

The Built Heritage of the Balkans: A Rehabilitation Project

by

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This essay describes a project sponsored by the European Commission and the Council of Europe designed to attract funding for the rehabilitation of the built heritage in the countries of South East Europe (the Balkans), as a contribution towards sustainable development and social cohesion in a region undergoing major transition. The description is set in the context of the Council of Europe's long-standing programme of Technical Co-operation and Consultancy. The project methodology and the results are summarised. These have important implications for international heritage management projects, and broad lessons for international initiatives within other disciplines.

Since 1975, the Technical Co-operation and Consultancy Programme of the Council of Europe (CoE) has carried out a wide range of projects related to the conservation, rehabilitation, enhancement and management of the cultural and natural heritage, at national, regional and local level.¹ A small staff has successfully identified and harnessed the skills of almost four hundred experts, to produce over one thousand assessments within over one hundred projects: from the conservation of the Pont du Gard and of the floor of the Cathedral of St John, Valletta, to the creation of heritage management systems in Cyprus and Malta; from advising on heritage policy within the Baltic States, Croatia and Belarus to advising on the conservation of numerous historic centres, including Segovia, Toledo, Valencia, Funchal, Cracow and Telc. At least thirty projects have been directly concerned with urban rehabilitation.² This programme, prompted by individual national needs, and informed by the Council of Europe's development of Conventions, Charters and Recommendations, has played a major role in contributing to the establishment of the Cultural Heritage Directorate of the CoE as the principal European promoter of the theory and best practice of heritage protection and management.³ The scope of the programme is wide-ranging in interpretation and application, grounded in the fundamental tenets of the CoE. It is regarded as an instrument for strengthening social cohesion while respecting and celebrating diversity, informed by the broader guiding principles of developing democracy, defending human rights and advancing the rule of

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law. The organisation has become the non-directive moral conscience of the European cultural heritage, with an impact recently acknowledged as being out of proportion to its size: the CoE 'has become adept at working with the grain of developing sectoral trends, whilst challenging member countries to move forward more quickly from ideas to principles and from principles to rights'.⁴ Currently, forty-seven member states are the potential beneficiaries of its actions.

Technical Co-operation initially was directed towards finite projects, typically terminated by an expert report and recommendations for implementation by the national authorities. Subsequently, the programme targeted the development of national heritage policies through 'Specific Action Plans' and exemplary pilot projects, with workshops and follow-up activities. This process was underpinned by the establishment of the Legislative Support Task Force in the mid-1990s, designed to provide specific guidance to Central



Fig. 1

Former French Embassy, Cetinje, Montenegro; 1910

and Eastern European countries as they adapted to new political circumstances. Work carried out on the urban regeneration of Tbilisi, Georgia in 1998-2001,⁵ a project carried out by the CoE in partnership with the government of Georgia and the World Bank, capitalised on this experience and marked the beginning of a shift towards investigations with the potential for long-term sustainable impact not only on the built fabric but also on economic and social progression. The Balkans project described here represents an even more ambitious development aimed at engendering and supporting major cultural shifts in attitude towards the built heritage and its management. The Integrated Rehabilitation Project Plan/Survey of the Architectural and Archaeological Heritage (IRPP/SAAH), proposed in 2003, is a joint initiative of the European Commission (EC) and the CoE, made possible by their combined funding. Begun in the same year, and continuing, it is part of the CoE Regional Programme for Cultural and Natural Heritage in South East Europe. This geographical designation has been chosen in acknowledgement that the most commonly used collective name, the Balkans, is too often regarded as a pejorative descriptor, with connotations of nationalist, ethnic and religious division. It is used here however as a portmanteau term for a group of neighbouring countries with a complex history, great diversity and an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage which is frequently ignored by writers on European architecture who tend to favour the more geographically and historiographically accessible Western European examples (especially those which trace their lineage from the Italian Renaissance) in telling their evolutionary stories.⁶

The project, conceived as a contribution towards peace and reconciliation in a region experiencing social, economic, legislative and political transition, was intended to facilitate compatibility in built heritage protection with the member states of the European Union. It was predicated on the belief that the cultural heritage is fundamental to the building of national and European identities, respecting their diversity and bringing people together to build the future, informed by perceptions of place and an understanding of the past. There is particular resonance in this message in a region which includes the countries of the former Yugoslavia where conflict during the 1990s was characterised by the destruction of 'foreign' heritage as part of the creation of new myths in the service of ravaging nationalisms, but it is one which must be communicated if mutual respect is to be achieved and maintained. In accordance with the spirit and letter of the CoE Conventions of Granada (Architectural Heritage, 1985), Valletta (Archaeological Heritage, 1992), Florence (Landscape, 2000), and Faro (The Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, 2005), as well as in light of the Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development (Hanover, 2000), the preservation, enhancement and rehabilitation of the landscape and the built environment are regarded as crucial to social and economic development.

