

The Protection of Folk Architecture — a Sociological Problem

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The hurried civilization of our times presses on man and suffocates him. Golem is no longer a fantasy, it has become a reality. It pursues man in the streets and lanes of towns and villages and neither we, nor I suppose even our grandchildren, will live to see a relaxing of this grip of iron. Maybe now man on this earth will never live to see it.

It is ironical that it was just our striving after comfort and ease that deprived us of our quiet sleep, clean air and clean water, of freedom of movement and here and there even of the sun. A refuge from what we have unwittingly created is to be found in the white wooden cottage in a green garden with a paling fence and above it deep silence broken only by the sounds of the countryside — peace in memories of long ago. Our longing returns to this house and we try not to realize, and we do not want to hear, that this idyllic little house is a faded postcard and that we shall perhaps never again breathe in the azure air which we associate with it. It escapes from us into the sphere of emotions and poetry.

Man needs protection for his longings and it seems that this is identical with the protection of villages.

Today we preserve folk architecture as a document of the history, craftsmanship, skill, taste and simplicity of our ancestors. We can make of it a rare beast in a zoological garden. As art-historians and museum experts we shall probably succeed in doing this, partly in situ and partly with the professional methodicalness of the botanical herbarium in an outdoor museum.

I certainly do not wish to criticize either of these methods of protection. They are both excellent and valuable in their way. At a time when civilization has brought about a revolution in the minds of people, and when society as a whole has not yet regretted this revolution and in general does not yet realize what threatens it, these methods of protection [often regarded as a violent attack on society], are extremely progressive, because real appreciation by the public can be expected only in the distant future. I know that many problems connected with

these methods of protection have already been solved and others certainly will be solved, because people all over the world are working in this field.

Let us look, however, at what is happening to us, and what in the final phase will inevitably happen to folk architecture in situ. For the time being, we still have, here and there, and with a greater or lesser degree of success we are protecting its surrounding environment, the so-called 'green' or 'protective' belt. Even today we must already be more modest in our attempts to protect the surroundings of folk architecture, but in the future we shall have to be even more so. So-called 'higher public interests': motorways, bridges, airports, department stores and so on, are slowly but surely depriving us of the opportunity to take decisions about the protective belt. So far, unfortunately, we have not yet found such arguments in favour of the protection of folk architecture which would be understood and respected by contemporary society as a whole. Folk architecture may, perhaps, remain in situ, but the place itself, the environment, will disappear. It will not be surrounded by gardens, lawns, greenery and it will not even be on a horizon for the high buildings will annul the rolling terrain. It seems that in most cases with folk architecture in situ we shall get into a worse situation than there will be in outdoor museums, where the folk house stands in an imitation environment, but nevertheless in an adequate one.

When architecture in situ finds itself in a transformed environment, it will in fact be nothing else but a historical document, a museum piece placed for the most part in an unsuitable show-case.

The question of the protection of folk architecture should not be allowed to rest here. We must find such serious arguments for the protection of folk architecture that society will spontaneously accept them, and I see these in man himself, in sociology. I cannot shake off the idea of protecting folk architecture in situ in the form of a human reservation, a reservation for man with his individualistic make-up. It must be a lively urban whole with surroundings and life, such as it once had, with its original working activities.

Certainly this would not suit everyone, but enough people could be found who would be willing to use their free time in this way. There is a large number of possibilities: a sanatorium for convalescents after mental stress, or in the future it could teach the younger generation from what we have grown and on what our lives are based.

In our conditions it is almost too late for this method of preserving villages. Harmonious wholes, which could come under consideration, are today rare and a project for preservation would probably not be ready before even these last exceptions declined or disappeared. Nevertheless I think that with a certain involvement of society, such a project would be worth the effort even in our case, and I draw it to the attention of those who still have enough folk architecture to choose from.

The theme of my talk no doubt seems utopian. Hope, however, lies in the fact that we have begun to use the term 'utopian' for something which was once everyday life here.