

Cultural Heritage and Urban Planning in Hungary, 2001

Zoltán ERŐ,
architect,

Regarding the situation in Hungary of the INTEGRATED CONSERVATION OF ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE, the main points are still related to the general political, social and economic changes in the Central-Eastern European countries. Although ten years ago, a general change in the background of the conservation of "historic monuments" could already be seen, the proper answers were not born easily until now.

This State of the Art report has to analyse and introduce the factors influencing the field of conservation of architectural heritage in 21-st century's Hungary. This analysis has to evaluate the recent tendencies in

- the changes of the legal and organisational background,
- the changes in conservation ideas and practice,
- the actual programs directions

These three main areas can be discussed as follows.

1. LEGAL AND ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUND

Conservation of historic heritage has a more-than-century old history in Hungary. Institutional systems for listing and safeguarding "historic monuments" are present since the late 19-th century.

The conservation practice in Hungary – including historic research, architectural experiments, development of special conservation technologies – has had its prosperous and significant era in the 1960-80-s. At a time, when the political system provided a centralised managing power to act for the preservation of historic heritage in the name of the "common interest".

The democratic changes in 1989-90, have brought completely different possibilities for the society – and for the management of historic heritage. This latter has lost its important strength, the centralised power, that could organise ownership – research design – decision making – construction/restoration in one, precisely working verticum. From this time, both urban planning and conservation became multilayered, and former centrally managed societies had to realise, that decision-making – even in our most noble field – has new interests and techniques.

In Hungary, from 1989, the political and professional issues of conservation became sooner or later connected. Not generally in main policies, but mostly in institutional questions.

1.1 From "building affairs" towards "cultural affairs"

The most significant changes in the approach of cultural heritage policy can be outlined by the generic movement of "historic monument affairs" from the "planning and construction" sector towards the cultural sector.

The "historic monument affairs" have been linked traditionally to the Ministry of Building and Urban Development. The most important body of the field, the National Office of Historic Monuments, has worked as a department of this Ministry for nearly thirty years. During the fundamental political changes of 1990, this type of ministry has been eliminated, and the handling of planning-and-construction affairs were moved to the newly created environment. At that time, it has seemed to be a fundamental question, to which Ministry the historic

heritage affairs should belong. Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Home affairs, an independent Ministry of Construction could equally be proper answers.

Belonging to the Ministry of Environment – as it is usual in Northern European countries – has had important advantages: the general view on environment, as a whole, the similarities between the protection of the built and the natural heritage, the strong financial support of these affairs could have been a strong potential for conservation. Unfortunately this system has been strongly criticised by the "green" lobbies, who did not agree with the presence of "grey", building and construction oriented affairs in the Ministry. Due to their efforts, following the 1998 elections the "construction and urban development" affairs has been taken out from the Ministry of Environment, and – following a much more problematic decision – were separated. In general, "construction and urban development" has been taken over by the Ministry of Agriculture and Regional Development. The "historic monuments" affairs were taken over by the Ministry of National Cultural Heritage. On that way, a long-term intention of culture oriented professionals – art-historians, archeologists – became true, while the whole sector became cut from "construction and urban affairs" – not rarely in the form of unnecessary competing.

The same process can be seen in legislation, as well. The preparation of a separate law on the Protection of Historic Monuments has been commenced as early, as 1989. After several years of sharp disputes, this Act has been accepted in 1997, followed by a separate law on the Protection and Development of the Built Environment, the so called Building Act. The long discussions were about the question, whether these two acts should be one. The decision about the separation of these affairs, regarding the recent changes, seems to be long-term.

In these days, early summer of 2001, the complete replacement of the four year old law is on the schedule. This new law under preparation, that includes the handling of architectural heritage, wishes to handle the cultural heritage, as all. Its field spans from archaeology to museums and fine arts, from archeologic fields to buildings and to objects.

The same shift could be seen in the changes of the financial system. Earlier, the financial support of the historic monument sector, was based on the system of support of environment protection. Following the 1998 changes, a separate subsidy system, the Millennium Historic Monument Program has been created to fulfil a general need for co-financing the upkeep of architectural heritage. At present, the continuation of this program is integrated into a general financial program of cultural affairs, restoration programs are running parallel with museums, archives, film-studios.

Although all systems can work precisely and well, the above described shift of the architectural heritage affairs towards cultural affairs, has an important message on one hand, i.e. architecture is an important part of culture, but a danger of the complete isolation of "historic" buildings from "normals", on the other.

1.2 The appearance of local governments

One of the most important changes has been the appearance of local governments. Municipalities in Hungary have a strong constitutional independence, it is said, that there are "3200 small republics" in the country. In Budapest, the situation is more complicated, as there is a two level governing system: 23 strong district municipalities have to live together with the 24., the municipality of the capital.

