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Rural Architectural Heritage at Risk

With respect to 'heritage at risk' there are extraordinary monuments singled-out, for which it seems to be easier to awaken international interest regarding their fate. Yet there are a great many and a great variety of monuments typical of their region and past life-style, which are also special but not often recognised and sometimes not given any thought. Max Dvorak's Prophecy in the 1918 'Katechismus der Denkmalpflege', stating that the simple often needs more protection than the important, is also relevant for this major field of cultural heritage today. In other words: the culturally non-spectacular and seemingly normal has been lost, although it is of great value for exactly the same reason as more 'impressive' monuments.

Every country has its cultural idiosyncrasies from which those that remain most often are either museum-like clichés or those employed by tourism.

In terms of cultural capital, it is Austria's variety in landscape which assumes a primary role: from Lake Neusiedl in the panonic plains of the east, across the ridges of the Alps to Lake Constance in the west, and from the hills of Bohemia in the north to the connections with the Mediterranean south. This variety of cultural landscapes is especially shaped by its architectural heritage, mostly by the structures connected with rural life. The latter, in their rich differentiation, are particularly endangered as an entire category in Austria: from the typical houses located around the region of Bregenz in Vorarlberg (Bregenzerwaldhaus) to the varieties of alpine farm houses; from the beautiful three- and four-sided farm houses located in the central regions to the arcades in Burgenland. Wood and clay structures are the most endangered, as well as those belonging to the greater area of the farm house, including structures of past-agricultural practice and methods.

Threats & pressures

What are the reasons? In general, the cause would be attributed to the dynamic mixing of city and country, with the obvious outcome of urban dominance. In reality, however, it is the dramatic change in the economic and social framework of agriculture since 1945 that has been accelerating the danger of loss: technological developments, higher production although resulting in profit loss, dramatic reduction of the work force, and several changes in the aims and framework of production. Agricultural structures have become either too big or too small, non-functional or not modern enough or simply superfluous.

A further pressure – in addition to social, technical and economic causes – resulting in endangerment lies in the areas of ideology and style. Probably more historic fabric of the rural heritage has been damaged through ideological mechanisms than through real economic and functional necessities. The current of modern times has led to a basic change in the role of beauty itself; the result is an increased threat, especially with respect to rural heritage, which has been seriously and negatively affected.

Obviously conservation approaches have been restricted until now. For far too long, interest was directed solely to the extraordinary. But such examples are atypical and not representative of rural heritage. These, so to speak, 'exotic' examples of rural architecture were rarely conserved, however, but often restored as open-air museums based on images of the original – in a way as an alibi for the real loss.

Solutions

Preservation/conservation alone cannot solve this problem, but should receive more attention in order to develop common aims and guidelines with the owners and representatives of the farmers, and with communities and politicians. An opportunity lies in the fact that agriculture has been undergoing a second structural change since 1945. While the first phase of change was characterised by industrialisation, recent years show increasing conviction that agriculture in the classical sense of 'agricultura' will continue. As a result, culture in its true form will be reinforced by preserving and caring for the many different types of cultural landscapes. This task is ecologically motivated and is successfully employed by tourism to some extent. However, built and shaped heritage in the rural area has been rarely considered. If future aims and tasks are to be focused more on the cultural aspects of preservation, conservation and sustainability, then concepts must be developed that include the preservation of rural architecture.

The pictorial examples included stand for *pars pro toto* and *regio pro mundo*. The phenomenon is not specific to Austria, it is worldwide – global.

The Survival Problems for Unused Palace Complexes

The areas surrounding historic castles and palaces have, as a result of their complex and not always easily-usable building substance, greater difficulties than other historic monuments in defining their function or finding a contemporary usage. The socio-political upheavals of the 20th century have altered traditional ownership patterns and thus destroyed the economic foundations on which the survival of such complexes had been based and depended. In many cases, events during or after World War II caused even more damage and engendered a struggle for survival that has, for many significant historic palace complexes, continued to the present day.

Ebenfurth Castle

Schloß Ebenfurth (Ebenfurth Castle) in Lower Austria represents a tangible illustration of this problem. The once splendid, but now alas dismal and dilapidated moated castle dates back to the mid-17th century. However, the origins of the massive three-storey building, the four sides of which enclose a centre court, go back to a rambling mediaeval border fortification, of which the corner towers still dominate the shape of the building. After 1754 the interior was magnificently decorated with paintings, particularly the chapel, of which Franz Anton Maulpertsch's ceiling frescoes depicting the *Apotheosis of St Leopold* are among the major works of Austrian Baroque art. In addition, a significant picture gallery, a collection of 17th-century Gobelin tapestries, sumptuous interior decorations including Chinoiserie wallpapers and early Neoclassical paintings, richly ornamented furniture, tiled stoves, plasterwork and some intarsio parquet flooring were among the original refurbishments.

The first losses occurred during World War II, when pictures and other valuables that had been evacuated for storage were destroyed in a fire.

Unoccupied after the war, the castle's north-east wing was used as a chicken farm, the neo-Baroque styled great room turned into a



Ebenfurth Castle

Ebenfurth Castle



granary. The buildings were empty for a long time; by the end of the war and during the Russian occupation, parts of the remaining furnishings were either stolen or destroyed. Ongoing plundering of remaining furniture and architectural elements transferred inlaid flooring, flagstones and other movable parts of the building into other hands.

Despite new ownership in 1973, hopes for the appropriate measures to prevent further losses were not realised after several false starts. In 1982/83 and 1990/91 the most urgent repairs to safeguard valuable painted ceilings with roofing work and static measures were undertaken as part of two costly restoration campaigns – the result of initiatives and funding on the part of the Province of Lower Austria and the *Bundesdenkmalamt*/Federal Office for the Preservation of Monuments.

Nonetheless, the process of deterioration could not be successfully halted and by the Winter of 2000 it was again necessary to erect emergency roofing over the chapel area and to do urgent repairs in other areas of the roof.

The year 2000 again brought a new owner and a new concept for revitalising the complex. A psychiatric treatment centre is planned, as well as opening certain areas for public use in collaboration with the municipality of Ebenfurth. However, the high cost of the necessary start-up investment is a continuing problem. All the roofs need to be recovered, the attics and drains need renovation. In the interior, the flooring, doors and much of the necessary infrastructure require replacement, while the artistically decorated rooms, particularly the endangered substance of the painted décor need stabilising and restoration. This important architectural monument and its remaining artistic decoration can only survive if it is possible to secure the necessary and substantial financing by means of an appropriately supported funding plan.

Ebenfurth Castle represents one particular case of 'Castles in Peril.' However, at the same time, it illustrates the situation of numerous, similar large-scale castle complexes in that very area of Central Europe where political and economic changes during the second half of the 20th century held back opportunities to master the consequent survival problems confronting many significant historical monuments. The dimensions of the recorded historic buildings, with their rich and artistically valuable decoration, present such an enormous burden to their useful value that it has not been possible, to date, to find viable schemes for a revitalisation that would give these large, significant monument complexes a new lease on life and a secure future.