Article

Populism's Building Complex; or: Is there such a thing as Populist Architecture?[1]

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Abstract

This article argues that there is a distinctive populist approach to the built environment. Populists claim that they alone represent what they often call "the real people." Hence, there is a need for them to specify who "the real people" are. If they have sufficient power (and time) while in government, they will reshape the built environment – architecture, no less than urban and rural environments more broadly -- in line with their understanding of "the real people." In particular, they will create spaces (some obviously political, some not so obvious, such as football stadiums) that can serve as sites for the collective affirmation of a particular understanding of peoplehood. The article also asks how post-populist governments should relate to a built environment reshaped by populists.

In the run-up to the momentous parliamentary and presidential elections in Turkey in spring 2023, one part of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's record received special scrutiny: the building boom over which his AK Party had presided for the past two decades. The earthquake on February 6 – in which more than 50,000 people perished – made many Turks painfully aware of the dark side of that boom: not just shoddy buildings, but also wide-spread corruption and the creation of construction industry oligarchs ready to cement the power of the ruler (Bechev 2022).

However, Erdoğan is not the only right-wing populist leader who has relied crucially on the building business: Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Indian prime minister Narendra Modi are others. One little-noticed side-effect is that such long-ruling figures have systematically transformed the built environment – especially city centers, but also small towns and villages – in line with their understanding of who the "real people" are.[2] If such populists lose power – a big if! – new governments will face many urgent tasks. But on their agenda must also be the question whether they should dismantle the symbolic landscapes populist leaders have constructed.

This article investigates what I shall describe as an *elective affinity* between populism and a particular approach to the built environment (I take the latter to include architecture and urban as well as rural planning). My approach differs from previous attempts to think about architecture in conjunction with populism; such accounts rely on an understanding of populism as "giving people what they want," or as egalitarian housing policies, or as somehow relating to popular culture (Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's attempts to "learn from Las Vegas," and postmodern architecture more broadly, have often been described as "populist") (Venturi, Brown and Izenour 1972; Lefaivre and Tzonis, 2006; Frausto and Szacka, 2021).[3]

Instead, I shall first offer an approach to populism that identifies the phenomenon with a particular claim by leaders and parties uniquely to represent what populists often call "the real people" or also "the silent majority" (Müller 2017). Clearly, every populist has to say something about "the people"[4] – the people needs to be demarcated somehow (which also shows why those who call a particular policy "populist" – for instance economists criticizing an economic approach for supposedly being inflationary or protectionist – are really making a value judgment; they are not describing anything specifically related to a claim about the people). In a second step, I shall argue that populists with sufficient power (and time) in government will try to reshape the built environment in line with their conception of "the real people." Put differently, they will seek to establish cultural hegemony (an effort not unique to them, of course) in a distinctly anti-pluralist manner.[5] Needless to say, building is not the only way of doing so; there are also films, soap operas, museums, textbooks in schools, etc.[6]

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[2] As the German right-wing intellectual Claus Wolfschlag once put it, "whoever wants to talk about Volk or Heimat cannot remain silent about architecture (in which and with which the Volk lives, after all)." (Trüby 2019, 20).

[3] Another rare exception is Emilia Palonen who writes that "for populists, urban transformations provide a tool for generating affect but also drawing these discursive political frontiers and points of identification." (Palonen 2019, p. 185).

[4] Of course, the subtext is often: the people simply do not know what is good for them.

[5] As Orbán (2018) explained at one of his summer university speeches in Romania: "An era is determined by cultural trends, collective beliefs, and social customs. This is now the task we are faced with: we must embed the political system in a cultural era. This is why it is logical – and in no way surprising – that it is precisely in the field of cultural policy that we have seen the explosion of what is currently the most intense debate."

[6] One need only think of the lavish biopics on Erdoğan and Modi.

