

COOP
DESIGN
RESEARCH

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PROGRAM

ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE
UNDESIRABLE ARCHITECTURE EXPERIENCE OF THE PRIOR
DEPARTMENT STORES IN SLOVAKIA

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Author: Natalia Kvitkova

ABSTRACT

Hailed among the defining architectural projects of socialist modernism, the Prior department stores in Slovakia constitute a significant part of its cultural heritage. As an ideological apparatus of the socialist regime whose purpose as a tool of propaganda and proof of the material conquests, power and economic vitality of socialist Czechoslovakia, the Prior was also an integral component of socialist consumptive practices from which Slovakia emerged as a mass consumer society. Faced with enduring contest against their existence and potentially insensitive refurbishments and demolitions, I question why and how are the Prior department stores, monumental examples of socialist modernist architecture in Slovakia, undesirable eyesores?

My study of socialist architectural heritage, consumption culture and collective memory is seen through three examples of the Prior in Slovakia. My own experiences, interviews with Slovak architectural historians, former Prior employees, the community and stakeholders in the redevelopment process of the Prior buildings, elucidate the breadth of its cultural contributions. Archival Prior materials and building plans supplement a discourse analysis of architecture as a mnemonic device and heritage monuments.

I do not propose a solution for dealing with socialist modernist architecture in the post-Soviet landscape but trace the undesirability of the Prior through its past, present and future, and evince its worthy cultural heritage. It is through the recognition of what the loss of these buildings spells for Slovak identity that offers recourse for their legacy.