

AUSTRIA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

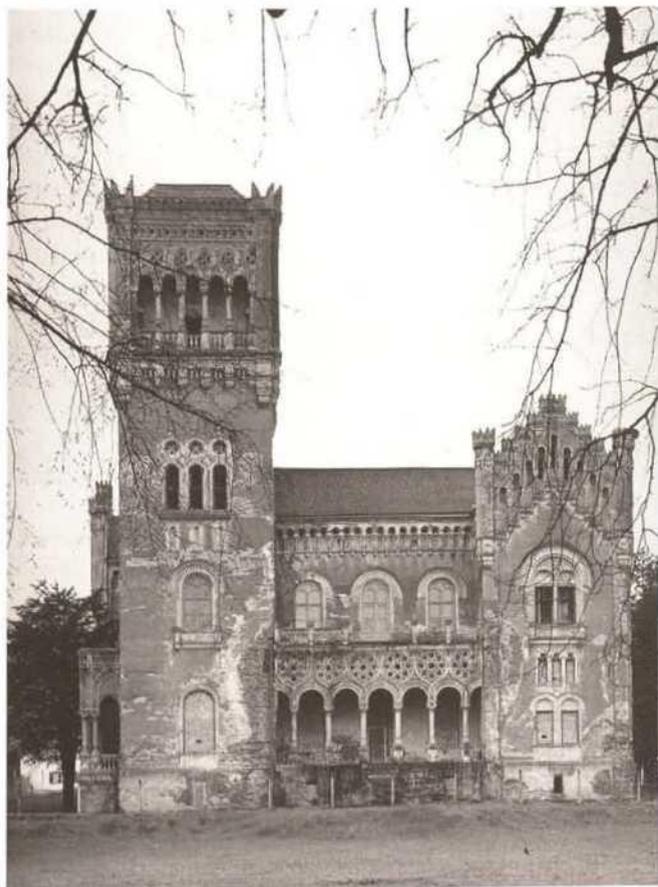
The great Austrian tradition of heritage conservation (1850, the foundation of the Imperial Central Commission for the Maintenance and Research of Architectural Monuments) was exemplary for other European countries. The conservation of monuments in Austria is based on the Monuments Preservation Act of 1923, which was amended by the version of 1 January 2000. In this law, the possibilities of an adequate protection of sites with their surrounding areas, as well as of historic districts are not sufficiently embedded, and historical parks and public gardens can only be listed in special cases. According to today's standards, the number of heritage places in Austria (among them all public and ecclesiastical buildings which are automatically considered as monuments) probably comprises about 100,000 heritage places. Many of them are located in Vienna and in historic town centres like Salzburg and Graz, which have both been inscribed in the World Heritage List. Furthermore, in many cases there are well preserved town districts of the 19th century like the famous buildings of the Ringstrasse in Vienna. Here, as in many European countries, there is often the danger of mere façadism. It has to be added that together with architectural projects in general the so-called "Ortsbildpflege" mostly lies in the hands of local authorities, – with the disastrous consequences of an ineffective or non-existent area planning policy, mainly in those areas opened up for tourism.

On the other hand, the decisive socio-political as well as socio-economic changes during the 20th century have removed the economic basis for many historic castles and palaces everywhere. Large, richly-furnished building complexes thus lost their function and their means of survival. In eastern Austria, where the Iron Curtain created additional handicaps to economic growth for decades after World War II, numerous significant palaces remain empty without any appropriate use. In many cases their poor structural condition has already endangered their chances of survival. To mention just one example, Rotenturm Castle in Burgenland, an interesting late-Historicism 19th century complex, has been unoccupied for decades and is decaying towards its unavoidable disintegration.

In Vienna, the Neugebäude, an important palace of the 16th century, has been empty for years. Also the baroque palaces of Auroldmünster in Upper Austria and Ladendorf in Lower Austria are particularly endangered. Of course, many industrial monuments, which are no longer used, are at risk as well, for instance the Heiligenstatt branch of the Viennese Stadtbahn (city railway), designed by Otto Wagner.

Like in so many countries, the most endangered area type in Austria is rural architecture. Here too, it is primarily economic and social upheavals which have led to the changing face of traditional landscapes. In Austria there are more than two dozen