I shall suggest further, drawing on a number of contemporary examples, that spaces created by populists often serve as sites for affirming a particular understanding of peoplehood. While populism, as I conceptualize it, has an inbuilt authoritarian tendency *qua* being anti-pluralist, the approach to generate consent through culture by populists in the twenty-first century is notably "softer" than what we know from the experience of twentieth-century dictatorships. Hence this article also confirms recent theories in comparative politics about the peculiarities of today's authoritarianism. These theories highlight systematic differences between twentieth-century "fear dictatorships" and twenty-first century "spin dictatorships," with the latter being demonstrably less violent and primarily focused on manipulating public opinion (Guriev and Treisman, 2022): particular artists and architects (and styles and symbols) might be shunned; monuments and buildings might be dismantled -- but nobody is sent to prisons or camps. Finally, I want to suggest some ways in which governments that come to power *after* populist regimes have transformed the built environment might address the question how to relate to that particular populist legacy. Here I shall claim that much depends on the specifics of transitions back to democracy (which is not to suggest that all democracies before populists came to power were perfect!). But it can be said that, in general, post-populist governments should resist the temptation of iconoclasm, which is to say: simply erasing edifices built by populists. There are some important exceptions to this suggestion, though.

Why Would Populists Care about the Built Environment?

Contrary to conventional wisdom, populists are not just characterized by criticism of elites or "anger at the establishment." It is true that, when in opposition, they attack sitting governments and other parties, and, as Cas Mudde has pointed out in his seminal contribution to an ideational understanding of populism, they always do divide society into strictly separated entities of "elites" and "people." (Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).[7] However, they also do something else: they claim that, and *only they*, represent what they often refer to as "the real people" (Müller 2017). This implies that all other contenders for power do not represent the people – because, so populists relentlessly insinuate, every other politician is fundamentally corrupt. At stake here is never just a disagreement about policies, or even one about values – after all, such conflicts are completely normal and ideally even productive in a democracy. Rather, populists make differences with others immediately *personal* and wholly a matter of *morality*: the others are never just misguided in their understanding of policy or hold different value commitments; they are ultimately just bad, nefarious characters. In other words, populists, on a basic level, deny the legitimacy of their political opponents.

Less obviously, the claim to a monopoly of representing the people also implies that all those citizens who do not share – or simply do not fit – the

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[7]   Evidently, I do not quite agree with Mudde in seeing populism as an illiberal form of democracy (though I have sympathy for the view that it can be a reaction to undemocratic illiberalism, that is to say, a technocratic approach to politics).

ultimately symbolic construction of "the people" undertaken by populists do not belong to the people at all. Populists do not simply criticize the powerful (something that can be very healthy in a democracy, of course); rather, they always seek to exclude particular others: this happens obviously at the level of party politics; less obviously, but much more dangerously for democracy, at the level of the people themselves, where already vulnerable minorities are often cast out from "the real people" (in addition to "globalists," "liberal cosmopolitan elites," etc.).

Erdoğan is an obvious example: in 2014, at a party congress, he claimed about himself and his AKP: "We are the people;" then he turned to critics and asked: "Who are you?" Another one is Trump who often responded to criticism of his policies not by offering a defense of them (as a "normal" politician elected to govern would have done), but by simply calling the critics "unamerican." In short, populists reduce politics to questions of belonging, and they take an evidently anti-pluralist stance when trying to generate legitimacy: *only they* represent the people; whoever does not fit their notion of the people (or whoever does not support them politically) does not belong to the people. Note the overall consequence: not all citizens are "the real people" in this kind of politics of exclusion.

Populists, contrary to what one might call two liberal cliches, are capable of governing. It is not true that their approach to politics is necessarily characterized by having simplistic ideas about policy; according to those holding this view of populism, populists in government will quickly find that all their promises – based on "simplistic solutions" – cannot be kept; these promises founder on the rocks of reality – hence populist will necessarily fail, or they might become pragmatic and do justice to the complexity of the world, in which case they cease to be populists, by that liberal definition (note how this account is essentially a version of the "moderation through inclusion"-hypothesis). The other rather cliched notion is that, since populists are supposedly always "against elites," being in government means that they have to stop being populists: after all, they will have become "the elite" themselves, and they can hardly criticize, let alone govern against, themselves. As with the narrative about populists being *terribles simplificateurs*, the problem of populism will sooner or later solve itself.

