

# MARTOR



---

Title: "Cultural Heritage Building in Hungary: Models and Approaches"

Author: Gabor Sonkoly

How to cite this article: Sonkoly, Gabor. 2006. "Cultural Heritage Building in Hungary: Models and Approaches". *Martor* 11: 9-12.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Țăranului Român* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-11-2006/>

---

*Martor* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review) is a peer-reviewed academic journal established in 1996, with a focus on cultural and visual anthropology, ethnology, museum studies and the dialogue among these disciplines. *Martor* review is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Its aim is to provide, as widely as possible, a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for scientific, educational and (in)formational goals. Any use aside from these purposes and without mentioning the source of the article(s) is prohibited and will be considered an infringement of copyright.

*Martor* (Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain) est un journal académique en système *peer-review* fondé en 1996, qui se concentre sur l'anthropologie visuelle et culturelle, l'ethnologie, la muséologie et sur le dialogue entre ces disciplines. La revue *Martor* est publiée par le Musée du Paysan Roumain. Son aspiration est de généraliser l'accès vers un riche contenu au plus haut niveau du point de vue académique et éditorial pour des objectifs scientifiques, éducatifs et informationnels. Toute utilisation au-delà de ces buts et sans mentionner la source des articles est interdite et sera considérée une violation des droits de l'auteur.

*Martor* is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.

## Cultural Heritage Building in Hungary: Models and Approaches

**Gabor Sonkoly**

Historian, Assistant Professor,  
ELTE, Budapest

In this paper I shall examine the construction of national cultural heritage in Hungary. First, I shall briefly summarize the reasons, which made the success of the notion of cultural heritage in the last three decades possible in order to be able to set up the levels of heritage building. Second, we shall show through the Hungarian example how the previously undefined notion of cultural heritage became institutionalized from the 1990s on the national level. To conclude, I shall share some hypothetical thoughts to place the national heritage building in Central Europe to a larger framework.

### **General considerations about the construction of cultural heritage**

The notion of cultural heritage witnessed an exceptional success both in scientific and political discourses in the last three decades. In Western Europe, especially in France and in the United Kingdom, scientific debates were shaped around the term of cultural heritage, which soon became a key notion in cultural policy. In Hungary, the notion of cultural heritage entered the political discourse by the establishment of the Ministry of National Cultural Heritage in 1998<sup>102</sup>. Despite of the fact, however, that the codification of the national heritage had a considerable impact on several disciplines such as his-

tory of art, monument protection, archeology, ethnography, museology, etc., Hungarian academia was rather slow to react: the first conferences were organized in early 2000<sup>103</sup>. In 2001, when a new system of research grants, the Széchenyi Plan, was started by the government, one of the three major areas was national cultural heritage. Due to this grant and to European grants and projects with the focus of cultural heritage has already become a determining notion in the scientific discourse, although it is still undefined. From 2005 onwards, a new debate started on the notion of intangible cultural heritage due to the UNESCO Declaration on intangible cultural heritage. In the Hungarian context even the translation of the term “intangible” happened to be quite problematic. The term used in the law on intangible cultural heritage (*szellemi*) means “spiritual” as opposed to the “material”-ness of the tangible heritage giving the philosophical scent of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the debates about the definition and the meaning of this new term.

Until the 1960's the historical monument was the key notion: heritage is collected and classified according to its antique character and its age. The notion of cultural heritage grew wider from the 1960's onwards in national and European legislation: first the notion of architectural heritage was codified, and by the end of the 1970's we reached the notion of cultural her-

itage twinned with the notion of collective memory. In the case of France, for example, the law on the archives of 1979 was the first to mention the notion of heritage. The Council of Europe defined this notion at the Congress of Granada in 1985 for the first time. Among the decrees of the Council of Europe, we can find this notion as early as in 1949, since one of the most important aims of this institution was the protection of "the common European heritage," though it remained undefined that time. In addition to this, in 1994 the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe established the principles of the definition and the protection of local cultural heritage.

