

SLOVAKIA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

The protection and conservation of cultural heritage in the Slovak Republic is regulated by legislation, adopted in 1987 during the socialist era, and based on the responsibility of the owner, at that time mostly being the State. The changes throughout the system after 1989 – both in government administration and in the economy – were not yet in harmony with the real importance and the role of heritage. The system to administer the legislation is still in the hands of the government administration, which has to use advisers in the specialist and planning organisation, the Institute for Heritage Conservation. The system for financing heritage restoration collapsed in 1990 and as yet has not been replaced by an appropriate mechanism.

The present situation for heritage conservation has its roots not only in the socialist era with its planned economy, not accustomed to unexpected needs, but some of our actual problems were in place at the end of the 19th century and survive until now:

- indifference and ignorance
- grasping, egoism and decadent taste
- incorrect understanding of contemporary needs
- efforts to renovate and beautify the original, which loses its authenticity and is ultimately damaged

To this list could be added contemporary problems:

- a lack of cultural awareness
- unclear ownership, often combined with restitution, that speculatively exploits heritage, and its inappropriate use and lack of maintenance
- the absence of a funding incentive system that respects investments in heritage maintenance and restoration

Although some, often ideologically selected monuments, were richly financed by the State in the planned economy, its limited resources did not allow it to cover the expenses of restoration work for all decaying heritage places. (Those left out form the bases of the current total number of 700 listed monuments at risk out of a total 12,000 protected immovable places). One of the features of the past heritage management system was that it was not based on maintenance, but on costly reconstruction, undertaken by State building companies, often by replacing the neglected valuable fabric by copies or simply by new detail. The real damage in that way of „restoring“ heritage is compounded by the distorted public understanding of the methods and aims of heritage conservation.

Generally we can say that all types of immovable and a remarkable amount of movable heritage are at risk in Slovakia.

Historic centres –

although their legal protection was established from the early 1950s, most suffered from the lack of maintenance, gradual deterioration, the ruthless application of local aims often without any respect of heritage values, and with an ageing population and depopulation rendering ugly neighbourhoods in towns and villages. The flats in historic houses were not renewed, or were rented to socially weak families, State shops replaced private ones, preferring newly built structures to historic ones. The shift in ownership 10 years ago rapidly changed the situation, on the

other hand, there is now a growing lack of respect for heritage values and a lack of realistic plans at the level of municipalities, especially in smaller towns and villages. As an example, the town of Banská Štiavnica could be mentioned: listed by UNESCO on the World Heritage List, there is no valid town plan, although its provision is part of the responsibility of the municipality, and although it has been apprised of this fact for many years.

Archaeological heritage –

is continuously affected by the growing building activities, including those on listed monuments, by the absence of a central fund to cover rescue archaeology and by the pressure of time connected with the implementation of large building projects, such as highways.

Folk / vernacular architecture –

its poor state and disappearance is partly caused by the very weak fabric of this type of complex, constructed from pine-logs or mud-brick, with very small interior spaces. Another issue are the requirements for contemporary living standards, which are in contradiction to the limited space offered in their interiors. The rapid disappearance of this type of buildings is also partly caused by the brutal break with traditional culture within the artificially and violently applied system of the State and Co-operative farms, and by the fact that State ownership was preferred to private ownership after 1948. This negative development is underlined by global technical progress that infiltrated the country.

Technical and technological heritage places –

typically belong to endangered heritage. The region of central Slovakia traditionally was one of the most important centres of mining development in the world (Banská Štiavnica was inscribed in the World Heritage List thanks to this fact). Yet until today there is no appreciation of the importance of all kinds of mining, including the opal mines in Dubník and iron industry areas, as well as heritage places documenting the development of transport. Several complexes, with no clear ownership and without any basic idea for their future use, are a special problem, such as Solivar, a Baroque complex of salt mines and storehouse in Prešov, destroyed by fire in 1986 and only temporarily roofed. Its present owner, the Slovak Technical Museum, in spite of efforts has not found appropriate resources for reconstruction and restoration.