The independence of local governments touches the question of conservation at two main points: on one hand they are important property holders, on the other they are legislative bodies taking the omnipotent position in physical planning on the area of the settlement.

As landlords of a significant historic building stock, they have handled a large quantity of buildings, mainly the urban residential stock, but in a less quantity important public buildings, as well. The upkeep, the development and the preservation of these buildings is their duty. An important factor in this question was the process of privatisation of residential buildings: in

huge numbers, the formerly state-owned rental buildings were sold to the sitting tenants on a very low price. The appearance of the large number of self-governing condominiums was an astonishing result of this process. Needless to say, that buildings of historic town centres were deeply involved into this process. At this moment it is difficult to say, whether those, who supported or those, who protested against the idea were right in their intentions.

The other significant role of local governments derives from their legislative power. The whole system of physical planning has been changed since 1990, so the recent years were essential to find new forms, new legal means for urban planning, including possibilities of conservation, too. As an important measure, beside the traditional urban planning, local governments have the right to use the means of local protection. This legislative measure is used at more and more places, to give legal protection for locally appreciated elements of the architectural heritage. Usually local governments imply a certain type of subsidy system, to help in co-finance the costs of the upkeep and renovation of buildings.

1.3 The integrated conservation and the role of the Council of Europe in changing attitudes in Hungary

The co-operation with European institutions, namely with the Council of Europe has started as early, as late 1989. The field of the management of cultural heritage was among the first issues, where co-operation was offered to Central-Eastern European countries.

In a fortunate situation, Hungarian representatives could join in several working groups on the most important general topics. The idea of integrated conservation, based on the Grenada Convention, has become an important new factor for ideas of legislation and every day practice, as well.

Although the official legislative and organisational background has followed these ideas in the above described form, the professionals has got a series of new impressions by learning new approaches and techniques.

An important factor of the changes has been the appearance of NGO-s in the field. Already, from the early 1980's, an important movement has been flourishing around the country, the "town and village protector" associations. Their presence has given an important stimulation for opening the spectrum of protection of historic monuments. Adding to this still basic movement, a large variety of supporting organisations have appeared, mainly in the form of not-for-profit organisations. As a matter of fact, these forms of civil organisations have inspired even governmental organisations to raise similar bodies to manage their duties. A long list of government based non-government organisations can show, how new forms of management could be added to the system of maintaining and conservation of architectural heritage.

2. CHANGES IN CONSERVATION IDEAS AND PRACTICE

The general changes of the stage of urban development and conservation has resulted in the change of the approach either in the ideologies or in the practice of the protection of historic monuments, as well.

2.1 Challenge of the multi-personal environment

The evolution of the democratic system has brought the necessity of changing attitudes in the management of conservation. The most important factor is the appearance of a large number and variety of actors in this field. The above described "monobloc" system of the protection of historic monuments had to give its place to the co-operation of newly formed actors.

As already mentioned, even the public bodies – central and local government actors – have a multi-personal nature, that needed to work out new mechanisms of co-operation.

Fundamental, that the State has lost its formerly general role as developer. Market oriented property owners, real-estate developers have arrived in the scene. In the field of

historic heritage, there are extremely positive and negative examples, as well, considering the result of the participation of the private sector in the conservation. Anyhow, the control of their action, the partnership between public and private actors, has to be continuously revised and developed.

On the other hand, we have to see, that the participation of the private sector is far less, than it was expected, or than it could be possible. Large number of important historic houses are neglected, out of use and order. A special factor emerged among the well known obstacles of the use of historic properties: the intention of the state ownership of the most important properties. The Act on the Protection of Historic Monuments contains a list of more than 200 properties, that cannot be sold or mortgaged. They belong to the Treasury. Unfortunately the central budget cannot provide the necessary sources for the restoration or even for the proper upkeep of this building stock. The State itself cannot be the correct owner of the heritage. Trying to involve private resources, the obstacles in front of public-private partnerships are extremely solid, and the exclusion of sale is one of the most important among them. Long term leases or rents cannot provide the advantages of free-hold ownership.

2.2 New enterprises

Although formerly there was a strong background of the conservation practice, a lot of these formations have been quickly dissolved in the economic changes. Once, the centrally organised and directed network of art- historians, architects, builders, etc. was really purpose oriented and efficient. From 1990, a series of new practices, private companies appeared in this field. Some of them became really skilled, and powerful even in economical terms.

We have to see, that some of the specialised architects, even researcher art historians provide excellent services in the framework of private companies, and their network.

At present, a large spectrum of contractors exists. Some of them are specialised to certain restoration techniques, others are general contractors, specialised on historic buildings, as a whole. We can say, that these companies take even the responsibility for education of special skills, in different form.