The IRPP/SAAH provides a demonstration of the applicability of such concepts to specific circumstances. It has underlined the importance of an integrated approach to the cultural heritage, informing activities at national, regional and local levels; building capacity; involving all people, and fundamental to spatial planning and sustainable urban development, meeting present needs without, it is hoped, prejudicing the ability of future generations to do the same in their turn. It has also provided the opportunity for a multi-lateral approach with cross-border co-operation through cultural corridors or



Fig. 2

Zlatko's Tower, Kratovo, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; sixteenth century

routes, both real and virtual, with associated possibilities for tourism, although this must not be regarded as a developmental panacea: beneficiaries of rehabilitation initiatives should be the local population first and tourists second. This is especially important when that population, prey to economic uncertainty and social vulnerability, with the rights and responsibilities of property ownership in a state of flux, remains to be convinced of the value of the cultural heritage and the potential benefits which it might contribute to a revitalisation which benefits them as well as the investors.

The project has also illustrated the value of the incremental approach: steps may be small at first before accelerating and increasing, and it is not always necessary moreover for all to travel at the same speed. It is important in all projects to make a start by doing something which is achievable – a small finite project or a component of something larger which can be broken down into self-contained steps or phases – avoiding the risk of beginning with a discouraging failure. Visible success helps to develop the momentum which encourages the participation of others.

The IRPP/SAAH is one of three components within the broader South East Europe Regional Programme of the CoE. Although discrete, it is closely related to the other two: Institutional Capacity Building (advice on legislation and institutional management)⁷ and the Local Development Pilot Project (encouraging partnerships and participation in conservation and economic development). It was conceived as a stage in a process towards attracting partners and funding bodies in order to secure firm investments to rehabilitate buildings and sites in their social and cultural context, with a management regime capable of ensuring long-term sustainability. The project has been designed to apply specifically to the countries of South East Europe, but obviously might also provide generic ideas for other situations. The direct participants and beneficiaries are: Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia (including Kosovo), and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. It has been the intention of the project not to impose, but to provide methodological tools and mechanisms enabling national institutions in these countries to help themselves. It is essentially pragmatic in respecting the individual situations in each country, all characterised by limited resources and lack of confidence in heritage management, while at the same time encouraging



Fig. 3

Fortified Church of St Nicholas, Drauseni, Romania; thirteenth century and later



Fig. 4
Hammam of Gazi Mehmed Pasha, Prizren, Kosovo; 1563-4

the development of alternative strategies through fixing priorities and inspiring new attitudes. Both the project-specific and the generic benefits of the methodology have been underlined in a CoE guidance publication.⁸

The project has been characterised by the recognition that the identification and preservation of the cultural heritage is not only an end in itself but a mechanism which is geared towards the larger objectives of the CoE, with the ultimate aim of improving the quality of life for all. The project is predicated on the belief that the heritage of each country is part of our common European heritage, for which there is a shared responsibility, a message as applicable in a Britain currently suffering from declining funding for the heritage as it is in the Balkans. The integrated conservation of this heritage, within the constraints of sustainable development, is based on a vision which encompasses physical, social, economic, cultural, ethnic and religious elements. It also contributes to harmonisation and co-operation between countries which eventually will become members of the European Union, with all the attendant risks and benefits of free trade and free movement within the market economy. This co-operation and evident goodwill between countries, achieved through the project and encouraged through regular meetings of representatives, is less tangible than the restoration of individual



Fig. 5

Mill in the urban complex of Sremski Karlovci, Serbia; eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

monuments or the management of rehabilitated sites, but it has nevertheless been the most encouraging outcome of the exercise, not least because some of those countries have so recently been in conflict.

Within the project, the heritage is seen as a dynamic asset rather than as an inconvenient barrier to progress. Historic buildings and sites provide a sense of identity (which in the recent past has had negative outcomes as well as positive); they encourage cultural tourism; they have been shown to perform well economically, often better than new buildings, when properly restored. This perception of the built heritage as an economic and social asset is fundamental to this project which goes beyond simple conservation and restoration, sometimes perceived as self-contained, finite acts, to encourage and facilitate rehabilitation, providing new uses and new possibilities for the local population. The project has a strong social dimension in encouraging an approach which balances the protection and sustainable re-use of the heritage with the planning of the future shape of the built environment.