These examples of the definition and classification of cultural heritage show quite clearly that the cultural heritage as a norm is shared by such strange bedfellows as regional councils, nation-state government offices and continent-wide organisations as the Council of Europe. If the Centre of World Heritage of UNESCO is added to this list, one can admire the whole picture: cultural heritage became a determining element from the smallest village community up to the whole of humankind, able to represent the identity of these communities.

Managing and processing cultural heritage follow the same principles irrespective of the size or the level of organisation of the community. The cultural heritage is the stock-hold of objects and that of intangible entities represented by objects considered to be part of the shared memory of the community. Proper institutions collect, catalogue, examine, exhibit, preserve these objects, and they restore or decipher in case of necessity to draw conclusions. During this process, the original meaning is enriched by something new, i.e. the interpretation of the new owner. That is how heritage is coupled with memory, both being part of identity, and they are to be found, to be preserved and to be re-explored. In this sense, heritage serves not merely cataloguing or registering purposes of the possessed goods, but to describe and to determine

the identity of the inheritor even if he or she is unconscious about it.

Heritage and memory share, among other characteristics, an important feature: they both enter the interpretative fields of history(-writing). Along this intrusion the identity formation of old/new communities can be grasped, and it explains the rapidly growing popularity of the notion of cultural heritage. Any trial of the reconstruction of the horrible events of the Second World War, the Holocaust and those of the communism makes the testimony of the witnesses indispensable and survivals are ordered to remember. Personal testimonies, the manifestations of individual memories are liable to be published without any or with very little censorship.

Nowadays, memory and commemoration in Western Europe are often organised around heritage, which leads to the multiplication and certain denationalisation of the forms of these commemorations. The discipline of history, originally established as a national science, is becoming less and less attractive for a community whose memory is based on cultural heritage. In certain cases the nation itself can become as a part of heritage. As Pierre Nora states in 1997: "As if France was not a history, which divides us, but it becomes a culture, what we share"<sup>104</sup>.

Obviously, we cannot forget that it is one of the most dynamic branches of the economy, i.e. tourism, which is in a need of more and more sites of cultural heritage. It is the economic interest of the community as well as of the whole country to classify more heritage sites, which are being determined by specialised enterprises backed by local authorities. Historians and other social sciences are welcome to put together a reliable documentation, which is not expected to reflect any national character.

The key to the understanding of this fast spreading of the notion is that the institutionalisation of the actual identity of a given community based on its collective memory can be realised through the establishment of the cultural heritage. That's why one can spot this notion from

the local level up to the universal one. The forms of organisation of these communities are obviously different, what is also true to the application and interpretation of the notion of heritage. The universal appearance of the notion does not necessarily mean that the social actors mean the same by heritage at all the levels. Disputes over cultural heritage unify the inner tradition of a given level and the tensions of the unavoidable dialogue between the levels.

This short paper does not give the possibility to examine all the four levels mentioned before, that's why we shall give a short presentation of the second and the fourth levels, i.e. the national and the universal ones, through recent Hungarian and Central European examples.

### The Hungarian example

In the second part of this presentation, I give a short history of how cultural heritage was shaped in Hungary from the middle of the 1990s to the present day, and, as a conclusion we try to expound a set of ideas which derive from observation of the Hungarian practice, but may have some common features with your experience of other Central European countries.

As we mentioned before, the fact that the term *heritage* appeared in Hungary, had political origins, and its most conspicuous results were of the institutional kind. After some precedents, the expression *cultural heritage* was introduced by the Hungarian government based on the coalition of the socialist and the liberal party in the middle of the 1990s, and it was used sporadically in the law on culture in 1997; it was also mentioned in connection with the Millennial celebrations of the Hungarian land conquest in 1996, and a new Cultural Heritage Directorate was set up besides the National Board for the Protection of Historical Monuments, an old institution with a tradition of more than hundred years. Then, after the parliamentary elections of 1998, the winning conservative parties not merely adopted the term from their political rivals,

