

# American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms, and the Search for a 'Normal' Life in Post-Socialist Hungary

K. Fehérváry

University of Chicago, USA

**ABSTRACT** *Throughout the post-Soviet bloc, people regularly describe as 'normal' high-quality commodities and living environments otherwise considered extraordinary in their local context. In Hungary, this discourse of the normal indicates that middle-class aspirants, claiming 'European' status, now evaluate their own standards of living by comparison to imagined western ones. Looking to the socialist period, I argue that the construction of a socialist modern consumer led to the equation of western standards of living with self-value and dignity. Western material worlds were perceived to be conducive to a form of family life and personhood impossible under the 'abnormal' conditions of state-socialism. As this new standard comes to dictate middle-class fashioning, it becomes instrumental in the ongoing social, economic and material transformation of the country.*

**KEYWORDS** *Normal, post-socialism, material culture, domestic furnishings, middle-class, Hungary*

In the 1990s in post-socialist Hungary, astonishing transformations to public space were often surpassed by those made within the confines of private homes. Hungarians aspiring to middle-class status, who had lived most of their lives in one- or two-room apartments, proudly showed me around newly constructed, detached family homes with spacious living rooms, high-tech kitchens, multiple baths, and extra rooms for laundry and hobbies – often built at a cost far above their means. Others displayed renovations of their newly privatized socialist-era apartments, arched doorways and open spaces created by tearing down walls, new tiles in the hallway and in the modernized bathroom, and the coveted 'American kitchen' (*amerikai konyha*), meaning a kitchen open to the living area. During this period of economic uncertainty and inflation, studies conducted nationwide showed that the average size of new houses was significantly larger than had been considered com-

fortable by the standards of the socialist 1980s (122 m<sup>2</sup>). Furthermore, these Hungarians seemed willing to make sacrifices elsewhere in order to obtain the highest quality materials possible, from Italian tiles and domestic porcelain fixtures to German appliances and American floor heating systems (*Magyar Nemzet* 10/15/96). But when I exclaimed over the size of these new spaces, the quality of the materials used, or the novelty of design, I was met repeatedly with the puzzling response, 'Why, it's totally normal, isn't it?' (*Hát, ez teljesen normális, nem?*).<sup>1</sup>

As I was to discover, this reaction was not limited to my fieldsite, nor to Hungary. Throughout the post-Soviet region, scholars have reported similar uses of 'normal' to refer to objects, services and standards of living which are clearly extraordinary in their local context – and yet are imagined to be part of 'average' lifestyles in Western Europe or the United States. Accounts from the Baltic and Central European states in particular make clear that what I call a 'discourse of the normal' indexes a profound adjustment of identity set in motion by the sudden geopolitical shift of these countries from Soviet satellite to aspiring members of a reconfigured 'Europe.'<sup>2</sup> Those nations and peoples once identified as the most western of the Soviet bloc states suddenly found themselves situated on the undefined *eastern* border of greater Europe, with all the loss of prestige this entailed. Now they were in the unenviable position of having to prove their 'westernness' in a new context – to themselves as much as to a European Union reluctant to grant them membership.

Around the time of the Soviet collapse in the early 1990s, much was made of the profound disillusion experienced by citizens, of dashed expectations of rapid transformation and absorption into the much-fantasized world of the West. The difficulty of the ensuing years has indeed been a 'reality check' of sorts, as citizens have adjusted to the notion that it will take years, perhaps decades, for their nations to 'catch up' to the West; in many places, they are resigned to the possibility that it will not occur within their lifetimes. Nonetheless, as the present essay will demonstrate, the discourse of the normal illustrates that people have not abandoned expectations of western standards of living in their private lives. These longings are most evident in the realm of the material, as objects, built environments, consumer goods, and even the human body, have been subject to rapid shifts in meanings and value as their contexts have changed. Material culture, indeed, is emerging as a particularly revealing site for the investigation of the effects of the fall of state socialism on practices, values and subjectivities.<sup>3</sup>

Citizens of these post-socialist nations are not unique, of course, in comparing themselves to an idealized West. As Richard Wilk has written of Belize, a 'global standard has become an ever-present (and perhaps internalized) significant other by which the local is defined and judged' (Wilk 1995:127; also Howes 1996). Such comparisons were certainly true of Hungarians in the socialist era, as Western standards of living set the implicit standard – however unattainable – by which Hungarians evaluated their own material worlds. In the post-socialist context, however, this standard has been often seen less as an 'other' to be emulated, than a measure of a 'true' identity, or self, tied to a pre-socialist, bourgeois-democratic past, the development of which was suppressed or distorted by Communist rule. Without the taint of Soviet dominance, Hungarians now demand recognition of their European identity based on the nation's history, culture, educational level and professionalism, pointing to Hungarian contributions to western civilization in fields as disparate as theoretical physics, classical music and Hollywood cinema. With the removal of all apparent obstacles to rejoining Europe, the consensus has been that the country must strive to become what it would or should have been if its history had followed a 'normal' course.<sup>4</sup> As the realm of the possible is perceived to have expanded dramatically for citizens within this changed national context, so have internalized expectations of realizing a 'normal' life.

Yet settling on identification as 'western' or 'European' leaves many underlying questions unanswered. How is it that this peculiar kind of identity formation manifests itself through material culture, and more specifically, in notions about 'comparable' standards of living? What accounts for the cultural logic that dictates that only imagined European standards of living are acceptable for middle-class fashioning, even when it makes realization of such 'normalcy' increasingly out of reach for much of the population? Finally, what is the significance of the modesty implied by the normalization of these extraordinary material aspirations, given their context? In the following, I describe the discourse of the normal, drawing in particular upon fieldwork done among professionals and entrepreneurs in the Hungarian steel town of Dunaújváros. Expanding upon studies of 'normal' which focus on questions of identity, status and morality (Pesmen 2000; Rausing 1998; Wedel 1986), I examine how, in the realm of material culture, this discourse both emanates from transformations to the material landscape and serves to transform it.

In order to understand the power of this concept of 'normal' to shape practices and subjectivities, particularly in exerting intense social pressures to acquire

these material worlds, I turn to the state-socialist period. Drawing on popular socialist-era publications on interior decor and house-building,<sup>5</sup> I examine the diverse forces shaping the socialist citizen as modern consumer.<sup>6</sup> I suggest that the mass consumer society and consumer subjectivities fostered by state socialism led to the equation of modern standards of living, always calibrated against those considered average in the West, with a self-value and respectability accessible to a large middle stratum. While elite taste-makers attempted to develop a modern citizenry through modern commodities and living environments, the private, domestic sphere became idealized as a site of autonomy and refuge from an intrusive state and the 'abnormal' social, economic, and political conditions it fostered. Although abnormal conditions have not disappeared with the fall of state-socialism, the desire for the private spaces of new houses, American kitchens, and luxurious bathrooms stems from a cultural logic in which such spaces are fantasized as conducive to idealized lives – and selves – long imagined to exist elsewhere.

This historical background will help us to understand how the struggle for 'modern' standards of living is not a new phenomenon; such standards, adjusted for the conditions of state-socialism, have long been a criterion for social respectability and harmonious family relations. As the discourse of the normal reveals, what has changed is the perception that 'normal' worlds of western standard are now within the realm of the possible and must be attained in order to access the dignity accorded to European middle classes elsewhere.

