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The Genie of Cultural Heritage – In Whose Service?

I will start by giving an explanation about the title of my contribution. If you get the feeling that I am interfering with fairy tales, it was not done just by chance. Looking at the development of understanding and changes of meaning of over the last few decades, we can compare this story with “The Spirit in the Bottle” by the Brothers Grimm or, taking another viewpoint, with the Ghost of Aladdin’s wonderful lamp from The Book of One Thousand and One Nights (Arabian Nights).

This similarity is even more striking if we compare the fact that heritage has been with us almost since the beginning of mankind, just like the spirit used to be in the prison of the bottle. However, it is only in the last few decades that heritage has become known and recognized at its current level. One can say that this new understanding of heritage is “in the air”, and, furthermore, that we are speaking about things which are genuine attractive, and have merits which need to be dealt with. It is also possible to say that heritage, as such, has become fashionable, although this used to be a bit of wake expression because the situation is really much more serious. In my view we are a part and testimony of a paradigm-shift concerning this segment of culture and human life, and there is no doubt that it is important enough to be studied in a much more in-depth manner as I can do in this paper.

From among the circumstances compelling a paradigm shift, i.e. primarily in the wrestle between the global and the local, heritage has come to a special position, and it has acquired a special role. The term “cultural heritage” can have different kinds of definitions largely based on different approaches. Referring again to the „spirit in or from the bottle”, the extent in phenomena and diversity of heritage is still growing, similarly to the spirit. This process gradually arrives to incorporate almost all segments of the framework of our lives, notwithstanding their tangible or intangible character. Looking for the “pre-history” of this current state, we certainly have the story of birth and development of the idea of historic monument preservation, but today this is far more than values which only belong to so-called historic monuments¹.

¹ Jukka Jokilehto. A History of Architectural Conservation, Boston, 1986.

Where are we now in the appreciation of built heritage, and more generally of cultural heritage? How we are supposed to deal with this issue? It should be mentioned that such a status survey from a global aspect is also not my intentions, because „... the respect due to all cultures requires that cultural heritage be considered and judged within the cultural context to which it belongs”. Yet a clearly Central-European approach of this study is its intrinsic feature „by definition”, so it is not by chance that any statements made can bear of relevance primarily to our cultural region.

The spectacular enlargement and accomplishment of the scope of assets deemed today as being cultural heritage values are considered to be of decisive significance. Only by starting from the protection of historic monuments from the modern ages with the focus on individual buildings, which commenced around the middle of the 19th century (cathedrals, fortresses and castles), through the approach of valuable complexes and historical settlements (quarters) of the 20th century, up to recognition of the architectural heritage of the 20th century, and finally arriving to industrial heritage and heritage landscapes, is the trail from “historic monuments” to heritage completed².

What does, for instance value preservation mean? Or in a wider meaning, what does such abundance of “heritagery or heritageization” mean from the aspect of the society or the community? We can say for sure that taking the step of qualifying as a historic monument not only means a quantitative but also a significant qualitative, more precisely, substantial, change. Let us start from a more distant point and recognize that in alteration of a “memorial” that is destined to serve a purpose and, therefore, from the very moment of its creation functions to commemorate something, in the case of a “historic monument”, its substantial or functional elements which honour the memory of something, are the consequences of some later addition or understanding and recognition. In other words: nothing is built *ab initio* as a historic monument, but may become a historic monument based on the social demand or more precisely the appreciation of later generations.

² dr. Miklós Horler: A műemlékvédelmi gondolat kialakulása Európában [“The evolvement of the historic monument protection concept in Europe”

In the case of monuments – their complexes and monumental sites – this social expectation is met through professional-scientific selection and, accordingly, a decisive role is given to historical, artistic-aesthetic and ethical valuation aspects. Thus, becoming a historic monument is not the result of a “democratic process” to the extent that the decision concerning whether or not a cultural heritage element, as it is termed today, hits the standard necessary for being inaugurated as a historic monument, is not made by a majority voting. According to the approach used (at least) in Hungary, an essential feature of a “historic monument” (here we mean all versions of protection i.e. self-standing monuments or territorial-site protection) is that it is not an analogous term to the extent that, according to its definition, this category exclusively includes those elements that are of significance on national level.

