

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT, AS CATALYST OF SOCIAL LIFE - NEW PHENOMENON IN HUNGARY

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There are *places* in every town where people like *to be*: to come together, to talk to each other, to relax, or just to enjoy the atmosphere and the environment. Most of these places have long roots in the past and history. And of course it appears and adds much to the physical appearance of these *places*. These places may be *streets, squares, surrounded by buildings, or buildings themselves*, but popular places may be *parks, boulevards, riverbanks* or even *bridges*.

It is wise to extend the life of these beloved places as people do not always like changes. It helps to strengthen local identity, to maintain and reutilize the built heritage and it also accords well with the ideology of sustainable development.

In this respect there are many joyful phenomenon in Hungary. The creative ways of remodelling, reutilizing or revitalising different elements of the historic environment helps to regain the former liveliness of places in the settlements and to bring people again more closer to each other.

The “phenomenon”, the different new ways how historic environment enhances social life may be grouped as follows.

1. Cultural programmes in mansions that are under refurbishment or reconstruction

The mansions and county-houses which were built during the 18-19th century, were also centres of cultural life. There are certain sites, which have particular historic interest, so they must be kept in state ownership. They are managed by two major state institutions. These institutions *safeguard* and run *rehabilitation projects* on state financing mostly, but some private contribution and public involvement is desired. There is a new initiative: to organise cultural events in these buildings as soon as it may be safely organised already from the beginning of the construction works. Important benefits may be gained from these programmes: the public and private sector may get interested in the project, the project may get better support from the local community, ordinary people may get more and direct information about the complexity and importance of conservation work, and at the same time these buildings are regaining their cultural role again.

Examples: Nádasdy mansion, Károlyi mansion, Ráday mansion

2. Castle-reconstruction projects

Castles are representatives of different kind of values, forwarding messages from long bygone days. People love to listen to these stories, so castles are the most favourite

sites to be visited by families. Mostly if there are also programmes that bring medieval life closer.

In most of the cases castles were also political centres as well. The *reconstructed* castles or parts of it may well serve again for political events or functions. It again raises the interest for these buildings and brings masses there to look at them as it happened with the reconstructed Sándor Palace. It became a “fashion” to go and see the refurbished rooms, thousands of schoolchildren were taken there as well.

Examples: Royal Palace of Visegrád, Royal Castle of Esztergom, Sándor Palace

3. Reutilization of industrial sites

Closed, redundant, useless industrial sites may be like odd wreckage anchored in the cities. They may also mean sadness, clumsiness, dirt and pollution both in physical and visual context.

Creative reutilization may wash away all of these negative radiation, and turn them upside down. Cultural function may bring new thoughts, fresh influences, up-to-date physical environment, architecture and interiors for the buildings, clean water and green fields for the environments if used as parks and mostly jolly people, who open up in such an environment.

Examples: Millenaris Park and Cultural Event Centre, Trafó Cultural Centre, MEO Art Gallery

4. Refurbishment of market halls and market squares

Making business is an old form of communication. Even if the “businessman” is actually an old, kind lady, selling fresh tomatoes from her garden. She may tell also some recipes...

In Budapest there are huge market-halls with outstanding value of structure and architecture from the end of the 19th century, in smaller historic towns there were open market squares in the centre of the settlements. *To refurbish them and to keep their original function* is a big gift to the local community. Their former life may go on in a refreshed but well-known environment.

Examples: Central Market Hall in Budapest, Market Square in Vác

5. Chain of village-houses as museums

In different regions of Hungary vernacular architecture has its own character. The construction-method, the used building material, the use of spaces, the lay-out of the plots,

the interiors, the objects and traditions of the everyday life and holidays may be detected in these little museums that are arranged in original houses situated at their original sites. If there is such a museum in a village, it is always the centre of culture, it is the meeting place of locals and foreigners. It teaches foreigners about local culture, and at the same time it strengthens the identity and commitment of the locals.

Examples: Ócsa, Zengővárkony

6. European Heritage Days in Hungary

There are also *events*, which help to know, respect, love and safeguard historic heritage with the participation of thousands of people. When the doors open of “secret places” on the third week-end of every September, heritage-pilgrims fill the streets of Hungarian towns to visit the offered sites. It is like a big game: who may visit the most sites, who collects the best information-leaflets, who takes part in the most interesting events. And in the meanwhile, people meet each other, learn about culture and their own heritage and get convinced, that we all have to work together to preserve this treasure.

What is the secret, how can we help historic environment to bring people together, to enhance social cohesion?

The secret is: creative thinking.

Creative thinking of architects, planners, designers, authorities, heritage-protection and conservation experts, owners and users.

Creative thinking in realising, how many types of values may be together in a historic site, and how it could be unlocked to serve people's everyday life.

Creative thinking in identifying local identity and to find the ways to keep it throughout changes and development

Creative thinking in letting *organic* developments to continue, instead of starting *artificial*, never successful ones.

Creative thinking in finding ways for reutilization, where the new function does not harm the integrity of the heritage value.

Creative thinking to ensure quality in every respect.

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