Stephen the King, a popular 1970s Hungarian rock opera, at the Csíksomlyó shrine.

While many online commentators imagined Makovecz “rolling over in his grave” and expressed outrage that one of his “original works” was being ruined, Makovecz did not actually complete the design for the Triple Hill altar. Bogos, the architect from Miercurea Ciuc, created the design while studying under Makovecz in Hungary. In the end, Makovecz and Bogos came down in favor of the King Stephen version of the Hungarian state steal. They affixed a wooden crown to the base of the cross where it meets the roof that mimics the Triple Hill shape (Figure 9). While they thus allied the shrine with Hungarian political conservatives who traced the roots of the state to King Stephen and the Catholic Church, the specifics of Makovecz’s design were not especially fraught or controversial. In the early 1990s, Makovecz founded a professional artistic institution called the “Makovecz Wandering Institute” (Makovecz Vándoriskola). Part of a broad revival of interest in the institutions of the pre-socialist Hungarian polgár class (equivalent of the German...
“Bürger” class), the Makovecz Wandering Institute was patterned after a medieval “guild” that gave opportunities for young post-graduate architects to study with established masters.42

The Makovecz Wandering Institute was specifically designed to reproduce Makovecz’s signature Organicist style.43 Makovecz wanted these guilds not only to recover the historical political and cultural dispositions needed to renew Hungary for the post-socialist age, but also to create a system of intellectual reproduction that would withstand external colonization. In Makovecz’s words, “[It should] withstand internal and external gales and the stars’ change of color from red to the twelve yellow ones [in the European Union flag].”44 As a young architectural student in the 1980s, Bogos would have had limited contact with the Szekler cultural revival, which was focused on other aesthetic forms. While the 1970s push to create a national socialist culture in Romania led to new production in fields like ethnology, music, and dance, other fields like architecture were still dominated by socialism’s modernist cube and concrete design. Bogos first came under the sway of anti-socialist artistic trends by designing the Triple Hill altar to satisfy the Makovecz Wandering Institute’s graduation requirement: completed plans for a Makovecz-inspired structure.45

In the mid-1990s, as the plan for installing Makovecz’s altar was getting underway, the Franciscan Order was still trying to secure ownership of the amphitheater space they were using for the annual Pentecost pilgrimage Mass. In 1948, Romania’s Communist government had dispossessed the Franciscan Order of most of its property. While the Franciscan Order had not owned the amphitheater in 1948, Father Bartók requested ownership from government officials overseeing the restoration of church property when the Order began using the amphitheater for

42 Fehérváry writes, “Here the notion of polgárosodás (embourgeoisement) was used to mean eradicating mentalities of entitlement and dependence on the state, reforming slack work habits, and fostering risk taking, economic autonomy, and entrepreneurial activities, as well as civic responsibility.” Fehérváry, Politics in Color and Concrete, 152.
43 According to the Institute’s mission statement, “The Wandering Institute guarantees the practice, popularization, and pedagogy of Hungarian Organicist Architecture.”
the Pentecost Mass. According to the ethnologist Tamás Mohay, “He was guided by the notion that might have need of this land as its own real estate to use for the pilgrimage. He felt that no one should be allowed to build on the area, and that the Order should be able to guard its use.”46 Father Bartók placed a request with the Harghita County officials overseeing the restitution of church property. In the end, Bartók ended up bargaining and bartering with the government. He offered the Miercurea Ciuc city administration agricultural land that the Order had once used for growing hay in return for the amphitheater space.47

