
THE ETHICAL PROBLEMS OF ARCHITECTURAL RECONSTRUCTION – HUNGARIAN CASE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT: Modernist practice, the modernist way of conservation and restoration, is against historicism, against reconstruction. The main rule is: deceit, forgery, falsification is forbidden. Despite this, some reconstructions were undertaken in Hungary, and recently the pressure for reconstructions has become even greater. Unfortunately, the categories of listed buildings, open-air museums and Disneyland are sometimes mixed up by the public and even by decision makers.

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1. Introduction

Modernist practice, the modernist way of conservation and restoration is against historicism, against reconstruction. The main rule is: deceit, forgery, falsification is forbidden. The authentic history of a building should be preserved, and this history consists of all the periods of the building, including those of destructions.

Despite this, some reconstructions were undertaken in Hungary, and recently the pressure for reconstructions has become even greater. Unfortunately, the categories of listed buildings, open-air museums and Disneyland are sometimes mixed up by the public and even by decision makers.

In my article presents some old and recent examples of copies and reconstructions. My aim is to make clear what maybe ethically acceptable.

2. Old examples – antecedents

Copying buildings, rather part of buildings was quite common during the age of historicism. Especially cinquecento was fashionable in Budapest, where you can find – among others - a nice palazzo Strozzi built in 1884. A solution according to the ideas of the architecture of the period – we shouldn't criticize by today's ideas.

A huge exhibition was organized in the *City Park* of Budapest on the thousandth anniversary of the foundation of the Hungarian state, in 1896. The so-called “ethnographic village” was a part of the exhibition. It consisted of typical houses of 24 regions, and the church was compiled out of Transylvanian buildings. This project was underpinned by the scientific approach of the time; thus, this village is a predecessor of today’s open-air museums.

Another part of the exhibition, - *Vajdahunyad* castle - was made with less scientific, rather a picturesque architectural approach. It is a compilation of copies of famous buildings standing in various regions of historic Hungary. Three aspects were important: visual appearance, touristic attraction and national pride. This solution is a stage design, an early ancestor of Disneyland.



Fig.1 The castle of *Vajdahunyad* (*Hunedoara, Romania*) and the so-called *Vajdahunyad* castle in the *City Park* of Budapest; Photo: Ádám Arnóth

These late 19th century examples do not represent an ethical problem as they are neither conservations nor restorations, and these copies do not stand on their original location. The problem is the way of restoration using reconstructions without authentic documents. Some alterations were made in the case of the facade of *Ják* abbey restoring it at the very beginning of the 20th century to create a more regular building. In the middle ages the nave had a wooden ceiling that was replaced by a groined vault in the baroque times. This restoration reconstructed the mediaeval rib vaulting – not the unknown original one, but the imagination of the restorer.

The restoration of the ruins of the church of *Zsámbék* in the same period is considered the starting point of modernist restorations. The building was preserved as ruins, and the necessary additions were made from brick. However, the architect, *István Möller* even designed a reconstruction of this very building in Budapest (1932). Of course, nobody can mix up the new church and the original one, this new church indicates the temptation and the challenge of reconstruction even for the experts.

Rebuilding losses of WWII was not as common in Hungary as in some other countries, but we can find some copies as well, for example some residential houses in the castle district of Buda. The rebuilding of the bombed bridges of Budapest represents the two main ways of thinking. Some of them are proper representations of the Kraków Charter being partly reconstructions as the “exceptional motives related to the identity of the entire community” were obvious. In the case of the Elisabeth Bridge a totally new bridge was built, but the size, proportions and the suspending structure of it is reminiscent of the lost one.



Fig.2 The restored ruins of the church of Zsámbék and the church on Lehel place, Budapest; Photo: Ádám Arnóth

3. Recent, acceptable examples

One of the two towers of the Orthodox Church in Budapest collapsed in World War II. Reconstruction works began after the war, but they were not finished. Works recommenced about ten years ago. The missing tower will be a copy of the original twin which remained.

The ornaments of the art nouveau façade of a Budapest hospital could not survive because of the lack of maintenance. They could be reconstructed according to detailed researches in situ and investigations of documents.

