

- Schosberger Palace in Tura, which is empty, the owner from India who bought it in 1991 is not able to maintain or to restore it
- The stone bridge in Zalaszentgrót, where restoration has already started
- Several protected vernacular houses to be found everywhere in the country
- The garden of a medieval Cistercian monastery in ruins in Píliszentkereszt
- Baroque Huilier-Coburg Palace in Edelény, 18th century, decorated with excellent wall paintings, is empty and seriously infected with fungi ("merulius lacrimans").

Certainly, this list could be continued for a long time, but we think that these examples will be sufficient to illustrate the present situation. As far as the "political background" is concerned, there is certainly an improvement: financial resources for cultural heritage have been considerably increased in the national budget. We also hope to find new proprietors in the future, who will really feel responsible.

ICOMOS Hungary

ICELAND – HERITAGE @ RISK!

A well known postulate declaims that Iceland is on the border of the habitable area of the globe. So it may be but this borderline existence has all the same brought about various cultural achievements of great importance both locally and in a wider perspective.

Iceland is a volcanically and seismically active area, which represents a great threat to the environment and all living creatures in large parts of the country. The harsh climate also represents various threats to the built environment and can in certain areas indirectly lead to serious danger in the form of avalanches of snow, mud and rocks. Thus Icelandic nature itself, from which the national culture has grown, is at the same time wearing down its physical cultural heritage. The same goes naturally for all other regions of the earth, but under the extremities in Iceland the threats from the natural environment are as serious and periodically overwhelming as they can be.

Written sources tell us about powerful earthquakes in the southern areas of Iceland, which have shaken the earth regularly at intervals of every hundred years, ever since the settlement of the country. The same sources describe serious damage done to buildings and other built constructions in large areas. Time and again nearly every farmstead was damaged and many were totally ruined near the origin of the earthquakes. In 1786 the bishopric in Skalholt, which is in the middle of southern Iceland, was damaged by an earthquake to such an extent that it was transferred to Reykjavik which is situated in a less seismically active part of the country. The same area was again shaken by a powerful earthquake in 1896 and still again in the summer of 2000. In the meantime modern technology has made it possible to construct houses which resist the forces of earthquakes, and buildings erected in the latter part of the 20th century did not suffer damage in the earthquake mentioned above.

The built heritage and ruins from earlier centuries are made to a large extent of local earthen materials such as turf, peat and stone and such constructions are easily damaged by earthquakes. In Iceland the turf-house based upon a common Nordic tradition, evolved through the ages to the late 19th century, whereas in the other Nordic countries it was replaced by houses of timber and of stone as early as the 10th century. With growing economic strength in the 19th century the Icelandic turf-houses were gradually abandoned and replaced by more hygienic and adequate houses of timber and concrete. Around 1900, 50% of the population still lived in turf-houses but in about 1950 only very few turf-houses were to be found in the country.

The building materials and the building technique of the traditional turf-houses are of a nature that they deteriorate rapidly and have to be maintained constantly. The turf-house can rightfully be characterised as a continuous building process. To find a new role for an abandoned turf-house is almost impossible apart from as museums and therefore the economic means to maintain them are very limited. Left abandoned and not maintained, the turf-house falls into ruins in only a few years. Only a handful still exist of the thousands of turf farms to be found in Iceland until the 19th century. The National Museum of Iceland is responsible for 10 turf farms in various parts of the country and another few are under the protection of municipal museums and even in private ownership.



The Old Parish Church at Reykholt

The maintenance of a turf-house demands skills in traditional building methods, cutting turf and peat, various methods of building walls with characteristics which are derived from local geographic variations etc. As a derivative of this borderline habitable area of the globe, the Icelandic turf-house is at great risk. To ensure the maintenance of the few still surviving, they must be accepted as requiring a continuous building process, demanding at the same time the continuation of skills in traditional building methods and the economic means to keep the process going.

A new risk for built heritage lies in changes in the demographic structure. Structural changes in the fishing industry and farming result in the centralisation into fewer and bigger social units. The population in rural areas and in fishing towns rapidly decreases and the population in the area of the capital grows at the same rate. The result is a fall in the market prices of houses in the areas where the population is decreasing, which readily leads to a lack of maintenance. The older houses which are in biggest need of care suffer most from these changes and the process is locally threatening the built heritage.

Case Study 1 – The Old Parish Church at Reykholt

Reykholt in Borgarfjörður, south west Iceland, is a settlement of great historical importance to Icelanders. It was the place of residence of the country's most renowned medieval scholar and writer, Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), who wrote many of the great works of historic literature known as the Sagas. Some parts of Sturluson's residence remain in fairly good condition, such as an outdoor circular bath with natural hot water and a half-fallen tunnel leading from the bath to the farmhouse. In 1996 the UNESCO World Heritage Committee visited Reykholt in order to decide whether to place this site on the World

Heritage List. The Committee rejected this proposal because they found Reykholt not sufficiently well managed.