Bártok’s willingness to parlay with Romanian government officials stands in stark contrast to Father Pál’s public statements about defending the altar against Romanian threats. On the tenth anniversary of the Triple Hill altar’s construction, Father Pál told a regional newspaper about a tense encounter with an unnamed official from the Romanian office of heritage protection. “After the Triple Hill altar was completed, some group of heritage officials visited from Bucharest.”48 Father Pál recalled that they were especially offended by the Tiple Hill shape, because they recognized it from the Hungarian state coat of arms. “They said it was not appropriate to the landscape and too close to other heritage-protected monuments.”49 Father Pál claimed that the latter, in particular, was an invention to justify the officials’ demand to tear down the new altar. In the article, Father Pál does not explicate exactly who deflected this demand or how it was accomplished. He skips ahead to the current state of affairs, saying simply that the altar remains at the site. He implies not only that the Romanian government is antipathetic toward Hungarian cultural initiatives at Csíksomlyó, but also that he played an agentive role in thwarting the Romanian state’s attacks. With no identifiable information given to the officials and no exact dates or locations for Father Pál’s encounter with them, the story is empirically unverifiable but emotionally affecting—evoking both fear of aggressors and pride in defenders—for the newspaper’s audience of ethnic minority Hungarian readers.

47 Mohay, “A csíksomlyói kegyhely,” 175.
48 Székely, “Imákkal megåsztelt hely.”
49 Székely, “Imákkal megåsztelt hely.”
By the time I arrived at Csíksomlyó for fieldwork in 2009, Father Pál’s involvement in building the Triple Hill altar had earned him the ire of many former colleagues in the Catholic Church. Tainted reputations and shifting patterns of circulation are often linked. “The diversion of commodities from their customary paths always carries a risky and morally ambiguous aura,” Appadurai argues.50 When I spoke with Miercurea Ciuc’s lead priest, he criticized Father Pál for putting a plaque on the Triple Hill altar calling attention to the role he played in its construction. The priest called the plaque a sign of Father Pál personal “itch” (viszketni) to call attention to himself. Father József, in an article he wrote for the Csíksomlyó shrine’s official website, objected to a plaque that Father Pál had affixed to the altar. “It was Father Pál,” the monk complained, “who put up a plaque saying that ‘the Csíksomlyó parish council built’ the Trimount Altar. But the plaque is inadequate, because it forgets to say, based on whose donations?” Father Márk went on to state that, in fact, the Catholic Church in Hungary had donated the most. Strategic efforts to move commodities across spheres, though often perceived to be a violation of a “moral economy,” are at the heart of what Appadurai calls “the politics of value.”51 Father Pál’s reputation for self-serving manipulation was attached to how he strategically conveyed the Triple Hill shape into a new context after the fall of socialism, helping to renew its political effectiveness and usefulness in moving government officials to support Transylvanian Hungarian communities. Father Pál gained significant fame and influence, but also envy and ire by taking advantage of the changed political context for funding cultural production and conveying the Triple Hill shape into a structure of stone, earth, and wood.

PAPAL DESIGN, OUTRAGE ONLINE

Two months before the pope visited Csíksomlyó, Transylvania’s Franciscan Order used its official Facebook page to publish plans for the white sheet-metal covering over Makovecz’s Triple Hill altar. The announcement appeared on the day after Holy Week, the series of holidays culminating in Easter as the holiest day in the Christian calendar. The timing of the announcement was perhaps strategic, since

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the post-Easter period is a time of exhaustion in the Catholic Church. After believers have spent a full week paying close attention to events in the Church, many turn their attention to other matters. If the Franciscan Order hoped to mute the response to the renovations, the post-Easter period was the right time to release their plans.

The 225 individual comments on the Franciscan Order’s Facebook post were swift and overwhelming. Nearly three hundred comments appeared below the Facebook post. According to the Transindex.ro news website, a mainstream media outlet that nevertheless used ripost.hu’s tabloid-style terms, the designs caused a “small uproar” (kisebb felháborodás), with most commentators criticizing “the metal roof covering the stage.”52 Some used outrage discourse’s crude and profane language to defend a threatened Hungarian national aesthetic. András Aklecov wrote that, “It’s clear that for the pope Hungarian design just a big turd.”