### **The Discourse of the Normal**

In looking at the discourse of the normal, I am casting a net of inquiry wider than a precise definition of the word itself and the mechanisms of its use. I see the use of 'normal' to be a particularly provocative instance of a wider discourse incorporating other terms and communicative behaviors, from gestures to gift-giving practices. With this caveat in mind, I turn here to the definition of the word, examples of its use, and other discourses it builds upon. As with regional variants, the Hungarian *normális* is taken from the Latin. According to a Hungarian dictionary of foreign words and expressions (Bakos 1994), *normális* has much the same meaning as 'normal' in English: according to norms, standards; what is customary, normative, ordinary and average; in addition, what is nice, natural, healthy, dependable, rational, sane.<sup>7</sup> In my experience, synonyms for 'normal' include 'humane,' 'livable' and 'respectable,' while equivalent expressions for 'not normal' include 'unbelievable,' 'ca-

tastrophic,' and 'inhumane.' Not mentioned in the dictionary is its counter-contextual use, originating in the perception – common in most Soviet bloc countries during much of the socialist period – that everyday life was generally 'abnormal' under conditions of constant material shortages, all-encompassing bureaucratic entanglements, and political anxiety. Hungarians have thus regularly used 'not normal' and its equivalents to refer negatively to the familiar and the expected, to the accustomed workings and environments of everyday 'abnormal' life. Conversely, 'normal' is often used to refer to the extraordinary, to things that are neither customary nor normative within their local context, but, since the fall of state socialism, are expected to become so in the future.

What one meant by referring to something as 'normal' or 'not normal' in Hungary varies of course by speaker and with context – on whether it is used seriously or with sarcasm, or whether it is applied to people, to organizations, or to the material environment. In general, when Hungarians use 'normal' they are referring primarily to economic, political, and social spheres, much as Norbert Elias (1978) described the use of the term 'civilization' in nineteenth-century England and France, rather than to inner states of being or spirituality. In fact, when *normális* is used to describe a person, it usually indicates acceptable social behavior rather than imputing anything more profound to his or her character. As we shall see, however, 'normal' economic, political, and social systems can be seen as necessary conditions for the possibility of 'normal' social behavior and private life, with consequences for the construction of personhood. This point is critical for understanding how the discourse of the normal has come to mark the regime change as a turning point, even though the discourse itself is not new to the post-socialist period.<sup>8</sup>

Evaluating aspects of one's existence in this way arises from discourses of identity in which peoples on the periphery of a conceptual 'West' position themselves in some relation to it. Susan Gal (1991) has described the mechanics of such a discourse in Hungary, as the oppositions between terms West/East, Europe/Hungary, Hungary/Orient, modern/traditional, and so forth, shift in value depending on context. In this discourse, western or European qualities are not always positively valued, but can suffer in comparison to indigenous analogues, such as the 'alienation' brought on by European civility opposed to Hungarian 'community' (Elias's *kultur*). The post-socialist discourse of the normal – at least as it was used by middle-class aspirants in the mid-1990s – diverges from the West/East discourse in that its value remains constantly positive, even though what is being designated as 'normal'

can shift with context relative to what it is being compared to and who constitutes the audience.<sup>9</sup> 'Normal' (especially when referring to material culture or to governmental and commercial systems) makes reference to what is considered modern, civilized, or western, and thus fixes Europe and the West as the hegemonically positive norm for Hungary in opposition to state socialism, now permanently aligned with the East.<sup>10</sup>

The values of this discourse are reinforced by the ways they are analogous to those of long-standing anti-socialist discourses. 'Normal,' with its association with what is natural and healthy, is equated with the market capitalism and the bourgeois middle classes of European states as well as those of the pre-socialist era in Hungary. Such economic and social institutions were thought to produce forms of order, or legal, political, and economic systems which were understood to work 'normally' in the West. 'Normal' was commonly used to describe services, goods or constructions new to Hungary since 1989, things in keeping with socialist era expectations of life under a capitalist, free-market system. New telephone systems, automatic teller machines, 24-hour convenience stores and courteous sales clerks were examples of a 'normal' world available to most of the population. These were amenities that Hungarians associated with a certain dignity accorded to bourgeois citizens of the 'first world.'

In contrast, 'not normal' usually indexed spheres of life which had not changed or were seen to have deteriorated since 1989, vestiges of state-socialism deemed unnatural and even inhumane. My fieldnotes are full of people registering their discontent with or disassociation from out-of-date and inefficient technologies and infrastructures, corruption and rude behavior, and the frantic pace of everyday life. While the phrase 'this is not normal!' continued socialist era discourses on the abnormality of everyday life, it now also signified disappointment in the regime change for not ushering in an expected normalcy. As my friend Timea, a successful manager at the steel factory, once explained to me: 'Here, it's still not enough to work hard at several jobs. One has to go through friends to get things done; one can't simply make a phone call, but must do errands in person; it's not possible to trust a professional to take care of house-building or repairs, you have to do it yourself; if you come home at night tired, you can't go out to eat somewhere but have to cook. All these things burden a person, make them feel that they are scattered in all directions at once.' Occasionally the phrase referred to new and unexpected changes brought on by market capitalism and democracy, but again, socialism was implicated in the lawless and disorderly – 'not



Post-modern facade in ground floor of panel construction housing estate

normal’—*form* these new institutions had taken throughout the former socialist bloc because of the legacy of a state-socialist system. Like some eerie inversion of socialist realist discourse, which posited the future-in-the-present with hope (Fitzpatrick 1992), the discourse of *normális* posits the past-in-the-present with bitterness, that is, the abnormal way the state-socialist past is clinging to and interfering with a ‘normal’ present.

### Discourse of the Normal and Material Culture

If the discourse of the normal served as shorthand for identifying aspects of life which had or had not been transformed according to expectations after 1989, its application to material culture – from consumer goods to the built environment – seemed to mark the Hungarian landscape spatially and temporally, distinguishing objects and spaces contemporaneous with the West from those that remained behind a European standard, caught in the quicksand of the socialist past. Throughout the former Soviet bloc, the abundance in shops of consumer goods once available only by traveling to the West or through contacts has been much elaborated in the western press as well as in academic literature. Though more gradual, change to the built environment in the 1990s was no less dramatic. In cities like Budapest, the ground floors



*First cathedral in Dunaujváros, under construction in 1996.*

of many buildings blackened from soot and pollution over decades have been painted bright colors and often house small shops, restaurants, and boutiques, creating a bright corridor for pedestrians. Sometimes a single building on a soot-dark city block is renovated, revealing for the first time in a half-century intricate facades and sculptures but heightening the dinginess of the buildings surrounding it. The construction of new commercial spaces – post-modern office and bank buildings, luxury hotels, medical clinics and malls – has boomed. Billboards and neon signs, which existed in limited form during socialism, have proliferated. In the meantime, maintenance of existing socialist era buildings, both civic and private, has often deteriorated as state funds have evaporated.

Changes to the landscape in and around the former ‘socialist city’ of Dunaújváros since 1989 have been particularly conspicuous. With its steel factory, modern architecture and urban planning, the city was a showcase for the aging symbols of a modernist utopia, but now provides a backdrop for the eclecticism and color of the postmodern. The steel support arches of an enormous cathedral under construction rise to break the gray, angular uniformity of socialist era residential estates, which continue to house 90 per-



cent of the city population. Downtown, the first new structures to appear were a mirrored-glass bank and an oval-shaped shopping center, contrasting sharply with the cube-like socialist savings bank and department store next to them. Just as striking are the new neighborhoods of single-family houses, painted bright sherbet colors and adorned with red-tile roofs, which are emerging on the outskirts of the surrounding villages. Hidden within houses and apartments, but made 'visible' by ubiquitous advertising, specialty stores, television depictions and home decorating publications, are the transformations made to interior space.