Religious monuments –

other than the above-mentioned general problems, these are part of our heritage that suffered 40 years of long neglect and



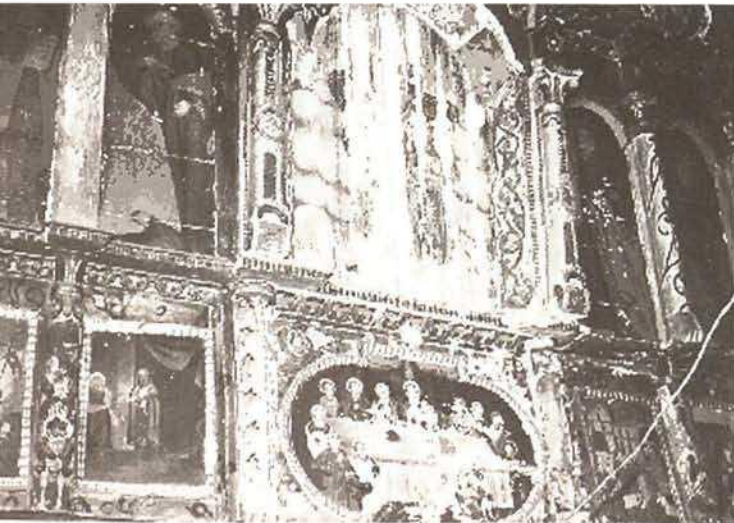
Krajné Čierno, wooden church (1730)

unsuitable use. In many cases, the process of dilapidation has not stopped yet, and it is threatening furniture and other parts of the interiors as well. In many very large monasteries (such as the Gothic complexes in Leles, Šahy or Hronský Beňadik) the basic question of their proper use is still unsolved. Churches, often situated outside contemporary town centres, especially the oldest ones, are left without any use, although their interiors are often covered with precious medieval mural paintings. Persistent efforts to rebuild and enlarge historic churches are part of the actual problem and often result in a preference for a new construction to the maintenance and use of an old one. On the other hand, large synagogues, ignored and misused disparagingly for years, are without use, such as the representative 19th century one in Lucenec. An increasing problem that persists is the vandalism, destruction and pilfering of churches in a post-totalitarian community. The wooden churches in eastern Slovakia are a delicate problem, as their weak fabric needs regular maintenance, but the communities responsible often consist of between 20 to 200 inhabitants, mostly elderly, without any chance of allocating the budget for necessary actions. One of the churches – Krajné Čierno, has been inscribed in the year 2000 *List of the 100 Most Endangered Sites* by the World Monuments Watch.

Movable Heritage –

the main factors threatening this heritage, as mentioned, are long-time neglect and ignorance by the State, pilfering and the frequent ignorance of owners, caused by the redundancy of many movable items, as nearly 90% of it belongs to the Church. Artistic components of the architecture and immovable monuments (such as plague columns) are affected by aggressive external conditions. If there are funds for restoration, the original

Príkra, iconostasis in a wooden church (17th century)



is replaced by a copy, while no appropriate place and conditions are secured for the originals, which are often abandoned without interest.

Castles and manor houses with historic gardens –

are a very typical part of our countryside. Their fate is identical to religious monuments: they are either ignored or degraded by a reduced function. Their furnishings were destroyed, plundered and pilfered. There has been a change of ownership of this kind of heritage place during the last 10 years. They are either restituted to previous owners and afterwards often sold or massively rebuilt, or otherwise left without any care once again to be plundered and rapidly decay, or they are given in the possession to municipalities with a lack of resources for their restoration, which may start but is mostly not continued. One of the crucial problems is their use, especially for large complexes that are often situated in regions undiscovered by tourists. No-one is prepared to make an effort for them, and they are sometimes still used for social services (hospitals, orphanages, etc). Their often unique artistic values are affected by the afore-mentioned lack of maintenance and simple conservation methods and means cannot be effective in such cases (such as the Renaissance Wedding Palace in Bytča).

While the preparation of new heritage legislation has already been taking place, the present situation is alarming in regard to international documents which aim to create standards for appropriate heritage administrative and financing systems, while it is considered that the adoption of new legislation will only be in place in two years' time.

ICOMOS Slovakia



Lučenec, synagogue in Art Nouveau style (1923/26)



Žip, neo-classical manor house with collapsed roof

Nové Sady, empty manor house from the Renaissance period

