

# Živá památka

Pavla Melková (ed.)  
Jorge Otero-Pailos

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## (RE)VISION OF MONUMENT CARE? (RE)VÍZIA PAMIATKOVEJ OCHRANY?

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In the past year, the Prague Institute of Planning and Development (Institut plánování rozvoje hlavního města Prahy - IPR Prague) issued the new publication *Živá památka* [Living Monument]. Based on the reflections of Jorge Otero-Pailos, professor and head of the heritage-protection program at the Columbia University School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation in New York, it also provides a series of essays by Czech and Slovak authors active in architecture, monument protection, or culture. As stated by its editor Pavla Melková, the goal of the publication is to “enrich the discussion on the wider possibilities of perceiving the monument and its protection, primarily in the area of connecting monuments to contemporary life.” (p. 11) To the words of Melková, a leading architect and theorist, it is nonetheless necessary to add the qualification that for certain texts, the goal is not merely to expand the framework of what the monument is and how best to integrate it within daily life. The authors of these essays made good use of the

opportunity to reflect on the various opinions regarding the way to restore monuments, or respectively their creative aspect. A reader aware of the activities in the field of heritage protection will be quick to grasp that these texts arose in reaction to the current controversies and atmosphere in both the Czech and Slovak settings. All the same, the standpoint toward restoration presented here represents only one side of the debate. Even the composition of the authors, set out on the title page alongside the publication data for the IPR Prague, indicating that among the texts there is not a single contributor representing monument-protection institutions, makes it clear that we should not expect a clash of widely differing opinions. Nonetheless, it is worth stressing that *Živá památka* is, metaphorically, a glove cast down, demanding its appropriate response.

Returning, though, to the central axis of the book, the main idea lies in the thoughts of Jorge Otero-Pailos, which provide a point of departure for the writings of the other authors.

His reflections take up the question of “experimental preservation”, theoretically supported through practice, testing the hypotheses of what this preservation should be and what it should accomplish. His aim is to shift the boundaries of the field, which at first glance might appear simply to undermine its very foundations. In reality, though, experimental preservation is an attempt to revitalise the conventions of the discipline. (p. 67)

One of the themes with which Otero-Pailos takes issue is the very selection of what becomes regarded as a monument, more precisely which objects, complexes, or urban compositions are viewed as monuments in terms of official preferences and ideologies, and which objects come into the purview of experimental preservation: “... experimental preservationists guard their freedom to choose objects that might be considered ugly or unsavory, or unworthy of preservation, objects that might have been ignored or excluded by official narratives, perhaps because they embody the material, social, and environmental costs of development which governments and corporations seldom account for.” (p. 15) Through various examples, he demonstrates how objects are selected to be worthy of preservation, simultaneously drawing attention to the consequences of this selection, reflected in any given society’s social relations and cultural identifications. He puts forward the idea that the chosen object is not merely material heritage but immaterial as well, since the object itself participates in a wide range of environmental, social, historical, or authorial relationships. In other words, it is not only the physical work but the surrounding context, the expanded perception of the objects. Otero-Pailos supports these ideas with examples where abandoned structures were adapted for new uses, became an inspiration for their user, and equally served as the unifying force for a new community. Confirming it as a verified and well-functioning method are several earlier instances, such as the exhibition in the French pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2018. Here, the French Institute displayed several instances of once-abandoned buildings adapted for new use, moreover with the advantage of concentrating new social communities among the users of the objects. The same theme of built structures at the edge of any form of attention, in fact, appears as central in several of the contributions contained in *Živá památka*.<sup>1</sup>

Other supporting examples that could help indicate the influence of a selected building on cultural-social identification while additionally casting into doubt the conventions of institutional preservation in selecting what is suitable for passing on to future generations, include the controversy around the Palace of the Republic in Berlin or the interventions of the Bosnian artist and historian Azra Akšamija. The Palace of the Republic, closed down right at the moment of German reunification in 1990, was a building that even after its demolition continues to divide society into two camps: one primarily East German, who could not imagine the city without the “People’s palace” of the former GDR, the site of Communist Party congresses along with cultural and scientific events, and the other primarily West German, who saw the Communist building and all its connotations as a deviation that needed to be removed to make way for a replica of the Baroque *Stadtschloss* that once occupied the site. (p. 19) This model serves Otero-Pailos as an explanation for the way that experimental preservationists select their objects of interest. These structures could, at the outset, be chosen only for orientation, since their hypothetical selection is only subsequently confirmed or repudiated by society, which often can see the values in them that official authorities may not. And, in the end, such should be the mission of preservation itself, representing collective interests over individual preferences. Moreover, he uses the same controversy to reveal how decisions regarding the selection of what will be protected and presented go on to influence our future, in other words how the choice of the “right” past shapes the shared future. Similar future-oriented questions, yet also ones indicating the influence of governmental and political ideologies on preservation, are brought up by another example – the project by Azra Akšamija entitled *Future Heritage Collection*, in which the residents of Sarajevo were asked to supply objects they found valuable. The choices they made, however, clashed with the official state narrative of a clear-cut political break with the former state of Yugoslavia: “From the perspective of Bosnia and Herzegovina, these Yugoslavian objects do not exist; and more, the obligation to account for them belonged to a nation that no longer exists.” (p. 24)