but took also advantage of it in the transformation of the governmental structure: following the program of the leading party of the coalition, FIDESZ - Hungarian Civic Party, the Ministry of Culture and Education was divided in two, and the *Ministry of National Cultural Heritage* was established. With a reference to foreign examples—especially the British—culture, monument protection and tourism, which had previously belonged to three ministries, were unified in this one. The electoral program underlined not only the economic potential of heritage, but also its capacity to raise the awareness of “historical and cultural identity,” which on the one hand, should help the “citizens” (*polgárok*, a word frequently used by the new government, playing upon the ambiguous meaning of the word) face the challenges of the globalizing world, on the other, should qualify them for the reception of its positive effects. Culture, seen in this light, was ranked as a strategic goal in the state's policy, while, paradoxically, the years to come were characterized in the program as a period of moderate governmental intervention.

In the parliamentary debate about the new ministry, the socialist and liberal parties, now in opposition, claimed that the word, being unable to describe the integrity of culture, was not appropriate as a name for the ministry, and that it would provoke a shift towards the past, i.e. a conservative historicism. To these objections, the government answered with a combination of the “national” and “European” logic: the preservation of the objects from the Hungarian past and the adherence to the European standards of cultural politics were both arguments suitable to prove their right. Predictably, the debate gave a chance for a fight between stereotypes, between the imaginary “protectors” and “enemies” of national values, or “conservatives” and “liberals.”

In the following years, the term became widely used in the official texts of the government, but the definition of “heritage” was again missing. The discourse, taken from the EU proposals, that is, the invitation directed to the local com-

munities, with the intention to make them find their own heritage, opened the door to practical definitions, overshadowing the necessity of a theoretical one. Actually, the loose terminology seems to be connected with the uncertainties regarding the status and whereabouts of heritage itself. Not only “communities” were mobilized, but a wide range of things, now summed up as heritage, was “moving” as well.

The year 2000, the Millennium of the Hungarian state, in connection with the second millennium of Christianity, gave an extraordinary chance for the politics of identity and of heritage. Preparations started before the parliamentary elections of 1998: both governments, old and new, intended to take advantage of it. When the former cabinet talked about the reconstruction of royal castles of the medieval period, they were mentioned as parts of “the built heritage representing the thousand years of the state.” The new cabinet called for a nation-wide renewal and preservation of heritage, and repeated the ideas on national self-confidence, cultural productivity, the ability to filter the effects of globalization – these were ideas well-known from the electoral campaign.

But how the concept of nation was described on this occasion? Instead of a homogeneous identity, the government chose the mosaic of different ones, without ethnic, religious or gender discrimination. This official statement could be interpreted as a gesture, made in order to avoid accusations that Hungary simply follows the pattern of the Millennium of a century before, when the country had celebrated the thousand years of land-conquest with an “imperialistic” accent. In 1896, the references to modern technical progress, political integrity or even supremacy made a curious blend with romantic national mythology. The model of 1896 was in part imitated by the practice of the new celebrations of the year 2000. Pride radiated not to only to the figures of the more distant past, but also to the 19<sup>th</sup> century ancestors, since *they* had given a prestigious and enduring example of dignified

remembrance. What did the Hungarians remember during the Millennium of Christianity and statehood? Perhaps the patterns drawn by 19<sup>th</sup> century Millennium of the land conquest and the memories of the political propaganda of the period between the World Wars were more powerful than the knowledge on the first nine hundred years: the historic past of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was near and concrete, and influenced the vision of the rest of the country’s history.

In the financial system, drawn up for subsidizing the large cultural enterprise, direct central investment was combined with a competition, in which, according to the logic of the heritage movement known from Western countries, the communities were invited to participate with their own projects. However, the government’s propaganda put it the other way round, too: delegations of the government brought the so-called “state banner” to many towns and villages: a sign of acknowledgement for their efforts and achievements throughout history, and a captivating device to express their unity with the wider community of the country.