The situation is different with regards to the term “heritage”, which by its nature is analogous, i.e. a term construed on different levels with similar content but different scope. Some don’t dare to say, „Architectural heritage is a subjective term. It means that a building expresses the identity of a person, a smaller or larger human community. My grandfather’s house is important for me, a section of the main street or the war memorial of a village expresses the identity of the local inhabitants, forms part of or witnesses their lives, their past; historic monuments or sites carry the identity of larger communities: nations, religions, etc.”³ And so forth, up until World Heritage.

All of the above suggest that “every historic monument is heritage, but not all heritage is a historic monument”, and suggests also that nowadays (even when used officially), words are mixed up, and the term “cultural heritage” primarily means a protected cultural heritage, i.e. it is used as a synonym of the expression “historic monument”, with a twist that may not be underestimated, namely that locally protected heritage elements (by the local governments) are included. This terminological confusion is, regretfully, a significant element of the picture of the situation today, because it sheds light on the possible “deviations” in either direction, menacing existing values.

³ András Román: 487 bekezdés és 617 kép a műemlékvédelemről [“487 paragraphs and 617 pictures on the protection of Historic Monuments” – published in Hungarian only], Budapest, 2004.

It would be important or even inevitable that terms, the definitions used should mean what they really mean and should not be mixed with each other. With this in mind, it can better to recognise that the spread of the “heritage concept”, and the positive attitude related to heritage in the current situation, has played a decisive role in the currently progressing significant changes in the protection of classical monument. Although the Venice Charter⁴ emphasized that the best preservation method is the necessary continuous and good maintenance⁵, it has not become generally accepted either in the past or the present, almost up until the spread of the concept “it is my heritage (it is our heritage) therefore I take care for, preserve and enrich it” which is mostly be observed in the attitude of the non-governmental (civil) organizations. Closer link to heritage and more personalized relationship and commitment, „healed” the public opinion that earlier deemed the protection of historic monuments to be the exclusive task of some alienated central-professional institution (state or local government). However, it is true, that the concept which suggests that we all are responsible for the preservation of the values of our own (individual and common) heritage and even more for its bequeathing, has not yet become widely spread in all respects: at least a targeted public poll conducted recently demonstrated the significant overweight of the opinion that expects state/local governmental care.

In the evaluation of the elements of cultural heritage, ever-increasing significance is given to the aspects of utilisation and usability that claim higher rank than the intangible values or contents carried by the given property. Explicitly: the significance of the development potential inherent in the heritage has definitely increased. Therefore, it is worthwhile to briefly examine its possible causes. The heritage-valuation „boom” discussed above is certainly one cause, and the evidence that speaks for itself is the large number of newly built i.e. artificial „heritages”, that can be seen in the hotel industry, for example. In a wider meaning, environment prettification programmes that strive less to imitate the genuineness of previous ages rather they intend to reflect their atmosphere – which is an accompaniment or protuberance of the post-modern – may be contemplated within

⁴ International Charter for the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites – The Venice Charter, 1964 – www.icoms.org

⁵ www.monumentenwacht.be/nl/uploads/b494.pdf

this scope. Another approach that has become quite general by now has something in common not only with the direct heritage value but also with the „location value”. This is an approach that says „good locations” were almost all occupied by (historical) buildings and if we don’t demolish the existing objects already standing there, let us utilize them in a manner that generates the largest profit.

Difficulties are not caused by the idea of utilization or the termination of the „moral depreciation-degradation” and the revitalization of the heritage-properties, because cultural heritage, the existing elements of the architectural environment, could play a predominant role in the implementation of the urban development projects, on the ground of the development potential embodied by those heritage elements. This is essential to assure sustainability for heritage by the so called “integrated approach”, implementing projects serving the preservation of heritage and development targeting to lift up the quality of life at the same time.