Others said the roof was the imposition of an external and generic colonizing material culture. “This is why they have borders,” Gyöngyver Gyöngyössy wrote, “which shouldn’t be crossed. So that they don’t insult our inheritance like this.” One writer used the phrase, “papal invasion” to describe Francis’s visit to Csíksomlyó. Authors complained by comparing it to an airplane hangar, a bus stop, and a garage. Others said it resembled a football stadium, that infrastructural emblem of modern consumer culture. Others complained about the neutral and indifferent impression it left. It was also a sign of modernity’s aesthetic impoverishment. Gyöző Petres called the roof a “vile and inconsiderate modern abomination.” According to the ripost.hu author, another critic grudgingly wrote, “Fine, it’s practical, but it’s also nasty and not appropriate for the landscape.” The final design thus signaled modern production’s valorization of form over function.

Observers not only took offense at the design, but used this opportunity to express their criticisms in a Szekler style. After the news broke in September that the roof addition would be permanent, some said they were complaining on Szeklers’ behalf. “Even during the papal visit, the Szeklers and the pilgrims found the covering

ugly, crude, and inappropriate to the landscape,” one individual wrote. Another critic claimed the covering had ruined the pilgrimage for him. “It’s good that I’ve already been to the amphitheater,” Zoltán Zsolt Vig claimed, “because if they leave this abomination there for sure I’m never going to back.” Vig finished by quoting the opening words of the Szekler national anthem, “Who knoweth where, O where our destiny shall be?”

Others evoked their identification with Szeklerness in subtler ways, using Szekler slang expressions in their complaints. “They’re covering over the national character of the altar just for the papal visit,” another observer stated before using a slang expression to speculate about the Church’s motives: “I reckon that mayhaps the Triple Hill offends the eyes of the Eucharist?” The commentator used rural Szekler expression to invoke a complex theological notion that the Eucharist is the real presence of Christ. According to Catholic theological doctrine, a priest’s act of blessing the Eucharist transforms ontologically the bread and wine into the real presence of Jesus Christ’s body and blood; but the commentator suggests that the Church wants to cover the altar so that Jesus will not take offense at the shape of this Hungarian national symbol. For this individual, the controversy evoked a conflict between Hungarian aesthetic values and the Church’s liturgical theology, but did so by offering an opportunity to imagine a concretely embodied encounter between Jesus and Hungarian aesthetics. Jesus has eyes to express distaste for the Triple Hill shape.

Gyula Ede Sztuflák invoked an influential Hungarian architect, Károly Kos, who became famous for creating a Szekler design style during the post-World War I period. Sprinkling his commentary with phrases in all capital letters, as if shouting, Sztuflák insisted that Szeklers should learn a lesson from the affair. He quoted Kos’s disgusted reaction at a new fad for modernizing church buildings that appeared in the early 1900s. The quotation came from a regional newspaper in one of Transylvania’s Szekler areas. Although Kos complained about one renovat-

54 Siculus, May 1, 2019, comment on Barabás, “Csak a pápalátogatás idejére fődik be a Hármashalom oltárt.” In Hungarian, “Ejse tén sérti a szemét őszentségének a hármashalom?”
ed church in particular, Sztuflák concluded that the local Szekler community had learned its lesson and repaired the roof in a traditional style.

The altar’s new covering not only materialized a conflict between universal Catholic theology and particular Hungarian aesthetic motifs, but also allowed observers to engage unresolved and enduring questions about the nature of the Church and the pope’s identity. Following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), many in the Catholic Church embraced a less clergy-centered and hierarchical vision of the Church, which was supposed to become far more communal. The metaphor of pilgrimage, as in the phrase “pilgrim Church,” evoked the idea that the Catholic Church was not only capable of progress and change but also a democratic community. The way of following Jesus was symbolized by the collective direction of the pilgrimage group.