As should have become clear in recent decades (if not before), populists are in fact able to govern (which is not to say that populist governments are invincible, let alone that all their policies turn out to be successful); it should also have become clear that populists in power can *remain* populists: no populist head of government has ever run out of elites, which is to say: scapegoats, for the fact that the people's authentic will has not been implemented yet, and that policies have gone awry (of course, "shadowy international elites," or some universally available hate figures like George Soros are particularly easy to blame).[8]

In fact, there is what one might call a distinctive populist art of govern-

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[8]   For an analysis of why many regimes have converged on Soros as a hate-figure (Rachman, 2022).

ance which is centered on capturing the state in the name of the people (legitimating the replacement of career civil servants with partisan loyalists), on engaging in mass clientelism (only "the real people" should obtain material benefits or bureaucratic; everyone else is nothing and should get nothing) and on pushing back against any opposition from civil society with the claim that those in opposition might just be, as Trump once put it, "paid activists," or "foreign agents," but, in any case, not "real people" (for, by definition, the people cannot be against their only authentic representatives). I do not claim that all populists necessarily exhibit these tendencies to the same degree, but there is a clear pattern (or, if one prefers, a family resemblance); and the similarities are not least explained by the fact that populist leaders can learn from each other, and copy practices across borders.

Now, one rather underappreciated (and under-researched) part of these patterns is this: populists eventually seek to make the correct understanding of the real people permanent in the built environment. For such a strategy has several advantages for them: first, it can be a crucial part of creating cultural hegemony. There are obviously political buildings that can convey a political message through sheer size and choice of location, through a particular iconography, and also through stylistic choices. Not for nothing has Balázs Orbán, Viktor Orbán's chief strategist (no relation), declared "architectural revival" a "top priority of the Hungarian government."[9]

There are other, more practical advantages, too. Building projects – including major infrastructure undertakings like Istanbul's new airport – are visible to all; they also, as with China's rapid creation of airports, for instance, seem to prove state capacity as such.[10] But they also make it easy to push taxpayer money (or, in the case of Hungary, EU subsidies) to cronies who can return the favor by buying up TV channels or newspapers critical of the populist ruler.

Yet more than financial power is in play: many decades ago, the American political scientist Harold Laswell, in an unjustly forgotten volume on architecture and power, distinguished "strategies of awe" from "strategies of admiration." (Laswell, 1979). The former, mostly associated with totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century, aimed at directly intimidating citizens; today's authoritarians, much more focused on spinning success stories than on instilling fear, try to generate admiration, a sense of national achievement – and tourism. Hitler's megalomaniac city of Germania (never built) and Stalin's Palace of the Soviets, a skyscraper with a gigantic Lenin statue on top (also never built), were not exactly meant to attract foreign visitors to leave cash behind. Today's spectacular buildings aim simultaneously at a "Bilbao effect" (named after the transformation of the Basque city into a major tourist hub through

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[9]   https://twitter.com/BalazsOrban_HU/status/1637388891182301184?cxt=HHwWgIC8oa6h lrktAAAA . This was retweeted by the account Architectural Revival (https://twitter.com/ arch_revival), which declares "Beauty and Tradition Matters" (sic!) (apparently grammar does not matter). Balázs Orbán's larger reflections on government priorities can be found in his The Hungarian Way of Strategy (2021).

[10]   I am grateful to Pratap Mehta for this point.

Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum) and a bunker effect (as in: ensconcing leaders in power).[11] But, to be sure, they also on one level are intended to inspire awe: they send a message of "we are winning" or "we have won and hence can permanently alter the environment in which the political losers will have to live."[12]

Some Examples Examined

Erdoğan has had new mosques built all over Turkey, including the enormous Grand Çamlıca Mosque in Istanbul, which can accommodate more than 60,000 worshippers, which contains a Museum of Islam, and which is visible from many parts of the city. A large mosque is also what those leaving the gigantic new airport will see first. And in 2020, the president turned the Hagia Sophia from being a museum into a mosque, releasing the building, as he put, from "chains of captivity." (Konakçı, 2023). Remnants of Christian iconography have been covered with white drapes. Not by accident did the president pray at Hagia Sophia the day before the first round of elections in 2023.

A mosque holding 4000 people has also been completed on Taksim Square, traditionally associated with Turkish secularism and Atatürk's republicanism, symbolized by a monument at the very center of the square (now dwarfed by the mosque). The modern architecture pioneered after the Second World War, from the famous Hilton hotel built by large American firm SOM (giving rise to the anti-modern charge of "Hiltonism") to the Atatürk Cultural Center, has been complemented with conspicuously neo-Ottoman buildings; sometimes, modern buildings are torn down altogether (Bozdoğan and Akcan, 2012, p. 129). In what arguably remains one of the major symbolic defeats of Erdoğan so far, the plan to destroy the Gezi Park next to Taksim in order to build a shopping mall and reconstructed Ottoman military barracks had to be halted after major protests (to this day, people the regime dislikes are arbitrarily charged with having instigated the Gezi protests; the site remains so sensitive that a massive police presence and conspicuous surveillance are ensured by the government – then again, the original plan has not been implemented, and Gezi is simply decaying).

Populism is not primarily about the symbolic conquest of urban (and rural) spaces, but it is also about strategies – often literally -- to cement an image of "the real people." Orbán's enormously expensive reconstruction of the Castle District – making it the seat of government, and displacing cultural institutions such as the National Gallery– evokes a late nineteenth-century bourgeois "Golden Age."[13] The Habsburg-era buildings, while claiming to be "faithful" to the originals, are often being created from photographs and in effect feature ornamentation around a concrete structure, similar to Erdoğan's mosques (there are also, to be sure, similarities with Germany's controversial reconstruction of a Prussian palace, the *Stadtschloss*, in the middle of Berlin) : what claims to be truly traditional is often postmodern pastiche; and, while heavily

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[11]   On the Bilbao effect (and a very effective critique of it), see de Graaf (2022).

[12]   I am grateful for Atticus Carnell for suggesting this point.

[13]   I leave aside here the Liget project; for that, see (Hajdu, 2019).

surveilled and guarded by police, these spaces also offer plenty of opportunities for consumption by tourists.

Even more telling is the redesign of the square around Hungary's parliament, what is often referred to as *nemzet főtere*, the main national square.[14] The space supposedly has been restored to the condition it was in in 1944, with a monument to Kossuth erected under state socialism replaced by the copy of an earlier monument that depicted the national hero as a rather downtrodden and isolated figure. An iconography condemning the "Red Terror" after the First World War has also been restored, including a female statue glowering at the parliament building – after all, it was liberal parliamentarians, according to the right-wing reading of interwar history, that enabled the Communists to come to power.[15] A statue of Mihály Károlyi, the liberal prime minister who had signed the Armistice after the First World War, had already been removed in 2012 (doing away with the statue had been a long-standing demand of the far-right party Jobbik); later on, a moving memorial to Imre Nagy, the leader of the ill-fated revolution of 1956, standing midway on a bridge, also disappeared.

The restoration of the pre-1944 square sends one clear signal: proper Hungarian history stopped with the occupation by the Germans in March 1944; and the state socialist period also does not properly belong to it. It is only in 2010 – the beginning of Orbán's second period as prime minister, soon followed by the creation of a new national (and nationalist) constitution – that national history as such resumes. Meanwhile, despite the gesture towards faithful reconstruction or even "authenticity" – everything has to be as in 1944! – new elements have been added as well: an underground memorial to the villages and cities lost after the Treaty of Trianon (when Hungary had to give up about two third of its territory).

