

Ambulance for Monuments – urgent intervention on heritage

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The "Ambulance for Monuments" project is targeting, in a desperate race against time, the salvation from collapse and degradation of hundreds of Romanian threatened historical buildings that are listed. It carries out emergency interventions done by volunteer experts, students, passionate/amateurs and trained craftsmen, always with the support of local communities and authorities. Most of the activities for the 32 finished interventions are related to the replacement of damaged roofs, propping walls, organizing proper water drainage and stabilizing wall paintings. The heart of the project in each region is an intervention kit: a lorry equipped with tools, construction equipment and materials.

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The motivation and the background

The ambulance was launched in 2016 with the support of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales and The Anglo Romanian Trust for Traditional Architecture in order to preserve Romanian build heritage. It was designed as an umbrella project for several organisations, similar to a franchise system in order to give independence to "grassroots" decisions, which should be implemented by a network of NGO's all over Romanian territory. The project is covering today 35% of the national territory and is extending rapidly from year to year. Since 2016 there have been carried out several interventions on local, national and world heritage sites (ongoing project) like: churches, mills, manor houses, train stations, historic fortification ruins etc. Nineteen of them have been carried out by Asociația Monumentum (owner of copyrights and developer of the project), six of them have been carried out through Asociația Pentru Patrimoniul Activ - PACT, one through the new established Asociația Vernacular and one through the new established Asociația Arhaic. A number of interventions are planned to be undertaken in 2020 by other 2 new established organisations, Asociația Actum in the northern part of Moldavia and Atelierul de Patrimoniul in the region of Muntenia. Asociația Monumentum is assisting the establishment of new organisations and provides them with tools, a lorry and seek funding for implementing their local projects. Each organisation is raising locally additional funds for the implementation of the project. For supporting the repair of damaged ceramic roof coverings Asociația Monumentum has build a traditional kiln in the village of Apos which produces authentic hand made tiles and bricks used in the ambulance project. In 2019 we had the great honour to receive the visit of Mr. Toshiyuki Kono, the President of ICOMOS International who made and signed a tile which will be shown in the exhibition at the kiln beside a handmade tile which was done by HRH The Prince of Wales.



Figure 1 Main supporter, His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales meeting the teams of the four ambulances in Cuștelnic, 2019 ©Flaviu Gabriel



Figure 2 Main supporter, His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales meeting the teams of the four ambulances in Cuștelnic, 2019 ©Flaviu Gabriel

The great achievement on national ground is the establishment of a successful sustainable intervention and funding model where local and regional authorities are supporting most of the costs for materials, private companies and donors are funding additional materials, equipment and tools, communities are working side by side with the volunteers hosting and feeding them, volunteers and craftsmen are doing the labour work, media is used at highest level to promote the message of stewardship for heritage.

The project tries to find solutions to similar problems of East-European countries: lack of heritage education for civil society, the lack of practical skills and knowledge by specialists, loss of authenticity and low quality interventions, the abandonment of monuments (public buildings) by communities due to a low sense of understanding the value of cultural heritage and cultural identity in their haste for globalization and perishable values.

The main communication activities of the project are taking place through the 3 social media pages of the ambulances in different regions, mainly through Facebook which is very popular in Romania.



Figure 3 Young and old craftsmen and community members from Breb having fun during the intervention at the church, 2018 ©Eugen Vaida



Figure 4 Lads from the village of Jupânești transporting the shingles for the roof of the church during the ambulance intervention, 2018 ©Eugen Vaida

Working mainly on public buildings was a premise to engage communities in a wider scale. Hundreds of mayors, priests, local councilors and other representatives of local communities have put hands on tools and joined forces with the volunteers in a desperate race against time and the destruction of their own heritage. This has thrown the attention of local communities to their own heritage while rediscovering a strong sense of cultural identity and self-esteem. A slight intention of local leaders and owners to save built heritage was

always there but increasing bureaucracy, a low level of understanding of procedures on emergency interventions and the lack of assistance of an intermediary or facilitator has discouraged them in the past.

Detailed description

(1) Aims and objectives

The aim is to preserve, to promote and valorize build heritage through a sustainable education process based on the collaboration between four main actors: owners (community), professionals, policy makers and mediators (NGOs).

