

Why preserve Vernacular Architecture, and how?

The Vernacular Architecture of Slovenia is a basic specialist and popular work on monuments of this kind by specialists in ethnology and conservation.

Publications by architects, art historians and ethnologists have hitherto concentrated on the development of Vernacular Architecture and on typological reviews, but there has been no systematic review of properly maintained and renovated publicly accessible monuments of Vernacular Architecture, compiled from the point of view of the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage. The introduction aims to present preservation activities, their main tasks and the specific nature of the preservation of Vernacular Architecture. The bulk of the publication consists of a presentation of selected buildings and areas of Vernacular Architecture with an emphasis on reviewing their significance and the preservation works undertaken. Since surveys of the most important aspects of the ethnological heritage and protected ethnological monuments are published exclusively according to professional criteria, we have insisted on the existing basic criterion of selection with the primary aim of promotion in the broader sense. Criteria of the degree of preservation and historic importance have also been observed.

The immovable ethnological heritage of the countryside, or simply "Vernacular Architecture", consists of professionally selected and defined rural settlements, market towns, homesteads, residential and farm buildings and also all landscape planning related to the buildings. This includes the cultural landscape, embracing all human activity in nature, ranging from construction to the cultivation and exploitation of land. The value of our Vernacular Architecture cannot be judged according to selected buildings from other parts of the world, which do not exist in Slovenia. We should recognise that even the most elementary part of our heritage is irreplaceable on the world scale. Our heritage has sprung exclusively from original, independent, Slovene creativity, which is closely connected with and conditioned by the natural environment and tradition of the particular community.

Ever since the very the outset, changes in economic activity have prompted changes in the architectural heritage, although these have occurred slowly and with some consideration. The deterioration of traditional lifestyles and changes in mentality with regard to appreciation of the past in the post-war period have jeopardised the existence of Vernacular Architecture more than ever before. Increasingly strident claims that a modern lifestyle cannot be pursued in an outdated environment have been beyond all sober justification. In recent times, these threats to the existence and preservation of the architectural heritage have been joined by the desertion of the land, the loss of its value, ignorance of the qualities of Vernacular Architecture and the desire to live in a new, more beautiful home.

Because of the absence of cooperation between the owners of examples of Vernacular Architecture and conservation specialists, nowadays the Institutes for the Preservation of the Natural and Cultural Heritage, uncontrolled adaptation and demolition have become so widespread in the last thirty years that it is still impossible to curb them adequately. Despite a number of attempts, architects have failed to introduce proposals for typical projects of new construction, adjusted to the local lifestyle, into contemporary building in villages. Apart from the architectural image, the image of the village environment has also changed. The former arrangement of villages started to disappear when old, unwritten rules of the construction, distribution, proportions, scales and height of houses, the use of materials appropriate to the environment and the people, roof cladding and pitch, facade decoration, and the disposal of windows, entrances and rooms, ceased to apply. Future generations might be unable to see mills and sawmills, drying houses and granaries. It would be a great success if we simply recognised the

mistakes of the past and, in sober consideration of all that remains, tried to take more responsible and wiser measures with regard to our heritage and to the Slovene environment in general.

It could be said that only a perfect, comprehensive awareness of the value of Vernacular Architecture, its unique nature and its vulnerability and transience, can make complete and proper preservation possible.

A positive attitude on the part of society towards our rich inheritance has slowly been developing, just like society itself. Our professional activity is guided by the Law on the Natural and Cultural Heritage, the Constitution and the provisions of international conventions. I emphasise once more that we, alone, must form a creative, living attitude towards our heritage and foster cultural and historical awareness (which is mainly the task of educational institutions). Laws and professional work are merely aids. Individually or as part of a narrow or broad community we often wonder whether protection might not actually negate any kind of progress. We feel particularly threatened as owners of old buildings classed as monuments of Vernacular Architecture, lest the experts force us to return to using open fireplaces and to live in houses without bathrooms and electricity. Yet such sacrifices are not asked of anyone.

Conservators discuss all measures and changes with the individuals and local inhabitants concerned. Only if all planned works are decided upon with consideration and awareness and if each question can be resolved to the satisfaction of the owner and the specialists can we speak of the complete and appropriate preservation for which we are all striving.

Vernacular Architecture still plays a practical, living role and is greatly influenced by the environment. Planning and management are therefore of extreme importance, especially the management of the interior. The fact that numerous buildings inherited from the past can be entirely renovated according to the needs of modern life must be taken into account in planning. We must bear in mind that the renovation of old houses contributes greatly to resolving the issues of overpopulation, environmental pollution, excessive building on farm land and housing shortages.

Unfortunately, the protection of the heritage cannot wait for better times: taxpayers, too, contribute some of the means for our activity. Timely interventions and regular maintenance can save a lot of money in monument protection as in any other sphere of activity.

Our legal system confers on us many rights and obligations. On the proposal of a professional body, municipal assemblies declare individual buildings and areas as immovable cultural monuments because of their evident cultural and historical value. The preservation order places cultural monuments above all other buildings viewed as part of the cultural heritage. It does not deprive the building of its practical purpose, but nor does it release the owner from the burden of maintenance. With the declaration or "birth" of the monument, mechanisms of social assistance to the owner and reliefs for maintenance are put in place. In the event of damage or destruction, stiffer penalties are provided for.

The owner of the monument has the right to cost-free explanations from the professional body as to the characteristics and significance of the building, to advice and instructions with regard to preservation and to directions as to how to maintain the building on a regular basis and protect it from natural threats or human activity. The owner must allow experts and the general public to visit the monument.

By law, municipalities must provide financial compensation for owners whose use of the building for everyday life and work is hampered as a result of the preservation order. Institutes are obliged to provide financial assistance to the owner if the cost of the envisaged renovation works

is higher than the cost of regular maintenance (such as the restoration of a fresco or thatched roof or installing windows or doors of a special format or shape, etc.). The owner may carry out work on the monument only with the prior consent of the relevant Institute for the Preservation of the Natural and Cultural Heritage, in accordance with its instructions and with contractors agreed upon by specialists from the institute.

Since we recognise that the owners of cultural monuments carry a great burden of legal obligations, the regional Institutes for the Preservation of the Natural and Cultural Heritage (in Celje, Kranj, Ljubljana, Maribor, Nova Gorica, Novo Mesto and Piran) have striven for some time to secure the introduction of legal provisions allowing higher tax reliefs and favourable loans for renovation works on cultural monuments and buildings with purely cultural heritage qualities. Funds must be set up within institutes to provide for unforeseen maintenance and renovation works and the formulation of suitable adaptation plans. Institutes unfortunately do not have means of their own and they are forced to ask for scarce municipal or state budget resources for each project they undertake.

In short, before every renovation project on an example of Vernacular Architecture classed as a part of the heritage or declared as a cultural monument, you should turn to the relevant regional Institute for the Preservation of the Natural and Cultural Heritage for advice and its staff will try to assist you as far as possible in accordance with your needs. With institute specialists you can also discuss what to do with and how to treat old buildings which are empty and no longer in use. In the course of the discussion, they may propose to purchase them, especially if they can be suitably transformed to serve new purposes, such as a museum collection, tourism or enterprise. Appropriate, mainly wooden, buildings might even be proposed for transfer to an open-air museum.

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