The railway station in *Gödöllő* used to have the Royal Waiting Pavilion. Roofs, details, and decoration disappeared after World War II. They could be reconstructed recently according to the remaining documentation.



Fig.3 The Royal Waiting Pavilion in *Gödöllő* in 2007 (photo: Péter Klaniczay) and after the restoration/reconstruction; Photo: Ádám Arnóth

The Elephants' House of the Budapest Zoo used to have a minaret-like tower indicating the culture of the biotope of the animals, but it was pulled down just after completion in the 1910s because of the protest of Islamic states. It was reconstructed about 20 years ago – this time no protest arrived. Some of the smaller buildings were neglected, other disappeared in the zoo, and a few of them were recently reconstructed to regain the unique architecture of the zoo.



Fig.4 The Elephants' House and other reconstructed buildings in the Budapest Zoo; Photo: Ádám Arnóth

The Calvinist wooden church of *Miskolc* built in the Hungarian art nouveau style disappeared in a fire a few years ago. It could be rebuilt immediately using the original drawings and remains.

The old wooden bell tower of the *Tákos* Calvinist church collapsed in the 1930s, and it was replaced by a simple belfry. The original one was documented precisely, so it could be rebuilt in the 1970s.

Another old bell tower – *Nemesborzova* – was dismantled and set up in an open-air museum in the 1970s. A simple masonry tower was built in front of the church. The village was not pleased, and it had an exact copy built in 2000. This case shows even the difference of a preserved listed building and an exhibit of an open-air museum – in a strange, reversed way.



Fig.5 The bell tower of *Nemesborzova* in the open-air museum of *Szentendre*, and the reconstructed version on its original spot; Photo: Ádám Arnóth

The synagogue of *Mád* was built at the end of the 18th century in the *Tokaj* region. It was rather dilapidated, but it could be restored twenty years ago. The inner decoration was totally reconstructed. It is totally authentic made after in situ researches and old photographs, so it cannot be questioned from the point of view of ethics of reconstruction. On the other hand, the reconstructed interior reflects nothing of what happened to the Jewish community in the 1940s, where almost nobody survived in the settlement.

4. Recent, controversial examples

The remains of the gothic-renaissance royal palace of *Visegrád* were found in the 1930s. The courtyard remained in ruins after the first restoration works. Several scientific attempts were made to imagine the phases of the original building, but these proved impossible. Despite this, a version of the courtyard was built. This very reconstruction cannot be true as it isn't consistent with the rules of classical architectural forms, and no details were found as evidence of the rebuilt version.

Sometimes it seems we live not only in the age of fake news, but that of fake olds. The renaissance house of *Nyírbátor* survived as a distorted barn. 10 years ago, a new plan was made to reconstruct the "original" building using some fragments found by the researches. The 18th century parts were pulled down and a renaissance façade was built using much more fantasy than original fragments. The original building was supposed to be a regular one, although there is no evidence of this. It is a typical example of conjecture-based reconstruction.



Fig.6 The granary/castle of *Nyírbátor* around 1970 (photo: Lajos Dobos – in: *Örökség*, 2007, no. 2, p. 4), in the years 2005 and 2007; Photo: Ádám Arnóth

Füzér used to be one of the finest mediaeval castle ruins. Some roofs were made about 20 years ago to protect the most valuable and less collapsed parts of the ruin. Recently it was reconstructed according a 19th century ideology to create a proud, picturesque castle. The result is like *Kreuzenstein*, but without any original parts.

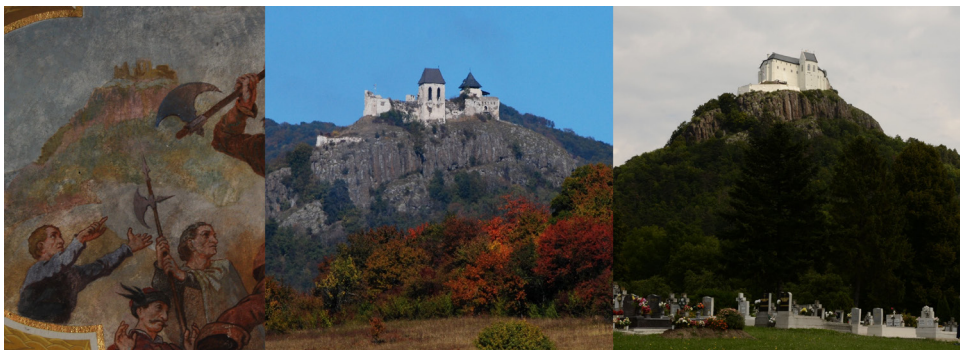


Fig.7 *Füzér* castle depicted as a ruin on the vaulting of the local parish church, and on photos taken in 2013 and 2016; Photo: Ádám Arnóth