The project has been carried out in conjunction with the national and regional authorities in the countries involved, so ensuring that the individual countries and institutions were regarded, and regarded themselves, as the primary stakeholders right from the start. They were and have continued to be active participants in a mutually informing process of institutional capacity building. The project has provided guidance and frameworks, and set timetables, but all the significant choices have been made by the representatives of the individual countries themselves. They know better than any outsider what is important, not least because this is an architecturally rich, but from the western perspective, relatively little known region, but they do not always have the experience of self-determination or the confidence to express that importance succinctly and persuasively.

The project methodology has been four-fold, moving from the general to the particular, from broad assessment of heritage identification and management strategies in each of the participating countries, to the detailed specific consideration of the feasibility and costs of restoring and rehabilitating individual buildings and sites. The initial 'Heritage Assessments' were prepared by CoE experts in consultation with the national representatives. They considered the main characteristics of the heritage and the associated legislation, management, staffing, funding, partnerships, documentation and training. The great importance of the heritage was well understood by all participants but common problems and needs emerged – for management training; for improved and integrated legislation, with associated guidance on implementation; for consciousness-raising and education to engender public support; for well-managed partnerships; and for training in documentation, craft skills, conservation and restoration.

Following the assessment, the compilation of Prioritised Intervention Lists (PILs) was the task of the national experts in each country. They produced a descriptive list of significant monuments at risk (from deliberate destruction, the development process or mere age or neglect) which they considered to be prime candidates for rehabilitation and restoration. This identification of priorities was for most a new approach, representing a significant cultural shift. The sites chosen were intended to cover a wide range of building types – Orthodox churches, mosques, archaeological sites, houses, ensembles, urban and rural buildings, infrastructural and industrial monuments (including the first hydro-electric plant in the region, at Kokalians, just outside Sofia, Bulgaria) – and a broad range of potential interventions, including, controversially for hard-line conservationists, complete reconstruction of emblematic monuments deliberately destroyed in the recent conflicts.⁹ The results of this exercise have been very successful. We now have 160 monuments and sites which are representative of the heritage of South East Europe as a whole, chosen by national experts. This national commitment gives the compilation a weight and focus which an imposed, internationally compiled list would lack. The PILs, together with the heritage assessments, have been published for each country and they provide an important reference point: a snapshot of the contemporary situation and a guide to future actions.¹⁰ The identification by the individual countries of what is important is absolutely critical to the success of the project since it enables the authorities to tell funding bodies what is important from the national point of view, rather than having the destination of funding dictated according to the agenda of the individual

agencies. This is part of the process of learning to benefit from the western market economy without compromising personal and national integrity. The assessments and the lists are being updated to reflect changing circumstances in heritage management and legislation, and in priorities for restoration.

In the third stage, in Preliminary Technical Assessments (PTAs), the technical requirements and broad cost estimates for each phase of every proposed intervention, from initial conservation to full rehabilitation were identified. The framework was drawn up with the requirements of the international funding agencies in mind: an assessment of the historic or artistic significance of the monument or site; the degree of risk or deterioration; and the viability of the proposed project. These PTAs were compiled by national specialists, with the initial guidance of international experts appointed by the CoE who visited the sites to test the methodology, discuss approaches and ensure a consistency of approach. The role of the CoE and EC in this process has been highlighted by the display of a plaque on or adjacent to the building or site, an imprimatur which is designed to increase the momentum and visibility of the rehabilitation project. Although they are stages in a process, rather than ends in themselves, the preparation and dissemination of the published PTAs has already had the consequence of enabling many countries to



Fig. 6

Jusuf Maskovic Han (caravanserai), Vrana, Croatia; 1644-5



Fig. 7

Hydro-electric plant, Kokaliane, Bulgaria; 1900

attract funding. So far, over fifty per cent of the 160 sites have received funding wholly or in part, as a result of the combined impact of this project and the associated activities within the countries which have been given increased currency and focus through the adoption of the methodology.

Before restoration and rehabilitation of sites can be begun, further Feasibility Studies, stage four in the process, are required. These are potentially wide-ranging in their impact since they go beyond the questions and costs of technical restoration to consider the roles and requirements of stakeholders and the methodologies of heritage management, not least in order to encourage confidence in potential international funding agencies, who will need to be assured of the relevance of their contribution and the security of their investment. Pilot Feasibility Studies have been carried out within each of the countries, chosen on the basis of the achievability of the project; the urgency of the intervention required; and the viability of the proposal for restoration or re-use. The next stage is the identification of 'flagship' projects for funding bids with the aim of rehabilitating

prominent sites within the countries in order to achieve the impact and snowball effect which will encourage further endeavour. These will be presented at a funding conference in Verona in May 2008.