The ideas of Otero-Pailos, interwoven with the prevailing thoughts and theses of many other disciplines<sup>2</sup>, point the way toward

a discussion on the underlying principles for monument care – what should we save for future generations in the sense of tangible and intangible heritage and in what way. In addition, he manages to find telling illustrations of the drawbacks in institutional or governmental preservation practice. It is worth mentioning at this juncture the publication, now nearly twenty years old, *Zánik a vznik památkových péčí. Filozofie památkové péče* [The Fall and Rise of Preservation. A Preservation Philosophy], by Tomáš Hájek<sup>3</sup>, where the author raises, among other questions, his doubts as to whether there will be at the turn of the millennium any new and vital text for understanding current heritage questions that would parallel the publication at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries of the work of the Austrian professor Alois Riegl, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus*<sup>4</sup>. Bringing the ideas of experimental preservation into conjunction with the viewpoint of Tomáš Hájek, it almost seems as if the latter's 2005 text is a prediction: "Nothing is excluded: a return to the so-called outworn forms of care for cultural heritage, a massive shift of heritage care from the state sphere to the private, a new topography of what has heritage value and what does not."<sup>5</sup> Looking back to the turn of the millennium, we come across yet another theme that currently appears unchanging and perhaps even trivial, yet after reading the texts of Otero-Pailos comes to the forefront of attention. The present review has used the phrase "monuments care, and done so deliberately. Since 2002, however, experts in Slovakia have become accustomed to the legally defined terms "protection and restoration" of the heritage fund.<sup>6</sup> Otero-Pailos, however, speaks of "care" for heritage (primarily architectural) in the sense of working towards the improvement of human life, since it is human to care only about what has a meaning for one's own life: "The simple guarantee that the buildings will not collapse can never be a lifetime goal. Care for architecture is important for human life only insofar as it acts with respect to its improvement." (p. 73)

Drawing upon the principles set out in the texts of Jorge Otero-Pailosa are the previously mentioned essays by the Czech and Slovak experts. While Otero-Pailos poses serious questions with the lightness of a fresh wind capable of blowing away the ingrained conventions of the field, most of the texts by the other authors turn our attention back to the quotidian circumstances of the

Czech-Slovak milieu. Appearing as most urgent in this respect is the matter of the input of new architectural work into a historic substance or historic environment, with three authors immediately addressing the theme: architectural historian Rostislav Švácha, heritage expert for modern architecture Martina Mertová, and architect, theorist, and the volume's editor Pavla Melková. Švácha, in his contribution "How to Behave Well 'on a Full Slate'?", presents a brief historical portrait of the contextual versus the contrastive methods applied across the 20<sup>th</sup> century in architectural creation in the Czech environment.<sup>7</sup> In parallel, from his position as a member of the established heritage association "Club for Old Prague" (Klub Za starou Prahu), he also presents the criteria used by members of the association's board for evaluating new buildings in historic settings in terms of the association's annual awards. Among the criteria, for instance, is "quality" (of the architectural design) or "improvement of the locality" caused by the given intervention. Much in the spirit of Otero-Pailos, the board of the Club shows, through this last criterion (if listed merely as a "bonus"), how it views as crucial the well-selected function of the building and its benefits for the community.

Martina Mertová, in her "Context Then and Now (or the Rise and Fall of Heritage Architecture)", continues a theme found in her previous writings<sup>8</sup>, this being the idea of what she terms "heritage architecture", in this instance reacting to the current debates around the expansion of the Invalidovna, a monumental Baroque complex in Prague, as designed by the studio Petr Hájek Architekti. After capturing the development of what is summarised in the term "heritage architecture", in other words the form of new elements in a historic setting that "behave neutrally, ideally with the aid of traditional / traditionalist means of expression, i.e., forms to a significant extent arising from the use of historic or pre-modern approaches and materials" (p. 193), she continues to a polemic on the reactions sparked by the additions to the Invalidovna, accusing the criticisms of Petr Hájek's design of an inclination to such heritage architecture. As in the contribution by Švácha, Mertová similarly addresses the questions of new creation in a historic setting, on the contextuality of new elements and the degree of their contrast. Though Mertová's contribution clearly shows her preference for recognizably differentiated, contemporary forms that are a full-fledged display of



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the reviewed publication, p. 20.