The reconstruction boom is not only a matter of nostalgia, or some form of golden ageism.[16] Substantive stylistic judgments are being made, and these judgments are linked to broader political ideologies. Modernism and, in particular, the "International Style," are derided by many populists as both overly rationalist, colonialist, or objectionably "cosmopolitan." Some – from the Netherland's far-right political entrepreneur Thierry Baudet to Donald J. Trump -- have also made a point of condemning it as simply "ugly." (Mathieson and Verlaan, 2019). In the light of what happened on January 6th, it has been largely forgotten that Trump, in the dying days of his administration, had issued an executive order, entitled "Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture," which made "classicism" the preferred style for new federal buildings, stopping just short of banning modernism from government construction

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[14]   See also (Dányi, 2013), and, for a comprehensive history of the square until the first decade of the twenty-first century, see Gerő, 2009), which makes clear that Orbán was not the first to use the square to communicate strong political messages; as Gerő puts it: "On the Kossuth Square everything speaks of power. (2009, p. 95).

[15]   I owe this observation to Balázs Trencsényi.

[16]   Nostalgia and promises of "making country X great again" can, but do not have to, feature in right-wing populism, pace (Priester, 2012).

entirely (The White House, 2020). This architectural imperative was argu-
ably linked to Trump's ill-fated 1776 Commission which decreed a "patriotic,"
critics would say: whitewashed, version of American history (The President's
Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021). Had Trump been re-elected (or gotten away
with stealing the election), new visual strategies for federal buildings would
have been combined with a larger pedagogy aimed at making the country feel
good about itself again (and beautiful).

It would be wrong to categorize any particular architectural style as inher-
ently populist (although, as briefly mentioned above, some versions of post-
modernism – supposedly aimed primarily at "pleasing the people" through
borrowing from popular culture – have been seen that way.) However, it
remains the case that some populist leaders have promoted particular styles
as part of solidifying an understanding of "the real people" – most obviously
perhaps in the case of Erdoğan's choice of the Ottoman-Seljuk style (Batuman,
2018): either existing buildings in the right style were remodeled (Orbán's
new seat as prime minister on the Castle Hill), or new ones have been built
(Erdoğan's presidential complex in Ankara, often derided as Ak Saray, or
White Palace).

Note how this is not just generally about "nationalism" (the Kemalists are
nationalists, too, after all); rather, it is about cementing a particular notion
of peoplehood in competition with other conceptions – and demonstrating
the efficacy of a regime in remaking a country in light of that conception.
Heritage – which, to be sure, is never politically entirely innocent – is clearly
weaponized for purposes of exclusion; and, as Svetlana Boym once put it, the
actual products of reconstruction are "historical in form and antihistorical in
content." (Boym, 2001; Blokker, 2022).

It is worth adding that the regimes discussed here have also pursued policies for
which the general – often too general – term neoliberalism is appropriate (Akçalı and
Korkut, 2015). In fact, rather curiously, religious and nationalist architecture is often
created in conjunction with shopping malls and other spaces for acquisition and more
or less conspicuous consumption. Overall, the three leaders mainly discussed here have
presented themselves as champions of business (sometimes specifically also as cham-
pions of *national* business – while it would be a misjudgment to see Orbán as somehow
"anti-globalization," he did nationalize a number of companies). At least I do not see any
specific elective affinity with populism here; rather, the more basic (some might say:
banal) point is that right-wing populist authoritarian parties cannot really come to power
without the support of conservatives elites, business elites in particular.[17] In that sense, the
broadly speaking neoliberal programs are not accidental, and the real estate and construc-
tion booms – with the selling of public land at low prices as a cause and the displacement
of poorer populations as an effect – are tied to the populist building agenda somewhat.[18]

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[17]   On the crucial role of elites – which becomes a blind spot if one uncritically accepts
notions such as a "populist wave" or populism as a "grassroots revolt" by the forgotten or the
losers of globalization – see Larry Bartels (2023).

