

NARRATIVES OF HISTORY, NARRATIVES OF CHANGE: THE CONTINUING CREATION OF HERITAGE AT THE LEDNICE-VALTICE MONUMENT ZONE

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After crossing the “Mikulov” Austrian-Czech border into Southern Moravia, one’s eye is immediately drawn to the smooth, undulating Czech landscape and the architecture that graces it. Passing through winding allées and vineyards, the visitor counts neo-Greek follies and eventually stops short at an enormous Baroque castle in the town of Valtice that casts a shadow on the small-sized town buildings below it. To the north of Valtice Castle, still more allées lead to Valtice’s sprawling neo-gothic counterpart, Lednice Castle, and the adjacent English-style park that contains artificial islands and an enormous “Moorish” minaret. For over six centuries, ending in 1945, this area served as the ducal seat of the Liechtenstein family.

Today, after five decades of state management, the 220 square kilometer area surrounding Valtice and Lednice enjoys the status of a nationally recognized Monument Zone, as well as of UNESCO World Heritage Site for its unique qualities. The cultural landscape also continues to bear the stamp of socialism’s interpretation and representation. While Austrian tourist visitation has increased and international collaborative conservation projects have been carried out, on the surface there seems to be essentially no change in the statements on Czech national identity found at this site of premier status.

National Narratives

As with the other two hundred heritage sites in the Czech Republic, the past fifty-five years of the socialist and post-socialist periods have seen Lednice-Valtice used for the dissemination of official narratives on Czech national identity. While the Monument Zone appeals to tourists as the natural landscape and historic site it is advertised to be, much of its very physical fabric represents a deliberate creation by the previous socialist-era management. In a neat reduction of the former Liechtenstein political epicenter to a group of rather large art objects, the socialist interpretation allows for the easy naturalization of a foreign, bourgeois past. In this way, a former political seat of power is reduced to a form of cultural wealth that is smoothly claimed by a new owner.

With the change of governmental regimes in 1989, historic sites throughout formerly communist Europe took on new significance as emergent opportunities to create contemporary interpretations of all types of histories, both distant and recent. By the late 1990s in Southern Moravia, however, no visible changes could be perceived in the definition, presentation, or interpretation of the local historic built environment. In the Lednice-Valtice Monument Zone, management appeared to be continuing on its previous course. For example, legislation declared the Monument Zone a “national cultural landscape,” (Decree no. 484, of 10 September 1992). Regular management continued, including the placement of two sets of signs throughout the Monument Zone. Also, the diverse uses that had existed to that time – administrative, museum, and housing – continued uninterrupted. Tours at the Valtice and Lednice Castle museums within the Zone remained essentially unchanged from the pre-1989 era. Their narratives of national identity have continued to tout the remarkable art and architecture of these two spaces and avoid all political commentary in their presentations; in parallel, the state-produced literature has maintained a similar approach in brochures on these sites, such as *Zámek Valtice* and *Zámek Lednice*.

With closer examination, subtle post-1989 changes to the Czech narrative on national identity can be located within the Monument Zone, although their occurrence is rare and de-emphasized. In a room adjacent to the main exhibition space in the Valtice Castle Museum, the visitor can find the Monument Zone’s single overt reference to such changes since 1989. The final panel in a display on the Castle’s history briefly notes the post-1945 history of the Castle, including the 1960s installation of a museum. It offers a short reflection on the creation of the museum from the rubble left behind after the Second World War – namely, the arbitrary selection of the eighteenth-century Rococo period for presentation. Documented with a few mid-century photographs, this statement on the 1957-1962 preparation of the narrative on national identity presupposes an understanding of Castle’s overriding value as an aesthetic one. While the narrative at the Valtice Castle Museum – expressed in the display, the obligatory guided tour, and in the reconstructed fabric of the monument itself – maintains its pre-1989 appearance, the current negotiation of modest modifications to this narrative reflect powerful debates that remain out-of-view to the general visitor. As in the socialist period, today’s

negotiation of narratives on national identity displayed at Czech heritage sites does not take place within general political or societal circles, but primarily unfolds among a narrow community of state-employees, the preservationists. Stepping into this community of administrators, the apparently static versions of state identity become less fixed, with their place taken by negotiated histories and continuing debates over the appropriate physical intervention into, representation of, and organization of state heritage.