Among the neglected buildings is the Old Parish Church, a timber construction dating from 1886, located in the centre of the old churchyard, evidently influenced by the prevailing Neo-Classicism of the time. A new church was built in 1992 with great financial assistance from the people of Norway who also consider Snorri Sturluson as an important part of their cultural heritage. The new church houses the Snorri Sturluson Institute, including a library and lecture hall. This church building, a construction of concrete, is perhaps a little too dominating at the site but it has undoubtedly added to the importance of Reykholt cultural centre in the region.

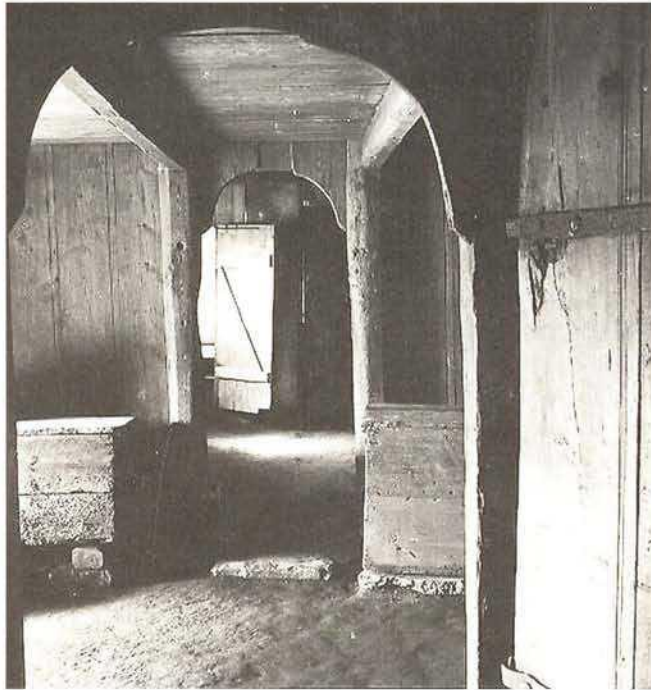
The Old Parish Church at Reykholt is listed by Icelandic law as a national monument. When the new church was finished the parish committee decided that the old church be removed. Unfortunately the authorities concerned, ie the National Museum of Iceland and the National Architectural Heritage Board, granted their consent on the condition that a suitable site be found and the building maintained as a church. A new site still remains to be found in spite of some honest efforts, and it is more than doubtful that such a solution could be satisfactory because the old church is an essential link between the historic buildings at Reykholt and the new church. Removing the old church would be a disaster.

In the last few years, extensive excavations have been carried out at Reykholt and in the summer of 2000 a 13th century basement was found, probably belonging to Snorri Sturluson's house. This discovery and possibly others in the future added to the existing remains of the past make it even more important to maintain the old church to bridge the gap between the old and the new at Reykholt. The new director of the National Museum of Iceland has recently offered the parish board of Reykholt to take over the maintenance of the old church provided that it remains in its present place. Unfortunately her proposal has met with some opposition, so the future of this old church is still uncertain.



Turf-house at Keldur

Detail of the old turf-house



Case Study 2 – Old turf-house at Keldur

The old farm at Keldur in southern Iceland is the oldest turf-house in the country and in parts the oldest existing building in Iceland. Keldur is mentioned in several places in the *Njal's Saga* and in *Sturlunga*, both written in the 13th century. The arrangement of the old farm indicates a very old building type and the timber construction at Keldur resembles that of the old Norwegian stave-churches.

Iceland was settled from Norway in the 9th century and for many centuries the building materials in Iceland remained the same: a timber-frame construction (on the inside) to support the roof and outer walls for insulation made of turf, peat and stone. The buildings are therefore in absolute harmony with the land, a splendid example of organic, vernacular architecture.

Turf-houses were constantly being renovated. The rapid deterioration of organic materials called for regular annual maintenance of the buildings, and the close distance of Keldur to the Mt. Hekla volcano and the frequent earthquakes have severely damaged the farm of Keldur several times.

Keldur was an important farm for many centuries. Less than a hundred years ago it was endangered by sand that blew from the interior of Iceland and devastated vegetated land, but the farmers never gave up and the old farmhouse was lived in until the middle of the 20th century. The National Museum of Iceland bought Keldur in 1947 to protect it as a good example of a turf-house in the southern part of Iceland of which only very few exist any longer.

The deterioration of a turf-house becomes more apparent when it is no longer used for habitation. For some years, the Museum could not afford to spend much money on the project and the farmers at Keldur, who had built a new house not far from the old turf-house, were unhappy with the way things were going. Co-operation with the present farmer has been rather difficult. The proximity of the old farmhouse to recent animal houses, eg a barn and byre, has visually harmed the turf-house and made it difficult for tourists to get a good picture of the old buildings without an undesirable background.

Last summer two strong earthquakes with an interval of four days caused considerable damage to the old farmhouse at Keldur. All the old houses are still standing, but damage was done to turf-walls, which are constructed of an inner and outer phase of stone with specially cut turves in between, then a core of earth and gravel. The earthquake has torn this construction apart and it will have to be taken down and reconstructed.