

Preservation of underused and redundant churches and chapels of Christian church denominations. (A brief view into history and present state of preservation and alternative use of ecclesiastical buildings)

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Religious buildings are a very specific kind of architecture. They play a prestigious role in the urban development and in the overall development of settlements in Europe. They also played (in the past) significant role in cultural life and are very important in case of tangible and also of intangible heritage. Their use varied during history. They were, until relatively recently, multifunctional structures in the sense of religious and community life of the parish community. Whilst the whole community was religious and the only religion was Christianity, this meant that many activities took place in churches and chapels. They were the „living structures“ with almost permanent use.

Situation changed due to social and religious changes. The most significant change was brought by recatholisation – perception of using of ecclesiastical heritage was changed to a monofunctional way of use and this is the main problem in nowadays situation, when many redundant church buildings are left without any use and decay due to public opinion, that any other use is inappropriate.

Introduction

Situation across Europe (as well as in Slovakia) and demographic trends provide us with an idea of further evolvement of already existing problem of underusing, redundancy and abandonment of church buildings in our country. We must know the history of using of sacred buildings and also the nowadays situation in our neighbour countries (as well as in the whole Europe) to prepare arguments for adaptating this built heritage for new use in the manner, which will be suitable for the built substance as well as for the public opinion and sacrality of each individual place of worship.

Historical and cultural importance of historic places of worship

Churches and their decorations and movables represent the largest component of Slovak architectural and historical heritage. Ecclesiastical heritage is a common yet unique heritage of previous generations that symbolises continuity and tradition while constantly in development process.

Religious buildings have evolved for more than a thousand years in constant interaction with other parts of the community and played a significant role in history of our country. Religious buildings represent a comprehensive historical archive, each one reflecting various aspects of life, community, faith and ecclesiastical practice throughout history. From architectural point of view, churches in our country illustrate changes in building technology and architectural design for more than a thousand years of our history, beginning in early middle ages during reign of Great Moravian emperors, who brought masons from Italy, Germany and France to our country.

The first type of churches were small churches with apsidal presbytery and rotundas, which are very specific kind of buildings and are typical for territory of former Great Moravia Empire. Nowadays, we can find them only in Slovakia, Czech Republic and a very few examples in Poland (two rotundas in Cracow), one in Ukraine and one in Hungary. They were the first masonry buildings of our nation in our country. Nowadays, they are used very rarely for liturgy.

Since the beginning of our history, churches, chapels and parishes were the centres for local communities - for their religious/spiritual and cultural life. Many of churches were also fortified and had important defensive role for the whole settlement and its inhabitants. With the belonging buildings such as parishes, farm buildings, granaries etc., the church property has been increasingly linked to overall social development. There have always been very close links between parishes and the local communities.

Uses of church buildings

The places of worship didn't have exact shapes or exact measures since the beginning. Caves, cellars, big burgher's houses, market houses (large rooms) were used for meeting of worshippers. Later, after Edict of Milan (313 a.D.) Christians could build special buildings for worship. But even these buildings were used also for other purposes or functions - such as courtroom, school and library, and hosted meetings, elections, debates, plays and festivities. In fact, until relatively recently, churches were multifunctional for the whole community. (Botek 2005) It was perceived more as a community center than a special place dedicated only for liturgy and worshipping.

During osman wars, some of the churches were used even as mosques. (Nejezchlebová 2002) Many of unused churches were used as housings, depots, granaries, stalls, military barracks, factories, lunatic asylums etc. (Fowler 2010, Botek 2005) First after times of reformation and recatholisation, church buildings began to be perceived only as a place of worship. This changed after reformations of emperor Joseph II, when many of religious buildings were without use and as redundant buildings, they were adapted for alternative uses or even destroyed as a source of building material.

Reasons of destruction of religious buildings

Religious buildings were endangered also in the past - mainly by wars, fire, thunders (because of height of towers and its location on the top of the hills), underuse caused by migration of communities, riots, iconoclasm etc. Reformations of Joseph II were the

first to start destruction of churches in huge scale only because of ideology and politics.

Twentieth century was the end station for big number of our (Slovak and Czech) churches. It all started with the World War I, continued with big economic depression and the World War II. After the World War II, Decrets of president Beneš caused migration of one fourth of total number of inhabitants from Czechoslovakia, which led to situation, that large border areas were unpopulated. New inhabitants, who came to these areas didn't have any connection or relation to new home, so they started to destroy old buildings - and churches were among them.

Soon after this, communist regime came into power in the year 1948. Communists built „The Iron Curtain“, which was very well patrolled border area along the border with „imperialistic world“. This caused another migration of inhabitants further from the borders, leaving all behind. The border area became a military zone, many villages were destroyed, the churches were used as targets for military training. Only few of the churches remained - for example as a viewing point for military and patrol purposes. In year 1950, „Akcia K“ (Action K) led to liquidation of all Czechoslovak cloisters (monasteries and convents) which meant leaving all the buildings redundant - later used as military barracks, depots, sheds etc.

