A Corrupt Past: The Case of Bratislava Castle*

Ján Bakoš

Institute of Art History, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava

Abstract

The paper explores the history of the restoration of Bratislava Castle, the typical symbol of Slovakia's capital. It concentrates on the extensive reconstruction of the castle carried out in the late 1950s and 1960s under the former Czechoslovak communist regime. The story of Bratislava Castle is peculiar not so much because of the way in which the past was violated and history used for the transient goals of political leaders, but because of the way in which the castle was nationalised through a historicising reconstruction. The final utilitarian act of all the previous ideological manipulations of the castle was the erection of a new building within the castle walls. It was built after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 to serve the needs of the new independent Slovak parliament. Nationalistic illusionism had again joined forces with utilitarianism, this time to produce an architectural language known as commercial Baroque.

Contents

Nostalgia versus functionalism

A silent agreement between ideologues, neoromantics, nationalists and pragmatists

[1] The case of Bratislava Castle[1] is a typical case of heritage preservation. It is typical because of the way relations evolved between the public and heritage preservation, on the one hand, and between conservation and contemporary art, on the other. In 1536, Bratislava became the capital of the Hungarian Kingdom and would retain this status until 1848, when it was transferred to Buda. At that time, known as Pressburg or Poszony, Bratislava was a German and Hungarian town and would remain so until 1918. With the founding of independent Czecho-Slovakia, the town was renamed, drawing on its Slav origins. By renaming it, the new Republic was claiming its historical right to this multinational town, following President Wilson's refusal to heed the Pressburgers' claim for it to be recognized as a free international town.

[2] Following a fire in 1811, Bratislava's most typical symbol – the castle – was left in ruins. Subsequently, the Habsburg Court lost all interest in the castle,

* This essay is an extract from Ján Bakoš, *Intelektuál & Pamiatka* [The Intellectual and the Monument], Bratislava 2004, 173-182; translation by Catriona Menzies.

1 This paper was written before the most recent neo-Baroque reconstruction of the castle area was completed, which would require a special analysis of its own.

which had until then been the seat of the governing lieutenant Duke Albert of Saxe-Teschen and Archduchess Maria Christina (1766-1781). Without the care of its owner, the castle was left orphaned.[2] Indicative of the shift from a utilitarian approach to heritage to one based on ideology, localism and patriotism, Ján Batka, the town chronicler prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, wrote memoranda to attempt to force the authorities to look after the castle, but to no avail.[3] Already in a woeful state, the castle ruins deteriorated rapidly – in sharp contrast to the town where construction continued apace in an era of post-war modernization (Fig. 1, 2). Paradoxically, though, it was the castle ruins that were to become the town's visual symbol.
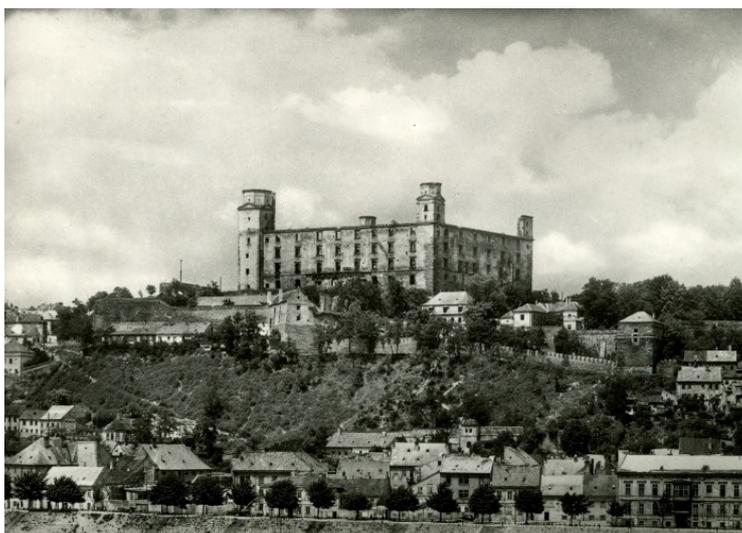
1 Bratislava Castle in the early 20th century (photograph provided by the Institute of Art History at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava)