[18]   For displacements – justified in the name of disaster prevention and weaponized against
potential political opposition – see Eray Çayli (2021).

Spaces for Affirming Peoplehood

Churches, mosques, and temples are obvious ways of affirming a particular religious understanding of the "real people." Sports venues are much less obvious. Yet both Orbán and Erdoğan have invested enormous resources in building football stadiums (with the aim of making national football great again); Erdoğan has also modestly named some after himself (in Hungary naming buildings after living persons is illegal). Meanwhile, Narendra Modi had the world's largest cricket stadium created in his native Gujarat; initially named after independence hero Sardar Patel, the name was recently changed to … Narendra Modi (Aljazeera, 2021). Needless to say, which cities and regions get new stadiums is determined by proximity to the ruling party: Konya, Kayseri, and Trabzon would be blessed with generous funding; Izmir, dominated by opposition to Erdoğan's AKP, not so much (Goldblatt, 2019, p. 300).

As briefly mentioned above, these structures can easily demonstrate state capacity; after all, they are visible to all. Less visible are schemes that allow companies friendly to populist leaders to donate to stadium construction, currying favor with the regime – Hungary, with its tax credits for donations to sports clubs, being a prime example (Goldblatt, 2019, p. 222-3). Companies are encouraged to buy special skyboxes and to conduct business there; in fact, according to some observers, it can be the only place where you can meet the relevant politicians to get deals done (Goldblatt, 2019, p. 222).

The most well-known example of a fusion of sports and architectural style is the Felcsút football academy and stadium founded by Orbán in the small town where he grew up. Initially designed by the leading anti-modernist (broadly speaking) post-war architect Imre Makovecz, the buildings (far too large in relation the size of the town, as many observers have pointed out), resemble nothing as much as a cathedral.[19]

Less obviously, these spaces, like churches and mosques, allow crowds to experience themselves as being committed to a shared project – albeit it only one of celebrating the national football team (and perhaps a glorious football past). People are in awe of whatever is staged by way of an event, but also of their adulation. This lesson about the uses of spaces for mutual visibility and hence affirmation is hardly new: Jean-Jacques Rousseau already recommended festivities in which the people, not a king or nobles, are the main actors (Rousseau, 1997).[20] In his advice to the Poles, he argued that they should institute festivities and "many public games where the good mother country delights in seeing her children at play" (in contrast with "shut-in halls" and "dissolute effeminate theaters" in which people would just passively consume and be isolated from each other) (Rousseau, 1997, p. 182).[21] Rousseau advocated

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[19]   To be sure, this is a somewhat cartoonish image of a complex oeuvre.

[20]   See also Ozouf (1976), who writes of the basic idea that the legislator makes laws for the people, but festivities make the people for the laws – something that explains' the Revolution's "festomanie" (p. 20). See also Reichardt (2002).

[21]   He generally recommended: "Nothing, if possible, exclusively for the Great and the rich. Many spectacles in the open, where ranks are carefully distinguished but the entire people participates equally, as among the ancients…" (p. 186).

making "these games attractive to the public by organizing them with some pomp ...so that they become a spectacle;" he continued that it was then "a fair assumption that all honest folk and good patriots will regard it a duty and a pleasure to attend them." (Rousseau, 1997, p.191). After the French Revolution, crowds were indeed drafted to partake in large marches and festivals -- sometimes holding up placards with sentences from Rousseau's books.

Symbols are one thing; they might be passively consumed or in fact not really be noted or be appropriately decoded, at all.[22] Another thing is the creation of spaces in which people can solidify a particular identity by acting together (and seeing each other as acting together). It is not an accident that, in 2020, Modi hosted Trump in his cricket stadium, while Trump had already feted Modi in a stadium in Texas in September 2019, as part of the "Howdy Modi" tour.