Distorted copies of windows of another church were used for reconstructing the lost traceries of the chapel windows. Pieces of furniture – like the altarpiece – derive from the Budapest National Gallery without any connection with the castle; and they are bad, non-authentic versions of them. The whole bedroom was built recently from the floor to the vaulting. The green painted decoration is an imitation of a Gothic revival decoration painted in another castle reconstructed in the late 19th century. Only three aspects are important again: visual appearance, touristic attraction, national pride. It could have been accepted as a product of entertainment industry if it wouldn't have been built on the ruin covering the original surviving parts. For the visitors this architectural fantasy is the castle of *Füzér* itself, instead of the original one.

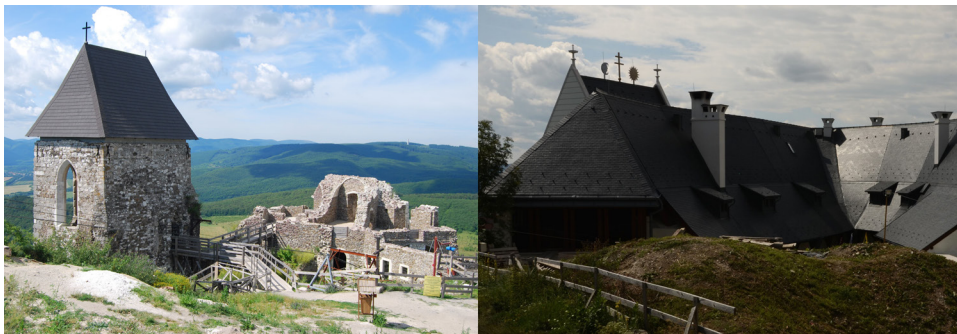


Fig.8 *Füzér* castle; photos were taken from the same spot, before and after the last intervention;
Photo: Ádám Arnóth

Budapest, Lónyay villa disappeared in World War II and its reconstruction began in the very end of the last century.

The concept of the townscape in the last 70 years was to maintain a green belt on the slope under the city walls, without any buildings. The reconstructed building is against this rule, so it doesn't fit to the surrounding. On the other hand, the building hasn't been reconstructed authentically, the materials and building technique are not according to the original. Unfortunately, this type of reconstruction becomes more and more common now in Hungary. Reconstruction of some parts of the palace of Buda has been decided. Some work has been begun. Some details – but not all of them - can be correct, but only as a form. The whole concept – “past under construction” - is questioned not only from the point of view of the ethics of conservation, but even from economic and political aspects, not to speak about good taste.



Fig.9 Buildings under reconstruction on the *Castle hill* of Budapest: Lónyay villa (around 2000) and the Riding School (2018); Photo: Ádám Arnóth

5. Conclusion

In any intervention all the categories of values by Riegl should be kept in balance even today (without neglecting historic and age values) to preserve authenticity and the document value of the heritage. Reconstructions cannot fulfil these demands, so they should be avoided; reconstructions can be accepted only in the cases of ‘vis major’ explained by the Kraków Charter.

I can add the following conditions:

- Reconstruction must be an exact copy of the original. This correctness depends on the available documents, fragments, research, etc. The period of non-existence is important as well from this point of view. Architectural concept of the original building and the way of execution can be important as well.

- The reconstruction should be harmful neither to the remaining original substance nor to the surroundings. The change of surroundings can make the reconstruction alien to the original location or even impossible.

And last, but not least:

- Ruins and contemporary architecture can have their risk, but they are more interesting from the point of view of architecture, and they can be much clearer from the point of view of ethics.