Commentators on the altar renovations wondered if the pope would live up to the image of the pilgrims who visit to Csíksomlyó. The new altar covering suggested otherwise, since pilgrims are often subject to the weather in the outdoor amphitheater and the roof was supposed to protect the pope from the rain. Affecting mock pity, one commentator pretended to worry about the pope’s getting wet: “Poor little pope,” the individual wrote, “what will happen if he gets soaked!” To this commentator, the pope’s unwillingness to get wet signaled his secret undemocratic inclinations: “Jesus gathered to himself neither an audience, nor a group of spectators, nor a sympathetic crowd, but rather followers!” The commentator thus mobilized a contradiction resulting from post-Vatican II discourse about lay leadership and the use of rituals like pilgrimage and the Mass to exemplify a newly democratic Catholic Church. Rituals like pilgrimage are valuable for their emphasis on popular engagement and participation, but the Mass that is supposed to sanctify these events also requires priests to perform acts like transforming bread and wine into the real presence of Jesus Christ—acts that are forbidden to everyone else.

Some claimed the demand to cover the altar was a sign of the pope’s hypocrisy in this matter: “Why is such a fuss necessary for a papal visit? It’s as if he’s not just
a person like everyone else.” The pope visited a pilgrimage site to show he was just another human believer, but celebrated the Mass at Our Lady of Csíksomlyó, a ritual that highlighted his distinctive ontological authority to instantiate the real presence of Jesus Christ on earth. The roof became a way to engage this fundamental social and ontological contradiction of post-Vatican II Catholicism.

CONCLUSION

During its twelve years in power, Hungary’s right-wing government, led by Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz Party, has spent lavishly on public architecture. The government has paid for over thirty public monuments across the country, all with the distinctive Triple Hill architectural form. The Triple Hill has been especially popular in structures memorializing the hundred-year anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon, which dissolved the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I. Areas formerly controlled by Hungary were transferred to the Empire’s various successor nation-states, some of which like Romania inherited significant populations of Hungarian-speaking minorities. Most observers of Hungarian politics have interpreted these Triple Hill monuments as signals of Hungary’s abiding irredentist desires, its continuing use of political tactics toward the goal of revising post-World War I borders.

I have tried to destabilize this interpretation with a historical analysis of the Triple Hill motif’s trajectories across borders and political economic systems. My goal has been to recover some of the diversity of meanings attached to this aesthetic form in contemporary Hungarian public culture. Not simply a symbol of right-wing political aspirations, in the 1970s the Kecskemét city government used the Triple Hill motif to take part haltingly in the process of de-Stalinizing Hungary’s public culture. The Triple Hill motif proved flexible enough to survive rematerialization into the favored natural media of Hungary’s Organicist architectural movement. The process of building Imre Makovecz’s Triple Hill-inspired altar at Our Lady of Csíksomlyó—a structure Makovecz did not see in person for a decade after it was built—made Makovecz’s partial knowledge of Transylvania’s ethnic minority cul-

55 Barabás, “Csak a pápalátogatás idejére.”
tural politics into a problem. To obtain funding for the project, the shrine's Franciscan caretakers also needed to navigate political institutions in Hungary whose inner workings were largely unfamiliar to them. Go-betweens like the local Hungarian priest, Father Pál, leveraged knowledge of Hungarian political institutions to come to their aid. In the process of bringing the Triple Hill motif to Csíksomlyó, Father Pál gained a reputation for opportunism, selfishness, and moral ambiguity that bred resentment among his clerical colleagues.

The Triple Hill motif is also a threatened symbol of Hungarian material culture, at least for those who participated in the outraged reaction to the proposed renovation of Imre Makovecz’s Triple Hill altar at Our Lady of Csíksomlyó. Pope Francis’s visit to Csíksomlyó raised anxieties about Hungarians’ vulnerability to foreign and alienating material cultures. These anxieties were in turn rooted in the pride that Hungarians’ felt in the late socialist period when they were the envy of the Eastern Bloc and a Western-leaning consumer paradise. The fall of socialism ushered in a profound adjustment of identity that only contributed to a tendency to read national and international politics through the lens of consumer culture. The Vatican’s insistence on covering Makovecz’s altar thus played into Hungarians’ pre-existing political anxieties about dominating material cultures.

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