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# The Conservation of Switzerland's Architectural Heritage

by Georg Carlen

Continuation and end

At federal level the Federal Department of the Interior is responsible for the protection of historical monuments, nature and landscapes. It is assisted in the conservation of historical monuments by the *Federal Commission for Monument Conservation*, composed of part-time members who are by profession art historians, archaeologists, university professors, independent architects and cantonal conservators. This part-time system – Switzerland has cantonal conservators but no federal monuments office – must be unique in Europe. The Commission for Monument Conservation works very closely with its sister organization, the *Federal Commission for the Protection of Nature and Landscapes*, which consists of specialists, politicians and representatives of private conservation societies.

*The 1978 federal credit for the conservation of monuments totals 12.5 million francs*, which is really not much when one considers that

the restoration of an average-sized cathedral or of Zurich main station, which was recently declared a historical monument, alone costs this sum. Federal Councillor Hürli-mann stated in parliament during the discussion of the Federal Council's report on its administration for 1977 that approximately 60 to 70 million francs were needed. In addition to the conservation credit, *6.5 million francs* were available to the Confederation for the *protection of nature and the landscape* in 1978; and besides the federal subsidies there are cantonal and communal grants.

## From the protection of individual monuments to en bloc conservation

The concept of conservation has broadened in recent decades. The destruction caused by the war and, in our country, primarily by the demolition mania and the new

building boom of the sixties and the first half of the seventies has gradually led to a recognition of the need to extend conservation far beyond cathedrals, churches, fortresses, castles, town halls and stately homes. The schedules which form the basis of monument conservation and the changes in scheduling methods bear witness to this. Thus, the scientific schedule *«Artistic and Historical Monuments of Switzerland»*, which has been published since the late twenties by the Society for Swiss Art History (11 000 members) and already numbers over 60 volumes, only went up to 1850 originally. Today it covers the whole of the 19th and the beginning of the twentieth century, at least in the rural areas. A work now in progress, the *Schedule of Modern Swiss Architecture*, will be devoted to the architectural heritage, principally urban, of the period from 1840 to 1920, while *The Swiss Farm-house* deals with rural architecture, which in our country is extremely varied and of a particularly high quality.

These are scientific schedules rather than critical assessments, so most cantons are also preparing detailed *site inventories* which will proceed from an individual study and evaluation of all pre-1920 buildings still in existence to an indication of the special characteristics and importance of architectural complexes and finally of whole sites. As most of these inventories will not be completed for several years, the Confederation decided in 1973 to set up an *Inventory of Sites in Switzerland deserving Protection*, which is based on the site as a unity and, taking account of the surroundings and views, lays down pro-

Experts working in the Abbatial of Einsiedeln (SZ)



tective perimeters around outstanding parts of localities. This inventory forms an important decision-making basis for the cantonal and communal planning and building authorities.

In practice, too, conservation takes account of the site *as a whole*. What would Berne Cathedral be without the magnificent old town, what would Romainmôtier Abbey be without its market town and its unique scenery? Most towns have set up commissions to examine, in collaboration with the conservator of historical monuments, all building applications which affect the historic town centre. The city of Zurich has its own conservator and a similar post has just been created in Berne. And in the villages, where conservation is essential for reasons other than tourism, interested circles are gradually stirring and forming foundations or group initiatives. The fruits of such efforts were especially apparent in the competition organized within the framework of European Architectural Heritage Year 1975, when Switzerland led with 12 prize-winning communes. The *Swiss National Heritage League*, with approximately 20 000 members in its cantonal and local sections, plays an important part in informing the people and inspiring them to action, and it participates in the work of restoration by making grants and providing expert advice.

*En bloc conservation*, of course, has social aspects as well, particularly in the big towns, where the historic centre has become the business quarter with the constant danger that dwelling-houses will be turned into offices or commercial premises.

A typical example of this is *Geneva*. Today the «upper town», which is the real historic centre, consists mainly of luxury flats and luxury businesses (art galleries, antique shops etc.). The craftsmen

and traditional small businesses have almost disappeared. Some other old quarters (like Coutance or Les Grottes) are inhabited mainly by poor people, including many of foreign origin. Both these extremes are undesirable, the former producing high site prices, which in turn lead to demolition and more profitable new buildings, and the latter resulting in the general neglect of the houses.

For a long time Niederdorf in *Zurich*, which comprises a large part of the old town on the right bank, saw the one-sided development of places of entertainment at the expense of residential accommodation. About 20 years ago, however, matters took a different turn. As a first step dilapidated houses were gutted and new flats and business installed in the old shell. This resulted in a partial loss of the historical building material. Today the aims of conservation and the retention of part of the population are born in mind during the process of rehabilitation.

