

Historic Town and Tourism

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Some things can be a blessing as well as a curse. The curing medicine can kill if overdosed, and the river which waters and feeds the fields can destroy them with its floods.

This is the same with historic towns. Their medicine and poison is tourism. Tourism, that keeps them alive, without which, their historicity sometimes could not have survived. The same tourism if overflows sometimes makes life sort of a drag on the inhabitants, and also counteracts the historicity.

The 20th century – especially its second half – is, besides others, the century of tourism. It is a short-term migration of hundreds of millions, an attractive site of the natural or the built environment being the target. In case of built environment it is mainly historic towns. Having our experiences of the present, it is really hard to imagine the life of historic towns without tourism. Some ninety years ago of the popular Hungarian writers travelled round Dalmatia, and he gave an expressive description of his surprise to meet a German family in Trogir. Now, before the Balkan war broke out, millions of tourists visited that beautiful Renaissance town. I believe all of you could mention similar examples of historic towns.

We all know that a town is a complex thing – landscape, architecture and the people are all its components. Any one of those is changed, the town will not be the same any more. Tourism helps maintaining the architectural character, as the inhabitants of the town are aware of the fact that a row of Gothic houses or a Baroque church-interior is of material importance for them: they attract tourists and so make money. This is one of the reasons for which they protect their valuable heritage, against all voluntarist innovations. However, the social character of the town is fundamentally changed by tourism –

which is as important a change in the life of the town as the architectural one. If the calm, well-balanced small town has to suffer such a pressure that changes its social character, tourism exceeded the measure within which it is still desirable and useful.

Historic settlements do not have the same capability of resistance in this respect. According to my experience, the smaller a settlement is, the less it can protect itself. A big city can absorb foreigners, no matter how great many of them there are. I have been to Rome when it has the peak period of tourists coming to the town but I did not feel it was overcrowded. The mass of people was far less than the hundreds of thousands of the citizens of Rome when they themselves crowd the Piazza Navona at Twelfth-day. The crowd can be a component of the big city: demonstrations or popular feasts are not strange to them, not even if the crowd is formed by foreigners. Tourism cannot change the social character of the big city either: London, Paris or Rome are capitals and intellectual centres of big countries regardless of the millions of their visitors.

The adaptability of a medium-sized town is less. In my country the whole character of the town of Sopron was changed by the fact it lies right beside the Austrian border and so our neighbours, taking advantage of the difference in the prices, come by the thousand for boxloads of cheap champagne or to the hairdresser or to see the dentist. And so the town, famous for its cultural heritage, its schools and university and the one-time concerts of Franz Liszt is degrading into such a shopping and smuggling centre as Algeciras is in Spain. Medium-size towns with especially great attractiveness are extremely sensitive to crowd as well: I have personally experienced being

jammed in the Merceria of Venice, where, in the street I felt as if the crowd were flooding the gates after a foot-ball match, blocking it at a narrowing.

The situation can become especially critical in the case of the smallest settlements, the historic villages. Let us have another Hungarian example, that of Holloko. It is a village a hundred kms from Budapest, and was included on the UNESCO World Heritage List as it is not only a beautiful, intact traditional architectural ensemble but a living village as well. However, after its inclusion on the List, and so becoming known nearly all over the world, the village character suffered damage. It is not only the crowd which is alien to the village, but the infrastructure required by tourism as well. On a Paris or Verona square the number of cafes hardly makes any difference – let there be as many as needed. But in the Hungarian villages there has never been anything else and more than one pub. So what has Holloko got to do with five sweet-shops?

It seems to be a matter of course that the original village character can hardly be harmonized with tourism. A real traditional village is closely connected with agriculture, which means that for it tourism is extraneous related to the life of a town. Animal-keeping and the smell of dung does not really harmonize with tourists' buses. Holloko used to live on animal-keeping but by now one can find only a few pigs or cattle in the village. A similar thing has happened to folk art and culture. Instead of the real and original, tourism requires its artificial, abstracted and devaluated form, stimulating mass production and setting back the original. It is interesting to see the similar phenomenon with the folk costume: it is by order, for money, that the women in Holloko wear those clothes which otherwise they would wear only on outstanding family or church holidays. I personally witnessed a contrary case only once: in Marken, a fishing-village in Holland women visited each other in clogs, wearing their folk clothing. Or was this as well for the sake of tourists?

