

THE ARCHITECTURAL MANIFESTATION OF THE HIDDEN PAST – THE MEMORIAL OF CSOLTMONOSTOR¹

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I believe that I must provide some clarification of the strange concept presented in the title of this paper. My point of departure is tradition – which is the underlying theme of this conference. According to the accepted interpretation of the word tradition, we mean those intellectual traits including heritage, knowledge, customs, and ideas which we consciously cultivate in order to make our mark on the world. The word 'heritage' has, on the other hand, a more prosaic, mundane meaning, referring to objects of value that are left behind when a people passes away. This can also have a legal referent. There is yet another, third kind of meaning of 'heritage' when the material objects left behind obviously carry intellectual, spiritual significance which can have historical, technical, artistic, as well as substantive contents. In this case, these are characteristics which are attached to personal, individual, communal, or national identity of a people. This third case is, if you haven't noticed, the rather abstruse identification of the notion of the historic monument. In fact, the historic monument, and its preservation, is a double-edged discipline, since it always has both an intellectual/spiritual, and a material aspect. The material aspect receives some identifying form only when the monument can be put to some use. And when the material aspect of its utilization, and the substantive, cultural aspect are joined, the object can rightly be called an architectural, historic monument. There are already well-established and tried techniques for the protection of historic monuments, which include proper planning, decision making, and actualizing of this: which, simply put, are already-perfected procedures. There is, however, a significant number of our architectural monuments which are simply unusable, which renders their material value nil. Here I am thinking principally of monuments that are in the state

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of ruin. Of these, there are several classifications: those which are ruined, destroyed to their very foundations and lie buried underground, and have been forgotten – these are monuments that only the archaeologist's investigations bring again to the surface. Such monuments are the most problematic for the agencies entrusted with their care and preservation. This is because:

- such remains can no longer be considered buildings. After all, a building in bad condition is obviously 'sick', and its treatment is, therefore, the challenge; in a state of ruin, the building is in its last gasps, but still, with a chance for its resuscitation. On the other hand, buried architecture – continuing the paragon, is at the state of exhumation – and it is the care of these monuments . . . I need go no further, you get the point: the situation is rather bizarre.
- Thus, following from the above, it is impossible to assign any kind of function to remains of this kind, and allocating funds for the preservation of monuments of this type can be called into question, from a practical point of view. The only thing that can justify the financial sacrifice is their didactic and museologic significance. Doing this, however, we are affirming that these historic remains are not even monuments, or in the best of cases, unreal monuments.

And, yet, in spite of the contradictions, we must say that even those architectural fragments that have come to light through archeological investigation, are historic monuments. There are numerous logical reasons for this statement as well.

Instead of listing these, I wish here to speak rather about the emotional aspects which can be supported by logical rationale; more important, however, are those aspects which spring from an archaeological finds' empathy, 'recognizable' bursting forth, that is, are related to intuitive processes related to the experience, and which, from the esthetic point of view, and the artistic, creative aspects of the object, are perhaps the most important.

During my insignificant professional life, much of my time was spent in a little-known corner of Békés county in order to bring to the surface, to demonstrate something of universal and of Hungarian history – both for myself, but more importantly, for the rest of humanity. This 'something' is at once banal and moving, similar to my childhood memories of the Elevation during the obligatory religious service.

Continuing on a less emotional plane, the hill of Mágó, just a stone's throw from Vésztő – the name bears witness to the traces of the medieval town – seemed to contain no secrets some twenty years or so ago, although the winding beds of the Sebes-Körös river, – practically dry water holes today – whispered memories of the ancient world of Sárrét. The Latin

inscription carved into the entrance to the cellar that penetrates into the side of the hill, speaks of ancient ruins on the site, as well as stating that in 1812 Count Wenckheim built a wine cellar here. As a matter of fact, every hill or topographic protrusion on the Alföld (the great, flat plain of Eastern Hungary) was turned into wine-producing lands, according to the logical expedient of agrarian economics/land-owning, estate management procedures of the time.

During the 1970's, it was here that archaeological investigations were begun to uncover the Hungarian medieval past, as well as life here, during the prehistoric era. Both these projects met with sensational results. The archaeologist Irén Juhász from Szarvas, discovered the ancient monastery of the Csolt clan on the south crest of the hill. The monastery had been rebuilt four times during the Xth to the XIIth centuries. The ruins were very fragile and fragmentary, and furthermore, the cellar cut right into the sanctuary, so that at first glance the entire thing looked sadder than the woeful fate of Hungary. In spite of this, Géza Entz of the OMF (National Monuments Protectorate) dared to say the decisive 'yes': the ruins must be restored, and given public view.

The prehistoric dig led by Katalin Hegedűs on the North crest of the hill turned up Central Europe's largest, and deepest settlement mound which in Arab terminology is called a 'tell'. Usual and unusual fragments found in a 7.20 m horizontal cultural-band, testify to the over 3000 years of life and activity of the peasant peoples who lived here from the new stone age through the bronze age; their bones and objects give a clear picture of this civilization.