2 Bratislava Castle in the 1940s (photograph provided by the Institute of Art History at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava)

2 Ladislav Šášky,"Premeny bratislavského hradu", in: *Pamiatky a múzeá* 5 (1993), 6-12.

3 See Šášky, "Premeny bratislavského hradu", 13.

Nostalgia versus functionalism

[3] Towards the end of the 1930s, the state of the castle had deteriorated to such an extent that plans were drawn up to replace the castle ruins with a modern construction. Characteristic of the presentism then in evidence, plans were mooted for it to become the seat of Slovakia's administrative centre. This provoked a lively public debate. Ultimately, two sides formed in opposition to each other to debate the future of the castle ruins. They came up with two opposing solutions. Those in the first camp defended the idea that the ruins should be replaced with modern architecture. In 1924, the leading Slovak secessionist architect and head of the Government Commissariat for Heritage Conservation, Dušan Jurkovič, proposed that a modern university be built to replace the castle.[4] Those who favoured this radical iconoclastic and modernist solution argued that the ruins were completely beyond use and that repairing them would be enormously costly. As is clear, they ignored the symbolic and artistic value of the ruins and simply recognised arguments relating to the economic viability and functional use of the building. In this, one can see an avant-garde and functionalist position that unequivocally favoured the present over the past and function over reverence.

[4] The shift from the decadent modernism of the late 19th century to the futuristic avant-garde can also be noted in the disregard for the cult of fragments, remnants and ruins. At the same time, it is striking that at this stage the other alternative – i.e. restoring or reconstructing the castle – had yet to play a significant role. The supporters in the second camp – for example Gizela Weyde, a student of Max Dvořák and former employee at the Town Museum (although at that time resident in Halle an der Saale in Germany),[5] and the then head of the Government Commission for Heritage Conservation, Jan Hofman,[6] – defended the idea that the ruins should be conserved. They would also allow any restoration that was essential to the revitalisation of the castle area. This they justified on the basis of the symbolic, artistic and historical value of the ruins; however, they also introduced the economic argument that tourism would bring financial gain. It was the first example of purely ideological or aesthetic arguments being used in support of a conservationist doctrine in conjunction with the notion that heritage could be a means of cultural tourism and a source of profit.

[5] Of historical interest is the fact that towards the end of the 1930s the public debate on the fate of the castle was joined by the leaders of the renowned Vienna School of Art History and followers of Max Dvořák – professors Hans Sedlmayr, then *professor ordinarius* at the Institute of Art History at the University of Vienna, and Karl Maria Swoboda, Dvořák's former assistant and *professor ordinarius* of art history at the German Charles Ferdinand University in Prague. Their decision to join the pro-conservationist camp was logical, not only

---

4 See Šášky, "Premeny bratislavského hradu", 13.

5 Ingrid Ciulisová, "Gizela Weyde a ochrana bratislavských pamiatok", in: *Pamiatky a múzeá* 1 (1994), 30-31.

6 Ingrid Ciulisová, *Historizmus a moderna v pamiatkovej ochrane. Obnova stredovekej cirkevnej architektúry Slovenska*, Bratislava 2000, 138-143.