But one thing is sure: a lot of local events come to life definitely for the sake of tourism. I do not mean the ones such as

the palio in Siena, the jumping procession in Echternach, Luxemburg, or in Mohacs, Hungary the masquerade seeing the winter out – these are all based on real folk traditions, even if by our times they are more for the tourists than for the local people. There are more recent local events as well. In Hungary, in the town of Gyula theatrical performances have been being held for twenty years in the summers, in the courtyard of the Gothic fortress, and by now it is an event well-known all over the country, and even abroad. The problem is, if, encouraged by such a success, every town with similar fortresses would like to arrange a similar event, the result of which is a number of performances but of inferior quality, unworthy of the place.

The case is different to a certain extent with the effects of tourism on the sight and architecture of historic towns. International experience has proved that, in general, the monuments of historic towns can well be utilized for the purposes of tourism. As for me, the best examples of this are the Spanish paradors and the Portuguese pousadas, which are homely, not too expensive little hotels in historic monuments. I am convinced that they suit the tourism of historic towns much better than the big, modern hotels alike all over the world, with hundreds of beds. So in this respect I consider tourism a positive factor rather than a negative one, as it helps raising funds for restoring buildings technically and morally decayed. It is beyond any doubt that the architectural heritage of a settlement important for tourism is much less endangered than that of others.

However, there are other dangers: those of rebuilding and trash. As far as the former is concerned, it is the ground-floors of the houses that suffer most damage. It is a commercial trick to sort of unite the room of the shop with the street so as to make more people come in, but it is also one of the greatest dangers of historic towns, which can hardly be overcome all over the world. In some countries it is not only the ground-floors,

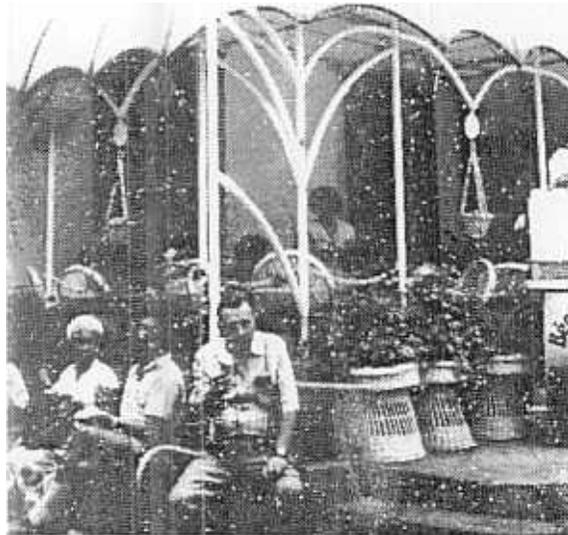
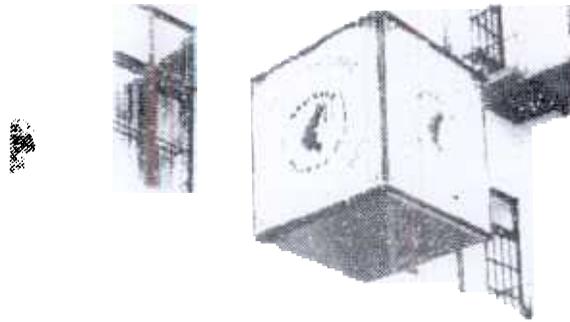
but the top of the buildings which are endangered as well. Tourism increases the demand for building rooms and flats in the attics, which in Hungary for example is totally contrary to the traditions. It is also a well-known phenomenon that tourism is one of the sources of trash, which had already reached historic towns as well, and not only the shops. I do not primarily mean all the junk in the shop windows, which of course are also hung in the outside, thus making mock of the noble traditions of the town, but I mean that tourism also helps give ground to architectural trash: false archaism, artificial nostalgia, the rebuilding of such buildings or parts of them which have never existed or were destroyed long ago. I cannot state that it was only of touristic purposes, but tourism must definitely have played an important role in the fact in the Eastern part of Berlin a Baroque inn was reconstructed, though it was destroyed long time ago. What is more, it was rebuilt two hundred metres away from its original place, as it had already been built in.

