

CZECH REPUBLIC

Heritage at Risk

Summing up the heritage conservation issues in the Czech Republic within the period 2016–2019, definitely the greatest concern was the proposal for a new Building Act. Ordered by the Ministry of Regional Development and prepared by a group of private attorneys, the proposal significantly reduces possibilities of state heritage conservation, namely the National Heritage Institute, to interfere in the building practice. The same would apply to conservationists' NGOs. The ICOMOS Czech National Committee carefully reviewed the proposal, but its objections, just like different objections of many other professional boards and even objections of the Czech Ministry of Culture, were mostly not taken into consideration. There is strong pressure from building and development companies to push this act through, deceitfully arguing that the proposed change helps to accelerate economic growth and especially new residential building, insufficient until now. The professional debate on the act is ongoing;

the Czech government will discuss the current proposal during the summer months of 2020, expecting its effect as from 2021.

Regarding individually protected landmarks, the Czech heritage conservation enjoyed great international recognition with two new World Heritage properties listed in 2019 (Landscape for Breeding and Training of Ceremonial Carriage Horses at Kladruba nad Labem and Erzgebirge/Krušnohoří Mining Region). Moreover, several first-class heritage buildings were quite successfully renovated with the financial support of European Union funds and governmental or local programmes. Among these buildings is the 19th-century main building of the National Museum in Prague. On the other hand, the "stock" of interesting heritage items has suffered several considerable losses: two great industrial areas in Brno, the Zbrojovka vehicles and firearms factory, and the Vlněna (former Stiassni) textile factory,¹ the latter's history dating back to the 18th century and operating until the 1990s, were almost completely demolished between 2016 and 2018, in order to make room for new commercial glass-



Fig. 1: Brno, to the left of the cathedral new office blocks replacing the former Vlněna textile factory



Figs. 2 and 3: Prague, the city centre with highrises on its horizon

and-steel blocks (Fig. 1). Industrial areas seem the most endangered category of architectural heritage in the Czech Republic; they were largely privatised in the 1990s after the end of production, without being listed. Unlike other countries (United Kingdom or the Netherlands), the Czech Republic boasts very few examples of clever re-use of authentic industrial remains or constructions within a new architectural design.

The country's capital, Prague, is constantly confronted with demands for the erection of highrises on its horizon, which are easily visible from historical view platforms (Figs.2 and 3). The recommendations of international conservationists' missions to safeguard the traditional panorama and vistas have been widely debated in the press; however, without proper action of the municipal authorities.



Figs. 4–6: Olomouc, Romanesque Zdik's Palace with roof and visitors' bridge from the 1980s, both intended to be replaced by glass-and-steel structures

Although the Czech Republic generally does not support the building of spectacular cultural temples designed by international architects, some institutions attempt to imitate this fashion, albeit in a provincial manner with provincial capacities. In the city of Olomouc, renowned for the second-largest protected historical core after Prague and for the baroque Holy Trinity column, a designated World Heritage property, the Olomouc Museum of Art together with the Archdiocese of Olomouc would like to re-restore the unique Bishop Zdik's palace from the 12th century, used as part of a permanent exhibition of the museum since 2006. Its unique Romanesque walls were conserved and presented to the public in the 1980s, with an elevated wooden pathway and a wooden roof designed by Jan Sokol, a distinguished period architect. His additions harmoniously integrated the medieval torso in-

to the cluster of buildings of the Olomouc cathedral hill. Because of this sensitivity, as well as the thoroughness of research and elaboration of details, the renovation of the 1980s belongs to the most important achievements of the Czech architectural conservation of the post-World War II decades. In 2018 the Olomouc Museum of Art as the present administrator published a controversial project by Jan Šépka, a Prague-based architect, for a replacement of Sokol's "aesthetically obsolete" elements by a compact glass display window and a mono-pitched steel roof (Figs. 4–6).² The Czech National Committee of ICOMOS has highlighted the value of the previous renovation and doubted the arguments for the proposed intervention, unfortunately without an answer.

The construction will take place from July 2020.

Martin Horáček
ICOMOS Czech National Committee

Footnotes

¹ Area images of its demolition see here: https://encyklopedie.brna.cz/home-mmb/?acc=profil_udalosti&load=5279

² For the new project see: <https://www.sepka-architekti.cz/index.php?lang=en&page=project&name=new-presentation-of-zdiks-palace-olomouc->

All images by Martin Horáček