Lednice-Valtice and Czech Preservation

Located in the very south-central tip of Southern Moravia, about 60 miles north of Vienna, the Lednice-Valtice Monument Zone encompasses an architecturally striking ensemble of two major castles (Valtice, Lednice), eighteen small castles or follies, three medieval ponds, Baroque gardens and picturesque English landscapes. The area surrounding the Valtice Castle corresponds to the former Liechtenstein ducal seat of residence which the noble family occupied from the thirteenth century up to the property's nationalization by Czechoslovakia in 1945 under the Beneš Decrees. By inscribing their presence onto the estate through interventions into the landscape and the built environment, the Liechtensteins self-consciously manipulated their holdings to convey a specific image. This mapping in the nineteenth-century resulted in the current predominant features of the Monument Zone – eighteen large follies and the landscape they grace, a romanticizing imitation of exotic cultures and of the Ancient world. Reflecting the tastes of the day, this nineteenth-century striving to incorporate the foreign into the domestic environment involved an objectification of the perceived foreign “other,” its modification for local tastes, and its ensuing submission to its new owners through their manipulation of it. Since the nationalization of the Liechtenstein property, inscription of identity onto the site has become a pursuit of both the socialist and post-socialist Czech states. Through creating “heritage,” these two periods have laid claim to physical space and its embodied past, as well as left their mark upon it. In the case of the Valtice Castle Museum, this mark takes the form of a completely negotiated display, one that has as little to do with its supposed eighteenth-century origins as the Liechtensteins' nineteenth-century creations had to do with the Antique period.

The uni-dimensional, completely apolitical narrative found in the Valtice and Lednice Castle museums has been cultivated at all of Southern Moravia's major historic sites. The historic built environment of this region of the Czech Republic falls under the care of one of seven regional administrative institutes that manage state heritage throughout the Czech Republic. Each State Institute for the Care of Monuments (*Státní ústav pro památkovou péči*) understands its legal mandate to care for the historic built environment to include: ranking all historic buildings according to heritage classifications; determination of appropriate uses for individual heritage sites; regulation of physical change to all buildings of architectural importance in its region, regardless of classification; and supervision and execution of restoration and conservation projects. In addition, each Institute is legally responsible for the management, maintenance and presentation of major sites that are classified as a “national monument” (*národní památka*) or “national heritage” (*národní dědictví*) in more contemporary terminology. The forerunners of these State Institutes came into existence under legislation of 1958 (Act No. 22; Slovak equivalent Act 7/1958) that defined historic monuments and outlined how they would be managed. Modified only in 1987 (Act no. 20, 30 March 1987) and 1992 (Act no. 242, 14 April 1992; supplement to Act 20/1987), the legal understanding of heritage management has remained close to unchanged since the conception arrived at in the 1950s.

At the Southern Moravian Institute, as elsewhere, the contemporary official narratives on identity are formulated by a community of state administrators who enjoy the unique qualifications for this task. Each preservationist (colloquially, *památkář*) employed at the Institute hails from one of a number of backgrounds that include architecture, art history, fine arts conservation, and management. The dominant professions indicate the Institute's conception of its task – to supervise change to historic sites from an aesthetic point of view. Significantly, the professional cadre which staffs these Institutes, together with their sense of professional identity, have only undergone minor changes since the 1989 Velvet Revolution.

The modest changes that have occurred in the negotiation of national narratives of identity since 1989 have figured as outgrowths of previously existing conceptions within the profession. Among Southern Moravian preservationists in 1997 and 1999, the burning questions related to heritage did not touch on the monuments' political meaning or relationship to the recent socialist past, but rather ran along the lines of well-established debates – those of the appropriate treatment of historic sites.

Debates on the most appropriate physical intervention into historic building fabric have a long-standing history among preservationists in the Czech Republic and form one of the points with which individuals position themselves in local struggles for power. From an outsider's point of view, the main issues which preservationists argued in the late 1990s frequently appeared to be of a theoretical nature. Discussions

frequently referenced Czech preservation's theoretical foundations, as well as bourgeois-era theories on aesthetics, particularly those of the late nineteenth-century Vienna School art historians Alois Reigl and Max Dvořák. These scholars' views on the primacy of original building fabric for the achievement of "authenticity" or "age value" shaped Czech preservation under socialism, as post-war Czech preservationists adopted pre-World War Two attitudes. As written sources reveal, during the socialist era professional debates centered around two approaches to the maintenance of monuments that were derived from nineteenth-century concepts of "age value" – the "analytical" approach, referring to the presentation of a pastiche of styles on a single monument, and the "reconstructive," denoting the privileging of one style through the rebuilding of any necessary, yet missing elements. While the "analytical" crowd eventually won out in the 1960s under the leadership of Josef Štulc, these debates continue to exert a decisive influence today.