In the same time, the ministry prepared a draft of a new law on cultural heritage, with the intention to establish a new and comprehensive institution for its protection. In this way, heritage was at last defined by law in 2002. The definition included monuments, archeological findings and collections (museums, archives and part of the libraries): three areas were now supervised by the new Office of Cultural Heritage, which united the former National Board for the Protection of Historical Monuments with the Cultural Heritage Directorate. The parliamentary debate was again edifying: the government played the cards of EU-conformity and national identity in the same time, while the socialist and liberal parties defended the previous system of heritage protection, trying to relieve the centralizing and modernizing fervor of the government, and in this respect, playing the role of a conservative opposition. In new elections of 2002, the socialist and liberal parties established a government,

and kept the structures of heritage protection created by the former government.

This overview shows that concept of *cultural heritage* was an important element in the conservative government's own identity-making: these politicians tried to prove not only their adherence to the European standards and expectations, but also their national commitment to their electors. Material objects of national heritage were used in political propaganda during the electoral campaign in a massive and unprecedented way: one could, for example, observe on the streets and in the underground posters representing the Millennial Monument restorations as elements of "Our cultural heritage—our common heritage." On the other hand, the fact that the term cultural heritage was kept by every government, proves that it has been treated as a useful technical instrument, and it is not necessarily identified with a given political project. On the other hand, though *heritage* is general enough to be apolitical, in the sense that any political power can utilize it (which facilitates its adaptation in Central European countries, candidates of the EU) it can be interpreted in terms of party politics as well, thus, instead of mitigating the conflicts in the name of a common patrimony, it is able to recreate the existing boundaries in politics and mentality.

It is difficult to find out whether and in what sense the millenary festivities met the official intention to strengthen identity in the individual communities, and how people will remember them on the long run. Moreover, the Millennium, which could be relevant for identity politics and cultural diplomacy, did not make easier the theoretic or legal definition of heritage either. Perhaps the moment was too exceptional for that: the Millennium connected heritage protection with commemorations. Although anniversary gave a very special occasion for exhibitions, monument restoration and the like, it could also divert attention from working out a serious concept of cultural heritage in Hungary.

The political heritage project of the Millennium ended, the term and the new structures remained—what comes next? Did the local initiatives gain enough energy from this particular event to persist even in an "average" period? In the meantime, tourism already left its mark on the production of local heritages: the city of Győr rediscovered its baroque potential, Gödöllő has its story to tell about the Habsburg dynasty, materialized by its palace, in which Queen Elizabeth, the wife of Emperor Franz Joseph used to stay; there's a long list of similar examples. New sites were added to the UNESCO world heritage list. The fabrication of new heritages does not mean that many of these local traditions had been neglected before heritage became trendy. But then, one should ask which features of national culture and identity are due to the concept of heritage.

In fact, are there such features at all? It is true that from the legal and institutional point of view, heritage is well defined now in Hungary. But, during the preparations of the 2002 law, a detailed and careful consultation with a wider circle of experts (archeologists, art historians etc.) was missing. The law avoided the definition of *intangible heritage* (in a period when UNESCO was trying to find criteria exactly for the same). Heritage did not bring about a new consensus on the national canon of literature and the arts. In intellectual debates of the past few years, the term did not play a remarkable role. A group of heritage experts has already appeared, recruited mainly from the field of monument protection, archeology and diplomacy, and there were academic projects, either on the process how heritage was being shaped by the humanities through the centuries, or how it works in contemporary Hungary. As early as in 1996, the European Folklore Institute tried to cover the area of the safeguarding, revitalization and diffusion of traditional culture and folklore heritage in Europe and publishes a review on Hungarian traditional culture and folklore revival. Neither of these research projects and represen-



tations, nor a more general public discussion (which is missing) have compensated yet for the inverted chronological order: that political decisions *preceded* the intellectual analysis of the problem.

