Protecting Slovenia’s Heritage: The Role of Wine

Some twelve years ago, after I bought in 2005 one of the oldest surviving houses in Ptuj (rebuilt 1668) the Zavod za Varstvo Kulturne in Dediščine Slovenija (Association for Protection of Culture and Heritage of Slovenia) insisted on their experts visiting to make sure the foreigner understood his responsibilities concerning its preservation.

Unaware of their reputation, and enthusiastic about the correct path to follow with my unique building, I eagerly agreed. I hoped to get some advice about, among other matters, how to treat its handmade bricks held together with slaked lime mortar.

Making this medieval mortar was a dangerous job – you could suffocate, get blinded or burned during the process. There was no health and safety culture back then. It was a manual chemical process. Protective glasses had not been invented.

The experts provided consisted of two visitors, firstly a lady who said the front of the property had already been ruined by communist-era rendering but should be preserved as it is. A tatty old 17th century internal door covered in yellowing 1950s-looking paint must not be touched. A preservation notice was issued confirming these two points of interest.

The rest, internally, was up to me, she said. I could do what I wanted inside. There was a verbal admonition not to let local tradesmen knock too many holes in the walls – this was why most of Slovenia’s heritage collapsed, it was explained.

No structural engineers, wall or roof stress-testing equipment, or wood restoration specialists arrived, and no money was proffered by the Association for the Preservation of the Culture and Heritage of Slovenia.

Meanwhile in 2005 the ZVKDS received a total of over 7.5m euros from various sources, including several hundred euros from the municipality of Ptuj.

The second visit was by a local stone expert Mr Victor Gojkovič, who is in fact an artist and sculptor of some renown. Mr Gojkovič spent a few minutes in the cellar, where some stones are indeed present, as they form part of the foundations of the house, probably going back as far as the 13th century or even earlier.

There is also a vaulted ceiling of brickwork held together with the aforementioned slaked lime mortar. It is remarkable stuff, which has only hardened through the centuries, I suspect. I doubt you could find anyone able to lay a ceiling of bricks in this way in Ptuj today.

This is a physically massive and correspondingly heavy house with walls up one metre thick. There are undoubtedly hundreds of tons of stresses of unknown dimensions and directions bearing down on the ancient foundations, which would originally have supported a single-storey brick-stone construction with a much lighter wooden upper storey.

At some point Yugoslavia had managed to lay an asbestos-cement sewage pipe through all of this, semi-visible at one point, crossing the cellar ceiling.

Water seemed to be collecting on the underside of this pipe, with the occasional drip, and I pointed this out to Mr Gojkovič, who declared bluffly that this was “just condensation”.

I was dubious. Why was this condensation just here, and not over there? I tried to ask, but was given to understand that I was not the type of person to question this expert, who had more urgent matters to deal with as he had to depart immediately in order to drink some wine, he said. And off he went.

Forward to 2017, when I asked the ZVKDS to visit again. By now the medieval stone foundation near the sewage pipe was completely soaked and you could smell urine coming out of the wall in the house above, where all attempts to get plaster to stick to the wall had been in vain.

This time an actual civil engineer attended, and though not an expert in sewage pipework he agreed it was obvious that the pipe was leaking somewhere and a subsequent visit by the municipal contractor – and the only plumber in town with a drainage camera – confirmed this.

In the intervening period cracks had appeared in the ceiling near the supporting wall in the habitable space above the sewage-soaked foundation. Even with repeated applications of hydrogen peroxide, residential or commercial use of the urine-flavoured room was not an option, even though it opens onto one of the best positions in town with thousands of tourists passing annually.

Finally, after twelve years, I was able to suggest to Simona Menoni and her engineer that, of all the people I should have been able to rely on in their advice on heritage-preservation topics, the ZVKDS – now pulling in a good 700,000 euros monthly including as much as 100 euros a month from Slovenia’s oldest town Ptuj – were it.

Along with the right to tell me what not to do with my own house came the responsibility, I suggested, for the outcomes of their own advice, or lack thereof. And this included the ZVKDS’ pre-wine counsel concerning the so-called Condensation of Gojkovič.

But the response of the Association for the Preservation of the Culture and Heritage of Slovenia, in the form of Ms Simona Menoni, was that I had no kind of legal claim against the ZVKDS ― as nothing concerning the Condensation of Gojkovič *had ever been written down*.

Moreover, she added, the Zavod never has any money for projects - such as preventing the foundations of medieval houses being undermined by leaking Yugoslavian pipework.

So even if the Condensation of Gojkovič *had* been written down it would not make much difference, it seems, as it did not form one of the pet projects of the staff of the ZVKDS, who prefer the wide-open spaces of the Roman Empire as well as preservation of the kind of cheesy religious stuff which the Catholic bureaucracy deems valuable.

I think of the poor local slaves whose toil and very likely premature death and injury at their lime slaking - thanks to the trickle-down economics of the Serenìsima Repùblica Vèneta - made it possible for this former silversmith’s residence and its predecessor to stand for 350 years, only to come under attack by Tito’s cement pipe factory and in the space of a decade, be munched away at from beneath by a slow trickle of my pee, or, as the protectors of Slovenia’s heritage denoted it, *but not in writing*, the Condensation of Gojkovič.

For although it is strong when dewatered, of all that we know of lime-based materials – one fact that can surely not have escaped Slovenia’s attention, with its 43% of karst territory and 11,500 known caves – is that they get full of holes when confronted by running water, including the Condensation of Gojkovič.

Julian Bohan

Owner

30.09.2017

What the ZVKDS can do with its advice and income of 700,000 euros a month, to save Slovenia’s heritage:

Pay for and conduct X-ray or ground-penetrating radar examinations of the house foundations, to determine the extent and influence of fissures caused by the Condensation of Gojkovič;

Pay for and perform stress-testing of walls;

Pay for tests by a competent public health laboratory for coliform bacterial and viral contamination of the affected structure, before and after treatment;

Pay for and supervise remedial work to the area, including structural collapse, subsidence and heave attributable to the Condensation of Gojkovič;

Pay compensation for loss of amenity;

Pay compensation for time lost on renovations;

Settle all associated legal, bureaucratic and translation fees;

Meet the cost of consequential losses beyond the scope of typical house insurance;

Indemnify the owner against claims from neighbours, if affected by the Condensation of Gojkovič

Offer adequate damages for negligence.

Arguments:

* The absence of a written report relating to the Condensation of Gojkovič confirms rather than excuses the sloppy and self-serving activities of the ZVKDS
* The householder was entitled and indeed required to rely on the advice of the ZVKDS;
* The 2017 unwritten advice of ZVKDS contradicts its previous unwritten advice;
* Why, if a written report would have helped then, does the present ZVKDS not write a report this time?
* The resulting damage is greater now than it would have been if the Condensation of Gojkovič had been fixed in a timely manner;
* Typical house insurance does not cover past damage as the property was not continuously insured;
* No insurer would have covered the present damage had the problem been correctly diagnosed and known of;
* The present insurance does not cover consequential loss arising from the Condensation of Gojkovič.