because they had been invited as proponents of conservationism (most probably at the behest of Gizela Weyde) and were expected to provide an objective and supportive viewpoint, but also because of their involvement and the views they expressed in the journal *Forum* that lent the debate an international dimension.[7] Spreading the word internationally was important to the initiators as was engaging international experts in a supervisory role. One might have expected that the internationally renowned expertise of Sedlmayr and Swoboda, who had been taught by Max Dvořák and reared, as one might say, on a diet of monarchical nostalgia, would be employed in defending the conservationist argument. Indeed, it was true that all the Vienna School disciples loyally followed Dvořák and weaved their adoration for this symbol of the monarchic past into their argument that the castle was of cosmopolitan artistic value. Gizela Weyde not only employed Dvořák's argument that the town panorama itself had artistic value and was part of its heritage ("For anyone who has ever gone along the Danube, the town's beautiful silhouette […] and its main symbol, the castle ruins […], [the charm of the […] ruins] present an unforgettable image").[8] She also justified her position by arguing that it would be an unforgiveable 20th century-iconoclasm: "To destroy such a significant historical monument so definingly important to the image of the town", wrote Weyde, "has become unthinkable in Europe in recent decades".[9] Moreover, she added the argument that Bratislava Castle was a monument layered in history and cosmopolitanism: "Anyone who is aware of how our nation after the others, and our century after the others laboured on this building for two thousand years will recognise that the responsibility for preserving it lies with our era."[10] All the while, Gizela Weyde was defending a moderate, unorthodox conservationist view. She was willing to accept a combined conservationist/restorative approach ("Erhaltung oder Wiederherstellung"), for example the "possible expansion of well-maintained sections", or "the rebuilding of the Crown Tower".[11] She linked her arguments in favour of preserving the castle with pragmatic ones. Whilst she was of the opinion that it was essential to invest significantly into professionally restoring the castle because of its artistic and cultural and historical significance, these expenses could be partially recouped if the secondary part of the castle area was dedicated to tourism. Ultimately she even fell back on Ruskin's argument that we are responsible to future generations ("wir tragen vor den kommenden Generationen die Verantwortung").[12]

---

7 See *Forum. Zeitschrift für Architektur, freie und angewandte Kunst* (1937, 1938). I am grateful to Ingrid Ciulisová for drawing my attention to this discussion.

8 Gizela Leweke-Weyde, "Für unbedingte Erhaltung der Pressburger Schlossruine", in: *Forum. Zeitschrift für Architektur, freie und angewandte Kunst* 7/8 (1937), 225.

9 See Leweke-Weyde, "Für unbedingte Erhaltung der Pressburger Schlossruine", 225.

10 See Leweke-Weyde, "Für unbedingte Erhaltung der Pressburger Schlossruine", 225.

11 See Leweke-Weyde, "Für unbedingte Erhaltung der Pressburger Schlossruine", 225.

12 See Leweke-Weyde, "Für unbedingte Erhaltung der Pressburger Schlossruine", 226.

[6] Likewise Jan Hofman also justified the need to preserve the castle on the grounds of the castle's "aesthetic quality" and "artistic value".[13] At the same time, in addition to "securing and conserving the ruins", he did not entirely exclude the possibility of certain "additions" being made, so long as they were spatial in nature (especially the devastated vaults).[14] Hofman was of the opinion that, given "foreign tourism", there was no need to stop at simply conserving the ruins; instead, they should be given a practical function. It is in this perhaps that the retreat of modern functionalism can be seen. This committed advocate of a conservationist doctrine[15] was understandably only willing to do this in order to achieve the primary goal – saving the castle.

[7] Professor Sedlmayr from Vienna defended the idea of "preserving the castle" and opposed the idea of a new construction, arguing like Weyde that Bratislava Castle was of international significance (the "embodiment of European history").[16] He also picked up on Dvořák's notion that the panorama was itself of historical value, and expanded it to include "landscape impressions" ("Landschaftseindrücke"), thereby taking a step towards linking heritage with environmentalism. At the same time he categorically rejected the avant-garde's juxtapositioning of new against old. Referring to Dvořák's criticism of bourgeois moralising and above all a faulty understanding of progress, Sedlmayr employed a modernist axiology against modernism itself and formulated an anti-modernist, retrospective creed. According to Sedlmayr, true progress was having a true respect for heritage:

If there is a field in which the concept of progress [...] has a positive meaning, if there is a field in which contemporary human or social progressivity can be extensively demonstrated, then it is the field of historic preservation. The idea of historic preservation is one of the most patriotic and most valuable ideas of the twentieth century.[17]

[8] Sedlmayr's justification for why the castle should be preserved contains the argument that preservation is about love for one's country. If Sedlmayr's point had a nostalgic, monarchic connotation, then in Swoboda's hands it took on a nationalistic, hegemonic meaning. Criticizing the proposal to replace Bratislava Castle with a new construction to be an act of barbarism, Swoboda argued not only in favour of its historic and artistic value but primarily of its place in German art history: He considered it a piece of heritage that "belonged to [...] one of the most interesting chapters in our late Gothic period [...] and was proof of the involvement of the greatest German master of Renaissance architectural art [...]".[18] Here we can witness the ideological shift the public debate on Bratislava Castle underwent in the late 1930s. The largely cosmopolitan or disguised

13 Jan Hofman, "Für unbedingte Erhaltung der Pressburger Schlossruine", in: *Forum. Zeitschrift für Architektur, freie und angewandte Kunst* 8 (1938), 37.