2.3 Changes in the process of restoration

The multi-personal background identifies much more clearly the situation of each actor. Due to this, interests and conflicts of interests are much clearer, too.

The most important change, that influenced restorations and architectural planning, can be observed simply as a certain "lift of quality expectations". This is present in the project management process, the technical quality of the building, the facility management. Although all these factors have a benefit for the architectural heritage, in certain cases the usual way of thinking has to be revised, down to the level of restoration techniques, use of materials, etc.

High quality expectations in terms of functions, comfort, etc. has led to new tasks, that were formerly simply neglected, considering their lack as a natural feature of a historic building. The level of necessary compromises nowadays differs from that of ten years ago – which is normal, but changes were much more sudden, than anytime before.

A large variety of new special restoration materials and technologies have arrived in the country in the last years. A general knowledge of them – based on evaluation and quality control – had to grow out among professionals concerning these new elements.

All these factors together have slightly changed the philosophy of restoration. Decisions about certain questions have to take more into consideration more points – even those, that were not accepted earlier.

3. NEW POLICIES, NEW PROGRAMS

There are clearly shaped policies and programs, that can affect the management of the architectural heritage.

3.1 "Enlarging the circles of the protection of historic monuments"

Since the year 2000, there is a definitive effort to involve new segments of architecture into the group of protected historic monuments. The two most important segments are the 20th century buildings, and the buildings of industry and transportation, but there are important elements in the architecture of schools, resort areas, workers' colonies, cemeteries, etc.. It is really actual to evaluate even the most recent architecture – let us say that of the 1960's, 1970,s –, and those parts of the heritage, that were not in the centre of interest until now.

In Hungary, the youngest protected historic monument was erected in 1951. Younger buildings were not chosen to the list, although legislative prescriptions are not against this. (in a way, it is said, that a living architect's building should not be protected...) Even, the group of the earlier 20th century buildings is relatively small.

The recent efforts are to increase the list of app. 10500 protected buildings with an addition of 3-400 buildings and ensembles, most of them from the 20th century. As a matter of fact, this tendency has strong criticism from two directions. One of says, that the protection itself does not give solutions, increasing the number of protected items will not be able to achieve the conservation of a larger and larger group. Others does not think, that the general public will accept the evaluation professionals, and are afraid of losing credit in the intention of protection.

3.2 Grouped restoration programs

From the 1980's there is a certain effort to create packages of restoration programs. The so called Mansion-program (Schloss-program) had a significant success, mainly in Western Hungary, when series of excellent historic buildings were restored and reused in the tourist industry in most cases. Unfortunately even this program could not be completed, and a large number of the largest mansions are still out of use.

Recently a new program for the restoration of castles and fortresses have started. The leading force of the program is tourism once again. The program is managed by the Ministry of Economics, in the framework of the tourism-development programs. The intention is the strong restoration of 12-15 ruined castles. Although the idea can be questionable at a few points, the effort to concentrate sources on the upkeep of neglected ruins, can be very positive.

3.3 Urban rehabilitation

The renovation of historic urban centres has already been an important program of the 1980's. In such towns, as Eger, Győr, Pápa, Sopron, Pécs, or even in the Buda castle, the program has had very positive results. If we want to summarise this, we can say, that following these programs, the historic town centres did not became slum areas - that can easily happen anywhere.

Nevertheless, the largest problem, the critical situation of the run down inner districts of Budapest, still exists. Neither the central power, nor the reshaped political and economical system could not have reasonable results in this field. The above mentioned privatisation process of residential buildings still increased the number of questions.

Since we can say, that the architectural character of Budapest is strongly decided by the 19th century residential building stock, it seems to be elementary, that a step-by-step renewal of these areas should began as early, as possible. Nearly 200 thousand flats are interested in this process, The risk of a negative spiral in certain areas is already there: the run down buildings are occupied by the families from the lower layers of the society, who have absolutely no means to improve their living area. The question is, whether the most important elements of the architectural heritage will provide the lowest quality living stock of the capital...

The actual urban rehabilitation Program of the capital is dated from 1997. Reflecting to the fact, that there are not enough resources to handle the problem in one, the Program tries

to concentrate on so called Action Areas. These areas are nominated by the Districts, and the Capital can decide, whether it undertakes the burden of a deep subsidy system on the area. In these areas the Capital supports the renovation of the privately owned condominiums, the renovation of the District-owned rental flats, the improvement of public areas. Anyhow, buildings, out of the Action Areas can also be

Until now, 11 areas were accepted. The results of a concentrated program can already be seen at certain areas, but districts are acting on different speed. Hopefully the program will be widened in the coming years.