

Debates on urban conservation policies in Communist Czechoslovakia of the 1960s and 1970s

A note of warning in the context
of the present UNESCO discussion
on Historic Urban Landscape

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At present, culminates the wide international discussion on the intended new approach to the protection of historic towns, known as the discussion on Historic Urban Landscape (HUL).¹ It is a new denomination originating from the outcome of the conference of town planners, architects and conservators held in Vienna in 2005 and published in the so-called Vienna Memorandum of the same year.² The discussion in process really has an intercontinental character. Energetically engaged in it are voices from Australia, the United States, South Africa and Japan, ie, the countries that do not have “classical” historic towns in their territories, such as Krakow, Český Krumlov, Bardejov and Soprony. However, they do not miss the energy or self-confident will to determine world conservation philosophy in this field. Perhaps because of this, instead of strengthening the protection due to the formerly unknown pressure of globalisation, the discussion is in many aspects directed at neo-liberal postulates. Such postulates cannot be applied to the valuable historic towns of our region – as I will attempt to conclude. In fact, their application in practice would bring the risk of heavy damage, if

1 UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/638> (accessed April 2012).

2 Vienna Memorandum on “World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture – Managing the Historic Urban Landscape”, Vienna, May 12th to 14th 2005, <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2005/whc05-15ga-inf7e.pdf> (accessed April 2012).

30 historical cities. At the same time, steps were taken to rescue their building substance and conserve their character and appearance.⁵

Unfortunately, the so-called “architectural-visual” (Hlobil) concept of rescue of historical cities, implemented in practice at that time and derived from the ideas of the Society for Old Prague, didn’t last long. After initial successes (the one-time renovation of roofs and façades of historical houses in the towns of Telč and Slavonice, financed by the government; and the rescue of a substantial part of the town of Cheb), the concept was abandoned because the political suite had lost interest in it by the late 1950s. The concept was later sharply criticised’ by many prominent Czech architects and city planners during the 1960s. They unjustly called it a demonstration of anachronistic historicism or even a part of the already refused so-called Stalinist Soviet “Socialist Realism” which had been enforced in the late 1940s and early 1950s in Czechoslovak arts and architecture. They criticised in their view alleged, socially irresponsible conservatism of the Society for Old Prague and of state monument care at that time. They saw the future of historic cities differently: in reduced scale of heritage protection, in liberalisation of conditions for the new development within conservation areas and, above all, in stimulation of new architectonic creativity. According to the reputed urbanist, Professor Emanuel Hruška (later president the Czechoslovak section of ICOMOS), it was necessary to “find a new, creative interpretation of the term ‘reservation’, in which people should be allowed to reconstruct, recreate and recompose the built-up areas for modern society”. The need for “purposeful accumulation of values” (Pavel Dostál)⁶ in the territories of conserved cities where “care of monuments is no longer the ultimate objective ... becoming only one of the means of higher objectives” (Hruška)⁷ was discussed. These objectives were published by Jaroslav Štván in 1962 as the official opinion of the influential Research Institute of Construction and Architecture: “Respecting the historical heritage in the area of an old city will mean for us both, the preservation of selected, actually unique complexes and buildings and observance of the principle of high architectonic mastership with new

5 See: Ivo Hlobil, *Teorie městských památkových rezervací, 1900-1975*, (Uměnovědná studie 6), Prague 1985.

6 Oldřich Dostál, *Potřeba tvůrčí kontinuity*, *Architektura čsr*, xxiv, 1965, pp. 288-290; Oldřich Dostál, *K šedesátinám Emanuela Hrušky*, *Památková péče*, V, 1966, pp. 57-58.

7 Emanuel Dost Hruška, *O niektorých zásadných omyloch v našej ochrannárskej praxi*, *Projekt* vi, 1962, Nr. 4.

means of expression and based on new functional grounds. If we maintain the traditional principle of a high level of architectonic creation within the areas of centres of cities, recreated in line with the needs of new society, we will do more than by restoring elaborately historical documents, keeping elaborately archaeological traces and conserving expensively constrained blocks with scarce artistic elements.”⁸ Despite having high prestige at that time and being supported since 1958 with an excellent, very rigorous Monument Conservation Act, Czech and Slovak monument care was not prepared for such massive criticism and was not able to resist it. Weakening the practice of conservation of cities also proved excessive stress on the superiority of the significance of intangible quality, ie the urban composition, over the significance of its physical components. An idea that was shared by a number of conservationists themselves. It resulted in the thesis that any singularity in a historical urban unit is basically replaceable without detriment to its substance, providing that the substitution offers new architectonic values.⁹

Disabled by its own theorists, Czech monument care gave up the struggle. It joined the contemporary trend of liberalisation of the conditions for development, and opened up protected historical cores of cities for new architectural creation.