Besides the human and the architectural factors, tourism has a third effect as well on historic towns: traffic. Realizing the effects of the traffic-boom after the Second World War, town-planners created pedestrian areas, with much restricted vehicle traffic. In itself this is not a matter of tourism. These pedestrian downtown areas can well serve the local needs – some towns, such as for example Bologna hardly miss the vehicles and so the city centre functions are undisturbed. Tourism however creates problems. Most tourists come by car. They do not know where to park their cars, or find the parking place too far, cannot drive close to the hotel, and break the traffic code easily as they know they can hardly be fined because they would leave the next day. If the tourists come by bus it is even worse – all of us have had the annoying experience of a tourists' bus blocking the narrow street, or having got stuck in a narrow crossroads.

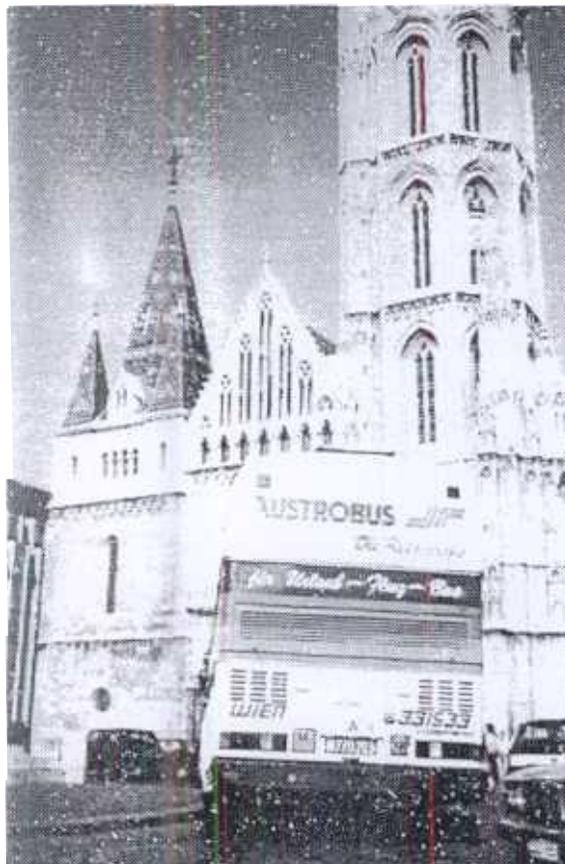
Finally, an economic question has also got to be mentioned: the disproportion of

the income of tourism and the expenses of the restoration of monuments serving the tourism. Though it cannot be the same everywhere, I can hardly imagine really great differences in the case of different countries. In Hungary a historic town makes practically no profit from its vivid tourism. I have already spoken about Sopron, but I was unjust, as the town has so many visitors not only because of the reasons I have mentioned, – the shopping tourism – but also as it is one of the most beautiful historic towns of our country. Well, the dentists, shopkeepers and hairdressers really became rich, but the Local Authorities have hardly any profit from this intensive tourism – they do not even have their proper share from the taxes coming from it. And the historic monuments of the town are in a worse condition compared to the average in Hungary.

So, is tourism a blessing or a curse for historic towns? I myself cannot give a definite answer, as, depending on the type and quantity of tourism the answer is different for each country, for each town. Among others it also depends on the social structure and the state of development of the given country. In the countries which we have called "socialist" for forty years we got used to being glad of tourism, as, being in the state of a general poverty and lack of funds it meant a certain vividness and helped certain political leaders, otherwise insensitive to the value of our architectural heritage, realize the importance of it. I think a lot of countries are in a different situation: historic towns suffer from tourism rather than rejoice at it. In general it could perhaps be said that if a historic town can keep its tourism under the preferable level, and can control its excesses, it can profit from it. The concept of "protective tourism" was created by those engaged in monument protection and not by those of tourism. As for me, I would like to achieve something like that, which, in other words means that it is tourism that should serve the town and not the other way round. Should the debate of this question at the General Assembly help this, it has already achieved its aim.