14 See Hofman, "Für unbedingte Erhaltung der Pressburger Schlossruine", 37.

15 See Ciulisová, *Historizmus a moderna v pamiatkovej ochrane,* 139.

16 Hans Sedlmayr, "Für unbedingte Erhaltung der Pressburger Schlossruine", in: *Forum. Zeitschrift für Architektur, freie und angewandte Kunst* 8 (1938), 1.

17 Sedlmayr, "Für unbedingte Erhaltung der Pressburger Schlossruine", 1.

monarchal patriotic arguments deployed by those advocating preservation were now openly developing into "Grossdeutsche" nationalist ones.

[9] But the debate on Bratislava Castle was not simply a polemic between futurists and nostalgists or avant-gardists and modernists. A new ideological dispute was emerging over the horizon – a dispute over democracy and hegemonic nationalism. Despite the intensity of the debate, it never led to any practical decisions. The definitive collapse of Czechoslovakia in 1939 did not, however, signal the end of the public debate on this cause. In the first half of the 1940s, under the Slovak State, the debate between those who argued in favour of replacing the castle ruins with modern architecture (this time with a government or new university building) and those who defended the historic and artistic value of the castle continued unabated.[19] However, the new nationalistic official ideology of the Slovak State led to a new voice entering the debate; a third alternative was formulated: return the castle to its original Renaissance and Baroque appearance. This began to compete with the prevailing iconoclastic viewpoint (destroy the ruins and erect a modern building). (The first proposal for renovating the castle via reconstruction had been conceived of by the painter Janko Alexy shortly after the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1920.[20] It was logical that the author of the idea behind this romantic reconstruction was a modernist artist, since he was a romantic national modernist.) A lack of funding, however, prevented any of the proposed alternatives from being realised.

A silent agreement between ideologues, neoromantics, nationalists and pragmatists

[10] In a certain sense it is significant that the decisions on the fate of Bratislava Castle, and its practical design, were taken under totalitarian communism. It is not just that the authoritarian regime based its decisions on ideological goals rather than economic criteria. As we know, communism systematically exploited the past and its remnants for its own purposes. Moreover, official art in the communist era, "socialist realism", was a specific kind of historical revival and as such mixed the past with the present to construe an ideal pretended reality. The attempt to mask the expansive, world-domineering nature of communist ideology and legitimise its hegemony forced the totalitarian regime to allow a certain degree of nationalism into the official ideology. Tolerance of this centrifugal Slovak nationalism probably had a role to play in the superpower politics enacted by the Kremlin against the Prague centre.

[11] Significantly, the definitive decision to reconstruct Bratislava Castle, and not only preserve its ruins, or replace them with a modern building, came at a time when the Slovak political establishment was strengthening its efforts to gain greater autonomy through the federalisation of the Czechoslovak Republic. However, the initiative for a neo-romantic historical reconstruction came from

18 See Karl Maria Swoboda, "Für unbedingte Erhaltung der Pressburger Schlossruine", in: *Forum. Zeitschrift für Architektur, freie und angewandte Kunst* 8 (1938), 2.

