

CROATIA

Diagnosis: The Culture of Denial

The Croatian conservation system is based on two elements: as an institutional activity, it has a venerable and dynamic history of more than 150 years; during that period, it was influenced by a historicist sense of the past and by investment projections of state leaders and administrators. It is therefore marked by an unstable coexistence of professional standards and politically proclaimed “higher goals”. The longevity of the system founded by Emperor Franz Joseph I also implies significant ruptures. These ruptures are an important part of the Croatian history of conservation, imperilling professional dignity. Along with its best traditions, conservation in this country has been marked by denial, indolence, oblivion, threats to the authenticity of monuments and sites, and forbearance of professional standards. This has become obvious especially in the past 25 years.

Croatia became an independent republic after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ethnic conflict that tore apart what used to be the Yugoslav Federation. Between the 1850s and the collapse of Communism, this South-eastern European borderland pursued a myth of the Western European value system by creating an imagined community. The Habsburg Monarchy fostered this by providing early heritage experts with funds, education and projects in monumental complexes such as Diocletian’s Palace in Split or the cathedrals in Šibenik, Zadar and Poreč.

Part of Croatia’s affiliation to the European conservation tradition can also be seen in the active reception of innovative principles created in Austria and Germany around 1900. The first Croatian conservators were influenced by Rudolf Eitelberger, Alois Hauser, Thomas Graham Jackson, Alois Riegl, Cornelius Gurlitt, George Niemann, Joseph W. Kubitschek, Max Dvořák and Gustavo Giovannoni. Thus, the spreading of the altruistic and emancipatory conservation movement from the German-speaking countries across Europe was also felt in these colonised provinces. During a century and a half of conservation tradition in Croatia, the country experienced identity shifts from decolonisation to full emancipation. In that process, the *fin-de-siècle* conservation theories were understood as an aid to build a collective identity. This meant that conservation was frequently used as a tool for political self-definition or as defence mechanism. This political teleology has harmed the professional ethos of conservators time and again.

Concepts promoted by the champions of the Central European conservation movement, such as democratised perception, cosmopolitanism and age-value, haunted Croatian experts until 1945. Until the bombardments of the Second World War, as in Poland, Italy and Germany, Croatian conservators dogmatically adhered to the motto *Konservieren, nicht restaurieren*, fostered by Dvořák’s Viennese students.

To understand the recent state of Croatian conservation it is necessary to study the genesis of its numerous ruptures. One of the first major breaks followed the creation of the revolutionary

communist state in 1945. In the conservation community, the political newspeak was accompanied by the methodological revisions conceived in Italy and Poland. Until 1955 the basic concepts of the Italian *restauro critico* had implicitly been accepted in Croatia. A more significant shift was promoted after contacts with Polish experts were established. The reconstructions of Polish historic towns encouraged a new interventionism in Croatian conservation. Abandoning the abstinent principle and accepting the reconstructive demand for physical and aesthetic integrity as tools for social experiments, the new paradigm led to the foundation of the Restoration Institute of Croatia in 1966, which has kept its relevance until today.

This is how during the 1950s and 1960s a methodological synchronism was established. In the professional community it gathered the advocates of both the conservation and the interventionist principles. Generally, life between the two groups was idyllic, especially in the 1970s when the so-called *active approach* to conservation was promoted, akin to the political programme of socialist self-governance. By that period, the system of conservation had attained an unprecedented success: from 1945 elaborated legal documents were adopted, inventorying was accompanied by reconstruction interventions, and the possibilities of fusing monumental forms and new socialist contents were studied. Croatia structured its conservation system by setting up regional and local offices, and devising ambitious projects primarily for the sites in the Adriatic region. The socialist system was also marked by corporative trends. Since the end of the 1950s Croatian conservators established their association and published results in a specialised journal. The system led to the inventorying of thousands of monuments. Although there were still problems of public appreciation of their work, conservators succeeded in inscribing the historic centres of Dubrovnik and Split, as well as the Plitvice Lakes on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979.

Immediately after the first democratic elections in 1990, Croatia could not tackle the two important concepts of emancipation in post-communist Europe, namely freedom and memory. As mentioned, 25 years ago bloody wars marked the end of the socialist federation. These tragic events represented yet another discontinuity in the system. Croatian conservation was then confronted with war destructions, but also with a new political reality. This reality implied the paternalism of political elites at the birth of the Croatian Republic and its submissive acceptance among professionals. This process was marked by the symbolic abandonment of the conservation tradition created around 1900, namely in the project of the historicist rebuilding of the mediaeval Medvedgrad Castle (fig. 1) on the hills above the new nation’s capital, the city of Zagreb. The project comparable with Bodo Ebhardt’s rebuilding of Wilhelm II’s Hohkönigsburg in Alsace and the Italian creation of *Altare della Patria* on the Roman Capitoline Hill was contrived by the first Croatian President Franjo Tuđman in the early 1990s. At the same time, it represented a re-



Medvedgrad castle after rebuildings in 1993–94 (photo M. Špikić, 2010)

nunciation, a will to methodological regression and a submission to political fantasies.