Our latest example from the chronology of the history of heritage in Hungary shall illustrate again the permanence of the term 'heritage' in political discourse despite the changes of governments. One of the main problems of Hungarian history from the early twentieth century is whether (and in what sense) the Hungarian minorities, living outside of Hungary, on the territories separated from the nation state by the peace treaty of Trianon in 1920, constitute a community with the actual citizens of the Hungarian state. How did the heritage discourse contribute to this problem? The conservative government tried to extend the festivities of the Millennium to the minorities, for example, it financed the restoration of some monuments, such as the cathedral in Alba Iulia, today in Romania, built during the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, which is of special interest because Alba Iulia was the seat of the principality of Transylvania, and once it was treated as a "national pantheon," since many of the princes of Hungarian origin had been buried there. While this case and similar ones may show that "Hungarian heritage" can sometimes be expanded to the culture of these Hungarian minorities in symbolic terms and even in the material sense, the state never claimed officially a right to incorporate those heritages into its own national heritage. The strategy of the conservative government was to create a special status for native Hungarians living outside the borders, which could have granted them several benefits when they traveled to Hungary or stayed there. As a result of this strategy a law was made in 2001, which, according to its preamble, was meant to guarantee the belonging of these people to "the unity of the Hungarian nation," to foster "their well-doing in their homeland," and to strengthen "their national identity." The new government

modified the law in 2003. In the preamble, the reference to the "unity of the nation" was now replaced by the formula "preservation of their relationship with Hungary," and "the possibility to express their adherence to Hungarian cultural heritage as a sign of their belonging to the Hungarian nation." To sum up: in 2003, the vague concept of national unity (though it was never interpreted as territorial or legal unification) seemed already too straightforward, and feasible to hurt the sensibility of the neighboring states, so it was left out and replaced by a reference to the common cultural heritage of Hungarians living inside and outside Hungary. However, "cultural heritage" was just as imprecise as "unity," which is not very surprising, if one looks back at the short history of missing definitions.

The restructuring of governmental institutions usually follows the legislative elections and the changes of the government in Hungary since 1990. In 2002, the Socialist-Liberal Coalition returned to power and kept the Ministry of Hungarian Cultural Heritage, in 2006, however, in the name of budgetary cut-offs, this Ministry has been integrated to the Ministry of Education and the State Secretary responsible for cultural affairs lost the nomination of "cultural heritage" and has become simply "cultural," but so many institutions have the term "cultural heritage" so far that this institutional modification does not seem to check the spread of the term in the future.

### Conclusion

The Hungarian case showed us how the heritage making can be analyzed in detail and offered an example of the modes of national reception of the universal imperative of heritage-making. The spectacular spreading of heritage in the West creates a shared culture shaped according to shared political aims. World heritage are destined to realize a similar goal: the construction of a universal cultural and natural heritage and introducing it to shared consciousness through consensus.

## Cultural Heritage Building in Hungary: Models and Approaches 149

Till the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, two conceptions of the nation co-existed in Western Europe: one supposed the existence of a national “spirit” penetrating all the members of the national community through the traditional institutions, the soil and the climate and determined their way of thinking. The establishment of institutions determining national identity lead to severe debates in most of the Western countries and divided the norm-giving elite, or even the whole nation. The other conception is based on an inherited national “character” possessing easily discernable marks of physical appearance and those of behaviour. Cultural heritage remained secondary from the point of view of both camps compared to the traditional institutions, i.e. the embodiment of national “spirit,” or to the race, the imprint of national “character.”<sup>105</sup>

The representatives of the former saw it as a sign of intellectual superiority, while the representative of the latter as the blatant expression of the inferiority of other peoples. Because of the well-known historical events of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, both approaches lost their credit. According to the heritage logic of nation-building, national identity is not based on a common “spirit” or “character,” but on a past we lived through and a shared future. This past is not represented through the dictates of the common “spirit” or “character” any more, but by the choice of the individual or that of a small community.