Unfortunately, very few good examples can be found for time being, since the projects aimed at the production of the fastest and largest profit generally stretch much beyond the borders of the carrying capacity of heritage properties. Although the balanced and well managed duality made up of the attraction and the carrying capacity of heritage may grant reliable pillars of sustainability – completed with a third pillar necessary for stability, the latter is the societal embedment that – as opposed to the two previously mentioned pillars - is not determined by primary economic interest but rather basically non-material aspects such as the role played by the given historic monument, heritage-element in the expression-preservation-building of various levels of identities. At this point it seems to be necessary also to mention the issue of the responsibility for the heritage of others, again on all levels, i.e. considering relationships among people, communities, countries (nations), which is essentially different from the approaches discussed above. However, there is a lot of common or even overlapping features, for example. in the very specific and sometime even sensitive cases of “shared heritage”.

The question is: what are the trends and tendencies in line to growing up, and what are the new ones that will appear in the near future? We may certainly expect the further strengthening and spread of globalization. The consequences – as regards the preservation of cultural heritage values – cannot easily be projected in the long run, because the circumstances and factors that intensify

or weaken the trends will predominate in future process are not the same at all. There is also a real danger that – as illustrated by architectural and urban planning trends, i.e. fact that they are starting to be identical on any point of the globe – a generalising approach may emerge in the case of cultural heritage. In this latter case it may occur in a manner in which the aspects applied in the selection of elements chosen for appreciation and protection, or more precisely for preservation, will “go global”, and therefore values carrying specific local or regional features which should justifiably be preserved or even that are of decisive importance from the aspect of the self-identity of the local communities, not being “fashionable” for “globalised eyes”, might be lost.

The International Convention approved by the General Conference of the UNESCO regarding cultural heritage sites and the protection of values has a very interesting and important role as a source of (mostly) positive models. The so-called World Heritage Convention⁶ – no matter what do we think of its „age” and of its origin in a period that preceded the sensible emergence and development of the globalization process – thanks to its dynamically proceeding application, plays a serious role among others in the presentation of the multiplicity of the heritage of the world, not only as an image but also as a value. The existence of the World Heritage List is a document in itself of this fascinating abundance, and by definition communicates the message that as the „tip of the iceberg”, it presents not only itself but the abundance intrinsic in all the other elements of the heritage.

Meanwhile an examination of the tendencies may reveal certain contradictions and paradoxical situations in the area of the world heritage evaluation. Primarily (but not exclusively), tensions emerge between global or universal and regional or even local values. This contemplation-analysis process reveals the special weight of the contradiction between global and regional valuation, or perhaps we should call it strengthening and assisting complementarities between them. In the area of heritage valuation, the gradual or even accelerating intensification of the intangible dimension that from the beginning is obviously present in the World Heritage Convention is not independent

⁶ “Convention on the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage” – approved by the 17th general Congress of UNESCO, on November 16th 1972 in Paris .

of the regional versus local/global dualism. The wide scope awareness of „new heritage forms” such as the cultural landscapes fits this trend⁷.

Another UNESCO convention that probably not less important from the aspect of the evaluation of the trends and tendencies or from the aspect of certain balancing of globalization movements is the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003⁸. Its obvious intention is that the world heritage inventory, more precisely the recognition of outstanding „products” should in a more direct manner be extended to traditional „human” areas that are free(r) from material properties. Given the fact that globalization processes exercises larger (meanwhile negative and extinctive) impact on this area than on the tangible heritage, it is very important that the Convention, by definition, should grant universal (the term „global” is purposefully not used here) recognition and thus – in certain meaning – the protection for local or at most (although in rare cases) regional heritage phenomena.

