

## SLOVENIA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

### Golden Altars

The rich decoration of churches has the highest ranking position in Slovene cultural heritage. Assessments from the beginning of the official cultural heritage service (1850 and later) describe the “golden altars” as an important achievement of traditional arts and craftsmanship. There are about 2800 churches in a relatively small geographical area (24,000 km<sup>2</sup>). Apart from the wall paintings (frescoes) from the Romanesque and Gothic periods and a few Renaissance items, the main decorations come from the Baroque period. About 300 items are listed in the Central Register of Cultural Heritage as complexes of the first order dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Each integral unit of a “golden altar” includes a rich sculptural composition, central and/or side paintings on canvas or wood, and the main altar above the altar table. There are often two or more side altars as well, mostly with equally rich decoration.

The churches are endangered as they are often in remote locations, on the top of a hill, many of them outside rural settlements and generally not protected with modern alarm equipment. Theft and illicit trade generally incur the physical destruction of doors or windows, in some cases being set on fire

The rich wooden statues of the Golden Altars from the Church of St. Stephen, Suha pri Predosljah, a fine example of church decoration from the Baroque period.



deliberately, and are the most frequent risks. The danger of lightning, storms and heavy rains, and in some cases landslides, are also on the list of potential risks.

The number of available experts who are able to treat the object with conservation and restoration processes is limited. The National Project Heritage at Risk is under development.

### Castle Ruins in Cultural Landscape

There are approximately 300 castle sites dispersed among the cultural heritage of the very heterogeneous and rich cultural landscape of Slovenia. The styles vary from Romanesque, through the Gothic and Baroque periods, to historic alterations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the buildings incorporate building phases from several periods and different styles, including alterations in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

For historic reasons, mainly armed conflict (the Turkish invasions, peasant uprisings, World Wars I and II), and earthquakes, the present condition of this cultural heritage is rather poor. The conservation of the buildings is only possible through an all-embracing expert approach, where all forms of presentation can be taken into consideration, from marking imperceptible sites in the landscape, to the presentation of archaeological remains, or partial ruins – there could also be some reconstruction, while good quality structures and intact buildings should be prepared for a permanent comprehensive presentation to the public.

National expert opinions need to be tested against international expert practice.

### Historic Town Centres

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, an increased concern for the fate of historic town centres can be observed in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Town centres which under past systems could be managed because they were common (collective) property, are now endangered. The reasons are mostly:

- denationalisation and the new (prior) owners, who are poor managers and have no financial means,
- a considerable increase in turning residential apartments into business premises,
- the fact that shops and crafts are no competition to huge suburban shopping centres,
- increased traffic flow through historic sites,
- the pressure for more parking areas, and
- excessive investment projects (with façadeism as a consequence).

Thorough analyses and the exchange of experience on an international level are an essential precondition for the future directions of heritage protection, in order for it to be in tune with an integrated approach. It is particularly important that urban planning managers understand working in interdisciplinary groups.

International co-operation in this extremely important field of protection policy and practice should be encouraged.



### Case Study 1 – Golden Altars – Suha near Skofja Loka, the Church of St. John the Baptist,

(ESD 710), baroque main altar, walls with 15<sup>th</sup> century Gothic paintings in the presbytery.

Because of the building's ongoing instability, the rich church interior is endangered. So far, the causes of the instability have been determined as poor quality original foundations, while as a result of ground humidity, the wall paintings are endangered and the relatively high humidity of the air inside the church has even increased. An inappropriate arrangement of the interior has reduced natural ventilation in the church. Additional heating for use of the church in winter has caused an increase in the relative humidity to 78-86%. Fungi and other micro-organisms have spread from the wooden parts to the walls and into the structure of the plaster and the layers of paint in the wall paintings.

Preliminary investigations have made it possible to compile a list of the basic causes for the decay of the monument. Unfortunately, so far only initial test restoration on the wall paintings and wooden statues has been done.

The church lies outside a rural settlement and has been robbed several times in the past. The theft of wooden statues and oil paintings (on wood and/or canvas) has not yet been solved. Incomplete photographic documentation of the interior makes the work of the police and the customs impossible.

Regular visits and monitoring are impossible, because of the isolated location of the church. Evaluation of the impacts of natural disasters (storms, lightning, strong winds) requires special attention. In spite of the fact that the church represents one of the most important heritage places, a comprehensive long-term plan of preservation and restoration has not been prepared yet.

### Case Study 2 – Golden Altars – Suha near Skofja Loka, the Church of St. John the Baptist,

(ESD 710), baroque main altar, walls with 15<sup>th</sup> century Gothic paintings in the presbytery.

The procedures for saving the building are a part of the national Heritage at Risk project. The first joint inventory of the condition of the buildings was done by a mixed field team of conservators and the police. They checked how safe the door, windows and roof were, and what condition the electric wiring and the lightning-rod were in. The first simple electronic protection of the building was installed. With the co-operation of the police, a primary photographic record of the interior was carefully done, including every detail of every statue. A so-called prevention file was set up as a result. The next stage – currently in progress – includes a stereo-photogrammetric recording of the exterior and interior, and drawing up a basic plan of the building (scale 1:50). The data inventory is done three-dimensionally, which will make building a three-dimensional model of the building possible in the future.

The wooden statues are seriously endangered, therefore conservators undertook preliminary protection against insects and fungi by filling their insides with a special gas. Individual parts of the furniture were transported to restoration workshops

for expert treatment. Individual plans are being drawn up for a gradual restoration of the Gothic church (repairing the foundations, draining the atmospheric humidity, and drying the walls with air channels).

The works are financed by the state (the Ministry of Culture), the owners (the parish), the local community (the municipality), and various donors.

Within the programme, the following new steps in this systematic approach are planned:

- investigations into the building with non destructive methods (radar, ultra-sound infra-red recording of wall surfaces with paintings and hidden architectural details, endoscopy of the wood and walls)
- a systematic use of photogrammetry as a documentation method
- laboratory research of materials
- interdisciplinary treatment of the building within the characteristic cultural landscape
- and other new approaches.

After the transfer of knowledge locally and the regular publication of the results, further systematic monitoring of the conditions of the building will be introduced. With a Heritage Management Manual, the owner and the user of the building will be educated to be able to carry out the building's further maintenance.

ICOMOS Slovenia

The central part of the Golden Altar in the Church of Virgin Mary, Nova Stifca near Ribnica, decoration of 17<sup>th</sup> century architecture.