An encouraging tendency has emerged in the «lower town» of *Fribourg*, inhabited since the 19th century, when this quarter was largely cut off from traffic by the re-routing of roads, by poor people who were looked down on by the residents of the «upper town». For some years restructuring has been in progress at three levels: 1) A considerable number of dwellings have been rehabilitated by the Association of Housing for the People, a charitable organization. This has enabled the local population to be retained and their standard of life improved. 2) In other houses large and comfortable flats have been installed, attracting middle-class families with children into the quarter. 3) The students and intellectuals of the university town of *Fribourg* are discovering the charm of the «lower town», with its romantic character, its sti-



Altar of 1489 in the restored church of Disentis (GR)

mulating atmosphere and the relative absence of traffic. More and more of them are going to live there, either in the renovated small flats or in the larger old ones whose lack of comfort is compensated for by an environment favourable to the exchange of ideas and to meditation. As they pay low rents and will in any case be leaving the town in a few years, they are prepared to put with minor inconveniences.

The smaller historic centres, particularly in *mountainous areas*, face a two-fold danger. On the one hand, some of the houses, and especially the farm buildings, are no longer in use because the population is moving away or giving up the traditional occupation of mountain farmer. The other danger comes from tourism, which often helps to disfigure localities and landscapes with its disproportionate buildings, but which also creates new jobs for the local inhabitants and can result in abandoned houses and agricultural being put to new use as holiday homes.

### Old materials – new scientific and technological methods

Materials present a major problem in the conservation of historical monuments. Admittedly, many of



Restaurated Market place of Solothurn.

the original materials are still available in Switzerland or in neighbouring countries, but they are often appreciably dearer than comparable modern materials or take longer to prepare, which adds to the cost.

Shingles made of larch or other wood, for example, which until quite recently were commonly used as *roofing material* for wooden houses and churches in many mountainous areas, can be obtained without great difficulty. However, a shingle roof today costs so much more than an «eternit» roof (slabs of asbestos cement) that there is a risk of the traditional material being supplanted by the new, as is happening to the stone slabs used in other mountainous areas. In the case of tiles the situation is better. In many places it has become customary to keep old tiles which are in good condition and use them again for re-roofing. Tile-works still produce the flat tile in its natural colour, which acquires a patina of vegetation soon after it is laid. Moreover, tiles can now be obtained with a slip which imitates the natural patina.

With regard to the substances

contained in *mortars and plasters*, to take another example, it was not only the advent of cement which led to a change in their composition. Recent scientific studies at the *Federal Polytechnic's Institute of Conservation in Zurich* have shown that in many traditional plasters the texture of the sand differs considerably from that in the plasters generally used today. Of the substances of which plasters can be composed, only slack lime presents any supply difficulties. It can be obtained from a few firms in Switzerland. Not infrequently, however, our specialist craftsmen (restorers, stucco-workers) have to send to South German pits for it.

Science and technology also help to determine the original condition of a monument. The trained eye of the art historian cannot always do this unaided. Colours may have changed in the course of the centuries, so microscopes and chemical tests are necessary to establish the facts. Today their use is taken for granted, thanks to the specialists of the Federal Polytechnic's Institute of Conservation and of the Swiss National Museum. In collaboration with the

*Laboratory for Stone Materials of the Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne*, the above Institute also tests newly marketed substances for cleaning, conserving and restoring sandstone, among other materials, which is rapidly deteriorating because of the high sulphur dioxide content of the air.

Conservation methods are acquiring a new scientific dimension through the increasing practice in Switzerland of *architectural analysis* and *mediaeval archaeology*. Conservators are daily confronted by the question of whether a building is worth preserving. Historical buildings often appear in the guise of the more recent past, which conceals their true architectural and artistic qualities and their history. Thus it frequently happens that a gypsum ceiling hides wooden beams from an earlier century, sometimes beautifully painted. In order to conduct their searches in a systematic manner, experts began a few years ago to examine masonry according to the methods of archaeological excavation. The results are so convincing and make the relevant technical and political decisions so much easier that two new professions have emerged: those of the academically trained mediaeval archaeologist and the technically trained architectural analyst.

The extension of monument protection to en bloc conservation and its new methodological and scientific dimension can only be successfully continued and developed if the people have the political will to make the necessary funds available. The constant growth in the numbers joining conservation societies, the spontaneous group initiatives and, not least, the positive outcome of many local plebiscites on the subject demonstrate that the idea of conservation is gaining ground in Switzerland.