During 1950`s, communists ordered liquidation of many churches (near 250) and smaller objects (several thousands chapels, devotional pillars etc.). One example: communists from local county council (ONV) had a small celebration with champagne after demolition of church in town Nakléřov (Ústí nad Labem county) in year 1975.(Nejezchlebova 2002) Communist ideology is in direct opposition with any religion - that was the main reason, why so high number of ecclesiastical heritage had been lost.

The communist ideology with its persecutions on clergy and on the faithful caused also massive secularisation in our country. Although even more than 82% of inhabitants declared affiliation to one of denominations of Christian church, only a few percents of the whole population attended worships regularly.

Nowadays situation in Slovakia

Fourty years of communist regime caused innumerable amount of damages and losses to our cultural heritage (both tangible and intangible). Christian church and its property is among the most affected subjects of loss and damage. The harms last till present times - and with the trend of underuse of buildings and insufficient budget of the church, many buildings continue (or even start) to decay. It`s generally accepted, that underusing, redundancy and abandonment isn't the case of emergency in Slovakia, but the demographic changes, economic situation and trends to disestablish church from the state suggest, that this will be an issue in a short time.



Abandoned chapel in Banská Belá - due to collision with main road



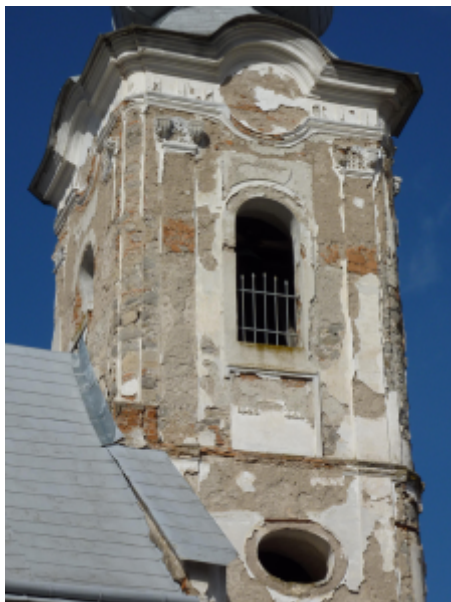
Abandoned church of Hussit church in Liptovská Osada



Abandoned reformed church in gypsy village Sútor



Abandoned romanesque church in Stredné Turovce

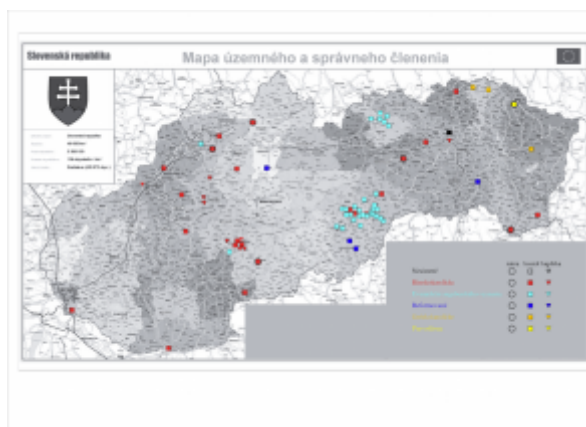


Church in Španie Pole



Redundant romanesque church in Kameňany

Abandonment is very often caused by building a new church in a settlement with a historical one. Reasons are often very similar - the old church is nowadays on peripheral position to the housing estates, on the hill, is in bad conditions and has problems with accessibility for disabled and elderly people, with low inner temperature and high humidity etc. Our research discovered more than 65 churches, 10 big chapels (not speaking about small chapels, chapels in churches and mansion chapels) and several ruins of churches by this time. These numbers do not contain buildings used as museums, buildings in open-air museums and are not definite. Many of these churches are of very high historical and cultural value.



Conclusion

Situation with ecclesiastical heritage is more complicated than with the non-religious (profane) sites according to laws and regulations, which must be taken into consideration when working with them. Ecclesiastical heritage deals also with canon and ecclesiastical laws and guidelines. They should also be mentioned, but they have strict hierarchy and are of very wide comprehension, so we do not have enough space for it in this study. Using of places of worship for other purposes deals also with public repute and with the opinion of church representatives, which is very often the main problem of preserving them.

Possible losses on this built heritage will be irreversible and will have a direct impact on our tangible and also intangible cultural heritage, because ecclesiastical heritage is integral part of local and regional identity and stability, and it is a basis for understanding of landscape and history of our country. Therefore it is a matter of considerable public interest to find sustainable ways to manage this heritage in a manner that is consistent with its historical and cultural importance and conserve it for future generations.

Excerpts from Legislative International documents and charters

International documents were adopted by ICOMOS (The International Council on Monuments and Sites). The main aim of this organisation is to preserve monuments in the international basis, which is imported into the legislative of all countries. The charters try to deal with problems of monuments preservation of any type.

