

## WHEREIN LIES THE SPIRIT OF BANSKÁ STIAVNICA – WORLD HERITAGE SITE

*Threats and Safeguarding*

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**Abstract.** Our world comprises material „phenomena“ and *feelings* invoked by places, spaces, works of art... Banská Stiavnica developed in a complex environment since 12<sup>th</sup> century including its urban spaces and houses, which we conserve. But there also is the *genius loci* that we sometimes fail to restore. Why? The town attracts settlers, not anymore because of golden-silver mines. People seek its *spirit*. What is it? The energy of our ancestors, authenticity...? The *spirit* usually vanishes with the use of modern materials and replicas. To counteract that we organise workshops in traditional methods, but question is what keeps original architecture alive and whether we can make new purpose and keep the original *genius*? Can we succeed? We are currently finding revival of the endangered unique Baroque Calvary Complex – the place filled with *energy*, inhabited by *spirit*... Will our activities diminish or reinforce the *genius* that makes our historical town so unique?

The life we live every day is made up of tangible “phenomena”. Nature, landscape, settlements, people and their activity transforming and forming the phenomena... However, there is something else that also belongs here, something less tangible - such as *sensations*. In connection with architecture, and natural or urban environment and space we usually hear about the tangible, measurable, and visible phenomena. We tend to deal less with the sensations that places, spaces, or works of art invoke. In the cultural conditions present in

Eastern European countries it is nearly a shame to speak about or express sensations, especially in specific disciplines such as architecture and urbanism. There are many questions that have never been asked, let alone answered... But spaces and places surround us and influence us by the power of their energy whether we understand it or not. Wherein lies the “power” the “excitement”, the “vibrations”, the “energy” of a place? And where is the threshold of our ability to perceive extrasensory stimuli? (Day 2002)

### **1. Banská \_tiavnica – Historical Background**

It was because of the indefinable “vibrations” and “emanations” of the town and its surroundings that I moved to and settled in the ancient little town of Banská \_tiavnica a couple of years ago. The town was established and was developing in a very complicated natural environment amidst volcanic mountains of Central Slovakia at least from the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Every century left an imprint in the town. The tiny town was gradually growing more and more compact, narrow streets and confined squares were formed, and palace houses were built one by one. On the slopes of the valley covered with palaces, poor miners would also build their tiny houses, coming here for work and settling near the mines. The profit made in the mines would show on the richness of the architecture, the quality of craftwork, and artistic ornaments of the palaces, churches, and schools... The mountainous country has also inspired the baroque constructors from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to take advantage of the natural landscape phenomenon. For example, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the important objects of architecture were being built on the tops of distinct hills to become their dominant features. This period was marked with the greatest development of mining (gold and silver), accompanied naturally also by the development of science, technology, knowledge, education, art, and architecture. The boom of the town in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the last one so far, thanks to which it was possible to preserve in the mediaeval urban plan the original medieval houses, although in a Baroque “dress”. The original materials used on the houses were preserved, including the high roofs inspired by German architecture, and their original constructions and details – windows, doors, stairways and the layers of exterior or interior plasters including ornaments, and plaster covered chimneys topped with heads of various shapes... The period of communism was

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not at all friendly towards the development of the town. Looking back today, however, we may say that it brought about some advantages along with the disadvantages. The advantages lied in the preservation of some historical structures as a result of lacking interest and poverty; the disadvantages included the damage of historical value due to negligence and unskilled, if not violent intervention into historical structures.



*Figure 1.* Banská \_tiavnica, medieval mining town amidst the volcanic hills.

### **2. Issues and Challenges**

By examining the construction development of the buildings within the historical framework exactly and scientifically, we really do come to the conclusion that the town and the objects in the town seem to have grown in the course of centuries. We scrutinise the concrete traces of objective reality – the historical development of urbanism, the houses and their historical constructions, the layering of ornaments and decorations in single phases of history, architectural styles, quality of craftwork... and many other concrete factors. All of them are helpful and necessary, since they contribute to our own better understanding of the issue in order for us to be able to determine scientifically what preservation, conservation, and presentation methods or other forms of “manipulation” with a historical object to employ. Based on the research and using the political tools we have at our disposal we try to do our best to preserve, conserve, and protect

those for future generations. That is what the law says. In Slovakia we have a very good Law Act on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, we have authorities designed to protect our architectural heritage and guidelines to help us preserve the historical heritage. However, despite all that we sometimes fail to preserve the *intangible – the genius loci, the spirit*. In most cases the reconstructed, restored, or conserved houses and spaces end up being spiritless imitations. We may be able to read in them the historical context, we may be able to determine the characteristics of the architectural style, but “the spirit of history” is gone once and for all. The spirit has been killed.

What do we do wrong? We don't even know how to define it, but we do feel it... Sometimes you may adhere to all written rules. The preservationists adhere to the Law Act, the owners and investors adhere to the rules given by the conservationists (although it is only rarely so). And yet...