Objectives:

- a) Safeguarding historic and listed buildings in an advanced state of disrepair

In the last 30 years since the fall of the communist regime, many historic buildings have been neglected and abandoned by their owners, while at the same time the state has not had the means to preserve them. The "Ambulance" was a direct reaction to a pending cultural disaster and possible loss of hundreds of buildings of vital historic importance to Romania.

- b) "Learning by doing" for (young) professionals

Continues professional development through the concept of "hands on training". This is a way of implementing non-formal and education which is identified as lacking not just in Romania but in most of European countries. Most of the volunteers are students and young professionals who are trying to enlarge their knowledge, soft skills, strengthening competences and meta-competences (project management, fund raising) while participating in a large inter disciplinary approach.

- c) Discovering and giving value to traditional local knowledge and handcrafts.

Young craftsmen are encouraged to work on the interventions, helped by older craftsmen who are invited to transmit their skills and knowledge during training activities.

- d) Encouraging local communities to take a hand in preserving their own built heritage and to have pride in their cultural identity. The sustainable preservation and maintenance of historic buildings would not be possible without the direct and active involvement of local communities.



Figure 5 Volunteers on the roof of the wooden church from Brusturi during a break, 2018



Figure 6 Volunteers repairing the covering of the church in Altâna, 2017

e) Encouraging philanthropy in the field of heritage in Romania.

Young people from the towns, members of local communities, policy makers are invited to volunteer to work or to donate funds for materials, or provide food and lodging for craftsmen and volunteers.

f) Capacity building for new and existing NGO's.

Strengthening and developing a structured civil society while supporting the birth new heritage organisations and supporting networking between them are key issues for the ambulance.

(2) Research

Previous to the interventions the ambulance team and its partners are doing the needed research (surveys, historical studies, reports on biological degradation, geological studies, dendrochronological studies, structural expertise) which reflect directly in the solutions of the intervention itself: architectural, art components and structural projects.



Figure 7 Wall painting conservation expert consolidating the plaster previous to the intervention at the church in Baru, 2019
©Ileana Burnichioiu



Figure 8 Experts extracting wooden samples during a dendrochronological research at the church from Brusturi, 2018
©Bogdan Ilieş

a) Stages of implementation

Yet, a number of 29 out of 600 threatened monuments from Romania have been sustainably put in safe while the ambulance is extending fast all over the Romanian territory.

b) Local, national and European context in which initiative was undertaken

Local communities from Romania and East-European countries were unprepared to respond in an efficient and sustainable way to the open working market and to the sudden transition to globalization after the fall of the communist regime. They abandoned apparently many historical buildings which they never saw as build heritage in the past. A now day general revival of cultural identity in Romania strengthened by the activities of the ambulance is leading to successful assumption of build heritage today.

(3) Results and future plans

a) Results

The project has sufficiently advanced so to have a significant overview on its results. To date a number of 32 interventions have been completed while 27 of them are in public use and ownership: 17 orthodox churches (3 of them being listed by Europa Nostra among the Europe seven most endangered monuments and sites in 2014), 6 fortified Lutheran churches, 2 train stations, 2 water mills, one medieval fortification ruin, one manor house, one memorial tower and one palace.

The interventions have been a pledge for the authenticity of the preservation of roof structures and coverings of historic buildings. Therefore the variety of types of wooden shingles and ceramic tiles has been highlighted through the ambulance interventions in contrast with the common practice of unification of local specificity.

More than 200 volunteers have been involved up to now, among them 15 experts accredited by The Ministry for Culture, and 30 other professionals from the field of heritage. More than 100 students from the field of architecture, urban planning, art history, archaeology, painting and tourism have been trained during the interventions. There have been created 5 new constant jobs for craftsmen who are helping with the labour and training courses, and many others for the production of raw materials such as shingles, lime, tiles and bricks.

A traditional kiln was built by Asociația Monumentum to produce handmade tiles and bricks for the ambulance interventions in Southern Transylvania.

A number of 4 new heritage NGO's have been established with the main scope of implementing the ambulance project locally, two others are yet to come.