The growing presence of these new, post-socialist spaces sharply contrasted with and transformed the significance of the older spaces around them, creating disjunctures in temporal and spatial experience. These 'normal' spaces were much like those Foucault describes as heterotopias, spaces which have the 'curious property of being in relation with other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect... Unlike utopias, which have a relation to society and existing spaces through analogy, they are absolutely different from all sites that they reflect or speak about' (Foucault 1986:24). And indeed, some of these new spaces – brightly lit gas stations in the middle of agricultural fields, malls with fantasy themes, the interiors of luxury cars speeding through the landscape – were seen to be 'absolutely different' from and opposed to those spaces associated with a backwardness of the socialist era – most notably, aging commercial spaces, bad roads and shoddy residential areas.

I use the term 'heterotopias' with some reservation, not wanting to imply that the Hungarian landscape in the 1990s could so easily be divided into static, socialist and post-socialist material worlds rather than transformations in process (Vörös n.d.). Not only were new styles doomed to become dated, but some, such as the distinctly Hungarian 'organic' architecture influential in the 1980s, continued in prominence in the 1990s. Furthermore, to my untrained eye, a friend's re-upholstered socialist-era couch looked as though it came from IKEA, an error in aesthetic judgment she found incomprehensible. Instead, with this concept I am pointing to widespread perceptions of aesthetic differences distinguishing the material objects and built environments of the post-socialist era. More than just postmodern trends, these differences were linked to impressions of quality, to intent in design and production, rather than to foreign origins.<sup>11</sup>

The notion of heterotopias helps to elucidate the qualities of these spaces for those excluded from them as well as those struggling to achieve them. As

Foucault observes, heterotopias often result from attempts to create spaces that are irreducibly 'other' and perfect in contrast to the messiness around them; they are spaces 'not of illusion, but of compensation' (Foucault 1986:27). As such, they are predicated on a sharp division between spaces, the heterotopic space being a kind of all-encompassing 'interior' creating its own reality within a problematic context. In Hungary, interiors of private homes have long been idealized as potentially heterotopic spaces, condensing qualities of a transcendent nature divorced from concerns with status and social display. As I will return to below, they appear to be places where a 'normal' life can take place, contained within but isolated from the not-normal world surrounding them.

### **Post-Socialist Middle-Class Fashioning and the Discourse of the Normal**

In its capacity of evaluating the material world in terms of past and present, socialist and post-socialist, Soviet and European, the discourse of the normal both reveals and creates social imperatives to position oneself discursively and associatively within a transforming material landscape. (Such social pressures parallel more familiar norms in the modern world to adjust one's position *vis-à-vis* changing fashions, but in the post-socialist context they are an extreme manifestation.) Sigrid Rausing (1998) has written with particular eloquence of the powerful incentives to 'normalize' the meanings and values of objects once considered unfamiliar or exotic in the shifting contexts of post-socialist Estonia. Estonians were forced to reconcile their socialist-era identity as 'western' with recent experience with the material trappings of such an identity, such as newly available and expensive western consumer goods from jeans to detergent. These goods could no longer be 'occasions for surprise, enthusiasm or confusion,' but had to be 'redefined as already taken-for-granted' (1998:190). Affecting a posture of disregard towards such goods not only established a person with a timeless 'European' and 'anti-Communist' identity, but identified one as a successful participant in the capitalist economy (1998:208).

In Hungary, western commodities had become increasingly commonplace during the 1980s; many items such as razors designed for women and blue jeans had already been demystified and allotted the status of everyday 'normal' items, though other items replaced them as 'special.' Nonetheless, the sudden shift in Hungary's geopolitical status combined with the abundance and availability of such commodities for cash created confusion about how

people were to respond to them. While it was necessary to mark success in the post-socialist world with status goods, it was no longer appropriate to express delight with a commodity simply for its western origins or inventive design; on the contrary, normalizing or even denigrating such goods was a way of demonstrating one's active participation in and knowledge about a transformed social and economic order. An example is the slang expression 'Pure American!' (*tiszta amerikai*), used primarily by teens and twenty-somethings to refer to novelties like the handy screw-top opening on a juice carton (in fact, of Scandinavian design). While it expressed appreciation for designs maximizing user comfort, particularly in contrast to state-socialist products, it often carried with it a note of amused disbelief and even disdain for innovations – associated with American culture – so sincerely dedicated to the pursuit of ease.

New material environments were also the subject of normalization, while older ones were recontextualized. For example, the 'modern' indoor bathrooms installed by peasant families wealthy from the second economy during the 1970s and 1980s were often only used for display, as family members continued to frequent the outhouse; after 1989, these baths were 'normalized' and put to use.<sup>12</sup> The emergence of new, postmodern office buildings or renovated historic castles and cobblestone streets were representative of a 'normal' – that is, European – built environment for post-socialist Hungary, and therefore part of a much anticipated, nationwide transformation. In Dunaújváros, some friends in their mid-twenties took me for a walk by a strip of small boutiques with ornate facades set in the ground floor of a state-socialist housing complex, commenting that it came close to being a 'normal' space. In the same vein, these friends often complained about the lack of a 'normal' café or theater in town, while teenagers were embarrassed that there was still no McDonald's. Early suggestions for turning Dunaújváros into a socialist theme park for tourists were shot down by the city council, illustrating the widespread sensitivity to being associated with a backwards communism.<sup>13</sup> Instead, the council and the steel factory management embarked on aggressive modernization campaigns to transform the city's socialist image – from hosting American car festivals and creating an 'incubator' for small businesses to investing heavily to imbue the old village area of town with 'historic charm' (*történelmi hangulat*).<sup>14</sup>

Not surprisingly, the contrasts between spaces Hungarians designated as 'normal' and 'not-normal' generated tremendous tensions, as they seemed to confirm the widely held sentiment that Hungary was being divided into 'winners' and 'losers' of the transition (see Bódnar 1998) – even though, statistically,

income discrepancies remained considerably smaller than those in western Europe (Róna-Tas 1996:39). Such material inequalities contradicted egalitarian principles cultivated under the state-socialist system, but also jarred with reinvigorated cultural notions of what kind of person was deserving of a 'middle-class' lifestyle.

After the collapse of socialism, an assumption held across the political spectrum was that the emergence of a bourgeois-citizen class (*polgári középosztály*), was essential for the success of the new, market capitalist, democratic nation state. While the size and character of this elusive Hungarian middle class were endlessly debated,<sup>15</sup> the population was bombarded with media images depicting the various middle classes being imagined, their 'culture' and comportment, and their domestic trappings. Predominant among these, especially in urban centers, were the characteristics attributed to an urban bourgeoisie or *polgár* dating to the turn of the century, its foreign origins elided. Family lineage was less important than claims to some sort of high-culture status – the intelligentsia, the performing arts, and so forth – to legitimize appropriation of a *polgári* material culture, one featuring high-ceilinged apartments or suburban villas, furnished with antiques, Persian carpets and book cases. In Dunaújváros, with its working class and agricultural roots, the *polgár* furnishing style and its referent were met with ambivalence; far more salient were images of an entrepreneurial and professional 'middle class,' with comfortable but elegant, modern decor, and ensconced in sherbet-hued family houses. This suburban form, closely associated with middleclass living in the West, differentiated residents from the populations left behind in the prefabricated construction 'panel' apartments in the city, or in the smaller, brown and gray-roofed peasant houses in the old village. Although the newly built, suburban family house was fast becoming the most important indicator of middle-class status nationwide, it was a particularly striking development in Dunaújváros, where the professional classes before 1989 had adhered to more prestigious city apartments.

