

Changed Functions. Changed Places

Some Aspects of the Impact of History on the Destiny of Monuments in Hungary in the 20th century

Vera Varsa-Szekeres
ICOMOS/Hungary
Budapest
Szentháromság tér 6
1014 Hungary

Abstract. 'Ours is a draughty country' we used to hint at the vicissitudes of Hungary in a semi-jokingly way. In this paper I am going to highlight the 'life-line' of different groups of monuments (protected or having only symbolic meaning). Hungary underwent several drastic changes in the past „short century”, i.e. 1914-1989, from the outbreak of WWI. to the collapse of so-called socialism. There is a group that changed both place and significance, that of the statues erected to glorify communism and its Soviet and Hungarian heroes. The majority of them were taken to a place called 'Statue-park'. The park reflects our history and our attitude toward it. Another group of buildings are synagogues, abandoned because of well-known consequence of the nazi rule and re-used. This way some were objectified, some kept as memento in a ramifying context.

A slogan often used in Hungary is 'this is a draughty country', with which we hint at the sharp curves of events: there were at least 8 drastic political changes in 75 years. They all caused fundamental and contradicting each other turns in the structure of society, caused massive changing of life-area for whole blocks of population; emigration where millions were involved, even massacre of hundred thousands, millions of war casualties. In different treaties - all decided by the Great Powers - Hungary became independent from the Austro-Hungarian (Hapsburg) Empire, but on the other hand lost 2/3 (!) of its territory and 1/3(!) of its population.

Obviously, these deep changes aroused long-lasting emotions, subdued, but from time to time erupting passions.

Hence any official or civic movement has to be/should be very cautious and tactful when deciding the fate of a building or when erecting a monument.

Before focussing on two types of monuments I have to underline that in the Hungarian monument protection practice difference is made between 'historic monument' and 'monument' erected in order to commemorate an event of history or a person of merit. Historic monuments are not built for being that, they are built churches, palaces, workshops, bridges or dwelling houses, by the time they take on patina, become historical. Being used according to their original function they keep the memory of by-gone generations and representing the roots they always actually help present users in defining their identity.

Now let me show how and why 2 sorts of the above-mentioned types keep on living in the changed framework of the society.

The problem of the Hungarian synagogues is a very complex and long-lasting one, in addition one, that outrages much sensibility, even more than other sacral buildings.

During WWII. 600.000 Hungarian Jews were killed by German and Hungarian nazis. Many of those who escaped the worst felt impossible to go on living in their once flourishing settlement where some dozens or even less survivors dragged on. They moved to bigger towns, mainly to the capital city, Budapest (where by sheer fortuity of the arbitrary caprice of horror larger proportion of the Jewish population survived) and, many of them immigrated toward all corners of the world. That is how the synagogues of the countryside were left to their fate. Many of them had been set to fire while their believers were captured, or had been looted right after the deportation, some only stood empty exposed to decay...

In the early 1950's a forced collectivization took place both in agriculture and industry. So, need arose for office buildings, but also for different warehouses, and for other purposes that need spacious interior (garage, gym, etc.) In many cases synagogues came in handy. Their majority was in bad state of repair already at that time and then they were not properly restored, the interiors were rebuilt to an unrecognisable state. It goes without saying that - though all wore historic value - not all of them were listed monuments based on their quality.

In the late 1960's, early 1970's Hungary knew a relative prosperity and in the 1980's an act, called 'palace program' was passed in the Parliament. (Palaces, manorhouses shared the fate of being used for alien purposes as their proprietors were also chased, their belongings confiscated - this time by the communist regime.) Restoration of some buildings began, among others some synagogues were beneficiary of the state sponsorate.

That was possible only in the cases when the new proprietors were ready to empty the synagogue, when negotiations of the recompensation were successful. (The difficulties of these procedures get in the frame of this paper only by the time factor: they consumed painstakingly long months, perhaps years; the more time, the more decay.) Several questions arose. The restoration could effect only a few synagogues because of the eternal problem of monument protection: the lack of money. Out of the 150 or so synagogues in Hungary only approximately 30 are listed monuments. To choose the best preserved ones? Or the most valuable ones? Those, the history of which bear an extraordinary meaning? By careful squaring the matters and thorough research work some were restored, rehabilitated, refurbished (perhaps even re-sacred).

Before and during the physical works were done a non less important work was carried out: that of the definition of the new function. There were few opinions that would not protect the idea that whatever the new function was going to be it had to reflect to the broadest possible scope the original function, should refer to the original usage, adopt as much as possible the interior design and naturally, keep the original architecture.

Fortunately the restoration program is going on, long after the 'palace program' as such is discontinued.

Let me cite as example two Hungarian synagogues.