This project is a tool providing mechanisms which are designed to help the national authorities in building capacity, bringing the participants together in a common cause, with a view to them learning from each other, sharing expertise and encouraging self examination within institutions. The reflection which is prompted by a project of this sort, is itself a positive outcome which might well act as a spur to increasing efficiency and mobilising resources in the countries which might then attract larger international investment. All institutions in all countries tend to respond to new circumstances and requirements by the addition of new activities and protocols which later, when circumstances change again, appear to be irrational, counter-productive or utterly absurd.¹¹ The analysis of how things should work within the institutions, balancing national and local responsibilities, should have the beneficial effect of streamlining processes which have grown unwieldy and inefficient. These processes should be both transparent and explicable, engendering confidence in both funding bodies and the general public, which is the ultimate beneficiary and guarantor of the activities. Public understanding and support for heritage protection is crucial in prompting the political engagement and action without which protection will not take place, but there is an inherent circularity which renders this difficult to achieve: support will follow the success on which support itself depends. It has been a consistent aim of the project to ensure that the processes become embedded within the institutions and that public approval is solicited and rewarded in order to ensure that the celebration and enhancement of the cultural heritage remains central to national concerns as a vital and defining element of nation and region. It is the intention of the CoE and the EC that following this generic activity, support of the countries will continue on a case by case, at need basis, tailored to individual national requirements.

The IRPP/SAAH has been a ground-breaking initiative which has achieved its initial purpose of identifying significant sites across a wide spectrum, from Roman theatres and baths to twentieth-century power plants and coal mines, extending through the inclusion of the latter the definition of the monumental protectable heritage beyond the traditional churches, mosques, castles and houses, which hitherto had been the focus of heritage activity in South East Europe. The project has enabled these buildings and sites to become candidates for funding, placing the heritage at the heart of rehabilitation initiatives. The second major aim of the project, to ensure the institutionalisation of the principles and the methodology, is a longer term, continuing process which initially found readier acceptance in some countries than others. Acceptance, and the ability to grasp new approaches, varied according to national political and management circumstances, experience and ambitions. That all can now see the benefit of sharing strategies and objectives suggests that following the general acceptance of various conventions, guidance and protocols, the countries, provided they attract the necessary financial investment, will continue to work towards the adoption of the appropriate institutional procedures. But in all countries this modernisation will be a protracted process, continuing long after the life of a project which is too specific in scope to effect radical change on its

own to long established cultural practices and expectations. Much will depend upon the timetable for the further expansion of the EU and the related convergence of political, economic and social structures which will have a direct impact on the cultural heritage and its management. Some small procedural convergence has already occurred: most of the countries have accepted the European Core Data Standard for buildings and sites, as a guide to best practice in documentation, and its translation in 2004 into the national language in Montenegro, under the auspices of the CoE, has set a precedent for full implementation within the region.¹²

Although significant progress has been made, there are clear lessons to be learned from such a wide-ranging multilateral project. The first is that although the countries have been advised to concentrate on the achievable, they were not set a good example at the start in being encouraged to select more buildings and sites than were reasonably manageable. The assessment process leading to the submission of bids for funding is lengthy and detailed, requiring considerable expertise. The process is not simply an addition to an existing task but a job in itself which requires continuity of personnel and the learning of new procedures, so in under-funded and under-staffed institutions



Fig. 8

Aladza Mosque, Foca, Bosnia and Herzegovina; 1550-1, destroyed 1992-5



Fig. 9
Bazaar of Korca, Albania, nineteenth century

subject to changing political, management and financial regimes, delays and occasional disillusionment became inevitable. Too often the project co-ordinators have shouldered the whole burden of the new tasks without adequate political or institutional support or acknowledgement, with a consequent risk of failure and erosion of confidence, the opposite of the intentions of the project. Confidence building, a key objective, is an intangible aim, observable and anecdotally reportable, but not readily measurable.

The second major lesson is that the adoption of new methodologies has conceptual as well as merely mechanical implications. It has proved very difficult for some representatives to understand not only the need to summarise information and present that which is significant, but also to develop the ability to produce the 'executive summary' beloved of politicians and funding agencies in Western Europe. Writing the one side of A4 which states the significance of the building, the viability of the proposal and the security of the management structure is a skill which must be acquired. Recognising that all information is not of equal value or significance to an outsider is a hard lesson for the committed professional in any culture, so the initial inability to understand that most people will not read all of most documents (so missing the vital point buried at the bottom of page twenty-five) should not perhaps have been a surprise. The skills required to present the information in a public forum must also be learned: the use of the ubiquitous Power Point encourages the mistaken notion that the new technology, utilising traditional text and illustrations, will make a convincing case when the format actually demands a rethinking of how the message might best be communicated.

