

# An Exchange of Ideas and Experiences in Building Restoration

by Solveig Schulz

»Conservation of Buildings and Urban Areas«  
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## **Introduction: background and aims**

“Conservation of buildings and urban areas” was the topic of the conference held in March 1993 by the *Centre for the Built Environment in Western Sweden* and the *Department of Conservation of Buildings and Areas* at Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, Sweden. The conference was coordinated by Ingrid Appelbom Karsten of Oslo, and Marianne Ohlander, Boris Schönbeck and myself of Gothenburg.

A topic of investigation at the conference was the new political and economic situation in the former Eastern European countries, and how this affects contacts and cooperation between them and the Nordic countries. One of the aims laid out in the programme was to create opportunities for each side to benefit from the other’s experiences so that knowledge of European building heritage can be extended and made more accessible. It is essential that we develop our different traditions and exchange information on the maintenance and buildings and urban areas. As Scandinavians, we thought it urgent to relate negative experiences with many of the new materials and methods used in restoration, now that Western-style market economies are being introduced in the East. On the other hand, we were interested in learning about the present conservation situations in the Eastern European countries, as compared with those of earlier decades.

The 46 participants came from universities or conservation authorities in Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland and Sweden.

The conference focused on the following themes:

- ideals and principles in restoration practices;
- the question of urban rehabilitation;
- the relationship between industrial materials and methods used in building conservation and those requiring the skills of craftsmen;
- the organization and regulation of building conservation, and the need for the development of international networks between the West and the East.

Topics that were later taken up in smaller theme groups were first introduced in plenary lectures. The participants in the smaller, theme groups had chosen the themes and written papers prior to the conference. A final plenary discussion concluded the conference.

In this and in the following two articles, some of the main discussions are summarized. Here, conclusions from the final discussion and the discussion from the Ideals in Restoration theme group are presented. These two discussions turned out to be partly related. Next is an article by Ingrid Appelbom Karsten on the theme of Urban Rehabilitation. Third is an article by Ebbe Hædersdal on Craftsmanship and Building Materials.

## **Different levels of rehabilitation problems**

While choosing theme groups, some important differences in interest areas among the coun-



View from a street in Vilnius. By what means and methods will the historical but worn buildings be restored? Photo: Ingrid Appelbom Karsten

tries were already apparent. For example, all of the participants in the group dealing with materials and craftsmanship were from the Nordic countries. Also, questions and problems related to rehabilitation turned out to be perceived very differently by the Nordic countries on the one hand, and by the former Eastern European countries on the other hand. This became very obvious during the final discussion, led by *Christina von Arbin* of Stockholm and *Boris Schönbeck*.

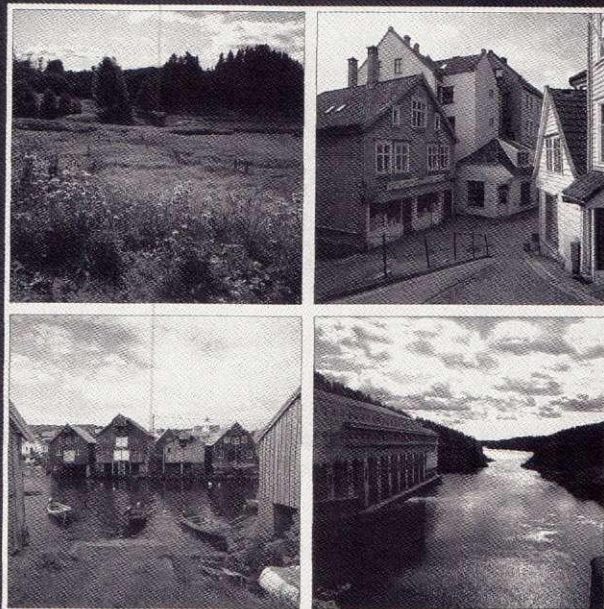
Since we in the Nordic countries have had periods of urban renewal with many demolitions of buildings and sections of cities, notably in Sweden during the 1970's, we wanted to discuss and share information with the other participants about how to restore a building's heritage in a practical fashion. We wished to raise questions about which methods and materials should be used, and which principles should be followed when working with older buildings. The message was: learn from our mistakes. Don't

let the market economy decide. We have seen how cement has replaced lime, how the use of synthetic paints has damaged the linseed oils business, not only in new construction, but also in renovations and restorations. The results for old buildings are often worse than if no restoration attempts had been made. Modern materials and methods might work very differently from the older ones; for example, they may be too strong or not porous enough, and we might thereby damage the old constructions. For these reasons, it is now time to rediscover the old techniques which had been developed and tested over hundreds of years.

Representatives from Poland and the Czech Republic reported on the enormity of problems of a different type in their countries. *Miroslav Baše* from Prague told that there are so many overwhelming environmental problems, such as smoke and other emissions in the air and pesticides in the soil, that the authorities do not have time to worry about building restoration.