Banská \_tiavnica is not only a tourist attraction in Slovakia. It still attracts new inhabitants – not anymore due to the original reason – the prosperous gold and silver mines and the profit and job possibilities connected thereto. People fed up with the commercial and technical world consciously or subconsciously seek for mystery, magic, spirit. We will ask ourselves again and again wherein lies the peculiar emanation, the “spirit”, in my case – of Banská \_tiavnica? In the original? The authenticity? The layers of history? In the mountainous surroundings? In the energy invested by the town's creators and all its inhabitants? Or in the customs, traditions, culture, the fragments of which have persisted? In originality, authenticity, integrity with the surrounding environment? In the invisible layers of centuries, in the visible and the sensed traces we find on the trodden stone paving, the soft round layers of plaster on the houses, in the old wood of the doors and windows... I am sure that it is the combination of all, even the seemingly meaningless but authentic details that merge into the all-integrating genius loci. (Norberg-Schulz 1981)

### **3. Initiatives and Results**

One of the many reasons of the loss of *spirit* has always been the utilisation of new and incompatible materials, techniques and industrialised technologies during the renewal of the historical environment, and replacing originals with worthless replicas. The said

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years of industrial construction in Slovakia have suppressed respect for historical construction and the details thereof, and led to the disappearance of craft that would concentrate on the preservation of the historical building material. Discreetly but gradually receding original character of the town of Banská \_tiavnica made me and my colleagues try to save at least some of the remaining “molecules” of the spirit, the preservation of which still could be in our powers. We could succeed by protecting the authentic, the original and conserving and renewing it the right way.

In the effort to prevent further loss and damage on originals we decided in 2002 to organise in Banská \_tiavnica vocational training courses and seminars for craftsmen, architects, preservationists, owners of historical buildings, students of architecture, preservation etc., whereby we laid a lot of emphasis on the value of the original and the authentic. The first international workshop and seminar that was held in Banská \_tiavnica in 2002 was titled and dealing with *Materials, Techniques and Technologies in the Built Heritage Preservation*. (Vo\_ková 2006).

The participants in the expert seminar adopted the “*Banská \_tiavnica Appeal*“, which accentuated that the authenticity and the spirit of the town may only be preserved by systematic education of craftsmen and all those participating in the process of built heritage conservation. *The Appeal* offered the platform and showed us the direction in which we should develop education activities in this field in the region of Slovakia. (Vo\_ková 2006). The following years were filled with organising educational projects -- international courses for craftsmen and expert seminars that were always aimed at a specific subject and issues in the area of tangible heritage preservation (in the second plan – also of the intangible heritage preservation). Practical courses for craftsmen working in practice and studying and teaching at schools, which were accompanied by theoretical seminars and aimed at teaching the craftsmen to prefer original pieces while repairing cultural monuments instead of replacing them with replicas, and teaching them how to treat the originals the right way included seminars titled: *Historical Façade Plaster Conservation* (2003), *Lime and Lime Technologies in the Built Heritage Preservation* (2005), *Doors and Windows in the Built Heritage Preservation* (2006).



*Figure 2, 3, 4. The vocational training courses and seminars emphasise the value of the original and the authentic historic elements.*

The knowledge and experience gained at the training courses and seminars were used in detail in the process of conservation a Renaissance and Baroque house in Banská \_tiavnica (on Remeselnícka Street 5), which was saved a couple of years ago from complete demolition. The house was used as an example to show that even a very seedy building may be preserved and conserved by using exclusively compatible materials and technologies to preserve its spirit.



*Figure 5. Renaissance and Baroque house in on Remeselnícka Street 5.*

The results of these courses and seminars are already visible today. A couple of years ago it was virtually impossible to find craftsmen in the town who would be able and willing to perform the restoration of historical buildings, constructions and their details using traditional technologies. At present, there is a group of craftsmen who specialise in conserving historical constructions, including carpenters, masons, and craftsmen who only use lime technologies, joiners, who repair historical wooden windows, doors, stairways, ceilings... This positive change is visible not only in Banská \_tiavnica, but all across Slovakia. Many castles in the region are being conserved the right way thanks to the courses organised in Banská \_tiavnica (traditional technologies taught at our international courses were employed on the castles

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Uhrovec, Lietava, or Fi\_akovo). In the town itself there are more and more original buildings repaired by trained craftsmen.

### 4. Spirit of Banská \_tiavnica Calvary

Of course, it is not only about traditional material and technologies, but also about asking ourselves what it is that makes architecture, environment, or a place alive. The question therefore is whether we still can succeed in using the historical environment for its original purpose. That is the question on our minds while we are trying to preserve the endangered unique baroque Calvary Complex in Banská \_tiavnica that evokes an unforgettable experience only by its very existence and location on the hill right opposite the historical town. A clearly Baroque concept of the architectural complex of 17 chapels and 3 churches connected by a zigzag footpath leading towards the upper church situated on the very top has got an immense influence not only on the genius loci of the site itself, but - being the dominant feature of the whole landscape around it - also forms the overall appearance of the town, its skyline and its own genius loci.