Rotenturm Castle in Burgenland



Schloss Auroldmünster in Upper Austria, staircase

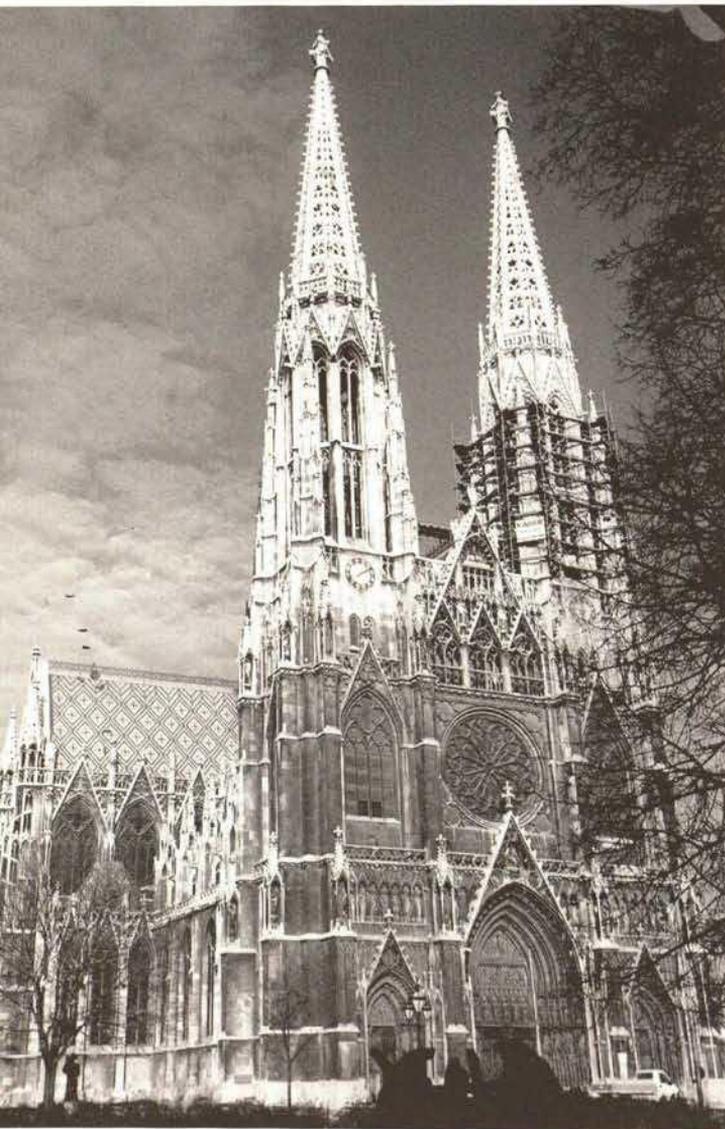


extremely different *Hauslandschaften*, ((farm)house-landscapes), extending from the Bodensee (Lake Constance) to the Neusiedlersee, with their particular patterns, buildings and farmsteads. In many regions, the leading industry – tourism – has additionally contributed to massive amounts of new construction and a homogenising of traditional methods of building. In all, the clichéd expectations of current living requirements have led to an extensive alienation and destruction not only of peasant architecture but also of villages, landscapes and townscapes of which it is an integral component. An illustrative example from western Styria, is the modest residential part of a Baroque cluster-farmstead complex built in 1744, in which the problems of preserving simple rural architecture are clearly recognisable.



Sierling, little farmhouse (1744) in Styria

Vienna, Votive Church, 1856–79, by Heinrich Ferstel



To date, thanks to the significant involvement of religious institutions as well as the community, not only the conservation, but the continuous restoration, of the some 10,000 churches and chapels, monasteries and convents in Austria has been assured. However, the increasing decline in numbers of people going to church and using religious welfare, combined with a shortage of clergy, means that today it is virtually impossible to keep all ecclesiastical heritage buildings in use. Large urban churches are especially vulnerable in regard to this latter, as are also the numerous, often frequently isolated affiliated churches scattered throughout rural areas that mould the appearance of the cultural landscapes. Here too, it will be very difficult in the future to protect such churches as individual significant heritage places when the on-site prerequisites for their function and care are no longer available. The Votive Church in Vienna, a very important example of Neo-Gothic architecture in the centre of the city, does not get sufficient income from its function as a parish church: its maintenance is no longer financially viable as a result of its function and thus is concentrated on its architectural and urban-historical significance. This means that the financial resources for securing its future existence must come mainly from the public sector. Another example, the Pilgrimage Church Maria-Waitschach in Carinthia illustrates the importance of isolated churches, situated far-off in the mountains, which have more or less lost their function.

This leads us to the serious problems that confront conservationists, ie that in the future, enormous efforts will have to be undertaken to save valuable cultural heritage from deterioration, as usually we are speaking of significant monuments with valuable furnishings and decoration.

The field of archaeology continues to present the problem that there is still no comprehensive national inventory of archaeological heritage and sites, and therefore the pertinent authorities are forced to take a broad-based approach to current construction projects, and conduct rescue excavations in order to at least attempt a salvage documentation of this archaeological heritage.



Maria Waitschach, late Gothic pilgrimage church

Case Study – Schloss Klessheim

Schloss Klessheim, built around 1700 for the archbishops of Salzburg, is a chief work of the famous architect Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach and one of the most important Baroque palaces in Austria. However, it is seriously threatened by plans for a football stadium. This stadium and a corresponding number of car parks would be built on the only remaining undeveloped ground near the palace and obstruct the view from the main axis of the park towards the steeple of the Müllner Church and the castle of Salzburg. It is of particular importance not to spoil this area, which is a nature reserve, since the surroundings of the palace and park have already been harmed by factories and motorways. If this plan is implemented, the palace will be degraded to an adjunct of a gigantic sports centre, for which many more suitable locations could be found. Public protest, also by ICOMOS, against the intended damage to Schloss Klessheim have not yet led to any change of mind by the relevant local politicians.

Project for a football stadium in front of Schloss Klessheim (in the background to the right)

