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UDC: 711.3:39(437.3)"1996/2006"

DOI:10.2298/GEI1002070B

Accepted for publication: 29.09.2010.

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Heritage Documentation of Villages in the Czech Republic 1996 – 2008*

The article deals with the project realised in the Czech Republic on the turn of the 20th and 21st century based on a field research. Wide database of the traditional buildings in villages could be used as a practical manual for care of historical monuments and state administration, and for ethnology, as well.

Key Words: villages in the Czech Republic – urban concept – ground plan – building – the turn of the 20th and 21st century

Although natural sciences and the humanities tend to employ computers and computer models to study reality, field work remains an irreplaceable method of scientific research. This particularly applies to ethnology. In the Czech Republic, two interlinked research projects were undertaken between 1996 – 2009 which seem to be rare even in the broader European context with the aim of producing a formal textual description, photographic documentation, scientific evaluation and comprehensive heritage documentation of villages.

Background

The new political, economic and social circumstances in the Czech Republic after 1989 had a profound effect on villages both in terms of building and urban planning. The construction boom which had started in towns spilled over to villages as well. Yet, in spite of all the negative impacts villages provide va-

* Written in the frame of the grant project IZ 23925.

luable evidence of the material, social, and intellectual life of our predecessors and forge a link between the past, present and future generations. To this day localities can be found with more or less preserved original buildings including their ground plan and urban concept where we can identify residua of traditional building procedures, materials, structures, and the vocabulary of shapes including decoration, with surviving internal relationships and functions formed by a long-term and complicated historical development and with external relationships and links between the settlement and the surrounding cultivated landscape.

This heritage is unfortunately in danger due to many often irreversible reasons and ethnographers and preservationists rather surprisingly find that it has not been reliably and comprehensively studied, investigated and documented. Admittedly, folk building culture became the subject of specialized ethnographical interest as early as the 1880's (Adámek 1890, Hauer 1894, 1895, Houdek 1893, Jurkovič 1907) and the results of field surveys and heuristic works in the archives were published in many specialized works and essential, extensive monographs (Vavroušek and Wirth 1925, Mencl 1980, Frolec 1984 etc.). Also, a number of surveys of folk building are available, however, they were prepared using different methodologies and specified/modified to serve a given purpose (e.g., rescue, inventory lists, study of selected features, etc.) and most importantly: they have always covered only a particular delimited territory.

Project aims

The aim of the project, the author and head researcher of which is Pavel Bureš from the central office of the National Heritage Monument Institute in Prague, was the basic heritage documentation of all villages including originally independent suburbs in the Czech Republic with an emphasis on how the villages are today. After theoretical preparation and many discussions with members of the research team and appointed critics the conceptual and methodological principles were drawn up for the research team to follow - the important requirement being a uniform approach which would be as objective as possible. In 1995 the project was accepted in an open competition of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic and received financial support.

Method

Field surveys were the basic method of the whole research project. The collaborators were experienced scholars from regional offices of the National Heritage Monument Institute and universities or museums who were already well acquainted with the selected region appointed to them.

In each village the observation consisted of both internal and external values. The internal ones, i.e. architecture and urban-planning, covered the state of preservation and readability of the spatial arrangement, including the establishment of the basic plan type, existence and preservation of original village houses and other outstanding buildings and monuments (religious, noble, technical, manufacturing, social, cultural, utilitarian, etc.) as well as the presence of other imposing buildings with no particular qualities or constituting eye sore. External values were represented by the village panorama and its location in the terrain, distant views, and relationships with the surrounding landscape. The overall heritage monument value was determined as the sum of the partial values, with a possible consideration of the overwhelmingly positive or negative impact of some of them. The researchers then made the basic photographic documentation as thought appropriate to visually characterise the site.

Statistical data

Around forty scholars became gradually involved in the project surveying approximately 12 500 villages. The financial support by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic amounted to 5 300 000 Czech crowns.

Project results and outcomes

The basic outcomes of the project are brief formal descriptions of the site and a table overview – together they provide the basic heritage monument and structural historical evaluation of each village. They capture the current appearance of the locality, its location in the countryside, the type and state of preservation of the built environment, a list of historical buildings and their specific architectural features, important elements of the settlement structure and, finally, a numerically expressed classification of the heritage monument potential.

The final product of the project is therefore a comprehensive documentation of villages in the Czech Republic compiled by regions and in alphabetical order and a simultaneously created digital database with a structure that allows you to extend and enter new data.

At the same time, the database arising from the project provides guidance and support for optimizing the selection of valuable and so far neglected or even unnoticed individual structures and settlement units as a whole, for preparing proposals for their inclusion in the list of heritage monuments or protected areas, and for the expert and managerial components of care of historical monuments and state and local administration bodies. The documentation is also important for the popularisation of the cultural values and historical buildings in the countryside and for informing the general public. This aspect could provide

an impetus for a deeper study and understanding of the historical buildings in the countryside thus contributing to a shift in the opinions regarding the necessary protection and maintenance of this neglected cultural legacy and improving the appearance of the villages in general.