Those middle-class aspirants who had managed to acquire high standards of living, however, were far from content. On the one hand, they complained bitterly about the extraordinary difficulties of achieving such worlds given the realities of the Hungarian economy of the 1990s and the 'not normal' context of daily life. On the other, they felt unable to enjoy the fruits of their labors, given the mixed implications of such lifestyles in a society transforming its moral standards and systems of value. This is well-illustrated by the contradictory responses of one family, themselves living in a detached



Home improvement loan advertisement showing typical socialist era kitchen, reading: 'Our fridge is Swedish, our coffee maker is German. Why can't our kitchen be American?'

family house built in the 1980s, to an eclectic array of new single-family homes. Driving me by this area one day, they proudly referred to it as a 'normal' part of town comparable to suburbs in 'the West'; later, in the context of a discussion about the opportunism and corruption of the factory elite, these homes were transformed into clear evidence of immoral economic and political activities as well as a conspicuous extravagance associated with a despised *nouveau riche*. Thus comfortable lifestyles were not only burdened by associations with corruption, illegal entrepreneurial activities and abuse of privilege, but were also tainted by pretensions to an undeserved class status. In new suburban neighborhoods, professional athletes and uneducated entrepreneurs lived alongside doctors and lawyers able to 'privatize' their services. Normalizing relatively extraordinary living conditions by reference to a west-European context was an important way of deflecting charges of illegitimate gain and maintaining the respectability accorded to a normative 'middle.' One

woman, for example, described herself as belonging to a 'middle stratum, not rich but not poor.' She related that when people came up to her new loft apartment, they 'sucked in their breath at the feeling of space.' For her, it had become 'entirely normal,' though she acknowledged the deplorable fact that 'the average Hungarian doesn't live like this, of medium standard, but in horrible oppression.'<sup>16</sup>

The tensions engendered by visibly diverging standards of living stemmed from expectations by a large segment of the population for European standards of living, expectations arising from their former membership in a socialist 'middle stratum.'<sup>17</sup> Although members of the unskilled working classes often felt disenfranchised by new class politics, many other members of the former 'middle stratum' struggled to reposition themselves and their families as members of this newly legitimate 'middle class' – often unsuccessfully. An editorial in the *Dunaújváros* newspaper explaining the long lines at the lottery window captures the bitter sentiments of many people who were in professions or from backgrounds that had faced a loss of prestige along with declining standards of living since 1989:

Most people know ... that unfortunately in this world it takes a lot of money for a full life. If you want to update your library, travel, see the world; if you want a livable (*emberleptekű*) home, drive a normal car, and occasionally have a respectable dinner – for these one needs a small fortune (*Dunaújvárosi Hírlap* 6/3/97).

The terms used – normal, livable and respectable – emphasize the perceived modesty of these aspirations for a 'full life' and a continuity with expectations from the past (see Dessewffy 1998). Nonetheless, while economic conditions had eroded the social position of this population, their expectations had shifted. A state-allotted apartment, a Trabant, and camping vacations were no longer the criteria for a dignified standard of living. A 'livable home' referred to a detached family home or a spacious loft apartment. A 'normal car' was one purchased from the new local Opel, Suzuki or Daewoo dealerships. And a 'respectable dinner' did not refer to dining at the company cafeteria.

### **Heterotopias of Normality**

The sense of bitterness accompanying the discourse of the normal stemmed in part from an acute consciousness of its counterfactual nature. As a young man ruefully commented to his seat mate, nodding to the silver car flying by the bus we were on, 'If everyone had a car like that, that would be normal!' Yet, as suggested above, it also derived from people's perceptions of

the modesty of these aspirations in contrast to the extraordinary difficulties they faced in obtaining them (see also Galbraith for Poland n.d.). These difficulties were indicative of the continuing abnormalities perceived to be a legacy of socialist, dysfunctional systems and the attitudes they produced, as well as a perception of the 'failure' of the new, capitalist, democratic state to incorporate Hungary into an idealized European world.

Ironically, this perception of a continued abnormalcy in service, bureaucratic and social spheres reinforced among citizens the desire to focus time and energy on creating spheres of 'normalcy' in spaces within their control – furthering the inclination fostered during the socialist period to invest emotionally and financially in the domestic private and remain detached from civic life.<sup>18</sup> The Hungarian ideal of a single family home with a garden (*kertes családi ház*) exemplified an anti-socialist heterotopia, and was often described with metaphors of withdrawal – an island, an oasis or a castle. But the interiors of all homes had this potential for heterotopic separation. An oft-cited compliment was that when one stepped into the 'enchanted,' personalized space of an apartment, one immediately forgot one was in mass housing. As one journalist wrote in the local steel mill newspaper about do-it-yourself renovations: 'If I can't do it on the outside, then at least let me enchant from the inside... I don't want mass housing, I want a home, a real one, where not just my body, but my spirit can rest! ... Even within panel walls we can create for ourselves a little island... one which can mirror our dreams' (*Dunaferr* 6/28/95).

In the post-socialist era, kitchens and bathrooms have been singled out for transformation by residents, a trend reflected in special issues of home improvement/interior decor publications. Though following trends elsewhere, this phenomenon has special significance in the Hungarian context. Within the idealized spaces of interiors, new 'American' kitchens and luxury bathrooms can be seen as nested heterotopias, sites of particular potency for condensing 'the modern' with their concentration of advanced household technology and hygienic standards, and for differentiation from a dated socialist modernity. New kitchens and bathrooms are also spaces in the home where anti-socialist values (for family and individual growth) are most powerfully opposed to the 'unnatural' and 'inhumane' designs of state-socialist construction. I elaborate the particularly compelling qualities of American kitchens and luxury baths at the end of this article, but here want to emphasize their divergence from Foucault's notion of heterotopia, one which seems to deny the possibility of a utopia. Hidden within interiors, new kitchens and bath-

rooms are less revealing about local status concerns than they are about how people want to objectify themselves as part of an idealized reference group and system of values. With their high-tech, hygienic and high-standard qualities, these spaces are not only 'normal' enclaves within a 'not-normal' context, but become conducive links to utopian imaginings of 'modern' lifestyles beyond Hungary's borders.

Even though it was well known that attempts to create spheres of 'normal life' within the walls of one's own home, as in the socialist period, exacted a high toll on friendships, family relations, peace of mind, and finances, longings for these heterotopic spaces persisted. In order to understand how western standards of living were the immediate criteria for middle-class belonging after 1989, and the continued idealizations of such 'normal' private spheres, we must turn to the socialist period.

