

Vernacular Architecture and Cultural Development in Europe

In 1987, first contacts were established between the Institute for Scientific Research of the Ministry for Culture of the Russian Federation of the former Soviet Union and the International Committee for Vernacular Architecture of ICOMOS to start a project with seminars on the conservation of vernacular architecture. At the basis was the idea that the conservation of rural and urban vernacular architecture had to be considered in a broader context of social, economical and cultural development.

The connections between conservation and development have been lately more and more refined in ICOMOS and had found before all applications in conservation projects of historical urban centers. For rural architecture the range of applications is larger but only a few successful items have been put into practice. Recently conservation politics focus more on architecture *and* nature in the cultural landscape concept where the difference between archaeological, rural, urban and industrial characteristics are not differentiating categories but integrated parts of the global site and its conservation.

In general social economical basies are laid for the conservation of the sites. The cultural panel of the development issue is less elaborated. In the project this cultural panel is especially studied and the role of traditions, as well as the confrontation of traditions with modernization and repercussion on the conservation of vernacular architecture are examined. The expected output is an insight in the cultural implication and cultural meaning of the conservation of vernacular architecture and the status of this preservation in a cultural development. The programme examines the conservation problem from a cultural development point of view and its relationship with other aspects of development.

From this point of view, it is impossible to divorce conservation of vernacular architecture from the building of new architecture or possibly new vernacular architecture, if the term *vernacular* is still valid in modern architecture. It goes without saying that in the discussion about the definition of vernacular architecture has to be opened again and that the question of the existence and development modalities of a new vernacular architecture is connected with this definition.

In this project, the cultural impact of heritage conservation is central. It is examined how an actual regional cultural identity of which the historical dimension was clearly articulated in historical vernacular architecture, is expressed in new architecture and environment; in other words how contemporary regional identity can be expressed in historical nuclei in renovation processes on one hand, and how new architecture can exteriorize a regional identity or the other. It may become clear that in such a perspective architecture conservation becomes a part of a larger development programme in which environment ecology, economy and culture are involved. This opens a new dialogue between the conservation practice and urban development, new architecture and cultural policy. Their cultural

denominator, how varied it may be today by the presence of migrants, historical and new tradition, is the point of departure in the investigation.

The role of historical architecture patrimonium in the development of new architecture will be studied. This historical architectural patrimonium is to be understood here as the "architectural memory" of a region where, apart from formal and material aspects, the immaterial aspects too play a role, e.g. the concepts, ideas, interpretations of international movements, skills and knowledge. The conservation of the architectural patrimonium has by tradition been restricted to the continuity of values as far as they are present in architecture that has survived history. Conservation focused on the continuity and renovation of this physical architectural heritage.

Continuity of architectural patrimonium however does not only exist out of formal or material aspects as this was realized in the conservation of historical architecture and its survival in new pseudo-rural style in some regions. The notions *continuity and conservation of architectural memory* can be interpreted as the creative and dynamic process, a continuation of values and principles in building in a modern way. Conservation of the architectural memory of a region means, in that sense, the updated realisation of values in building or the modern articulation of traditional values.

It goes without saying that from this point of view, historical architecture is an important source of information for new estate. The open air museums, developed in Europe at the end of the 19th century, and possessing hundreds of examples of historical vernacular architecture have a lot of this information not enough exploited, and could play an important role in the expression of cultural identity in architecture, past and present.