On the other hand, tourism is beneficial as well for the historic town: it brings life into the abandoned inner-courtyard/Gyor, Hungary.

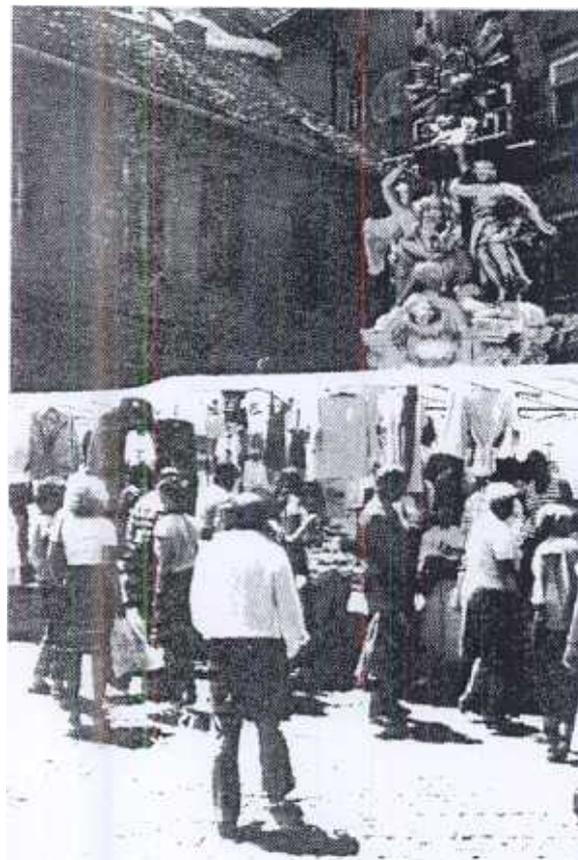


Too much traffic and big vehicles can, however, spoil the site of historic monuments /Budapest, Castle Street - included in the World Heritage List.

Harms caused by overwhelming tourism



A harmful effect of intensive tourism: building rooms and flats in the attics./Gyor, Hungary/



Too much commerce can hide the monument from the eyes of visitors/Gyor, Hungary —

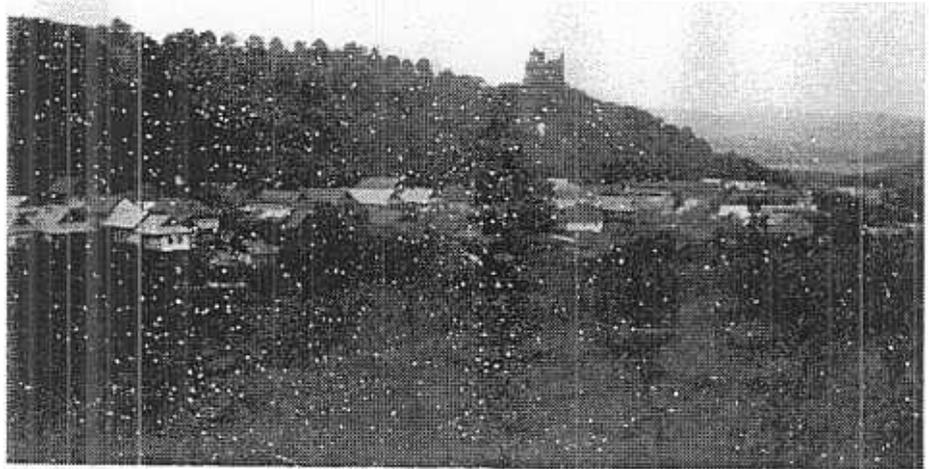


Local traditions helping tourism.

Marken/The Netherlands: Women are still wearing the folk clothing.



Echternach, Luxembourg: The jumping procession on Easter Tuesday.



Holloko; the only historic village included in the World Heritage List. It's survival was made possible by the fact that a number of its peasants' houses/listed monumnets/are used for purposes of tourism.