### **State-Socialist Logics and Respectable Standards of Living**

The logic by which the post-socialist middleclass demands equivalence with the West was fostered during the state-socialist era, when the aim of achieving and surpassing western standards of living was both a state and popular objective. Modernizing the country had been an elite obsession since the 19th century, but it was championed as never before by the postwar state-socialist regime. Modernization campaigns focused on heavy industry and infrastructure development, as well as transforming the 'backward' rural, agricultural population into a modern, urban working class. The latter was to be accomplished through education and work, but also through what were thought to be the transformative powers of a modernist built environment and culture of mass consumption – showcased in the new socialist cities. While the dominant motif during the Stalin era was of the new socialist man, the working-class hero building socialism through hard work and self-sacrifice, it was paired with visions of future rewards of consumer abundance.<sup>19</sup>

After the Hungarian revolution in 1956, the terrible years of deprivation and state oppression were eased somewhat by the policies of the new Kádár regime (1956–1988). Attempting to appease a hostile populace, the government prioritized improving standards of living by increasing production of consumer goods and housing in exchange for political acquiescence. Thus began a thirty-year era of gradual and uneven improvements to the material quality of life, as more and more of the population moved into housing with running water, electricity and indoor heat, and acquired televisions, refrigerators, washing machines, modest summer cottages and even cars for a lucky



minority (Andorka & Harcsa 1999:36–37). By the 1970s, as discussed above, a broad-based ‘middle stratum’ had arisen, defined in terms of expectations for modern standards of living. In an innovation unique to Hungary among the east bloc, the state gradually increased opportunities for semi-autonomous economic activities and introduced market initiatives to create an active second economy. Finally, the state retreated from private family life – allowing the development of what came to be idealized as an apolitical and sacred domestic ‘private sphere’ opposed to the politicized public sphere of the state (Goven 1993; Konrad 1984).

Although the Kádár regime was unique in how far it was able to push market innovations within the framework of a socialist system, the emphasis on raising standards of living had become a priority throughout the Soviet sphere by 1960. Satellite communist regimes followed Khrushchev in claiming that through the scientific advantages of socialism, socialist countries would soon ‘catch up with and surpass’ Western countries. Orchestrated in part by United States intelligence agencies, popular culture and mass consumption became a major battle ground of the Cold War (Hixson 1997). Using ‘normal’ as a synonym for ‘modern’ or ‘up-to-date’ at one time could refer to innovations produced by a state socialist system. In 1959, for example, an editorial in the Dunaújváros local paper hails the impending completion of a new modern filming room, and with it ‘the city’s second “normal” movie theater...’ (*Sztálin-városi Hírlap* 1959 Feb.20). While in 1959, state socialism could still be considered a bearer of modernity and therefore aligned with the ‘modern,’ by the end of the 1970s, it had become clear to the populace – and to the regime itself – that the slogan ‘a socialist way of life’ was coming to be associated with backwardness (Vörös 1997:19). Bourgeois middle-class norms rather than a working-class aesthetic had been the unspoken basis for Stalinist ideals for the cultured, modern, socialist subject (Dunham 1990[1976]). However, with the gradual devaluing of a ‘socialist modernity,’ in Hungary a bourgeois modernity was in ascendance, one based on idealized notions of modern, bourgeois lifestyles in the West as well as the continuing cultural prestige of historic, Hungarian bourgeois (*polgári*) ways of life and aesthetics (S. Nagy 1987; Szelényi 1988).

By the early 1960s, Hungarians understood, thanks to media images, movies, travel and stories brought home by countrymen, that average citizens in the West – even the working classes – enjoyed higher standards of living than any the Soviet system could offer. Furthermore, they became aware that in comparison to the artifacts produced by the socialist state, western consumer

products were more modern, better designed, and of higher quality (Reid & Crowley 2000:10). Western material worlds were only accessible in fragments, as certain commodities could be purchased in special hard-currency stores or made their way into the Soviet bloc as gifts or through black-market routes. As in other Soviet bloc countries, once there, even products intended for everyday use were often put on display. Daphne Berdahl (1999:124) discusses the tremendous symbolic significance of these consumer items as evidence of western connections; I maintain that they were also appreciated for their intrinsic properties: their color, quality, design, or craftsmanship in comparison to state-socialist products. Such western commodities became displaced metonyms of another world, as the opposition between the state-socialist system and the capitalist system became embodied in their products. State-socialist mass production emphasized quantity over quality to make goods available to everyone in society, but the inferior quality of these products in comparison to western products came to represent the inferiority of the socialist system, and unintentionally, came to imply the state's low regard for its citizens. Western products, in contrast, were seen to be designed either to make people's lives easier, or to provide entertainment and pleasure. Structurally equivalent to heterotopic spaces in the post-socialist era, in the state-socialist period many western goods not only reflected a better production system, but seemed to encompass an entire way of life and valuation of human dignity.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the inability of the Hungarian production system to fulfill state promises to 'surpass' western standards of living, state-sponsored publications regularly featured articles geared towards assisting Hungarians in achieving the highest standard of living possible and encouraging them to imagine these material environments to be closely approximating western ones. From its inception in the mid-1960s, the popular state interior decor magazine *Lakáskultúra* (Home Furnishing) frequently exhorted the population to be 'more demanding' of their material environments. For sociologist Zsuzsa Ferge (1979), this expression of being demanding or exacting (*igényes*) originated in early socialist concerns with raising the working class and peasantry's levels of 'need,' and became part of a broader modernization and enculturation project. The normative importance of being materially demanding, of 'giving to oneself' (*ad magára*) in a specifically material way, had long been a way of constructing respectability for a 'proper peasantry' (Fél & Hofer 1969) as much as for a bourgeois or petty-bourgeois class. During the socialist period, however, in the hands of professional elites, it came to indicate a level of self-

respect obtained by having high standards for the modernity of one's material environment and appearance.<sup>21</sup>

State-socialist understandings of a modern, discriminating subjectivity focused on hygiene and an informed consumer consciousness. Hygiene was central to notions of modern lifestyles, as in this description of the up-to-date bathroom in a 1977 article in *Lakáskultúra*: 'The bathroom is the home's most intimate place. If there is any place one can pass judgment on the [family,] this place offers the most opportunities. The family's hygienic demands (*igények*) and their level of culture is displayed' (1977/5). An article on new state-produced kitchen items from 1967 implies that the modern, cultured person was responsible for keeping abreast of constantly changing technologies, design innovations and even fashions, striving to incorporate them into his or her own life:

Every day, contemporary objects produced with up-to-date technology and design come into circulation... Cultured dining, table setting, and serving, is not a secondary question for home culture. Let us be more demanding and instruct our family members to be so. Let us follow novel things with attention (*Lakáskultúra* 1967/1:11).

Such encouragement from state sources to develop a modern consumer consciousness seems strange in a context of shortages in consumer goods. As Verdery (1996:28) and Borneman (1991:17–18) have pointed out, a paradox of state-socialist consumer culture was the state's unwillingness or incapacity to satisfy the desires it was itself often responsible for stimulating. However, of the Soviet bloc nations, Hungary in particular recognized the consumer's 'determining influence' early on (Reid & Crowley 2000:11). In *Lakáskultúra* editorials spanning two decades, design professionals suggest a link between such 'demandingness' and enhanced supply, arguing that 'exacting consumers' were key to the development of the service and production sectors of the planned economy, 'bringing new forms of production into being and insisting on more customer-friendly service' (1967/3:18–19, 1985/1:7).

Perhaps to compensate for its deficiencies in production, in Hungary the state fostered a do-it-yourself culture in which modern standards might be achieved in unorthodox ways, practices legitimized by their popularity in the United States and England. On a large scale, the housing shortage and low quality of housing built by the state conspired to create a mass movement of private home-building – strongly supported by the state after 1960, that was 'clearly driven by western norms of comfort and taste' (Szalai 2000:216). In

*Lakáskultúra*, photographs of a space-saving fold-down kitchen table were accompanied by ‘do-it-yourself’ instructions since it was not available in stores. These ‘do-it-yourself’ sections, regular features in local newspapers as well as national magazines, were wildly popular.<sup>22</sup> They were part of what Katalin S. Nagy (1997) has described as a socialist consumer strategy in which objects for interior decorating were valued according to the mode by which they were acquired. This strategy included being on ‘constant alert for tips on when, how and what kinds of home-furnishing objects were currently obtainable, making what couldn’t be acquired, and finally, seeking venues for getting goods smuggled in from abroad’ (1997:5).