This evolvement differs from the description of heritage building offered by a Hungarian anthropologist, Péter Niedermüller in his article on post-socialist national heritage construction dating from 2000. During the post-socialist redefinition of national culture, he states, “cultural myths of origin” still play a crucial role, i.e. the exploration and identification the culture of the people with the national cultural heritage. “In this sense”, he writes, “national culture perceived as national heritage and not as a social practice, which would let national identity be defined and represented”.<sup>106</sup> Niedermüller’s definition of heritage is just the opposite of what we

have seen in Western Europe, where it is the notion of heritage and heritage-building itself mean the common social practice of creating inclusive national identity opposed to the previous exclusive practices.

Central European countries, including Hungary, must codify cultural heritage following the expectations of the European Community. The introduction of a term, or even its codification does not necessarily mean the social practice it would suppose. With the fall of communism, national or ethnic belonging became a key element of political identity formation in Central Europe. In the Hungarian case, the introduction of the concept of national cultural heritage lead to an all inclusive treatment of diverse cultural realities within the borders from the ethnic point of view, i.e. a Serb or a Roma being a citizen of Hungary can claim his or her heritage’s approval on the national level any time; whereas the introduction of national cultural heritage did not reach a political consensus of the techniques of national heritage building.

The application of the term of national cultural heritage in the law of 2003 to express the unity of all the Hungarians living in and around Hungary is a fuzzy solution to a so far unsolved problem of Hungarian nation-building since the treaty of Trianon, i.e. the lack of overlapping of the territory of the State of Hungary and that of the Hungarian nation: *ország*, the country and *haza*, the *patria* (Fatherland, *Vaterland*, *Heimat*, *patrie*)<sup>107</sup>. Country and *patria*—could be interpreted as the tangible and intangible aspects of nationhood.

At the moment it is hard to tell whether the most recent political linking of the *patria* to cultural heritage—which already has highly problematic intangible aspects—would bridge the long existing painful gap between country and *patria*, or whether it only offers a temporary solution for the desired integration of the fragments of the nation. The nationalization of cultural heritage raises the question whether it is worthwhile re-examining the relationship be-



tween *patria* and *patrimonium*, which seems to be evident from the etymological point of view.

To put the spread of cultural heritage to a larger framework, as I promised in the beginning of this paper, it would be worth considering how this term is taking over the traditional semantic field of “culture,” which itself was defined mainly in national contexts in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Obviously, a much longer con-

sideration is necessary to analyze the shift from culture to cultural heritage. The appearance of the term “heritage” linked to “culture,” its direct allusion to the past we lost, and its mushrooming from the 1970s makes us think of the Freud’s *Trauerprozess*,<sup>108</sup> the mourning over the past worlds we were so eager to surpass from the 18<sup>th</sup> century till the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Notes

<sup>102</sup> The Directorate of Cultural Heritage was established before the 1998 elections.

<sup>103</sup> The first conference, entitled *Humanities and the Concept of National Heritage*, was co-organized by the Collegium Budapest and by the Central European University in January 2000. The second event was a roundtable discussion on *Heritage and Time* at the Centre for Central European Studies of Teleki László Institute.

<sup>104</sup> Nora, Pierre: *Les lieux de mémoire*, I, Paris, Gallimard, 1997: 1391.

<sup>105</sup> Pomian, Krzysztof : « Nation et patrimoine », in: FABRE, *L'Europe entre cultures et nations*, Éd. de la MSH, Paris, 1996: 85-95.

<sup>106</sup> Niedermüller Péter: « A nacionalizmus kulturális logikája a posztszocializmusban », *Századvég*, Spring 2000: 91-109.

<sup>107</sup> This distinction I owe to András Zempléni. András ZEMPLÉNI, *Terre, Land, Patria comme espace rituel de la nation: la „Terre Magyar“ des réenterrements hongrois (1870-2001)*, lecture at the International Workshop entitled *Structure et structuration de l'espace en Europe, du Moyen Age à nos jours*, Collegium Budapest, Budapest, 15-18 May 2002.

<sup>108</sup> Freud, Sigmund: *Trauer und Melancholie*, 1917, Studienausgabe, III:193-194.