Grounding themselves in the theories of the Vienna School, preservationists in the 1990s addressed questions of interventions into buildings' physical fabric through their socialist-era discourse on heritage management. These concerns ranged from the very general to the very specific. At one end of the spectrum, one preservationist found in 1996 that his theory-oriented question of "What exactly did Max Dvořák mean?," referring to Dvořák's 1916 *Katechismus der Denkmalpflege*, raised a vociferous debate in discussions among nationally prominent administrators in Prague on impending preservation legislation. At the opposite end of the spectrum, concerns over the specifics of appropriate interventions elicited diverse interpretations of Czech preservation theory. In the summer of 1996, Czech conservation students adamantly defended the "reconstructive" practice of sculpting new statues to replace deteriorated originals on minor historic buildings. The students judged the quality of such work through the contemporary artist's success at capturing the "spirit" of the original sculpture. They juxtaposed this to the completely fantasy "reconstructive" work which their teachers, they asserted in joking, had practiced on Renaissance frescoes of a well-known palace. Three summers later, in 1999, a castle curator/director took an almost opposite point of view in his complaints about the "disgusting" copy statues intended to replace deteriorating originals in his castle's park. In addition to finding them ridiculous, as evidenced by their being too large to fit through the workshop doors, the curator/director criticized them as representative of poor intervention techniques for their "reconstructive" approach that would eliminate original artwork.

These theoretically grounded debates offered preservationists a means of positioning themselves as enlightened professionals vis-à-vis the standing expectations of their field, and in turn of affiliating themselves with particular individuals who commanded local power. The "restoration" of the Valtice Castle Museum rooms noted above represents something of a problematic past in the light of these debates. The "restored" rooms today smack of a lack of professionalism, of a period before Czech conservation had truly come into its own and began to operate according to standards shared by most Western European countries. "It's completely constructed out of fantasies. Yes, it's about as authentic as your Disneyland," a highly-placed official confessed to me in the summer of 1996. By grounding his remarks in the terms of his profession's discourse on expertise, this middle-aged and extremely well-established professional found an avenue to handle the troubling nature of the historic displays he must today defend, given his position.

The "reconstructive" fantasy restorations of 1960s socialism represent a more annoying thorn in the side of certain state administrators for whom this heritage touches on deeper issues. In the summer of 1999, the curator/director of the Jaroměřice Castle, not far from Lednice-Valtice, spontaneously launched into a horrified recitation of the lies he feels he has to perpetuate every day when giving tours – notably, that his museum displays are inauthentic and only represent a history of the preservation profession, and not of his Castle. Stepping into a display area, he explained, "You can't imagine how horrible I feel while telling people, every day, about this room. There's nothing in this room that relates to the family that lived here – that painting above the sofa isn't them; this wasn't their furniture. We don't even really know what was ever in here."

The relationship of the Jaroměřice exhibition to socialism's invented displays, and by extension to the post-socialist present, however, remains undiscussed. Rather, it is the debates within the preservation community which unfold in the well-known discourse of theory and defend a particular means of restoration, as well as a specific individual, that disturb this young curator and drive his passion for the most appropriate display possible. As struggles for theoretical professionalism completely skirt political issues, they confirm and perpetuate the administrators' conception of preservation as a self-contained and self-defined profession.

Professional Narratives

The professional discourse which this community has engaged in historically also provides it a means of formulating its professional identity, although the changes to its professional narratives of identity are as de-emphasized as those to the national ones. Through invoking the historic discourse of their profession,

preservationists maintain their claim to the unique power to interpret the past, understood as the ability to classify this past according to its artistic style and conserve it physically. As cultural capital, in the sense outlined by theoretician Pierre Bourdieu, preservationists' knowledge of art history and architectural conservation allows them to perpetuate their self-conception as a non-political, professional body, whose work is also non-political and professional in nature.

The use of this form of cultural capital can be clearly noted in the training materials, which border on lessons, given to castle museum tour guides who are obliged to study state-prepared materials on castles' value. In literature such as the 1990 *The Tour of Valtice Castle*, preservationists from the regional Institute have created in-depth art history lessons exclusively for tour guides, to augment their understanding of the tour narrative the Institute also created for the Castle. While pedantic for North American tastes, *The Tour of Valtice Castle* provides an excellent outline of art history, and also asserts the preservationists' superior knowledge of the topic.

Claiming this unique power to interpret history, preservationists do not view their work as a site of political struggle, but rather as an one that transcends political eras through its objective concern with aesthetic value. As confirmed by restoration architects and major administrators, preservationists have never seen their work as a site of political struggle, but rather as an independent profession which, like others, has simply weathered the storms of various political eras. As expressed to me by a regionally significant Czech preservationist in the summer of 1996, "Oh no, of course not. The preservation and care of monuments have never been subject to politics in our country. It has always remained an independent profession, independent of political influence. Both during socialism and now." By asserting a non-political nature of their profession, preservationists have continued to avoid questions of the past neatly, as they establish foundations that cannot be contested in the future. As in the recent past, their discourse has also camouflaged the multi-faceted relationships of power at the national level, allowing them to suggest that a regime's political aims take a second place to the demonstration of competence in their field.