The socialist-era importance attributed to demandingness sheds light on conceptions of the normal in the post-socialist 1990s, showing how respectability had been tied to the struggle for material modernity under ‘abnormal’ conditions. Value and dignity continue to be accorded to people actively transforming their material environments – but now, the stakes have risen in accordance with Hungary’s transformed geopolitical status. In *Lakáskultúra*, a young professional couple is praised for ‘creating a relatively pleasant, livable and even enjoyable home out of the much maligned world’ of the panel apartment by ‘removing everything one expects in the standard housing estate pattern: taking out doors, the boring area rug and the wallpaper which spoke of undemanding people’ (*igénytelenségről árulkodó*) (1993/3), or, in other words, which spoke of a ‘socialist-era’ apartment. While such demanding transformations demonstrate a sense of self-worth, the goals are nonetheless considered modest: a ‘relatively pleasant, livable’ home.

### **Material Culture and the Search for a Normal Life**

The insistence on the modesty and morality of what in Hungary counted as a high standard of living stemmed from an understanding – fostered during the state-socialist era – that the material standards of living in the West were more than just luxuries. They were essential for the development of harmonious family relations and for becoming the kind of person one wished to be. As Milena Veenis (1999:95–98) points out in writing of the former East Germany, the West gradually became the materialization of all the unfulfilled promises of the socialist utopia as it became clear that the future ‘beautiful life’ socialist ideology had used to justify years of hardship and toil were never going to be realized. Contemporary desires for heterotopic spaces – for mini-worlds of normalcy like new houses, kitchens and bathrooms – arise as much from state-socialist understandings that ‘transcendent’ goals for self and family

are made possible by western material conditions as from reification of the domestic sphere itself.

To elucidate this notion, I draw on Daniel Miller's discussion (1994:60–65, 78–80) of two forms of temporal consciousness, contradictory but co-existing, which arise from the conditions of modernity and are made possible by the radical expansion of material culture. 'Transience' is defined as a centrifugal force celebrating 'an ephemeral present ... of a sense of freedom within the maelstrom.' The centripetal force of 'transcendence,' constructed in opposition to such transient values, stems from the desire for continuity, permanence and stability through the reification of family and tradition (1994:132). Critically, the custom, tradition, and family bonds central to 'transcendence' are not given, but are systematically cultivated with tremendous effort in direct refusal of transience (1994:133). Central to this project, Miller argues, is family property, specifically the objectification of the family in the home, made inalienable through the process of renovation and decoration (1994:143–144). Both of these value systems, transience and transcendence, are implicated in the discourse of the normal in post-socialist Hungary. The desire to spend money on ephemeral pleasures such as vacations, eating out and even filling up the gas tank without worry, are examples of transient values expected of a 'normal' life. However, amidst economic uncertainty and anxieties over maintaining status positions, middle-class aspirations for transcendence have come to the fore as people attempt to create a 'normal' life through investment in the concrete and seemingly permanent materials of private property, specifically a house or apartment.

As suggested above, middle-class lifestyles in the West had long been imagined to provide the conditions for such transcendent ideals as peace, quiet, and harmonious family relations (see Gullestad 1992:137, for Norway). In Hungary, many continue to share one Dunaújváros lawyer's assumption that people in London, for instance, live a more 'normal' life, one free of the hassles, conflict, and exhausting pace (*rohangálás*) that permeate Hungarian existence. Such a life of civility, efficiency, and order is also a life conducive to the existence of a different kind of person, imagined to be calm and dignified. This fantasy of a civilized persona is the antinomy of the type of person thought to be necessary for survival in Hungary, someone who is characterized by grasping at things and situations in a panicked, spastic way (*kapkodás*). Both *rohangálás* and *kapkodás* come up often in conversation, often with exclamations of 'this is not normal!' as women especially describe their impossible schedules, late buses, insolent store clerks, and never-ending run-ins with

bureaucracies. Even horoscopes assumed that the typical Hungarian reader was stressed out and overworked, and consequently someone who would act or react in haste – who would allow emotions of panic, anger, perceived slight or despair to govern their behavior.

The discourse of *rohangálás*, glossed as ‘anxious, exhausting, rushing about,’ is not new to the 1990s, but is evocative of how life in the 1980s and even the 1970s was characterized. Then, the difficulties of daily life under state-socialism were attributed to the inefficiency and corruption of the socialist state, but also to the sense that the state bureaucracy intentionally erected obstacles to control as well as wear down the populace (Verdery 1991; Berdahl 1999a). After 1989, the collapse of the state was accompanied by the realization that many of these daily hassles – the multiple forms to fill out at the post-office – were the product of nothing more than a dysfunctional system. Consequently, in the 1990s any such difficulties were seen to be the legacy of the socialist system and the kinds of people it created, and therefore ‘not normal.’ (Even immoral practices of the capitalist 1990s were often attributed to the destruction of a moral code during state socialism.) As one engineer working in the steel factory said, complaining about having to arrive at six A.M. with the shift workers: ‘I’m not objecting to the insecurity and the risk’ (of post-89 capitalism), he said, ‘I just want a more normal, a more humane, order! The simple things that smooth the day’s progress.’

As mentioned above, when applied to people, ‘normal’ indicated someone who was well-behaved, polite, dependable – indeed ‘civilized.’ Nonetheless, as in other places in the former Soviet bloc, Hungarians had a sense that ‘not normal’ conditions forced otherwise decent people to behave unethically (see also Pesmen n.d.:1–2; Wedel 1986:151–152). Dale Pesmen writes that Russians ‘who called themselves “normal” either appealed to the value of their poverty, or, at least, mentioned that a ‘normal’ level of material comfort ought never to be achieved at another’s expense’ (n.d.:1). Thus, it was thought that to become wealthy or politically powerful – that is, to achieve a ‘normal’ material life – one had to be ‘abnormal’ inside. In the Hungarian context, this same dilemma was approached with the reverse logic: one had to try to achieve ‘normal’ standards of living *in order to* live an ethical, spiritually-meaningful life, defined in terms of the family. As a friend confided to me: ‘it’s not normal that I don’t want to go see my sister. But I feel so claustrophobic in her small apartment!’

This correspondence between ‘normal’ material conditions and the possibility of being a ‘normal’ person was linked to long-standing ideals for a

pre-socialist bourgeois mode of life, one reinforced by state-socialist era publications attempting to raise the level of 'culture' in the population. For example, despite the preponderance of entire families living in one- or two-room dwellings, *Lakáskultúra* regularly discussed the necessity of creating a separate child's room or corner which the child would 'know to be their own' (1967/3). Another constant issue was how to separate functions in space – to recreate bourgeois ideals of front-stage and backstage areas, dining and studying areas, socializing and solitary, public and private, all within the confines of tiny apartments. This was to be done through movable screens, plants, platforms and lofts, multi-functional furniture, and finally, by using times of day to differentiate functions for the same space (the sofa doubling as a bed at night). While writers recognized the 'unfortunate small size' of mass-produced apartments, they nonetheless insisted that creating a livable and practical home 'doesn't depend on the number of meters' but on 'some compromise and rational thinking' (*Lakáskultúra* 1976(xi)1). In post-socialist interior design magazines, particularly those geared towards the 2.5 million people living in panel construction apartments, the time and effort put into rearrangements of small spaces, the ingenious solutions for insoluble problems, continue to take up a significant amount of space. *Szép Lak* (Beautiful Home), for example, encourages its readers to spend what little money they have on transforming their apartments into 'Enchantment in 67 m<sup>2</sup>' or 'Panel Luxury.' These publications all offer sections on how to do the labor oneself to save money, allowing those who have 'grown tired of their old bathroom' to renovate with new, colorful tiles, even if they 'don't have capital in the bank, haven't won a larger amount in the lottery, and must live within the narrow confines of their monthly salary' (*Családi Ház* 1997:38).