19 Belo Polla, "Ad vocem Bratislavský hrad", in: *Pamiatky a múzeá* 5 (1993), 14-15.

20 See *Pamiatky a múzeá* 5 (1993), 13.

within the ranks of architects (Alfréd Piffl, Emanuel Hruška, Ján Lichner, Martin Kusý etc.) and was to endure throughout the 1950s.[21] One can interpret the realisation of this historicising alternative in the mid-1960s – an era when the Republic obtained federal status – as a victory for the silent alliance between a nostalgic neo-romanticism and Slovak nationalism, on the one hand, and communism, on the other. The neo-romantics attempted to escape the limits of the totalitarian regime for an illusion of the past. The nationalists aimed at connecting Bratislava to Slovak history and longed for a vision of the idealised myth of national history. The communist ideologues pragmatically took the opportunity proffered by the neo-romanticists and nationalists (largely one and the same) to weaken Pragocentrism. The political decision to reconstruct the historical appearance of the castle was taken not just out of a concern to preserve the castle but also to construct a political symbol of autonomy. Hence, whilst the ruins of Bratislava Castle were being transformed into a romantic "record" of Slovak history, the entire area below the castle was cynically destroyed (Fig. 2). This paradoxical combination of constructing a national myth by historically reconstructing Bratislava Castle whilst iconoclastically demolishing old Bratislava is a typical example of the manipulation of history characteristic of both the communist relationship to history and the pragmatism of modernist engineering. This was not about conserving precious historical remains, but about the utilitarian use of history to create a national historical myth and about its political capitalisation. The materialisation of this neo-romantic nationalist dream was accelerated by the fact that, when efforts were being made to federalise the state, the communist chieftains stopped reinforcing the proletarian aspect of the ideology. Indeed, once they had obtained relative autonomy they began to feel as if they were successors to the former feudal rulers. They therefore welcomed the project to build a new Slovak parliament immediately next to Bratislava Castle, high above the town's inhabitants, on the castle peak (Fig. 3).

---

21 See Dušan Martinček, *Kronika obnovy bratislavského hradu 1953-1979*, Bratislava 1988.

3 Bratislava Castle following reconstruction in the 1960s (https://sk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podhradie_(Bratislava)#/media/File:Podhradie_1.jpg, accessed 12 July 2016)

[12] Any ideological obstacles to historically reconstructing the castle fell away. The totalitarian communist powers, who acted as an authoritarian lord and were, owing to the confiscation and nationalisation of private property, the outright property owner, showed no restraint in silencing the objections to the romantic reconstruction that were issuing from the nostalgists' camp. The long discussions on the fate of Bratislava Castle suddenly came to an end in the 1960s with the realisation of the neo-romantic dream and its political licence. This was evident in the silent alliance between neo-romantic engineering, Slovak nationalism and pragmatic communism.

[13] The ultra-modern metal construction of SNP Bridge (Bridge of the Slovak National Uprising [1967-1972]), wedged between the reconstructed castle on the hill stripped of its historical buildings below and Bratislava's Old Town, was testament to the silent agreement between the communist ideologues and the modern pragmatists. Still unique today, the bridge, built on a single pillar and originally conceived of as part of a motorway linking the Balkans with the Baltic, comes to an abrupt halt in the centre of town, reflecting the other side of the coin that represented the alliance between communism and nationalism: the romantic, ideologically distorted nature of communist pragmatism.

[14] However, the final utilitarian act of all the previous ideological manipulations of Bratislava Castle was the new building within the castle walls. It was built after the revolution of November 1989, albeit in a curiously illusory neo-Baroque style, to serve the needs of the new independent Slovak parliament. Nationalistic illusionism had again joined forces with utilitarianism, this time to produce an open and proudly declarative rhetoric: commercial Baroque. The case of Bratislava Castle is peculiar not so much because of the violation of the past and

the use of history for transient goals in the present era, but because of the way in which the castle was nationalised through a historicising reconstruction. Hence it became a certainty, as if the controversy over the historicising alternatives had been forgotten, as if its extensive utilitarian use for the ideological needs of the independent state after 1993 had in some way legitimised it. It also fascinates from a postmodern, pragmatic and eclectic perspective of the postmodernist "anything is allowed" ilk, in the sense that the rhetorical historicism evident within the walls of Bratislava Castle over the last decade [i.e. since 1993; editor's note] appears to be both plausible and legitimising. The neo-Baroque extensions within the castle walls were built without any public debate whatsoever. In the collective subconscious, the principle of "truth", it would seem, has been successfully replaced by the principle of usability.