While the Czech Republic has adopted the socialist-era state agencies, cadre, training facilities, and theoretical base, in the navigation of the new, profit-oriented waters of the free market, preservationists are faced with challenging issues that shake their inherited sense of professional identity. With this, the influences of a new, Western-style free market are gradually becoming visible in Czech preservation circles. Preservationists' narratives of self-conception are fraying at the edges as the object of their professional endeavors, "heritage," expands beyond the narrow tracks laid by socialism. As the underlying issues are not openly addressed in the existing professional structures, their influence on narratives of identity primarily relates to individuals' personal formulations of identity, rather than the collective one.

This arena of debate within the preservation community centers around the more practical questions of heritage financing and related uses. Such concerns that reach local preservationists through previously-established channels meet open acceptance and are easily incorporated into work schedules, as well as expectations of self. Decisions taken at the national level, for example, have introduced profit-generating activities such as Open-Door Days at the Museum and Heritage Days. In these endeavors some administrators, such as the young curator/director of the Lysice castle, enjoy success through implementing national directives well and with innovation. In the summer of 1998, the Lysice castle's curator/director had no difficulty integrating a half-day meeting on future profit-making activities – conducted with local politicians, a member of the Czech Parliament, local state administrators, and an American "colleague" – with her concerns over security, conservation concerns for ancient Japanese armor, and the replanting of trees in the Renaissance garden. Already by that time, the curator/director of Lysice had developed a reputation of successfully meeting expectations of her, together with implementing other programs, and had attracted the attention of local political administrators. Her and others' success largely depends on individual entrepreneurial ambitions; her flexibility in adopting these new measures reflects an acceptance of directives from the powers that be in the central heritage management offices in Prague.

When faced with impending changes at a more personal level, however, preservation officials experience difficulty in navigating these foreign waters. In 1997 a high-ranking administrator mentioned to me his concern that professional – meaning state-run – preservation would soon be completely erased from the Czech landscape. Debates over legislation then under preparation in Prague had him anxious whether, as he put it, "we will continue to exist at all." Two years later, in 1999, with the Southern Moravian Institute still in place, this administrator began to face increasing challenges from a Western-style market, such as negotiations with potential buyers of large heritage sites and the introduction of more profit-making activities into the monuments under his employees' charge.

These tasks did not daunt this official, as in the late 1990s he had successfully participated in discussions on future legislation with other preservationists in Prague, helped realize a tri-national conservation project while satisfying Czech legal requirements, hired foreign workers in times of financial duress, and negotiated with foreign entities for the purchase and appropriate use of historic buildings. These achievements index the powerful intelligence, organization skills, and political savvy that allowed him to rise high among preservation professionals in Southern Moravia. Like his younger colleagues, the innovative curator/directors, this middle-aged professional can manage the aspects of a free-market economy when it takes a familiar form.

While capable of successfully moving through familiar straits, at the personal level this administrator appeared overwhelmed by the personal demands apparently put on him by the free-market approach. While leading a staff meeting for all castle curator/directors in Southern Moravia, he blurted out that everyone would need to work harder, or, “face losing their job.” Continuing with a Czech version of the well-known North American phrase, “those are simply the rules of the game,” *taká sou prostě pravidla hry*, he indicated his personal insecurity with the new, imported system that could potentially threaten his livelihood and for which he could not successfully find a place in the existing structures of professional identity. The shocked reaction of his employees and their sharp, yet bewildered commentaries released after his departure, indicated the younger professionals’ equal confusion at how to navigate the new system.

The negotiation of contemporary narratives on national identity in the Czech Republic follows the patterns of discourse and practices inherited from the days of socialism by a sole community of state administrators. Their conception of historic site management, together with their sense of professional identity, rides on socialist-era modifications of theories dating from the bourgeois-era of the late Hapsburg Empire. In this formulation, historic sites are primarily interpreted as apolitical art objects in a neat simplification of their charged histories as political and heritage centers. The post-socialist wholesale adoption of these patterns of discourse and practices indicates more than a continuous recycling of historic sites by political entities for the dissemination of narratives on national identity. The preservation community of state administrators has and continues to engage in internal struggles whose ramifications are felt indirectly on the national narratives on identity for which they are responsible. Although plagued by the incursion of Western economic demands, this community maintains its inherited sense of identity. Through successfully managing their full acceptance by Czech society, preservationists’ formulation of professional identity assures their continued place of primacy in heritage management and dictates the lines along which heritage interpretation can unfold.

References

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