From the 1960s to the present, there is an underlying sense of bad faith in rhetoric attempting to convince the populace that it is possible – with the right amount of energy and creative thought – to transform tiny apartments into a transcendent 'private' sphere. Since 1989, such claims have lost credibility. Instead, a different kind of rhetoric fills new interior (and exterior) design publications, one echoed in the ways many Hungarians described to me their material aspirations. This is a rhetoric of 'liberation' from claustrophobic spaces, from unhealthy mixing of business and private life, of finally inhabiting 'dream' houses, where demands (*igény*) are no longer compromised. In a typical example from the privatized *Lakáskultúra*, a new home owner is asked whether he and his family had grown out of their old place. The answer: 'Yes, it was very small, we didn't fit,' replies the man. 'Agnes and I ran our adver-

tising studio out of a corner. The constant mixing of our family and business lives became increasingly difficult to bear ... I love it here because it is of such "human-scale." There are places where one can always retreat, like the office, the bedroom, the children's room. And the rest is open all in one, the kitchen, dining room and living room. No one is shut out or left out' (1995/7:80).

### **American Kitchens, Luxury Baths, and Heterotopias of Anti-Socialist Normalcy**

As mentioned above, the kitchen and bathroom have been singled out for transformation in the post-socialist era as particularly potent sites for condensing the 'modern,' but at the same time for materializing transcendent anti-socialist values. The state-socialist kitchen became one of the most reviled and ridiculed features of state planning, coming to symbolize socialism's detrimental effects on the Hungarian family as it effectively prevented – as the modernist planners had intended – simultaneous seating of an extended family for dinner.<sup>23</sup> Such kitchens continue to be considered 'not normal,' another example of state-socialism's 'unnatural' social policies. Cramped and cluttered socialist-era bathrooms, clothes drying overhead, likewise suffered from modernist assumptions that laundry would be done in a common space in the building. These bathrooms had little to do with notions of privacy or the cultivation of the individual body and self; they were strictly spaces for the functional fulfillment of hygiene and waste elimination.

The concept of an open 'American kitchen' had gained in popularity in the 1980s (although it was officially prohibited on the grounds that kitchen smells would permeate the rest of the house). After 1989, even people in privatized panel construction apartments began to hack holes in kitchen walls to 'open' them onto the living room, giving the illusion of more space and allowing the mother/wife to watch television or be engaged with the family while she cooked. Such a kitchen, with new tiles, cabinets, lighting and modern appliances, is now the standard for a 'normal' kitchen – indexing equivalence with western material standards. This index is made explicit by an advertisement for a home-improvement loan, placed under a photo of a typical socialist-era kitchen, pots crammed into tiny cabinets: 'Our coffee maker is Italian, our refrigerator is German, why can't our kitchen be "American"?' The normalization of the American kitchen also has implications for family life. In a 1998 *Lakáskultúra*, an editor reiterates the common derision of the modernist/socialist design of the 'future kitchen' based on the notion that the kitchen would eventually lose its importance in the house as the woman



shed her role as housewife and most dining would take place outside of the home. She asserts, instead, that 'humanity has been "kitchen loving" since ancient times,' and emphasizes the importance of this site for family relationships. Opposing the kitchen to the conditions characterizing the outside world, she describes it as a 'place where one doesn't have to be harried and nervous ... [where one can] speak earnestly while engaged in tasting and sipping. That is why ... the center of family life ... will always be the kitchen' (1998/6:3).

If American kitchens appear conducive to modern, bourgeois family life, then luxurious bathrooms promise to be spaces for self-indulgence and even rejuvenation for the soul. In show-rooms and magazines, 'theme bathrooms' (from terra cotta Roman to country style) reinforce a message of self-improving leisure with objects like soft towels draped casually over the tub, soaps, a book, candles, a champagne glass. In Dunáújváros, acquaintances drew from these images to create approximations in their own homes as space, finances and ingenuity allowed. The bath had become a place fantasized as an escape from the sights, sounds and smells of the outside world, as well as, perhaps, the turmoil of family life. It evoked the qualities of ritual space for healing through the powers of water, meditation and solitude, and at the same time, allowed for self-pampering and attention to physical appearance through mirrors and the paraphernalia required for preening. While publicity for new baths helped to construct desire for these heterotopic spaces as places to recover from the stresses of everyday life, expressions of longing were mixed with an ambivalence missing from similar expressions for new kitchens. The individualism and leisure implied by new bathrooms violated cultural norms equating respectability with constant, productive labor (Lampland 1995:315–321). Thus, a couple who considered the bathroom the centerpiece of their new suburban house, a combination of a design they'd seen in *Lakáskultúra* and a hotel bathroom they occupied in Paris, installed an enormous, tiled, walk-in shower, explaining, 'In this world, who has time for a bath?'

## Conclusion

While state-socialist regimes were known for their inability to produce abundant consumer goods and high standards of living, I have argued that it was nonetheless under these very regimes that mass consumer society and modern consumer subjectivities emerged – and with it, particular relationships to material culture. Reinforcing rather than contradicting widespread temporal and moralizing discourses of modernization, the socialist state prio-

ritized the material project of becoming modern over other modes of attaining social respectability. In the post-socialist era, the discourse of the normal reveals the tensions of situating one's sense of value in both local and global social hierarchies. The pressure to transform personal material worlds goes beyond local class positioning. It stems from the correlation between 'upscale' material environments and a level of belonging in an imagined international order, where 'winners' are somehow coeval and thus accorded the value and dignity of the West. In normalizing material environments clearly not 'average' in their local contexts, Hungarians aspiring to middle-class status are thus insisting on their right as Europeans to such environments, their equivalence in value with an imagined European citizen, and finally, the inherent modesty and morality of such aspirations. Thus, even renovating a panel construction apartment was a way of participating in the wider transformation of the country. As an elderly character on a popular television series exclaimed, 'This will be my apartment's regime change!'<sup>24</sup>

The discourse of the normal also reveals that home furnishing practices are often attempts to objectify in material form a kind of 'transcendent' life that had long been imagined was being lived elsewhere. While throughout the socialist period, Hungarians attempted to construct their homes as islands of privacy and normalcy, in the post-socialist period they can imagine themselves to be in touch with a wider world through the Internet, international bank cards, and a lifestyle associated with high-quality, material goods – thus bypassing the not-normal world of their immediate surroundings and the people inhabiting them. American kitchens and renovated bathrooms operate on this same structural principle. They epitomize attempts to create heterotopias of normalcy within a not-normal local world and yet, with their high-tech hygiene and postmodern decor, incorporate Hungarians into an imagined world and lifestyle beyond Hungary's borders.