Although the project was principally intended as a practical manual for care of historical monuments and state administration, the results are also valuable for ethnology as a science: the collected and processed documentation forms a broad basis of comparative material and in vertical comparison shows the dynamics of the development (or destruction) of traditional building.

After a short spell of time and for the needs of the conference in Sirogojno we carried out an additional survey at another level – a questionnaire sent to the researchers who collaborated on the project. Although the questions were quite vague and we expected equally vague answers only a few of those addressed replied. Their comments, experience or impressions are partly generally applicable, partly very personal, some of them identical or very similar to the experience of the past generations of ethnographers; at any rate they are interesting and shed light on the background of team work. A brief summary follows:

- the project was timed at the last minute, at a period when the image of the built environment in the Czech and Moravian countryside was being rolled over by a building boom of unprecedented dimensions, promoted by grant programmes and loans by the state.

- each of the researchers noticed an incredibly fast disappearance of the traditional way of building or what had remained of it. A return to the site after a few months with an intention of additional research or re-photographing something often proved to be too late.

- there was no time to investigate the social relationships in the local community which also affect the image of the built environment, although these latent relationships or even tensions were felt by the researchers.

- with smaller or greater surprise all researchers discovered remarkable relics of the building culture which could be pronounced expressions of the traditional building culture and would deserve to be protected as heritage monuments, including localities outside the interest of researchers and preservationists.

- the material and financial affluence, previously unattainable, are not a guarantee of aesthetic proficiency (confirming the well-known saying that the greatest enemy of historical buildings in general is financial oversaturation).

- the new developments of houses on the edges of villages completely disrespect the historically developed urban planning structure of the settlement unit and the types and the external rendering of the dwellings.

- hospitality, one of the principal virtues in village communities is rapidly diminishing: an atmosphere of distrust against strangers operating in the village is generated by negative experiences with door-to-door salesmen and thieves.

- there are still marginal structures which are nevertheless important and remarkable expressions of human building activities relating to the cultural landscape and the environment in general (e.g. the seasonal fishermen's shelters on the lower Morava river).
- the care by the village communities of small religious structures is evident – bell-towers, vayside shrines, chapels – including the building of new ones.
- occasionally it is possible to come across buildings reconstructed by an informed owner in harmony with the local architecture which also provide a high standard of living.
- and finally, each of the respondents felt himself to be personally enriched both on the level of the acquired knowledge that can also be useful outside the project and on a purely spiritual level – by finding a new dimension in the relationship to the studied region.

The building culture of the Czech and Moravian countryside which seems to have profoundly changed at first glance, has retained, even at the turn of the millennia, many building features which have been carrying the continual development since “time immemorial”: sometimes the building may find a new function (a barn turned into a garage or workshop), elsewhere the tradition is adhered to without a perceivable rational reason. The realized project of the National Heritage Institute found those expressions, documented them and provided arguments for their protection.

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Photographs' descriptions:



1. HORKY, district Česká Lípa, Central Bohemia. A chapel and wooden houses. Foto: Pavel Bureš, 2000.



2. MLÝNY, district Tábor, South Bohemia. A homestead in the quadrilateral form. Foto: Pavel Bureš, 2000.



3. BUDEČ, district Jindřichův Hradec, South Bohemia. A homestead, a statue of the Snt. Jan Nepomuk in the foreground. Foto: Helena Beránková, 2006.



4. KOMŇA, district Uherské Hradiště, East Moravia. Out of the homestead standing larder. Foto: Helena Beránková, 2007.



5. STRÁNÍ, district Uherské Hradiště, East Moravia. Newly built family house. Foto: Helena Beránková, 2007.

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Кључне речи: села у Чешкој Републици, урбани концепт, план грађевине, 20. и 21. век

Пројекат под називом **Документовање наслеђа чешких села између 1996–2008**, реализован на крају 20. и почетком 21. века, имао је за циљ да документује уз помоћ писане речи, фотографија, и научног истраживања, сложени комплекс наслеђа чешких села. Теренски рад и тим стручњака чинили су основно средство и методологију пројекта. Истраживањ у сваком селу је обухватило спољне и унутрашње параметре. Као финални производ, настала је обимна и детаљна студија о селима у Чешкој Републици, подељена по регијама и абецеди, а истовремено, створена је и дигитална база података, која омогућава даље уношење нових података. Првобитно, пројекат је био намењен државној администрацији али се испоставило да етнологија такође може да се коритси прикупљеном грађом, јер она омогућава компарацију материјала и тема и показује развојни пут од грађења до уништавања многих традиционалних грађевина.