At that time, the Society of Croatian Conservators was abolished, which facilitated a political take-over. This *coup-d'état* was codified in 1999, when the first law on the protection of cultural properties in independent Croatia was enacted. The controversial and still valid document inaugurated a new system of values for a new epoch: instead of the traditional concept of *monument* (evoking a spiritual dimension of the artefact), a new concept of *cultural property* aimed at the material or, rather, the market value of heritage. In a country whose national economy rests mainly on tourism, it is no wonder that the image of heritage was primarily seen as a tool for a short-term mending of the state budget.

This new era brought about two radical changes: conceptual (or terminological) and administrative (the transformation of the professional community into a mass of bureaucrats with diminished social reputation and no power to prevent negative trends). The conservation system was fragmented into more than 20 conservation offices (instead of four regional offices existing in the socialist period). The new system was an offspring of the non-transparent, unreformed and expensive state that stopped caring for professional expertise and dialogue between administrators, professionals and the public. Rare and praiseworthy successes were new inscriptions on UNESCO's World Heritage List between 1997 and 2016, but local conservation achievements were seldom incorporated in everyday public life.

Consequently, professionals have in most cases been pushed aside. Since the conflict in the 1990s, their professionalism has been substituted by political arbitrariness, hypocrisy and subordination. Naturally, there have been exceptions to the rule but not convincing enough to prompt the change. If there is a segment of Croatian society that exemplifies the crisis of the young republic, it is the conservation system. It is marked by paradoxes, simply because the political representatives, as key players in the process, still have no clear concept of how to preserve and interpret its heterogeneous heritage for future generations.

Consequences in practice

What are the practical consequences of this situation? First of all, the tradition of political denial has led to discontinuities in the perception and treatment of cultural heritage in Croatia. Therefore, the efforts of the best European experts who cared for and protected the monuments of today's Croatia were mostly forgotten or suppressed, as if they were considered uncomfortable or obsolete. It is one thing to ignore Riegl's and Giovannoni's reports on Diocletian's Palace in Split, published in 1903 and 1942 respectively. Equally problematic is the indolence towards monuments and sites that attracted those famous experts to this country in the first place. Administrators of the Croatian conservation system therefore devised a twofold denial: one is being oblivious of the previous conservation ideas (developed by "foreigners"), and



Šibenik cathedral, main portal, apostle without hand, state before substitution (photo P. Markovic, 2007)



Šibenik cathedral, main portal, apostle without hand, new work (photo P. Markovic, 2012)

the other is neglecting or misusing monuments and sites themselves. The second case is dependent on the first and can be seen in diverse forms: in a dangerous carelessness of tourist investments, in the autocracy of secular and ecclesiastical beneficiaries, even in nonsensical expert decisions. In an attempt to illustrate the seriousness of the situation only the most notable problems will be mentioned that have appeared at Croatia's UNESCO sites in the past few years.

The threats range from individual artworks to whole areas, that is, from aesthetic and semantic to ecological contexts. The Cathedral of Saint James in Šibenik was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2000 (criteria ii, iii and iv). In 2012, the local bishop decided to replace the statues of the saints on the main portal of the Renaissance cathedral without consulting the local conservation authorities. Despite heavy criticism and statements from conservators in 2013, the copies are still in place, harming the authenticity of the protected site.

In the historic city of Trogir, inscribed on the List in 1997 on the basis of criteria ii and iv, a group of art historians, prelates and conservators made a similar decision in 2011. Encouraged by an archival document suggesting that until the early 17th century

a statue of Christ stood in front of the Cathedral of Saint Lawrence, they decided to put a copy of the 15th century statue in the middle of the square that used to serve as a cemetery. Now the professional community was divided: not only were the authentic location, iconography and function of the sculpture controversial, but also the act of reproduction and its hypothetical location. After fierce discussions among the public and the experts' demand for the removal from the site, no change was made, so the copy, placed on top of a contemporary neo-Renaissance column, still stands in front of the Romanesque Cathedral.

These examples may seem harmless in comparison with the plans for the development of the traditionally uninhabited Srdj Hill above the Old City of Dubrovnik, inscribed in 1979 under criteria ii, iii and iv. The problems of Dubrovnik are manifold: they range from tourism sustainability (excessive number of cruise-ship visitors) and the preservation of monuments (menaced by the mass of visitors and "improved" by Hollywood blockbusters) to aggressive investment plans, such as the project of a golf-resort and accompanying apartments on the hill above Dubrovnik. Thanks to local NGOs the problem was internationalised. At the 2014 World Heritage Committee session in Doha, it

was decided that a reactive monitoring mission would be sent to Dubrovnik. In October 2015 the mission took place and in March 2016 a report was issued. This ambitious project, with investor, local and state political actors on one side, conservators on the other and NGOs on the third, is still on hold until “a comprehensive study and Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) in terms of its cumulative impact on the OUV of the property has been completed for the property and its larger setting.”

As we have seen, Croatia has a problem with non-transparent politics, silent or overambitious professionals and marginalised civic society. It has much to do with the evolution of democratic standards and self-respect, but also with respect towards the preceding cultural and political systems. This country therefore needs help, even in the form of international pressure, to improve its standards, or to retrace the best traditions in its long history of conservation.

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