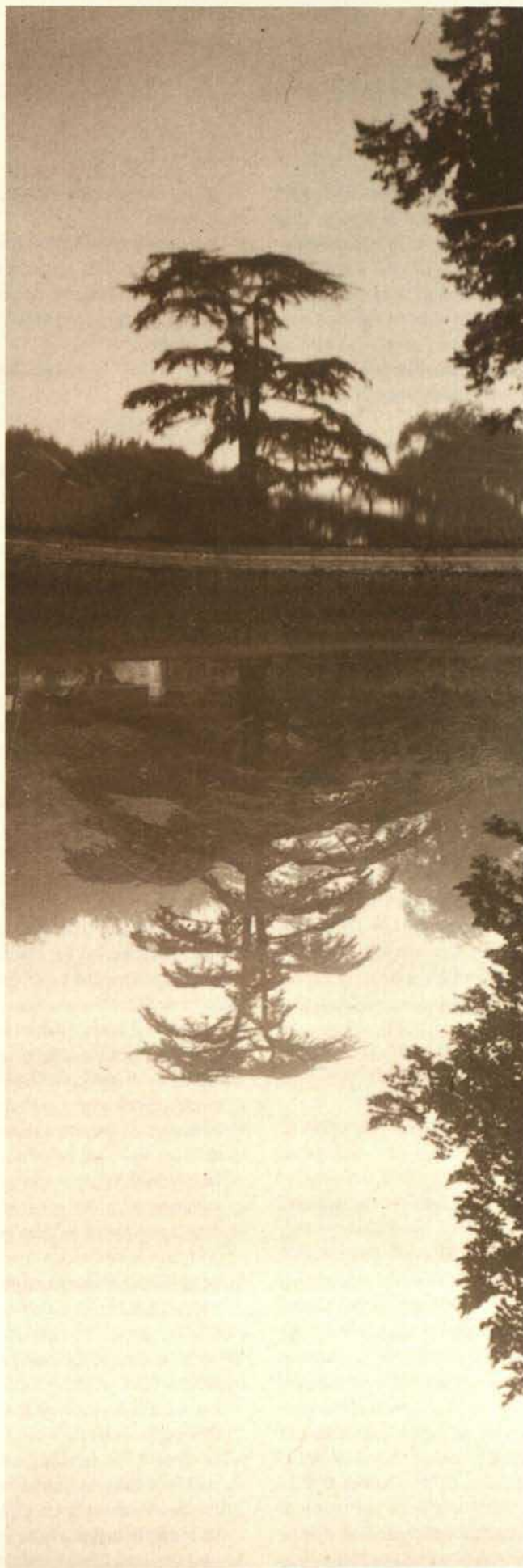
These few considerations modeled the project. The central topic is how modern regional cultural identity can find its expression in the renovation of historical vernacular architecture in rural, urban, industrial archaeological or cultural landscape context and can be shaped in new estate, new settlements and new architecture.

A panel of the study concerns the role of open air museums and architectural museums in this process. This last panel was treated at the centennial congress of European open air museums in Stockholm at Skansen in September 1991. This congress was organized by the Association of Open Air Museums to celebrate the centennial of the foundation of the first open air museum in Europe.

It was an occasion to take a close look at the future of open air museums which are a type of museums born hundred years ago. Three items were discussed: open air museums and nationalism, open air museums and ecology and open air museums and architecture. The first theme made it obvious that open air museums started in the 19th century in a spirit of

nationalism and how today they could be abused of in this new upcoming nationalism. The second theme was elaborated by several speakers showing the educative, training and developing role of the collections. The last theme became a controversial discussion.

The first function of open air museums was to give a future to vanishing traditional cultures. They were part of a more general conservation movement that appreciated threatened rural culture because of its social value and wanted to conserve these traditional cultures by transferring them into museums. Open air museums were, so to say, conservation projects where, together with material expressions such as objects and architecture, the social aspects of the vanishing cultures were kept. This made them "living museums" not only because they showed "traditions" with exhibitions of folk dance, songs and crafts but also because they "kept" a tradition "alive". The saving role of the museums was completed in the 20th century by scientific museological work. They became systematically organized collections founded on scientific basis, developing representativity for their content and museographic specificity. Their saving function remained, de facto, a reality but went to the background; they became scientific and educational museums for social history. Social actuality was and still remains a problem for most open air museums dealing truly with historical vernacular architecture. More recent periods of history came into the collections by the reconstruction of recent interiors



and, sometimes, by admitting buildings out of a recent past.

More speakers wanted the open air museums to be of help in exhibiting social history whereas only a few proposed to use the open air museums for an engaged social message, interpreting the message of history in this case as historical vernacular architecture and using it in further architectural development. Commitment of open air museums and exploitation of their contents towards nowadays cultural life is not a simple question. The relations with conservation *in situ* were scarcely recognized and are realized only in a few open air museums.

The second panel – conservation of historical vernacular architecture in cultural landscapes – is being studied today in the Abbey of Brauweiler in a meeting organized by the Council of Europe and the Rheinisches Amt für Denkmalpflege.

Next year's programme is *New Vernacular Architecture*; a meeting is prepared by Belgian and French colleagues. This whole project remains a challenge for Europe because, within the frame of political, social, economical and cultural unification, the key policy question will be whether to stimulate a policy of polycultural support or to promote a European cultural "koine". In other words, will a regional culture with regional expressions such as architecture and environment get a chance in front of a pan-European standard architecture? The results of these seminars could form a basis for further discussion, research and development programmes.