“genuinely living architecture”<sup>9</sup>, her text does not assume too radical a stance.

By contrast, Pavla Melková’s “Connecting Monuments with Life” is marked by a clear and radical stance. Its genre might be more of a manifesto than an essay, seemingly not allowing any other possibility of opinion than the one declared by the author herself. And even if the text contains many positive moments inviting reflection, the manifesto-format shifts it to a level where one expects a “response” more in the form of a repudiation than the preferable discussion. The theme of connecting monuments to everyday life is far from new: it is a problem that professionals have had to address since the first decades of the previous century. Like Melková, several previous generations arrived at the possibility of contemporary additions, which to a certain degree is reflected in the previous articles by Švácha and Mertová. What we are now witnessing is how contemporary society accepts the interventions of past generations in historic built environments.

And we should admit that this recent past is something that is gladly swept away as unwanted, not even winning sympathy from the broader public. In other words, there is a need to undertake a deeper and more thorough investigation that would shed greater light on this problem. And even more, there is not one single path: as the author herself writes, what is important is openness. However, openness not only in discussion but also in opinions. What Melková regards as “monuments made to speak”<sup>10</sup>, which are frequently assigned her favourite credo of the “right to a new layer”, might be regarded by another expert as a miscomprehension of the issue. After all, society does not speak in the same language. A question in a similar spirit – conservation of the original state versus the need to bring it into current life – was in fact posed by the editor to Otero-Pailos himself in an interview included in the publication. Yet his answer is one where no radical opinions can be found. Highly aware of the complexity of the problem, he points out

how sensitive a matter it is to add a new part to a historic building when ensuring the link between modern life and cultural heritage.<sup>11</sup>

It could be said that the publication *Živá památka* contains within itself two worlds – the world of the experiment, holding as its ambition progress in the care for cultural heritage through infusing it with new visions, and the world of the everyday where we address the well-worn, indeed daily-experienced themes of many generations. New ways of thinking are there to be found not only in the contributions of Jorge Otero-Pailos, but also in the texts of architect Norbert Schmidt, stage designer Markéta Fantová, or architect Igor Machata, who themselves present investigations that show new methods useful in saving built heritage and bringing it into current life. And the

texts by researchers like Švácha and Mertová, or practitioners like Hájek and Melková, simultaneously point out that the theme of interventions in historic substance is not only relevant but indeed urgent.

The living monument – a combination of words that many generations have invoked. Now, though, viewed through the optics of experimentation. Preservation and experiment? Is this a terrifying thought? Yet to experiment means to repress the fear that keeps us confined to our expected paths, in a feeling of illusory security, in the error that the set path is the only (right) one. While reading “Living Monument”, I was gripped for a brief moment by a sense of fear. But at the same time, it was a fear that forced me to think.

**1** The theme of adaptation is treated by Markéta Fantová in “Transformation by Experience”, Radoslava Schmelzová in “Reflections on the site specific project Kladno +/- Záporno after fifteen years” and to a degree by Igor Machata in “Radical Protection”.

**2** Jorge Otero-Pailos based his reflections on theses taken from philosophy, psychoanalysis, or literary criticism.

**3** HÁJEK, Tomáš, 2005. *Zánik a vznik památkových péčí. Filozofie památkové péče*. Praha: Nakladatelství Epoque, p. 200.

**4** The original text “Der moderne Denkmalkultus” appeared in Czech translation in 2003: RIEGL, Alois. 2003. *Moderní památková péče*. Praha: Národní památkový ústav, ústřední pracoviště, p. 172.

**5** Hájek, T., 2005, p. 69.

**6** In Slovakia, through Act no. 49/2002 Coll., on Protection of the Heritage Fund.

**7** For more on the contrast method, see e.g.: ŠVÁCHA, Rostislav. 2022. The Method of Contrast and Its Decline after 1968. *Architektúra & urbanizmus*.

56(1 – 2), pp. 2 – 15. doi: <https://doi.org/10.31577/archandurb.2022.56.1-2.1>

**8** For example, the contributions at the conference “*Monuments and monument care in Czechoslovakia and other Central European countries during the second half of the 20th century*”, organised in 2021 by the Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, The National Heritage Institute and Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences. Accessible online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4CSpIGxk98&list=PL8y3LNGWcj82xvP3zm1OKZX3otSQPfu85>

**9** This is what Mertová terms what we should expect from the addition to the Invalidovna in Prague. Melková, P., 2022, p. 205.

**10** “Rozmluvení památky” [Making Monuments Speak] is one of the subheadings of Melková’s twenty-four page manifesto.

**11** Interview with Jorge Otero-Pailos “Od etiky kořistění k etice péče” [From an Ethics of Exploitation to an Ethics of Care], conducted by editor Pavla Melková. Melková, P., 2022, pp. 73 – 79.