The basic document of this organisation is **the Athens charter** (1931) on which the other documents are based. The end of the first article says: *“The Conference recommends that the occupation of buildings, which ensures the continuity of their life, should be maintained but that they should be used for a purpose which respects their historic or artistic character.”* This is also the main idea of this doctoral thesis. We can see this statement in many other documents. Finding the adequate use for an abandoned church is a demanding task.

The Venice charter.

The Venice charter (International charter for the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites) the fundamental document subscribed in 1964 in Venice, Italy, speaks about main principles in monuments preservation. For this doctoral thesis (churches ...) most important of these principles are articles Nr.4 and Nr.5. The 4th article states that for the conservation of monuments is essential that they be maintained on a permanent basis. Article Nr.4: *„It is essential to the conservation of monuments that they be maintained on a permanent basis.”*

This is more important for churches than for other types of buildings because of their use. Other buildings can have permanent maintenance because of their permanent use but churches have their specific liturgical use. Nobody lives there; nobody cares except for big problems which need some repairs.

This is probably the most important problem of the abandoned churches. There is no maintenance when nobody cares. The 5th article of this charter brings very important statements in this case:

Article Nr.5: *„The conservation of monuments is always facilitated by making use of them for some socially useful purpose. Such use is therefore desirable but it must not change the lay-out or decoration of the building. It is within these limits only that modifications demanded by a change of function should be envisaged and may be permitted.“* This article is very often the problematic one in the case of churches, because many ecclesiastical buildings were changed or modified along with no change in function. This is the case of changing interior layout due to results of Vatican Council in 1960`s.

Next international document is **the Washington Charter** which deals with conservation of historical towns and was subscribed in 1987 in Washington USA. This charter complements The Venice charter and speaks about main principles and objectives in preservation of monuments (including churches).

The first article states: *“In order to be most effective, the conservation of historic towns and other historic urban areas should be an integral part of coherent policies of economic and social development and of urban and regional planning at every level.“* This means that the problem of abandoned churches without use is not only the problem of the church but also of the whole society. The churches were carriers of cultural and social life in the past. Nowadays when they are losing their liturgical role (because of many aspects) they still have their historical value. This article is very important and points out that new use should be planned and imported to the urban and regional plans of development.

The next very important article of this charter, Nr.15: *“In order to encourage their participation and involvement, a general information programme should be set up for all residents, beginning with children of school age.“* We think that there is no need to explain this sentence, that the information in the education programmes must cherish positive attitude not only to national history but also to local history and monuments to preserve the historical values of the country.

Another international document is **International cultural tourism charter - Managing tourism at places of heritage significance** (Mexico 1999). This charter deals with tourism, heritage and also with management of heritage sites. *„... A primary objective for managing heritage is to communicate its significance and need for its conservation to its host community and to visitors. ... „* The local community must have information about significance and exceptionality of ecclesiastical heritage in their locality/region. This is the way to make them understand that they can benefit from taking proper care of it. Not only financially but also in spiritual manner.

The charter then speaks about the objectives. One of them refers to importance of sustainability: *„To facilitate and encourage a dialogue between conservation interests and the tourism industry ... including the need to achieve a sustainable future for them. ...“* Following Principles of the Cultural Tourism Charter concerning also ecclesiastical heritage and its peculiarities: *„The natural and cultural heritage is a*

material and spiritual resource, providing a narrative of historical development. ...“
 (1.1) Church buildings are also identification symbols for each settlement - village, town etc. They are witnesses of events and stories through centuries and therefore they play an unsubstitable role in presenting of history.

„The retention of the authenticity of heritage places and collections is important. It is an essential element of their cultural significance, as expressed in the physical material, collected memory and intangible traditions that remain from the past. ...“
 (2.4) Church buildings were always centres of spiritual life and were closely connected to social life, festivities and other significant community activities.

„Tourism development and infrastructure projects should take account of the aesthetic, social and cultural dimensions, natural and cultural landscapes, ... and the broader visual context of heritage places.“ (2.5) Almost every church and chapel is precisely placed in thoughtfully designed composition with its surroundings and with the surrounding landscape and so it forms a typical landmark. Therefore every change, which could have impact to this composition should be examined and discussed with architects and conservators.

„Conservation and tourism programmes should present high quality information to optimise the visitor’s understanding of the significant heritage characteristics and of the need for their protection, ...“ (3.1) This is also important for local people to recognise and understand the value of their property. *„Respect for the sanctity of spiritual places, practices and traditions is an important consideration for site managers, visitors, policy makers, planners and tourism operators...“* (3.3) Dealing with Christian built heritage, we must take into consideration many more issues and points of view as by any of other heritage buildings (including jewish built heritage).

„Policy makers should promote measures for the equitable distribution of the benefits of tourism to be shared across countries or regions, improving the levels of socio-economic development and contributing where necessary to poverty alleviation.“ (5.1) Redundant churches are located very often in regions with bad economic background. Development of tourism could create new job opportunities and bring new life to stagnant localities.

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