These difficulties have been procedural, underlining the need for continuing professional training, and supporting arguments for increasing the numbers of expert staff in run-down institutions. They do not reflect on the architectural historical and archaeological expertise of individuals within the countries which is high and generously provided: hence the cumulative value of the sites selected as an indicator of the depth and range of the Balkan architectural heritage at the dawn of the twenty-first century. But there is an obvious need for training in the principles and practice of modern conservation and restoration skills as well as in project management techniques, so long as the adoption of western performance indicators does not lead to the familiar triumph of process over product, of the measurable over the intangible.

The process of determining how projects might contribute towards the rehabilitation of sites and monuments in their broader context has illustrated recurrent problems in heritage and environmental management: how to balance sustainable growth with the retention of historic centres; how to encourage and accommodate tourism without compromising the qualities which attract tourists in the first place; how to regulate against inappropriate or illegal interventions; how to deal with traffic; how to enlist the support of the indigenous population through education and demonstration of the benefits of maintaining historic buildings rather than knocking them down and starting again; how to integrate the cultural heritage into overall master plans, ensuring that historic buildings do not play second fiddle to urban planning; how to ensure collaboration between the various public and private interested parties and the responsible authorities; how to finance or otherwise enable restoration schemes, complicated by a new climate of privatisation of ownership and a consequent shift of responsibilities from state to individual; in short, how to balance the maintenance of the integrity of the historic site with the requirements for sustainable growth.

These problems and questions are all strikingly reminiscent of those which were identified in 1975 during European Architectural Heritage Year, which culminated in the European Charter of the Architectural Heritage and the Amsterdam Declaration, wherein the concept of integrated heritage conservation was introduced. This centres on the idea that architectural conservation should not be limited to the traditionally monumental but should be a major town and country planning objective in the service of revitalisation. The IRPP/SAAH project has been carried out in this spirit. That the problems and questions of thirty years ago are still with us does not indicate that we have not made progress; rather it confirms that the areas of interest and concern are ever-widening, the numbers of those involved ever-increasing, that problems recur in changing contexts, and that the protection, promotion and celebration of our common European heritage remains a continuing obligation of boundless scope and complexity.

NOTES

1. The programme was originally designated Technical Assistance. It is now known officially as the Technical Co-operation and Consultancy Programme related to the Integrated Conservation of the Cultural Heritage.
2. See *Guidance on Urban Rehabilitation*, Strasbourg 2004.
3. See *European Cultural Heritage: collected texts and review of policies and practice*, 2 volumes, Strasbourg 2002.
4. N. Fojut, 'The Council of Europe', English Heritage *Conservation Bulletin* 50, Autumn 2004, 4.
5. *Urban rehabilitation policy in Tbilisi (Georgia)*, Strasbourg 2002.
6. It is acknowledged however by UNESCO which has recognised thirty-three cultural and natural World Heritage Sites in the region, 'of outstanding universal value'. The most recent of these, the sixteenth-century Mehmed Pasa Sokolovic Bridge in Visegrad, Bosnia and Herzegovina, immortalised in Ivo Andric's great novel *The Bridge over the Drina*, was inscribed in 2007.
7. See *Guidance on the development of legislation and administration systems in the field of cultural heritage*, Strasbourg 2000.
8. *Guidance on Heritage Assessment*, Strasbourg 2005.
9. The sixteenth-century Aladza mosque, Foca, Bosnia and Herzegovina, is a good example. The mosque was destroyed during the 1992-5 war and its fragments scattered on a mass grave. These will be retrieved and the mosque reconstructed on the basis of comprehensive documentation, in order to encourage the return of refugees and to demonstrate that such crimes will not ultimately triumph.
10. The assessments and lists are also available on the CoE website (www.coe.int).
11. cf. Primo Levi's eloquent account of adding chloride to paint as an anti-liverng strategy, and predicting that this might well become redundant or even counter-productive, when supplies of raw materials improve, but nobody will remember why it was introduced in the first place (P. Levi, *The Periodic Table*, London 1984, 147-59).
12. *Guidance on Inventory and Documentation of the Cultural Heritage*, Strasbourg 2001, translated as *Vodic za inventar i dokumentaciju kulturnog nasljedja*. A Macedonian translation is also now in progress.

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