The effects were disastrous. Instead of the declared “high architectonic mastership with new means of expression”,¹⁰ dull blocks of panel buildings began to replace the historical neighbourhoods in numerous Czech cities from the mid 1960s. Picturesque groups of medieval houses in historic cities, inclusive of the declared conservation areas (reservations), were pushed out by architectonically decadent office buildings housing the secretariats of the Communist Party or socialist department stores. The losses caused by this era of socialist “tolerance to change” to Czech historical cities in the 1970s and 1980s can be compared to the losses caused elsewhere by the conflict of war. Unfortunately, almost no new architectural qualities were born to compensate these losses.¹¹

8 Jaroslav Štván, *Problémy perspektivní přestavby našich měst*, Prague 1962, p. 390.

9 Aleš Vošahlík, *K problematice hodnocení a ochrany urbanistických kategorií*, *Památky a příroda* 2, 1974, pp. 268–271.

10 Jaroslav Štván, *Problémy perspektivní přestavby našich měst*, *Výzk.ústav výst.a architektury*. Prague 1962, p. 390.

11 A handful of admirable works of outstanding architects at that time such as F.M. Černý, František Cubr, Karel Hubáček, Jan and Alena Šrámek, Karel Filsak and others, represented a quantitatively negligible proportion of contemporary building production.

not complete extinction, of their cultural values. In my contribution I want to recall the content of a very similar, also controversial discussion that took place on the same theme and in similar spirit in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s. In particular, I want to point to the impact of that discussion in practice and how it influenced the subsequent destiny of historic Czech and Slovak towns. On the basis of the experience from my country, I will subsequently try to express what I see as the risks of a number of seemingly convincing liberalistic voices of the present-day international discussion on HUL, against which we should protect the towns in our region.

In my country, the idea of protection not only of the individual monuments, but also of the character and appearance of whole selected historic urban areas was born in Prague at the end of the 19th century. It originated from the struggles of the Prague cultural public against speculation fever, brutality and non-cultural accompanying phenomena of the large clearance of the picturesque Prague ghetto and other parts of the Old Town, performed between 1896 to 1914. Originating from these struggles, the Society for Old Prague (*Klub Za starou Prahu*),³ founded in 1900, conceived the problems of the rescue of historic town quarters in a remarkably complex manner for its time. On the one hand, it advocated their protection through the law and fought energetically against the demolition of valuable historic buildings, changes in historic networks of streets and squares, and traffic break through in historic built-up areas. On the other hand, it showed an admirable understanding for the “sanitation” of historic quarters, including the questions of suitable replacement of historic buildings becoming extinct. It acknowledged and developed what we call the reanimation of historic urban tissue.⁴

Undoubtedly, the substantive authority which the Society for Old Prague gained during the first half of the 20th century, and the general awareness of the cultural value of historical cities the Society intentionally disseminated, were one of the main causes why in 1950, the government of Czechoslovakia at that time declared urban conservation areas (reservations) in

3 Kateřina Bečková, *Sto let Klubu Za starou Prahu 1900–2000, Schola ludus – Pragensia, Prague 2000*; Kateřina Bečková and Richard Biegel, *Society for Old Prague, One Hundred and Two Years, Prague-Paris 2002*.

4 Josef Štůlc, *The Birth of the Idea of Protection of Historic Quarters in the 19th Century Prague and its Impact on Present-Day Conservation Policy in the Czech Republic*, in: Andrzej Tomaszewski (ed.), *Values and Criteria in Heritage Conservation, Florence 2008*, pp. 145–150.

