

Historical brownfields are a chance and an option

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For many municipalities, these buildings are a burden. Their security and maintenance are costly and the return on any potential investments into their renovation is highly uncertain. In spite of all that, they can become an attraction, a cornerstone for travellers, a symbol for the municipality or a profitable enterprise. The thing is how you decide to use the building.

What to do with it?

The basic condition for the regeneration of a historical brownfield is: settled property relationships. Many buildings of this type have a very unclear ownership history, are caught in the network of restitutions or their owners live abroad.

If this issue is solved, it is necessary to consider the possibilities and the method to deal with it. However, several essential questions have to be asked from the beginning. What will be the new concept of the whole building? How will its historical value be preserved? What will be the scope of investments and their return? And there is one absolutely crucial question arising - if the building will be used for commercial purposes. You have to think about the building's operating demands and the possibility of its sustainability if it is not used for commercial purposes.

Castle - brewery - hotel

A good example of the commercial use of a historical brownfield is the Zámek Hotel in Ostrava - Zábřeh. The building, dated back to 1529, makes the impression of being in the environment of the Pískové prefabricated housing estate by accident. However, it is one of the last few original historical buildings in this area.

The castle, for which a demolition order had been already issued, was purchased by its current owners several years ago. At the very beginning, they faced a tough decision: what to do with the building. First of all, they decided to preserve its historical continuity and the authenticity of the location, and started reconstructing the building. "Even though I come from Ostrava, I didn't know for a long time there was a castle like this. Its rebirth became a passion, but there were downsides. I have to say that our cooperation with conservationists paid off. We listened to their advice and recommendations. The reconstruction took three and a half years and we used traditional building methods, conservation techniques and artisans," Radovan Koudelka explains.

From the beginning of its new existence, the project had to generate a profit, and the function of the building as well as the offer of products had to be conceived accordingly. "We had to confront our plans and the reality. The tradition of the place was a commitment, we didn't want to build a brand; marketing and the structure of the offered products were of prime importance," says Radovan Koudelka. The outcome - a hotel with thirty-two beds in rooms with historical furniture, the oldest wine cellar in Ostrava, a broad range of beers, wines and gastronomy. And a brand new feature - the first beer bath in the region.

The average price per room is EUR 71 and the project is economically self-sufficient. The good relationships with the local city hall increase the hotel's clientele during weddings and festivals. 70% of all hotel guests come from abroad, especially thanks to its massive foreign promotion.

Funding, however, is a crucial element in this whole story. The whole project was financed from the

owners' pockets, i.e. from private resources. According to Koudelka, the builders therefore had a lot of freedom and were not bound by deadlines for spending money or by the need to wait for allocations. "We didn't receive a single crown from the funds. The most common argument was that such projects are only little profitable," Koudelka added. "But it's a mistake. For example regional operational programmes were primarily aimed at projects with uncertain return, yet the money from them is most often channelled to well-secured commercial projects," Tomáš Kulman, of KPMG Česká republika, thinks.

Cooperation pays off

The reconstruction of the Kunín Castle was a wholly different story. It is an example of a non-commercial regeneration of a historical brownfield. The Baroque castle in Kunín was decaying for years and, during the high times of totality, was supposed to be rebuilt into a hostel. This approach resulted in destroyed furnishings and almost completely demolished furniture. What to do with this building? The first impulse came from conservationists and the museum, which offered the only preserved paintings from its supplies that were connected to the castle's history. The art was therefore the first step in the successful renewal of the monument. And everything changed in a year. As soon as the first visitors came there, the castle started hosting various events, festivals, charities etc.

"Our main plan was to promote the castle and attract people here. We were also looking abroad for people with family or historical ties to the castle. We managed to find the descendants of the former owners, and they wanted to contribute to the castle's renewal. At present, the castle's loft is already reconstructed into rooms used often by wedding guests. The remaining parts of the castle include a gallery, exhibition rooms, an information centre and a restaurant. We are trying to diversify the programme for different age categories and, of course, taking into account the different seasons of the year," Jaroslav Zezulčík, the castle's governor, explains the change.

The construction activities as such and the costs of conservation work amounted to CZK 60 million. Contributions were collected not only from the municipal coffers, but also from a subsidy from the Ministry for Regional Development. The castle is in the hands of the town and is operated by the museum.

Vítkovice at the start

Technical sites and monuments are a separate chapter of regeneration of historical brownfields. The regeneration plan of the lower smelting areas in Vítkovice is a pioneer of its kind in the Czech Republic. This technically unique area provides many opportunities for further development and use. The company Vítkovice is well aware of it and is slowly starting to rebuilt this technological open-air museum. One of the first projects in this large area was the reconstruction of a little castle owned by the House of Rothschild, the former owners of the iron mills, built in 1847. It cost CZK 110 million. The city of Ostrava contributed with CZK 750,000, the rest was provided by the company Vítkovice. The castle, used as a representative seat and flat for the director of the Vítkovice ironworks, has three stories today and includes a gallery and representative premises. Its two main halls are occasionally used for public events. "The castle will be open to public for special occasions only. We want to preserve its original function, i.e. it will serve to represent the company. However, the public will have a change to use its adjacent buildings, including the technical library," said Pavel Czene, of Vítkovice reality development. In cooperation with conservationists, this company is working on the revitalization of the lower section of Vítkovice. "We are planning to rebuilt the former gas holder and its surroundings into a congress and conference centre. Likewise, an award procedure is currently underway for a designer to reconstruct Blast Furnace 1 into an observation tower," Czene commented on the company's plans.

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