Today's authoritarians have had an ambivalent relationship with personality cults. Modi has covered all of India with posters featuring himself; in the garden where Gandhi was assassinated, a plaque emphasizing Gandhi's imperative to care for the poor features an image of Modi that is far larger than Bapu's. But such leaders are also aware that excessive personalization of politics might too easily remind both domestic and international audiences of twentieth-century dictatorships. As Serguei Guriev and Daniel Treisman (2022) – who have suggested the important contrast between ruling by fear and ruling by spin – have pointed out, populist leaders may well be better off with projecting an image of competent managers who just happen to be very good at implementing the will of "the real people" (which, according to the logic of populism, must be unerring). The awe-inspiring monuments they erect do not co-exist with a logic of state terror, as was the case with twentieth-century totalitarianism, but they still send a signal about who belongs and who does not (and it helps figures like Orbán that the borders inside the EU remain open: the not-real-people can always leave).

The imperative of "Don't make it too obvious!" also applies to the comprehensive refashioning of New Delhi's Central Vista. Modi's favorite architect, fellow Gujarati Bimal Patel, has redesigned the large spaces in front of the government buildings created by Edward Lutyens in the last decades of the British Raj. Rather than replacing these edifices – which often incorporated a diversity of symbols Lutyens saw as typical for different parts of India –new ones are being built next to them. In particular, a large triangular parliament has been erected right opposite the old circular one (what under the Raj had been the Council House); while new offices are also being created along what might remind visitors of the Washington Mall. Many of the changes are being justified in a decidedly technocratic language (better air conditioning; underpasses and proper bridges; better lighting, clean, well-kept lawns, parking, more restrooms) – very much in line with one aspect of Modi's self-presentation as a promoter of business and technology (as one his slogans goes, he seeks to achieve better governance and less government at the same time).

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[22] Walter Benjamin pointed out that the built environment is omnipresent and yet mostly unnoticed; people relate to it in a state of distraction (1991, p. 465-6).

Other elements are more charged: what used to be known as the Rajpath has been renamed the Kartavya Path, the road of duty. And, in another fraught gesture, a gigantic statue of Subha Chandra Bose has been installed under a canopy next to India gate, which commemorates those fallen in the World Wars. Bose is considered a hero of resistance to the British; though his name is also tainted by his attempts to form alliances with Nazi Germany and Japan during the war. Most important, he stands for an Indian nationalism not associated with the Congress Party, which achieved India's independence and remains Modi's main political adversary today.

The parliament was opened by Modi in May 2023 (opposition parties objected to the fact that the prime minister, not the country's president, was conducting the opening ceremony; 20 opposition parties eventually boycotted the event entirely); a new edifice for the prime minister remains under construction. It seems a fair guess, however, that none of them will make Modi's commitment to Hindutva – the core of his right-wing populism which leaves all non-Hindus outside the understanding of the "real people" – too obvious. After all, this commitment is much more plausibly realized in the construction of Hindu temples (and the demolition of mosques), and the creation of spaces that makes citizens put their Hindu identity first (as opposed to an identity as a worker, for instance). As in the cases of Turkey and Hungary, one layer of history is removed and a supposed reconstruction is celebrated as some kind of return to authenticity and greatness: a process most evident in Ayodhya, the supposed birthplace of Rama, where Hindu nationalists destroyed the Babri Masjid mosque in 1992 and where now the Ram Mandir (Ram Temple) is being built; completing it has been one of the major election promises of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party.

This, so to speak, double movement of erasure and reconstruction takes different forms: With Modi, it means erasing mosques which had been built on Hindu temples (whether that was always the case is besides the point; the idea is that the Mogul period is erased – something also increasingly the case with school textbooks); with Orbán, it means eradicating the modernist architecture associated with state socialism; in Erdoğan's case, the displacement of Kemalist modernist edifices by Islamic architecture, or at least buildings in appropriate Ottoman-Seljuk style, is the priority.