I recalled this experience from my early career as a conservationist' when I read in the previously mentioned, very ably formulated 2005 Vienna Memorandum that "continuity of culture through good-quality interventions in the historical urban landscape is the highest objective."¹² The following (2006–2007) extensive email discussion of ICOMOS members concerning the meaning of the newly printed term, "historical urban landscape", in the Memorandum, which was moderated in an inspired way by Michal Firestone of Israel, revoked in me the same memories at certain moments. I cannot endorse the opinion of numerous participants of the ICOMOS discussion, namely that permanent changes in the composition, physical structure, as well as the external image are parts of the very substance of historical cities and, therefore, deserve not only tolerance, but also support.¹³ On the other hand, I do endorse Michal Firestone's opinion expressed in a beautiful way, which I dare to quote: "Question is, what is it that we want to protect: the product that we value or the concept of change? Once we determine that a given complex is of value for whatever reason and that it merits protection, then it becomes a product. A product that we have to respect and protect. A time-capsule if you wish. With its own rules and rhythm of change. Modern development has plenty of room for 'free expression' elsewhere."¹⁴

Both discussions pertaining to historical cities – the Czechoslovak one from the 1960s and the current international one – have a striking common feature. The right to intervene using contemporary means, to rebuild and transform the inherited image of even the most valuable historical cities, protected on a selective basis (currently, the cities included on the World Heritage List), is enforced by its supporters in both cases with the assumption that such processes will surely result in the bonus of a new architectonic quality for those cities. In their opinion, contemporary architecture together with inherited values will create new harmonic units of a higher cultural value.

In my opinion, this is an unrealistic, extremely naive and, at the same time, very dangerous assumption. Whether or not intervention in historic

12 Vienna memorandum, art. 21.

13 This approach was aptly criticised, for instance, Dinu Bumbaru saying that it will lead to a reduction of conservation duties. See Michal Firestone, Revised Summary of HUL Discussion, December 2006.

14 Michal Firestone, *HUL Discussion*, email, May 10th 2007.

cities will bring forth a new quality is not, in the vast majority of cases, the decision of creative architects; of their knowledge, talents, invention and creativity. Neither in Czechoslovakia's communist past, nor in the liberal present. It is the decision of investors. In our socialist past, decisions were made by technocratic planners serving communist rulers whose cultural horizon did not usually extend over dull panel blocks of flats. Unfortunately, the prevailing cultural level of current developers, at least in the Czech Republic (domestic as well as foreign), is not much better. Their aim, despite being legitimate, is profit and quick recuperation of their investments, not the generous sponsorship of art and architecture in the style of Renaissance families of bankers, such as the Medicis, Strozzi, or Chigis. This is demonstrated by the distressed tediousness of the vast majority of the enormous volume of commercial development in Czech cities over the past 20 years. Architecturally remarkable works form a very small, quantitatively almost negligible fraction of it. The heritage preservation zones have become the only oases of harmony and beauty in this aesthetic desert expanding into the countryside (junk in many cases). Our bitter experience indicates that our unique heritage ensembles cannot be opened up to liberalised development without grave irreversible cultural losses. On the contrary, it is necessary to retain the rigid regulation. I would like to point out that works of admirable creative power, individuality and sovereignty, appeared in Czech cities during times of strict municipal building rules, that lasted up to the first half of the 19th century (the ingenious works of Peter Parler, Giovanni Santini, the Dientzenhofers, and others). This is why I believe that regulation and artistic creativity do not preclude each other.

Nobody, not least the conservationists, wishes to freeze down life in the protected urban zones and prevent continual functional reanimation of their buildings. However, as the late French philosopher and sociologist, Jacques Derrida, said in Prague in 1991, the point is to prevent "non-transformable structures that totalise the city and escape forever potential integration with the primary units" from penetrating into the tissue of the miraculously still-existing Middle European historical cities.¹⁵ Such untransformable structures include, above all, the fashionable and vigorously pushed through high-rise buildings, as well as other spectacular voluminous buildings that often, without any actual functional need, want

15 Jacques Derrida, "Generace (jednoho) města (Paměť, proctví, odpovědnost)", in: Alena Novotná - Galardová et Petr Kratochvíl (eds.) *Praha. Budoucnost historického města*, Paris 1992

to parasitise the attractive environment of historical cities and demonstrate the financial power and political influence of their developers (see Gazprom in St. Petersburg). The contemplations of theorists about “tolerance to change”, as a new universal conservation paradigm printed, for instance, by American architect and ICOMOS president, Gustavo Araoz,¹⁶ although interesting from an intellectual point of view, should not break ground for such structures and offer legitimacy to them. In the first place, this should not be done by ICOMOS, which has supported conservationists from many countries enormously due to its indubitable international professional and moral authority.

16 Gustavo Araoz, *Protecting Heritage Places under the New Heritage Paradigm and Defining its Tolerance for Change*, ICOMOS ADCOM 2009/10 – item 9.4: The initiative for tolerance and change.