Going through the materials we found in the archives we found out that the construction of the Calvary Complex was commenced by the Jesuits in 1744 as part of their efforts to recatholicize the town. Historical data and the guides working here at present only give us bare facts regarding its construction and its history. That is not enough to keep the Spirit of the Calvary once visited by hundreds of pilgrims alive.



*Figures 6, 7. The Baroque architectural concept of Calvary on historical veduta from 1812 and present state.*

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The only multidimensional interpretation material on the Calvary Complex is the book by the priest Arpád Hidvégy titled *Bansko\_tiavnická kalvária – Ako povstala, ako dnes vyzerá a ako sa na nej koná pobo\_nos\_* translated as *The Calvary Complex of Banská\_tiavnica. How it was established, how it looks today and how divine service is celebrated here* written in the year 1901. (Hidvéghy 1901). The description of the Calvary Complex reflects the enthusiasm of the people who participated in its construction, and who for years were taking care of the complex, who would repair it and undertake pilgrimages... The author of the book interlaces historical facts, legends, and the interpretation of the biblical message with a deep understanding of genius loci. And that is what we indeed feel in situ even today - all that despite the fact that the Calvary Complex site no longer serves its original purpose as intensely as it used to do in the past. The power of faith is lost; nobody is interested in such “impractical things” anymore. Due to its remoteness, the Calvary Complex has become the night refuge of junkies and vandals.

The landscape jewel, the great work of architecture including 17 chapels and 3 churches and a great number of works of Baroque art on the one hand, and its condition – seedy, robbed, and abandoned on the other, were the arguments that made the New York Worlds Monuments Fund put the Calvary Complex in Banská\_tiavnica on the list of *100 most endangered sites* in the period 2007 - 2008.

Listing the Calvary among the sites inspired us to organise an international student workshop and an expert colloquium titled *Banská\_tiavnica Calvary and the Prospects of its Revitalisation* in September 2007, during which we were thinking out loud about the prospects of this unique place. Students of architecture, urbanism, landscape architecture and ecology, art history, restoration and theology examined the Baroque complex on a multidisciplinary level, which helped us gain maximum input knowledge about the monument prior to its conservation and renewal.

The list of the world’s *100 most endangered sites*, the international colloquium, more coverage by the media, and increased interest among the sponsors... was soon followed by research projects, conservation... We shall surely take advantage of all the experience we have gained while organising the courses for craftsmen and we shall organise more. More courses and seminars connected by the need to preserve and conserve this multidimensional monument. It is our challenge to let craftsmen, architects, and preservationists gain

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more and more knowledge and skills... But what will come next? I do realise that we will never turn the time back to the era of intense Christian empathy with the passion of Christ on his ultimate way, which is the main theme of the whole Calvary Complex as it was described in the book written in 1901. We therefore look for other ways of using the Calvary today. We search for activities that would suit the environment of the site, try to replace lost originals in order to recreate the original appearance of the Calvary and restore the idea, the architecture, and the artistic interpretation of the monument, to give it the prospects of a tourist site... But where is the line that we shouldn't cross? What is it that we just mustn't do so that we don't ruin the "emanation" of the once truly religious spirit of the site?

Speaking of the tangible, we must note that the Calvary Complex in Banská \_tiavnica is a significant landscape monument, an artful complex of Baroque architectures, built according to a given liturgy based on the Biblical message with a great number of wall paintings and works of art made of stone and wood. All that in exquisite late Baroque quality... It is a very special place inhabited by a „spirit“, devoured by „power“, and filled with „energy“. We do perceive and feel the magical – the „intangible“: human knowledge, capability, manifested artistic talents, hard work, enthusiasm, love, gratefulness, thousands of sorrows and pains entrusted to God by the pilgrims... All that touches us while walking through the alley of linden trees 250 years old, past the chapels, or inside one of the churches with their suggestive illusive wall paintings.

I am happy to see more and more interest in the Calvary Complex today. I am also happy to see even tiny successes in fundraising fostered by the civic association called the Calvary Fund, which has been established to safeguard the protection of the national monument. At the same time I feel the breakthrough moment coming; I am aware of the fact that the enthusiasm in bringing life back into the town may bring along gradual and barely noticeable, or even violent „trampling“ of its original spirit.

Thanks to the “*spirit*“ of this conference I realise I have asked myself all the questions on time. And I do believe that our efforts, knowledge, energy, time and the interest of our generation in the Calvary Complex and in the town of Banská \_tiavnica will not change, but enrich their *genius loci*.

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