For me, as the architect summoned here by chief engineer Pál Havasi, this dig gave significance to, and brought to life, the erosion of the course of history of the site, over the past 6000 years. This ancient cemetery contained traces of the passage of unknown wandering peoples, of the settlement and establishment of the Magyars, of the clash of the Eastern and Western Christians, and of the events surrounding the organization of the Hungarian nation, as well as the devastations wreaked by the Tartars, the destruction by the Turks, the reconstruction, and resettlement following – now already at Vésztő –, the aristocratic estate or the life of the fishermen and herdsman, the deeds of the local peasant intelligentsia, the Messianic meeting-out of justice by the Russians, and the monstrous child of the rule by the power of the people; the place contained all the memories related to the Republic of Vésztő ... What a history.

And finally, but by no means last in importance, it was here that I met Gábor Komáromi, president of the town council, who is a local leader of rare sensitivity, and intelligence, who was able to drum up government

support and funding, and who relied on, and trusted the architect both when he was sanely designing, as well as when he was already dreaming.

We managed to put the remains of Csoltmonostor into an understandable shape, according to the standard procedures – the hows and how-to's of which I learned from Gyula Hajnóczy. There were times when bad luck and unfortunate incidents spoiled the effectiveness of some good ideas, but as I mentioned, the problems of the historic monument of Csoltmonostor are not unique in the country, nor in our professional experience.

In 1982 Imre Pozsgay, then President of the Hazafias Népfront (National Peoples' Front) inaugurated the restorations and the museum installed in the cellar. At first only a small service building was built – which I intended to serve as the ticket-desk, at the entrance, but it was turned into a buffet. Following this the big questions arose. Was the restoration worth all the money that had been spent on it? Is it enough to expose, to show, only 300 years of the total of 6000 years of the history of the site? Will the ruins of the Monastery, located in the middle of the plain, be attractive enough as to be able to draw interested people to this out-of-the-way location? These were serious questions for the architect, the local leadership, and the patrons, equally. But afterwards, the duties and tasks to be tackled demanded our attention.

The most seductive and attractive of these tasks was the preparation of the ancient, prehistoric layers of ground for showing *in situ*, that is, on the spot, and not in a museum setting. This was because the hill was full of historic fragments – anywhere you placed a shovel, you would come up with a boxful of remains to each cubic meter of dirt. We designed a unique building, a so-called antique crypt. The sample section for this was dug out by the outstanding archaeologist from Vésztő, János Makkai; together with Ferenc Vámosy, I designed a concrete shelter covering, whose roof was covered with replaced earth. Thus, unlike a cellar, there is an opening through which viewers can gain access to the interior of the mound and its history. In this way (even if not quite in this sequence) the mound of Mágó was turned into a historic memorial site, whose unearthed fragments represented 5 to 6 millennia of history, leaving the last 200 years of recent history to be shown.

This we did by reconstructing a fishing and houting homestead, to show the life of the simple people, and of the poor peasants of the region of Sárret, in the 18th and 19th centuries. Practically all aspects of this house – wall, roof, bed, bench, fireplace, oven – are of reed and mud construction. The world of the ancient meadows-shepherds is brought to life by a herd of 'racka' sheep, and several carriage or riding horses, with their old-fashioned corral and stable. Here, the sheep graze and multiply, – they are actually kept for breeding purposes – as well as part of the 'spectacle', and as historic

evidence. The horses are used actually to take people around the region of Sárrét.

The turn of the century brought a significant upswing to the district of Vésztő. A look at the Reformed Church, the County Seat, the houses of the uppity, industrious peasants, shows that there was an important social change here. What happened at Mágor, was turned into the memorial of all the folk-writers, and thinkers of the entire region of Tiszántúl (areas beyond the Tisza river), the so-called Pantheon of Sárrét. For this we chose a site that is no longer the hill, but is in strong visual relation to it. An earth-fill inspired the creation of a look-out point, which is reminiscent of the ancient Greek theatre, with its circular orchestra-space at the bottom. We designed a memorial arch for the spot where the stage would be, decorated with ancient folk-motifs and architectural elements on both faces of the arch. This became the centre of the sculpture park, where outdoor performances or school productions can be staged. Joined to this on both sides, is a circular basket-weave walkway, lined with the portrait busts, including, to date, the writers Pál Szabó, Ferenc Erdei, Péter Veres, László Németh, Dénes Barsi, István Györffy, Géza Féja, József Erdélyi. Besides a drinking fountain and the ceremonial flagstaff, at the third point of the circular paths is a so-called 'time-tree'.

The idea for this tree was inspired by the desire to memorialize and honour the existence, the struggles, and the burial grounds of those who inhabited the region over the six thousand years, in the same way as the writers of the more recent past are honoured. I felt it proper to remember them with their cult objects, burial markers. Thus, in ascending order, and spiralling up on the massive oak tree trunk, are the bulky female figure representing the fertility cult of the neolithic peoples; the regal axe, the peoples of the bronze age; the horns, the followers of the magic bull; the Scythian reindeer, the inhabitants of the Avar plains; the sword and the Latin cross, the epoch of the creation of the Hungarian State, and our ancestors as integrated Europeans: the Protestant grave-markers and 'kopja' (carved totems) familiar to the area, stand for the medieval epoch, and for those peasants who were struck down by Turks and Tartars, as well as the new settlers, those who struggled and hoped here.

Thus, a number of aspects – archaeologic, museologic, architectural, ethnographic – are shown together, resurrected from under the covering of the wild grape, and vineyards, and rocky meadows of this place – encircled thus, also by the pale aura of intuition.