

VERNACULAR HERITAGE @ RISK!

It is part of its very nature that vernacular heritage is vulnerable and sensitive to any influences coming not only from natural disasters such as floods or earthquakes, but especially from the progress in industry or telecommunication and also from social and economic changes, not only in the traditional rural areas. All over the highly developed countries world-wide, in Western Europe, Japan or the USA, the industrial revolution in agriculture has already taken place successfully and, as a result, has caused the loss of a very important part of built heritage – parts of the farmsteads, such as fences, gates, barns or stables, have been demolished and replaced by new and big industrial constructions necessary for industrialised agricultural production. If this industrial revolution has not yet happened in the former East European countries it is due to the economic situation and, before that, to the socialist system in agriculture. The collective or state farms provided a centralised system of technical assistance with machines, tractors etc., the result of which was that a great part of the outbuildings were again in danger while out of use, with no maintenance work anymore, which led to a slowly progressing decay. As an economic progress and technical development is expected soon in Eastern Europe, which will of course include a technical revolution in agriculture, built vernacular heritage will be endangered again.

Vernacular heritage is in danger world-wide – even in most European countries – since it is neither recorded nor listed. This implies that it is not considered worth protecting and conserving and is not considered important enough to be part of the protected national heritage. Even in countries where (at least after the destruction and loss caused by World War II) vernacular heritage was considered quite an important part of national heritage, such as in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands, and where consequently records and lists were put up,

important parts of vernacular heritage have already been lost. As a result of economic and social changes, most of the traditions and relics of former daily life in a rural community, as well as the repeating traditional cycles were only given little attention by ethnographers or ethnologists and were only sparsely collected and documented (for example traditions connected with the building of a new house or farmstead, the procedures and rituals accompanying the work and the participation of the community during the building process).

All over Europe it is also a problem of traditional conservation philosophy with its roots in the late 19th century and thus a problem of mentality. It should be mentioned that almost all members of the constitutive Scientific Committee on Vernacular Architecture of ICOMOS founded in 1976 were specialists working in open-air museums. After World War II, especially in the East European countries the protection and conservation of vernacular heritage was still the responsibility of the open-air museums, as the old conception of “Skansen” was still in fashion and comprehensible for the socialist conception of popular folk art and architecture. During the time of Soviet power, several villages all over the country – for example most of the settlements around the Onega Lake in Karelia – were completely demolished and only the wooden chapels survived, the population being forced to move to the cities (in this case to Petrozavodsk) and work in the newly built up industry. Some of the more elaborately designed farmsteads of those villages were transferred to the open-air museum around the World Heritage Site of Kizhi Pogost on the island in the Onega Lake. That incredible loss of vernacular heritage happened during Hrushchev’s time and not only in Karelia, but all over the vast territory of the Soviet Union.

This communist concept was also transferred to other East



Romania, village of Cineșor (Kleinschenk), abandoned house of Transylvanian Saxons (1993)



Greece, Mani peninsula village, traditional family tower, abandoned (1986)

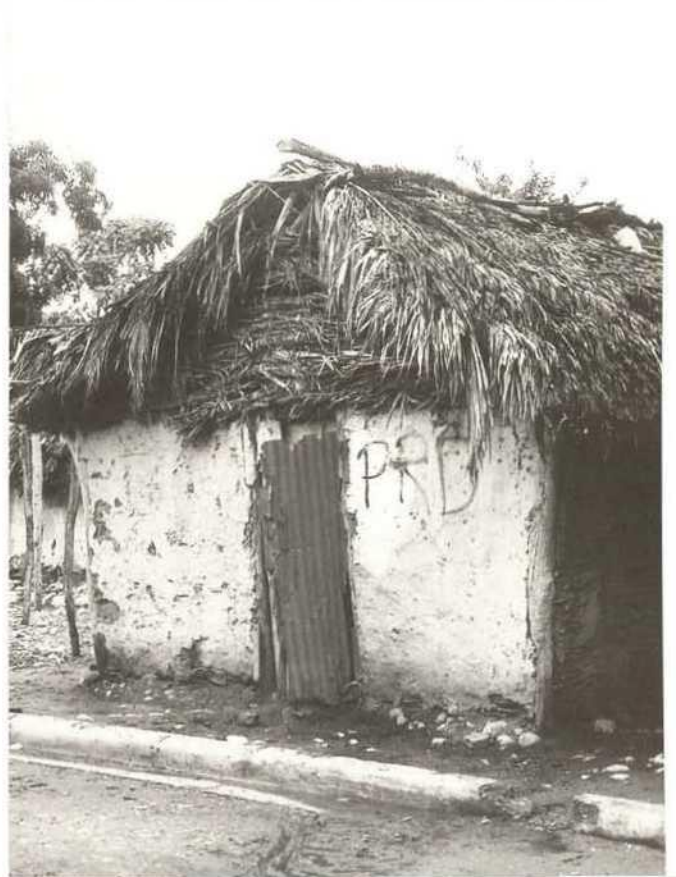
Israel, Palestinian village, Ramalah area, traditional family tower, abandoned (1996)



European countries, to much smaller entities all over the country: in Hungary, for instance, in almost every village one house or farmstead has been restored or reconstructed and converted into a museum of local vernacular traditions, the rest of the houses being available for renewal or changes. Only Bulgaria tried to find a different solution, starting to declare some villages as "museum villages", the most famous example being Koprivstica near Sofia. After moving the population from the settlements all houses were completely renewed, that means reconstructed and the villages were opened for visitors, especially from abroad. As a consequence, the normal life of such vernacular settlements died from the very beginning: after the events of the 1990s, almost all houses in those former museum villages are now owned by people from the big cities, who use them as weekend houses.

