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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is exactly ten years since my Institute of Art History has organized the international conference "Prague – The Future of a Historical City". At that time the top level experts from the whole Europe convened to offer their experience, to point out new opportunities as well as new risks to this wonderful city which would result from the expected changes of development conditions.

This little anniversary provides a good opportunity for a balance of profits and losses suffered by Prague and other Czech historical cities in the past decade. Before that, however, I should like to recall what in my opinion forms the meaning and significance of the historical heritage in the framework of city development. I shall not speak about the significance of individual monuments, but about historical urban units. This time I shall leave aside the aspect of art history, although the aesthetic and historical documentary features represent evident qualities of these parts of cities. I should like to emphasize primarily those values which play an important role in everyday city life.

Firstly: The historical parts of cities are the principal support of city identity. In comparison with considerably uniform newer construction it is the historical city center that gives the whole city its inimitable individual identity. The modern housing estates on the outskirts of Czech cities are the same in the whole country, the new shopping centres at motorway exits are the same all over Europe. Only when we enter the historical city centre we recognize safely in which city we are. This identity is the necessary prerequisite for our own identification with a certain city as our home.

Secondly: The identity which the historical parts of the city guarantee is not merely visual. It has its meaning, cultural and social contents. Historical city is the materialization of aspirations of whole generations of our ancestors. It is a collective memory with which also we link up and in which we feel our roots as the members of a certain community, whether national or local.

Thirdly: Modern man is exposed to the impact of changes, accelerating time, and as a certain compensation he appreciates those environmental oases in which time seems to have stopped. Historical environment is a symbol of the fact that life not only changes, but also perseveres and resists time.

Fourthly: Historical parts of cities are outstanding for the quality of their public spaces, determined by their clear-cut shape, human scale and variety of spatial situations. Modern urban planning has been unable to compete with these qualities so far.

And last, but not least: Also in practical meaning the historical parts of cities are the places which are potentially capable of absorbing almost all forms of contemporary life from living over working to social and cultural life. The only feature to which they cannot – and must not – adapt is the motor vehicle traffic.

All these qualities, and certainly also many others, represent sufficient reasons for the protection of the historical parts of cities and for their well thought-out development as the key components of the city territory.

Let us return now to the balance of benefits and dangers brought about by the development of the past decade. At its beginning the historical city centres were in a very strange, ambiguous position. For fifty years nobody had invested into their repairs as a result of which they were becoming deteriorated. On the other hand, however, this absence of new investments unwittingly conserved their historical form to a much greater extent than in

historical cities of other countries which underwent continuous post-war modernization. They have preserved also their social structure and polyfunctional contents, although of a very low standard.

After 1989 this state has changed radically. In an unbelievably short period the historical city centres flourished. Their physical renovation was not limited merely to the repairs of facades and I still cannot imagine the resources from which this reconstruction was financed. On the other hand, however, this renewal started certain dangerous trends against which Prague had been warned by the afore mentioned 1991 conference. The first danger was the rash endeavour to change Prague into a European metropolis regardless of its inherited character and genius loci. The second danger, on the other hand, was the endeavour to use the historical environment exclusively for tourism and to drive everyday life outside the historical area. I am not saying that these trends already have caused any major catastrophe and that they differ from what all European historical cities have to struggle with. Nevertheless these trends are coming forward on a minor or major scale also in other Czech cities and should be controlled continuously.

Some notes on the first danger: After several decades, when the historical city centre had been a neglected area, it has become the focal point of interest suffering with excessive investment pressure. The problem does not lie in the fact that historical environment would be unable to absorb modern architecture. The problem is primarily the scale of the new interventions and the single-sided type of functions concentrating there. As a rule the developer endeavours to saddle the historical environment with a greater amount of activities than it corresponds with the capacity of the site. The consequences are visible, although not always at first sight. The total use of courtyard sites, the impairment of the roof landscape by additional storeys or attic floors, radical layout changes concealed behind the conserved facades which lose the relation with the interior, the disregard of historical site division by new construction or concealed merging of old buildings, etc. This dangerous overloading of the historical area endangers not only individual buildings, but the character of the whole environment. It also increases the traffic requirements, parking requirements, etc. Most important is, however, that it drives out permanent inhabitants, because these new investment are intended primarily to provide business and office space.

The social effect of the second afore mentioned danger – the change of historical city parts into historical attractions – is similar. The conservationists are often accused of wanting to keep historical city centres as museums or "skansens". However, the city or its part does not become a "skansen" because the conservation authorities restrict its physical changes, but primarily because it ceases to be the living area of its inhabitants and becomes a site which is visited and inspected as a museum exhibit. I am proud that the cultural heritage of our cities is admired by foreign guests and am fully aware of the fact that they provide also financial resources for its maintenance. However, mass tourism brings about also the banalization of historical environment and its inconspicuous selective idealization satisfying the needs of tourist traffic. The beauty of a historical city should be discovered like the graces of a lady. Instead it is forced on us like the sex-appeal of a pin-up girl. Life and secrets of the city are evaporating, leaving only coulisse on the stage.

In their sum on town-planning level these trends mean a progressive disintegration of the city. Particularly due to their one-sided overloading the historical city centres are losing the integrity of their life and simultaneously they are alienated from the rest of the city surrounding them. It is not easy to seek and particularly to apply countermeasures. I shall try to outline at least some principles linking up loosely with the recommendations of the 1991 conference on Prague which, in my opinion, have remained valid not only for Prague, but for our historical cities in general.

The decisions on such cities must be based on a profound and systematic knowledge of their cultural values; the decisions on concrete interventions must be based on a thorough analysis of the quality and capacity of their sites.

The previously declared regulation rules expressed in democratically reviewed documents are good guidelines for potential investors. In their absence every ad hoc reviewed case is a potential source of conflicts.

The necessary restrictions in a certain area should be accompanied by an offer of alternative investment-attractive sites with a less restricted regime. This emphasizes the role of master plans of whole cities which can channel dangerous investment pressures to more adequate areas where they will be beneficial. It is on the level of whole-city master plans that it is possible to define the role of historical centres in the framework of the whole city.

In the historical parts it is necessary to support the conservation of the natural polyfunctional structure including dwelling. In these parts it is not the historical buildings, but life itself that is threatened most.