## PLAN OF ACTION TO PRESERVE THE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Summary, including economic and administrative  
consequences of the Plan of Action



A new political program for preservation of the cultural heritage in Norway.

*Zbigniew Zuziak* from Krakow reported on a major problem there: how to replace the 200,000 coal stoves that heat apartments in the inner city.

These environmental questions are accompanied by legal and administrative problems. Very often it is not known who owns a particular piece of land or house, and therefore who should be responsible for its rehabilitation. The planning policies of the Communist era are no longer in effect, but it is not yet clear what will replace them. Many have looked to the market economy for hope, but as of yet private entrepreneurs have not started any large projects. A

Swedish participant pointed out that a market economy does not imply any restrictions at all. And *Dag Myklebust* from Oslo told about the new Norwegian "Plan of Action to preserve the cultural heritage" in which the Government also includes economic and administrative consequences. *Thomas Adlercreutz* from Stockholm who gave report from the theme group of conservation policies stressed upon the importance of democratic principles, so that planning must not be a concern mainly for professionals. Regarding how to involve people in this process *Agnes Nagy* from Budapest told from her experience that the best way is to start with the school children – then their parents and grandparents will join the discussion and tell about their knowledge and opinions concerning their environment.

Still, even if the main task in the Eastern Euro-

pean countries seemed to be political and administrative for the foreseeable future, restoration practices there were discussed. According to *Jonas Glemža* of Vilnius, some years ago the negative effects on old monuments of many new materials were observed in Lithuania. With the aid of Polish conservators, they had started using cement in restoration just before the Second World War. 10–15 years ago synthetic paint from Finland was introduced in Lithuania. Two to three years ago, the negative effects were obvious and the authorities are now preparing a program for using traditional materials in re-

storation. Miroslav Baše related how in the Czech Republic traditional craftsmanship has survived on a small scale in farmhouses, where the occupants have renovated their own homes using traditional materials like timber and lime (an unofficial trend; just like a hobby) – remains of an earlier, very strong tradition of craftsmanship. On the other hand, the problems with the amount of dwellings in modern pre-fab construction using concrete have been evident in the housing of the last decades, and this has created an urgent need for restoration projects in the large cities of the Czech Republic, as well as in Lithuania.

### **Ideals in restoration practices**

The discussion in the Ideals in Restoration theme group centered on the Venice Charter of 1964. The Charter is a topic of much discussion among restorators all over Europe. It has been criticized because it places heavy emphasis on the importance of original materials while not taking into account the craftsmanship required to utilize them. This was also touched upon in the introductory lecture by *Ingrid Appelbom Karsten*, and was one of the points of the theme group discussion. A criticism voiced by *Tamas Dragonits* and *Ingmar Holmström* was that the Charter's requirement that old and new materials have to be discerned from each other was difficult to reconcile with the desire to carry out continuous repairs. Dragonits drew an analogy: the shaft of his great-grandfather's axe had been replaced three times and the blade twice, but it was still the same axe. His point was that we must be able to look upon a building, from both ethical and technical standpoints, in the same way; in other words, we must be able to repair it continuously.

Here the discussion tended to be the same as that of the Materials and Craftsmanship theme group. It was argued that, if an old building is repaired with traditional materials which are similar to the original ones, such as lime and

wood, it is possible to repair it again and again. However, if cement or sheet metal are used instead, the old materials might deteriorate over time. Therefore, it is necessary to recapture and preserve knowledge of both the traditional materials and the craftsmanship needed to implement them. It was also stated that, with regard to the environment, building culture and human health, this approach would also be good for new structures.

Does this mean we need a renewed Venice Charter? The group's participants agreed that the question is really about how to interpret the Charter. It should be seen as a product of its historical context – the 1960's. The Charter makes recommendations but does not offer specific solutions; especially in the case of restoration, it needs to be used in a creative way. At this point, *Mats Edström* from Lund told the group about discussions in Europe on drafting a new version, complete with opposing viewpoints from different countries. In these discussions, the importance of good training for architects, engineers, conservators and craftsmen was stressed. Bernhard Feilden's "Guidelines for training architectural and urban conservators" was mentioned as a good model to work from.

A recurring question was what criteria should be used when deciding what is valuable in our building heritage. Not only monuments but also urban areas and vernacular architecture must be included in the efforts. Compared to the Venice Charter, the Amsterdam Declaration of 1975 widened the issue's scope, although it is not mentioned so often in the context of restorations. In the latter the social questions in urban rehabilitation and the need for participation of those who actually inhabit the buildings were cited as major issues.

In the end, the group concluded that the history of restoration has not yet been written, and that it is urgent that we gain understanding and develop restoration and rehabilitation principles and practices for the future.