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The Conservation of Switzerland's Architectural Heritage

by Georg Carlen



In Tavel (FR), the basically Gothic parish church and the ossuary have been restored

Legislation, Organization and Finance

The conservation of our architectural heritage is generally regarded as a cultural task and therefore, because of Switzerland's federal structure, it is primarily a cantonal responsibility. Today nearly all the cantons have a full-time conservator assisted by a staff of varying size. Every canton has a law or decree relating to the conservation of historical monuments. The wording differs considerably, but in general they include provisions concerning, on the one hand, the placing of historical monuments under protection and the nature and scope of that protection, and, on the other, the financing of restoration, excavation and any expropriation aimed at safeguarding our architectural heritage. For example, Canton *Solothurn's*

decree defines as historical cultural monuments worth preserving «human achievements and evidence of past ages which should be conserved for the sake of their historical, artistic, scientific or folkloric value». *Expressly protected* under that decree are the old quarters of Solothurn and Olten, the village centre of Balthal, all castles and fortresses, immovable antiquities and archaeological finds. Furthermore, churches, chapels, public and corporate buildings, dwelling-houses and other buildings or parts of buildings etc. *can be protected*. In almost every canton objects actually protected are listed. On 30th November 1975 *Grisons*, the largest of the cantons, which is extremely rich in historical monuments, had some 250 listed objects. Canton *Grisons* protects almost exclusively those monuments to whose restoration

it has contributed financially. On the other hand, the wealthy canton of *Basle-City* has instituted the system of preventive protection, or official classification. This explains why one of the smallest cantons, which does, however, contain the historically and architecturally important City of *Basle*, protects more monuments (about 320) than Canton *Grisons*; and a further 200 are in the process of being placed under protection. Here, as in Canton *Grisons*, a very rigorous policy is pursued and a building seldom has to be deleted from the list of protected objects. But the record must be held by Canton *Vaud*, which protects some 1500 objects, of which only about two thirds are buildings, the others being individual articles like bells, chalices etc. This large number is due to the fact that the laws of Canton *Vaud*, too, provide for official classification, which

Left, the Swiss Credit Bank, restored in the fifties; centre, the Savoy Hotel, rebuilt with parts of the old façade, Paradeplatz, Zurich



was practised frequently for some years, though today a building is only placed under protection if its restoration has been subsidized by the canton or it is threatened with demolition. In addition to classification, which is nearly always extremely effective, Canton Vaud has a system of scheduling, which confers a lesser degree of protection on several thousand objects. Since the 1880s the *Confederation* has participated financially in monument conservation. The first *Federal Decree* on the subject dates from the year 1886, the current one from 1958. In it the Confederation «encourages the conservation of historical monuments by authorizing subsidies of up to 50 per cent of the cost of restoration, archaeological exploration, excavation or listing ...». The Confederation places under its protection every architectural monument which it collaborates in conserving by virtue of the Federal Decree of 1958. This protection consists essentially in entering in the land register the owner's obligation to maintain the monument and not to alter it in any way without the prior consent of the



In Laufen, Bern, town hall a banqueting hall before ...

federal authorities. Moreover, the public must be granted a specified measure of access to the monument. At present approximately 2000 buildings are under federal protection.

The Confederation promulgated the *Act concerning the Protection of Nature and the Landscape* in 1966 on the strength of Article 24 sexies of the Federal Constitution, approved by the people and the cantons in 1962. This had enshrined in the Constitution the Confederation's responsibility for protecting monuments, which had



... and after exploratory excavations

hitherto been regulated only by federal decree. The Act deals not so much with individual monuments as such as with «the character of landscapes and localities» as a whole. It stipulates that federal authorities, offices, institutions and services (dealing, for example, with post and telecommunications, railways, the military, national road construction) shall «take care, when carrying out the Confederation's tasks, to preserve the character of the landscapes and localities, historical sites, outstanding natural features and cultural monuments and to keep them intact where this is predominantly in the general interest». It lays on the Federal Council the obligation to draw up schedules of objects of national importance and authorizes the Confederation to contribute up to a maximum of 50 per cent of the cost of conserving landscapes, the character of localities, historical sites, outstanding natural features and cultural monuments worthy of protection. Furthermore, it authorizes the contractual acquisition, the placing under preventive and temporary protection and the expropriation of endangered objects of national importance. The last two measures, however, are seldom applied.

(Continuation and end in a next issue)

Aigle Castle, Vaud, is at present being restored