Monumentum Association partnered for the development of the project more than 20 local, regional and central authorities, 5 universities, 20 NGO's and over 15 parishes belonging to the orthodox and Lutheran church.

The pilot project for Southern Transylvania has been successfully completed but the initiative is designed to grow continuously similar to a franchise based system and to extend on an international level for saving as many monuments as possible.

b) Future follow-up of the initiative and plans for future dissemination.

A close collaboration with the organisations which are implementing the ambulance project in each regions will be kept in order to follow up the objectives and aim of the project as agreed in the MOU. The activities of the ambulance has been promoted through a massive support of national media through over 500 news, articles and broadcasts. Future plans include a Social responsibility campaign on national televisions (Asociația Monumentum had this experience before) and a wider and more consistent dissemination in schools.

The project received in 2019 several awards, among them being the prize for the best cultural project received at the Gala of Civil Society in Romania. In 2020 the project received the award for Education, training and awareness-raising from Europa Nostra / European Commission.



Figure 9 Volunteers lifting up the provisional covering for a Brancovan style gate, 2016

(4) Community impact

a) How cultural heritage benefits from the initiative

The main benefit of cultural heritage and local communities is the preservation of monuments which would probably have disappeared if they wouldn't have been helped by the ambulance. Many of the local community members feel a strong connection to the monument and to heritage in general after they touched it, knowing that the shingle or tile they have put on the roof saved actually a visible part of their history. Some of them are repeating the experience while helping in the neighbor interventions and many of them became supporters of the new heritage organisations established around the ambulance.

b) Evidence of influence at local, national and regional level

For most of the interventions the number of community members who donated funds for supporting the meals was more than 50% while in three of them it got to more than 90%. A remarkable intervention in respect of self-sustainability of rural communities was the intervention at the church in Breb where the wood was harvested locally, shingles were done by local craftsmen while more than 40 community members were involved among the volunteers to nail them on the roof. The community offered to the volunteers free accommodation and meals from home made products.

c) Involvement of youth, community and/or non-traditional audiences

Since 2012 Asociația Monumentum has worked side by side with The Global Heritage Fund community engagement projects than in more than 15 villages from Transylvania transferring the knowledge to the ambulance. New audiences in heritage have been created specially at the level of youth (members of rural communities and young people from the towns) due to the work on the ground and especially due to its wide covering in the national media.



Figure 10 Local craftsmen and community members from Breb working side by side with the volunteers for saving the XVIIth century church, 2018

d) Contribution to intercultural dialogue and to the protection of cultural diversity

The intervention have been made on buildings belonging to the Saxon (German), Hungarian, Romanian and Ukrainian communities in the last 3 years. Transylvania is well known for its strong sense of ethnic and religious tolerance since centuries therefore participants to the actions (belonging to more than 10 ethnics and nations) have been very interested in discovering the culture of "the other". Each Sunday which falls within the intervention period is used for site visits and organising events for discovering local culture (ethnography, gastronomy, traditional dancing evenings etc.).



Figure 11 Old carpenter during a training course for architects students at the church in Vălari, 2018

e) Long term impact of the initiative

The team of the ambulance monitors the indicators of success while keeping a strong connection with the owners and community after the intervention was done, advising them on future plans regarding the monument. Most of the actions which the community does after the end of the interventions are related to usual monitoring and maintenance activities of the building and surroundings: checking and cleaning the drainage, cutting the grass around the building etc. Animated by the intervention many owners started discussions with professionals for launching a process of the complete conservation and restoration of the building. On a long term it is estimated that the impact will be related to the growing visibility of heritage in general, increasing knowledge of professionals and craftsmen and activating owners and communities to launch their own actions for the preservation, promotion and valorization of their own cultural identity.

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Figure 12 Volunteer during the training course of tile making at the traditional kiln in Apos, built by Asociația Monumentum with the support of His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, 2019 ©Diana Iabrașu



Figure 13 A tile made by Mr. Toshiyuki Kono, the president of ICOMOS International, who has visited the traditional kiln in Apos, 2019 ©Veronica Vaida

Website of the project: <http://ambulanta-pentru-monumente.ro/?lang=en>