The oldest practically continuously functioning synagogue is in Mád.

This village is situated in the northeastern part of the country, in a region where since the 18th c. Jews had lived in important numbers. The village had been the centre of orthodoxy and chassidism.



In its cemetery 2 „wondrous rabbis” are laid to rest. The region is known by the famous Tokay-wine, roughly half of the Jews were wine-merchants. The overwhelming majority of the Jewish population fell victim of the German and Hungarian nazis. By 1949 even the handful survivors of the Shoah left, so the characteristic baroque synagogue became „abandoned good”, i.e. state property. The next 20 years saw the decay of it. Then the state authorities made the most important substance intervention, but as it was not used it got again in a very poor state of repair.

There is no contradiction between the fact that the building was abandoned for 40 years and that it is considered as a continuously used one, as according to a Jewish tradition a synagogue loses its sacrality only if it is used for non-divine purposes.

Between 2001 and 2004 the State Treasury Directorate (with the help of the WMF) assured the expenses of the authentic restoration to the buildings full blossom.

It is designated to be multifunctional: as foreigners often visit the cemetery it is important that the synagogue could serve for divine services, but could be used also as concert hall and convention centre. This last function is not really unfamiliar with a synagogue: in its original functioning it also serves as scene of the communal life.

Another fine building is the Apostag synagogue. Built at the end of the 18th century in the next decades it served a some 600 people strong assembly, roughly 20% of the population. 150 years later 6 people survived the genocide and none remained in the village.

Seen from outside the building is modest, the interior is richly decorated. The vault is brought by 4 columns, the *bima* (pulpit) and the Aron niche, the sacred place of the Torah scroll, is turned in the direction of Jerusalem. The stuccos, the wallpaintings, columns, not uncommon in the Calvinist churches of the region, reflect a late baroque classicizing taste.

Based on thorough research work the synagogue was meticulously restored in its original richness in the 1980's (it is awarded by Europa Nostra prize) as 'village-house', the communal place of all villagers. Weddings, concerts, ceremonial meetings are held in it, the once *women's gallery* is transformed into village library and they even found place for a little museum dedicated to a writer, native of the village.

The users are aware of the original function of their much liked village-house, understanding the meaning of the Aron-niche and the bima and protecting them and remembering the horrible fate of those compatriots of theirs who had built it and then perished in the storm of history.

In the normal course of history tradition should come down from generation to generation. Here there was a brutal rupture: there were no people left to remember. In most of the cases it was left to the buildings to hand down ideas, doctrines mainly to people who do not interiorize them in the deep meaning of the word.

Statues, memorial plaques form another sensitive part of those monuments that had to change function in the peripeties of history. Those, we examine now also survive in their physical being, only had to change place, this way they make the posterity remember and, as originally they draw attention only too straightforwardly to the ideology they represent, they still achieve that aim - but mainly with reversed sign.



After the political changes in 1989/90 it was decided to dislodge from the public spaces the Soviet and Hungarian communist memorials scattered all over Budapest in superabundant number. The idea of simply demolishing them was rejected not only because of the good artistic quality in some cases, but also because they represent after all an important part of our history and nobody wants to fall into a pit of trying to pretend that that period did not exist and, anyway, iconoclasm is not a procedure suitable to a democratic country. So, establishing a 'Statue-park' was decided and (having left a sort of Unknown Soldier Soviet monument in situ) a great many of them are together now in one of the suburbs of Budapest. The statues from that of Marx-Engels via the unknown fighter of the first Hungarian Soviet revolution in 1919 (which lasted for 133 days) to Lenins and Co. evoke those 40 years when our nation suffered again under the rule of a foreign power and served the ideology of that.

Obviously, the socialist range of thoughts, too, lie at the basis of tradition of not few Hungarians, they - while understanding that as consequence of the Soviet regime those statues do not find place in the living structure of the city - still find them in a tangible form. For the majority though they mean oppression, threat, lack of freedom... This way these statues bear large scope

of reference, allusion and hint for the important number of visitors to the park. Not without reason this uncommon park means more to native Hungarians than to the foreign tourists: it is our past, we are still able to visualize them at their original places, they still keep the aura of the yester years ceremonies around them (good, evil or ridiculous memories), or simply we know when is it when we pass along an abandoned stretch of grass in a street. For the foreigners and posterity this site is curiosity - calling for meditation on how much vain effort and talent, perhaps goodwill were bartered away for ephemer ideas, but for those who lived under their shadow they are unalienable part of our identity. Their removing from their original place, thus stripping them of their original symbolism and their concentration to a - let's call the site what it really is - a statue-reserve, or statue-ghetto, adds an extra symbolicity, creates the atmosphere of a preservingly transcending attitude.