After the events of 1989, the attitude started to change in the East European countries due to very close contacts with international specialists. But even today, as long as some of the functionaries in charge with the protection and conservation of monuments are content with the heritage value of the vernacular, the step forward towards recognition as historic monuments still seems to be very difficult. In Romania, a couple of months ago, a new department for non-listed heritage, that is for vernacular heritage, was created within the Ministry of Culture. Such an initiative has to be considered as very positive, because in most other countries, in Europe, Asia or Latin America, with a rich heritage and several items on the World Heritage List of UNESCO, vernacular heritage is neither protected nor considered worthy to be conserved.

Dominican Republic, Pueblo Viejo, abandoned house (1998)





Thailand, village in the Sukhothai area, traditional farmstead, the roofing has been replaced by corrugated iron (1997)

This could be explained by the fact that inside the traditional rural agrarian communities vernacular heritage with all its traditions is still alive and the typical process of constant repair, renewal or even additions and changes, as a response to the constraints of the economic or social situation is continuing. In most African countries, this is still valid, and due to the mental attitude which goes back to colonial times, even the notion of "vernacular" contains a negative touch for the mostly agrarian population, as it is considered as primitive and without any values. On the other hand, without an understanding of those typical characteristics of vernacular heritage, the principles of authenticity worked out during the ICOMOS conference in Nara, will, of course, not be followed.

Apart from the current impact of natural disasters already mentioned – one of the most dangerous being earthquakes – economic and structural problems have a very negative influence on vernacular heritage. In Europe, in all the Southern areas of the Mediterranean, such as Greece, Italy, Spain or Portugal,

but also the bordering Mediterranean countries of Asia Minor, Israel and the Palestinian settlements, agriculture is given up and, as a result, vernacular settlements are abandoned, due to natural conditions of the soil but also to structural problems of the economy in some areas. The famous abandoned family towers on the Mani peninsula in Greece or in some Palestinian villages in Israel are only a few of hundreds of examples. Especially Portugal and Spain, but also Italy and France have to face the problem of abandoned villages or vernacular settlements and at present there are no appropriate means to stop or fight such a development. There was also the emigration of the German population from Romania in 1990 and 1991. Leaving behind empty farmsteads, town houses and even abandoned churches and villages, did not lead to a completely new situation for politicians, administrators or conservationists. But even with the help of the European or the International Community it will be very difficult to find ways for a revitalisation of those villages with their important vernacular heritage. The most dif-

difficult and delicate impediment is the mentality of the population in the former socialist countries: having been taught that industry and urban life were most important, the population of Romania hardly shows any interest in moving back to the country, to take over the abandoned farmsteads and start working again in agriculture, which would certainly be the most reasonable way of revitalisation.

In many countries, economic pressures and governmental programs, for instance solutions against future earthquakes, have a very strong influence on the preservation of built vernacular heritage. While in Bulgaria all specific structural details of traditional architecture, like the logs inserted inside the masonry for elasticity during earthquakes, were replaced in the late fifties and sixties by concrete structures during the restoration/reconstruction of the museum villages, the government in Guatemala started to finance building programs for the peasants in the Highlands after the big earthquake of 1976, replacing the traditional wooden and earthen structures by multi-storey standardised buildings of reinforced concrete and demolishing and replacing vernacular heritage almost in all market places like San Francisco el Alto, Salcaja or even in villages like San Andres Xecul.

But even without governmental programs, the influence and pressures of new and cheap industrially produced materials available in every supermarket on traditional vernacular architecture are visible world-wide, as the owners of houses or farmsteads and even the craftsmen of the rural community replace the traditional most expensive materials offered by the geomorphologic conditions of the surrounding area which were used for centuries. Some selected examples from Thailand, Guatemala and Romania might illustrate the problem which seems to be out of control, as long as traditional housing is not considered to be worth protecting and/or traditions are not worth continuing.

This is the background for all activities of the CIAV, the International Committee on Vernacular Architecture of ICOMOS, which after finalising the international "Charter of the Built Vernacular Heritage" started to work on regional guidelines for conservation, but also for education and training not only of professionals in conservation and of craftsmen, but also of architects, administrators and politicians world-wide.

ICOMOS International Committee on Vernacular Architecture



Russian Federation, Karelia, wooden village church near the Onega Lake after the destruction of the village



Romania, Bran village – the results of modernisation (1998)

Hungary, Balaton Lake – reconstruction of a traditional house with thatched roofing replacing the original vernacular architecture (1993)