A draft presentation of the situation can hardly outline the future of the “heritagery trend”, but certain directions and phenomena are taking shape. The principle of „everything is heritage (if not materialised then intangible) or if it is not let us organise it”, in other words let us attempt to enlarge the scope of values to be preserved and protected, will most probably be present for a long time in the approach of societies. On the other hand, whilst everybody without exception equally seeks to recognize world heritage, it is an increasingly perceivable tendency that what is not recognized as world heritage, can’t be considered really important heritage worthwhile preserving. This, of course, is not an officially declared standpoint, it is just something that becomes perceivable as a frequently manifested part of everyday practice. The cause of this unfavourable tendency is not only the scarcity of financial resources, but also the consumer habit which is manifested with an increased intensity in global tourism, and which looks for the “top product”, in our case the badge of world heritage.

Another unfavourable trend and tendency is that these unique sites have become or are becoming development targets. Unfortunately these developments do not follow the rules of an integrated

⁷ Operational Guidelines 2005/2008 – UNESCO, World Heritage Centre, Paris
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/35/> (accessed April 2012)

⁸ Adopted by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in Paris, October 17th 2003

approach, frequently endanger, or in the extreme, terminate, the attraction which is the basis of such developments.

A discussion of the developments would analyse in more detail the tendencies related to existing, large-area heritages (primarily settlements) in more detail. The fact that today the greater half of the worldwide population lives in an urban environment is a consequence of a comprehensive social and economic trend. Obviously, the area of a cultural heritage is unable to escape the relevant impacts precisely because they are so comprehensive. If we study the proportion of historical towns, settlements within the entirety of heritage values, the decisive importance of the above phenomenon becomes more obvious. On the basis of our current knowledge it seems that the heritage values specifically attract urbanization pressure and/or profit-oriented development enforcements. The „continuation” of an existing heritage property could hardly be evaluated in general as being negative or positive, but can and should rather be evaluated on case-by-case basis. What, however, should surely be considered as a negative tendency is the intentional relativisation of principles and values, which declare in a pseudo-democratic manner that the heritage and a „creative” addition must have equal „chances for a career”.

Any investigation of the trends should have a look at the concept of the „heritage industry” which is not satisfied with simply selling cultural heritage values coming to its scope of interest, as commercial goods, but creates quasi-heritages that can be „operated” economically, i.e. produce more profit. A tendency may become more intense, where the maintenance of the really authentic heritage is deemed not only as repugnance but also as something unnecessary, where the maintenance or even a reconstruction of an image of heritage is enough. This tendency may cause extremely deep damages and losses in cases where the traditional maintenance, and the continuous survival of the heritage element (no matter whether tangible or intangible) is lost and replaced with a cheap, although easily reproducible, substitution.

I am inclined to discover the danger of „conceptual globalization” in the spread of the traditional reconstruction concept widely approved in Asia and other regions. Of course, this conceptual swap which is perceivable in our Central European region may obviously have a more complex background, i.e. other factors, among them astonishing social changes (transformation of the socio-economic system, creation of new states by the division of former ones, etc.) and may play their

role. However, I believe that the impact of the „global trend” or „globally trendy” may not be neglected.

Another feature connected to phenomena mentioned above is the sophisticated Information Technology (IT) which may have a significant impact on the preservation – or the neglect of the preservation – of heritage values in their physical existence. This is a tool that opens up almost endless horizons in the interpretative processing of enormous data volumes, in the imaginative – virtually three-dimensional – presentation of possible reconstructive solutions, and could, therefore, be applauded as a very efficient pledge of authenticity. IT as a tool, in fact, grants fantastic and unprecedented opportunity for scientific reconstruction, but at the same time it may boost the ephemeral feeling that a landmark or heritage property, just like the players in an electronic game, may have “several lives”. This is not only in contradiction with the authenticity and integrity criteria, but in extreme cases (unwillingly) it may make the loss of value or the destruction of a heritage property seem relative, which entails severe hazards. Something that „could be like that” or „with great probability was like that” in its tangible reality, carries intellectual content and authentically communicates messages, and thus will never be identical to an existing cultural heritage element with respect to the value level, i.e. with a historic monument even if it is ruined, mutilated or damaged⁹.