### **Acknowledgments**

This article is based upon ethnographic fieldwork done in Dunaújváros and Budapest, Hungary, during the summer of 1994, the years 1996 and 1997, and follow-up trips in 1999 and 2000, as well as visits to Hungary during the 1970s and 1980s. Funding for fieldwork was provided by the Fulbright Commission and the Social Science Science Research Council (IREX), while writing was supported by the American Council for Learned Societies. Earlier versions of the paper were presented at the meetings of the Annual Association of Anthropologists (1999), the Annual Conference of the Anthropology of Europe Workshop at the University of Chicago (2001), and the Russian Studies Workshop at the University of Chicago (2002). I wish to thank the discussants and members of those

audiences for their remarks and questions. In addition, I would like to express my appreciation to John L. Comaroff, Deborah Cornelius and Susan Gal for their comments on earlier versions of this paper, and to Leora Auslander and Martha Lampland for their insightful suggestions on a later version. David Altshuler, Matthew S. Hull and Laura Ring provided extraordinarily careful and helpful readings, as did several anonymous reviewers for *Ethnos*. Finally, great thanks to Jennifer Patico and Melissa Caldwell, editors of this special edition of *Ethnos*, for their comments and encouragement.

## Notes

1. All translations are mine. Special thanks to Ágnes Hasznos for her help with Hungarian diacritics.
2. Altshuler (n.d., 2001) for the Czech Republic; Galbraith (n.d.) for Poland; Rausing (1998) for Estonia; and Stukuls (1997, 1999) for Latvia. This usage is prevalent in precisely those nations expecting to be among the first 'granted' European Union membership, while in societies for whom the prospect of 'joining Europe' is dim, references to a 'normal' world often take on a more abstract character, for example Pesmen (n.d., 2000) for Russia and Watson (n.d.) for Georgia. For a discussion of the dual uses of normal in socialist Poland, see Janine Wedel (1986: 151–152).
3. For example, Barker (1999), Berdahl (1999a and 1999b), Humphrey (1995, 1997), Rausing (1998) and Veenis (1999). For recent investigations into the material culture and consumer societies of state-socialism, see Buchli (1999), Merkel (1998), Reid & Crowley (2000), Nagy (1997) and Vörös (1997).
4. Daina Stukuls (1997:131–134) and Sigrid Rausing (1998:190) make similar arguments about political and quotidian rhetoric of normalcy in post-Soviet Latvia and Estonia respectively. In Hungary as well, in political rhetoric 'normal' refers both to the West as a standard, but also to a pre-Communist, 'democratic' period in national history.
5. My primary sources were the state publications *Lakáskultúra* (1965–1998) and the *Dunaújvárosi Hírlap* (1951–54, 1956–1994), supplemented by other media on home-building and furnishing from the 1950s through the 1990s, as well as interviews with editors, journalists and photographers affiliated with these publications, and architects and city planners.
6. Attention to the consumer culture rather than the production orientation of state-socialist regimes has been fairly recent. In Hungary, as Martha Lampland (1995) has argued, behaviors and attitudes associated with capitalism were in fact the unintended products of the state-socialist system.
7. *Normális* does not appear in the classic Hungarian-English dictionary by Országos [1987(1971)], including the foreign words and phrases appendix.
8. The Hungarian expression 'regime change' seems a more accurate description for the events of 1989–90 than the rhetoric of 'transition' with its political and economic implications.
9. Consciousness of my status as a 'westerner' undoubtedly figured in how my interlocutors used the term; upwardly-mobile Hungarians who insisted that I understand their newly refurbished interiors as ordinary or 'normal' did so in part to place themselves on equal footing with me, associating themselves with what they

- assumed to be above-average material worlds in the West and thus compensating for the stigma of years of association with 'second-class' material environments.
10. This contrasts slightly with its use in Poland, the Czech Republic or Russia, where a maligned status quo – such as corruption, low-quality products or the need for constant dissembling to get things done – can at certain times be referred to as 'normal' and even 'ours' without irony (Altshuler n.d.; Pesmen n.d., 2000; Wedel 1986).
  11. I discuss the political nature of this post-socialist aesthetic elsewhere (Fehérváry n.d.[a]), opposing openness, quality, naturalism, eclecticism, color and rounded forms to the 'closed' socialist system, shabbiness of products, man-made artificiality, and aesthetic driven by rationality and efficiency with little regard for 'human' (i.e., irrational) needs and desires.
  12. My thanks to Eva Huseby-Darvas for this example. See also S. Nagy (1987:107–109) for accounts of unused luxury living rooms and baths in rural and suburban households during the 1970s and 1980s.
  13. Unlike the 'Nostalgie' experienced by former East Germans, which manifests itself in a fetishization of decontextualized objects from the state-socialist period (Berdahl 1999b), in Hungary, the nostalgia industry has been more successful targeting tourists. An exception is a comic film by Péter Tímár (*Csimibaba*), refashioning – even celebrating – the socialist past through a recontextualization of the consumer products and pop culture of the 1960s (Fehérváry n.d.[b]). This may be changing a decade after the regime change (Nadkarni n.d.).
  14. See Brian Schwegler (n.d.) for a similar phenomenon in Slovakia.
  15. There is no consensus on what percentage of the Hungarian population qualifies as an emerging 'middle class.' In Dunaújváros in 1997, a panel apartment cost about HUF 1.5 million. A rough estimate of the minimum cost of new houses (all built by future owners) was HUF 5 or 6 million (though differences in financing, labor, acquisition of materials, and land makes this an unreliable figure). A house designed and built by a private architectural firm in Budapest ran to HUF 80–100 million.
  16. For Ákos Róna-Tas, such bitterness stems from the fact that 'losses and gains are calculated in comparison to the state of the developed West ... even those whose economic situation has improved and who stand on the upper level of the economic hierarchy of their society perceive their own position as inferior' (Róna-Tas 1996:41).
  17. In Hungary, the rehabilitation of sociology in the early 1960s allowed for modification of the Stalinist two-class, one stratum model of society (peasants and workers, plus an intelligentsia) by introducing factors such as occupation, income, education, gender and generation (see Kolosi 1988). By such classificatory means, state rhetoric in the 1970s assumed a 'middle stratum' (*középréteg*) of society to be enjoying relatively comparable living standards.
  18. The discourse of the normal, thus, elucidates cultural dilemmas for the development of civil society – a discussion beyond the scope of this article.
  19. See, for example, a brochure published in 1952 of the city's soon-to-be-built movie theaters, swimming pools, fashionable department stores, and modern apartments for workers (reproduced in Miskolczi 1980:158–59).
  20. I make this argument more fully elsewhere (Fehérváry n.d.[a]).
  21. Julie Hessler (2000) has written of a similar movement in the Soviet Union in

the mid-1930s, as the Stalinist state embarked on an enculturation project in which retail spaces, sales clerks and modern commodities themselves would be the conduits through which more materially discriminating, hygienic, cultured subjects would be fashioned – despite conditions of tremendous shortages in consumer goods. Here too, there is an equation between modern material goods and the assertion of self-value and dignity on an international stage.

22. From the mid-1950s through the 1980s, the state regularly produced do-it-yourself designs for private house builders called 'pattern plans' (*minta tervék*) to encourage higher levels of modernization and more standardized and aesthetically pleasing (to state planners) constructions. Do-it-yourself movements in Hungary differed from those in the West in that they were often a *replacement* for rather than a voluntary supplement to mass-production.
23. Kitchens were allotted a bare minimum of space, shrinking in size from the 1950s to the 1970s. Affection and respect in Hungarian families are often communicated primarily through food (Kántor Károlyné 1992:30).
24. From the sitcom 'Neighbors' (*Szomszédok*). Jennifer Patino reports a similar conflation of transformation of political and material worlds in a billboard advertising new, luxury apartments with the slogan: 'Move from Leningrad to St. Petersburg!'

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