One last aspect of the populist art of building is important to mention: even if the buildings are not direct monuments to ego, the methods for creating them are usually autocratic: local governments are overridden; emergencies are declared for the completion of projects (as in Budapest); even when the rest of the country is paralyzed by a pandemic, construction is declared an "essential service" that must continue, as in New Delhi (Holland, 2021). At the best of times, architecture is not a particularly democratic enterprise; but populist right-wingers do not even try to justify what they do in terms of open design processes, and appeal to their conception of peoplehood instead.

Strategies for a Post-Populist Time

Laswell observed that "if actions speak louder than words, things often speak louder than either." Long after right-wing populists are gone from power, many things will remain. Erdogan announced, when opening the new Taksim Mosque, "God willing, it will stay until the end of time." (BBC, 2021).

Non-populist governments would be making a mistake if they started to remove everything – even if historically fake, even if entirely invented tradition – in some kind of act of symbolic cleansing; if anything, this would reinforce that sense, consciously stoked by populist leaders in any case, that every political battle is existential, and that every election might be a prelude to a civil war.[23]

Yet complete passivity would also be wrong in the face of iconography or inscriptions that consciously falsify history or send messages of exclusion. Here one might consider the memorial to Hungary's occupation by Nazi Germany in 1944. It was created by Orbán's government in 2014, literally during one night, and has never been officially inaugurated; instead, it was met with protest by citizens who, rightly, see it as a crude attempt to deny any Hungarian complicity in the Holocaust. Such memorials can be undone, or at least contextualized, in such a way that there is no message that amounts to a form of Holocaust denial by the state itself. Populist elements in the urban (and rural) landscape might be juxtaposed with counter-monuments and counter-architecture (back to re-imagined forms of modernism, perhaps). The point would not be to have a monument-free built environment, but a pluralistic one, in which the "authoritarian didacticism" – to quote James E. Young – of traditional monuments would be resisted, or at least relativized (Young, 2016, p.327).

Clearly, any choice of strategy has to be highly sensitive to context: sometimes demolition might be justified, at other times what has been called "amputation" or "profanation" might be more appropriate, and sometimes a problematic part of the built environment should be left standing and become incorporated into a democracy- and pluralism-affirming site of commemoration.[24] Perhaps more important, though, countries recovering from populism might want to invest in something many populist leaders conspicuously neglect: affordable housing for the supposed "ordinary people" who populists claim uniquely to represent.

Conclusion

I have argued that there is a distinctive populist approach to the built environment, but no populist architecture as such. Populists claim that they alone represent what they often call "the real people." Hence, they need to specify who "the real people" are; and, if they have sufficient power and time while in government, they will reshape the built environment in line with their

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[23] On the strategy of maximizing polarization, and raising the stakes of every election, see Svolik 2019.

[24] See Sharon MacDonalds' analysis of the different strategies of what she calls "demolition, amputation, profanation, reconstruction, looking elsewhere, commemoration, art, education and moral witnessing" (2008, p. 186).

understanding of the real people. They also will create spaces (some obviously political, some not so obviously political, such as sports stadiums) which can serve as sites for the collective affirmation of a particular understanding of peoplehood.

Evidently, not everything that has been built under populist governments is somehow tainted by anti-pluralism, let alone outright authoritarianism. Removing it all is not possible in any case; but it is also not desirable. Some form of comprehensive "iconographic cleansing" (or perhaps simply: iconoclasm) would reinforce the sense, relentlessly stoked by populists, that a country is fundamentally divided and that their supporters are part of an ongoing cold civil war which they might lose for good, with an endless series of exclusions of one part of the demos by the other (Svolik 2019). Clearly, there might be exceptions: it is hard to see how the German occupation monument in Budapest could simply stand as is. But how one can affirm pluralism will be highly context-dependent, not least in terms of what shape exactly a transition back to democracy may have taken.

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