Among the trends and tendencies in the area of heritage and its protection, last but not least, we should discuss the role of civil society, individuals and the community. The special emphasis laid on this factor may be a consequence of the central-European definition of this study, although a more generally valid phenomenon can well be presumed. This tendency, i.e. the increase in heritage appreciation and protection activity of local communities could be recognized with the greatest respect and only positively, mostly but not exclusively concerning the local heritage. Should one think that this is the greatest field of service made by the “Spirit from the bottle” of heritage, i.e. to help local communities rediscover their identity?

⁹ Tamás Fejérdy: lectures presented in expert meetings (Budapest, Ludbreg, Venezia, Florence, Nyírbátor, etc.)

The presence of civil activity in this field certainly has an additional potential for heritage preservation, namely the people can offer their own emotional commitment which may not be scientific but is decisive from the aspect of sustainability. Institutional protection may obviously contemplate its decision, and it must do so, by making comparisons among heritage elements of the same category, and may conclude that a given site is not (yet or any more) worthy for historic monument protection, but even so, the local value protection remains a still existing and irreplaceable option – at least theoretically. In fact the attitude is really important that considers the existing heritage as a value, but it is worthwhile adding that there are certain constraints in this area, which are generally perceived by a certain reasonableness and which are possibly not determined by necessity. The greatest challenge with the respect to the success of the work of the civil value protection, or more importantly, concerning the maintenance of the authenticity of heritage, is that civil activists should struggle and work for the provision, maintenance and implementation of the ever appropriate and proportional protection, while avoiding the temptation of the unjustly level small and large values.

What should and what can we to look for a saved future of our heritage? What answers should we try to give to the old and new challenges which come up? The outlined situation and the allegedly recognized tendencies contain some elements in reference to negative and positive phenomena. It seems to be quite unambiguous to give voice to the idea in the first place that negative phenomena should be restricted or eliminated as much as possible, whilst the positive directions should be strengthened in all possible ways. The main question or task is not, therefore, the setting of objectives, but rather the selection or identification of means which enable the achievement of these objectives.

In general, to what extent and how we could those large and comprehensive processes be influenced which – seemingly – overwrite the specific criteria scheme of heritage and its protection, and are meanwhile able to succeed in a manner that is much larger and efficient than those ever achievable by heritage protection? Let it be enough to mention climate change, the forecasted extinction of energy resources, and the unstoppable progress of voluminous urbanisation, as well as the increase in the headcount of humankind and that the number of people living in poverty. To what extent

can we think that in this dramatic situation there must be room for the preservation of heritage values?

The elaboration of a positive answer certainly needs an optimistic approach, while even an objective approach standing on the arid ground of reality may state that heritage belongs so strictly and inseparably to the substance of humans that it may not be deemed as ignorable or secondary issue, or something that is a specialty which should be only preserved „under good circumstances” for the few. Heritage, the recognition and protection of heritage values, and their sustainable utilisation, may not be deemed a part of a problem or task but, on the contrary, as a possible and important element and component of the solution. A paradigm shift leading to such an interpretation of heritage and the generalisation of its positive role is, in fact, a revalidation or a return to the roots. Revalidation of a situation or at least a determined enforcement to come to a situation where the former harmonic relationship between man and his heritage, communities and their heritage which previously existed, should again be reached. Sustainability is also a decisive and attainable feature when making this effort with respect to heritage.

An inherent property of sustainability of life or quality is “perpetual change”, which in any given case can be referred to as development. Meanwhile, a seemingly essential difference can be expressed in such manner that in the best case scenario the changes are controlled by life from inside, and not from outside by development intentions declared to be omnipotent, or in a less favourable case, by globalization.

Instead of the economic relevance-pillars of the sustainability of cultural heritage, I would rather emphasise the importance of the social side. This is mainly because in the scheme of the relationships that have emerged, an attitude which although on various levels of society but essentially in the same manner generally claims for its own heritage and the right of trading in it – including its utilisation and wearing out, i.e. its exhaustion (in the worst case its wasting) – can be an advantage and a disadvantage as. It is an advantage, because otherwise it would not even be worthwhile to dream about the implementation of the paradigm shift, or in other words about the reinstatement or eventual the re-establishment of the harmonic relationship between man and its heritage. At the same time it can also be a disadvantage because the heritage-fashion may disappear

as fast it is came (perhaps not very far from now...) as a consequence of the disillusioning experience which on the short run does not grant sufficient support in the solution to the local consequences of severe global problems, whilst neither patience nor the available reserves are enough for us wait in the medium or on the long-term. The appearance of the “we are fed up with heritage” hazard may seem to be overly theoretical, although perhaps it is not, since on the basis of our experiences we can mention some astonishing examples, including the occurrence of deletions from the World Heritage List. In the case of cultural heritage, similar situation may arise due to urbanisation and the restriction of the technical development as a consequence of satisfying either real or prestige demands in an insensitive manner, development projects, and quick profit making, resulting in the irreversible loss of values. But we must not be unfair, or let us try to be accurate and ask the following question: who is fed up, and with whose heritage? It is definitely not the same whether this is all about of one’s or of others’ heritage. From the aspect of the loss of value and destruction, i.e. the track to the occurrence of the final result, it is all the same, although it does matter with respect to the prevention and avoidance of troubles. Whoever doesn’t (re)cognize his own heritage, will not honour the heritage of others’ – if we may formulate the primary lesson in such a „quasi-proverbial” manner.

A heritage property is made what it is by its real values, and a value doesn’t necessarily depend on external valuation, and even less on the changes of such valuation (no matter whether decided by majority). For some, it might sound as a slogan: “go and return back to the idea of historic monument-appreciation”, in other words, heritages should be evaluated by professionals and not their lay heirs. In fact, to a certain point, this might be the case, but only in some analogous interpretation, including emotional identification as an added value.

Coming back to the question of „whose heritage is it anyhow” and honouring the heritage issues others’, the World Heritage Sites also offer further lessons and possibilities regarding this matter. Serial nominations, or the more frequent trans-boundary joint properties stretching to the territory of two or three State parties, are very good and practical schools for „joint common heritage” or shared heritage, which is in theory deemed to be a sublime idea by everyone, and which in everyday practice is not so easily implemented. Here, we mean a practice that can be successful and, again, sustainable through the cooperation among all involved and interested actors (stakeholders), and

which, importantly, can also be the means to sustain interested local communities¹⁰. The Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, adopted in Faro, Portugal in 2005, also considerably sets the direction and gives support to this issue, and introduces is the notion of “heritage communities” among others.

The recognition and acknowledgement of the possibilities offered by heritages in easing tensions between global and local, and their quick practical implementation should also be pointed out.

The more and more inclusive character of the understanding of (cultural) heritage, mainly if it can overcome only be fashionable, could play the role that it has always played in the expression of the self-identity of people and communities, in the creation and maintenance of the quality framework of their lives. This is the future: in which the matured heritage concept and role can find its place and can hopefully achieve good results in the exploitation of possibilities offered by the processes of globalization, as well as in struggling against their negative impacts.

Coming to the end of this article, we might consider that the Genie or Spirit of Heritage has already left the bottle, so we have to accept its presence and to acknowledge the fact that this “spiritage” is ready to give good service to all of us, both at local and global level – with the only condition that we are not to supposed to expect, ask or even do anything against heritage values.

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¹⁰ The Budapest Declaration – 2002 – UNESCO, World Heritage Centre, Paris
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/35/> (accessed April 2012)