

# Dialogue between history and modernity in the preservation of historical ruins: The case of Helfštýn Castle

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**Abstract:** The article examines contemporary architectural interventions at Helfštýn Castle in the Czech Republic, which illustrate an attempt to balance the preservation of historical heritage with the requirements of modernity. The castle, one of the largest in Central Europe, underwent a comprehensive restoration by the Czech architectural studio Atelier-r between 2017 and 2020. The work included structural stabilization, masonry repair, sandblasted glass roofing, and the introduction of modern architectural elements such as viewing platforms and pathways. The project was recognized for its creative approach and won numerous awards, including "Building of the Year 2021" in the Czech Republic. At the same time, it generated controversy, especially among conservation groups such as the Czech ICOMOS National Committee. Criticism included interference with the original historical substance, limited roofing exposing the ruins to deterioration, and the destruction of the building's late Gothic elements. The article highlights the complexity of the dialogue between tradition and modernity in the context of heritage conservation. Helfštýn Castle has become a symbol of the search for a balance between preserving authenticity and introducing contemporary functions and forms. The case study presented concludes on the challenges and opportunities of contemporary conservation, emphasizing the need for a delicate balance between preservation and adaptation of historical buildings.

**Keywords:** historic ruin, castle, cultural heritage, contemporary architectural intervention

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## Introduction

The ruins of castles represent an extremely valuable element of cultural heritage, combining aesthetics, history, and symbolic significance for contemporary societies. On the one hand, they are a testament to the passage of time and civilizations<sup>1</sup>; on the other, they serve as an important component of national and regional identity. The interest in them that arose during the Romantic period has its roots in an earlier appreciation of their aesthetic value<sup>2</sup>, which continues to attract tourists and researchers today. Due to changing social needs and

1 J. A. Tainter, G. Lucas, *Epistemology of the significance concept*, "American Antiquity", 1983, 48(4), pp. 707–719.

2 B. Frydryczak, *Historyczne formy waloryzacji ruin*, „Studia Europaea Gnesnensia”, 2011, nr 3, p. 176.

the development of civilization, many of these structures gradually fell into ruin and their original functions were forgotten<sup>3</sup>.

Helfštýn Castle, one of the largest and best-preserved Gothic castles in Central Europe, is an excellent example of the challenges facing modern conservation practice<sup>4</sup>. In response to the deteriorating technical condition of the site, extensive restoration work was undertaken. The aim was not only to protect the ruins from further deterioration, but also to adapt them for modern tourist purposes. The project, to be carried out by the Czech architectural studio Atelier-r<sup>5</sup>, between 2017 and 2020<sup>6</sup>, represents an attempt to combine modern architectural solutions with the preservation of the site's historical character. However, like any contemporary intervention in a historical context, it has provoked mixed reactions, ranging from recognition in the architectural community to criticism, particularly from the Czech National Committee of ICOMOS.

The aim of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the modern architectural interventions carried out at Helfštýn Castle in the Czech Republic. It focuses on their impact on the preservation of the historical authenticity of the site and the introduction of modern adaptive elements. The analysis examines the extent to which the actions undertaken are in line with contemporary conservation standards and doctrines, such as those outlined in the ICOMOS Charters. It also assesses their effectiveness in the context of the protection and presentation of the monument.

The article seeks to assess whether the interventions strike a balance between preserving the integrity of the historical fabric and the need to introduce modern technical and functional solutions. Particular attention will be paid to controversial issues such as the intervention in authentic elements of the structure, the introduction of new materials with a distinctly modern character and the decision to partially cover the site. The analysis will also consider both the positive aspects of the project, such as improving the accessibility of the castle for visitors and safeguarding its structure, and the negative aspects, including the criticism from conservation experts.

## Historical context and state of preservation of Helfštýn Castle

Helfštýn Castle is picturesquely situated in the mountainous region of the Moravian Carpathians, part of the larger Carpathian mountain range in Central Europe. Situated on a hill 380 metres above sea level<sup>7</sup>, at the narrowest point of the Moravian Gate, the castle dominates the village of Týn nad Bečvou near the town of Lipník nad Bečvou<sup>8</sup>. Its location provided an excellent strategic position for controlling trade routes and defending against potential invasions. The wide view of the surrounding area added to its military and observation importance. The castle covers an area of 1.9 hectares<sup>9</sup>, making it one of the largest castle ruins in the Czech Republic<sup>10</sup>. Its structures extend over an area 50 metres long and 30 metres wide<sup>11</sup>, oriented along a northeast-southwest axis. Surrounded by massive defensive walls, the castle is a prime example of medieval defensive architecture, its size and location emphasising its historical importance in the region.

3 G. Śladowski et al., *The Boyen Fortress: structural analysis of selecting complementary forms of use for a proposed adaptive reuse project*, "Heritage Science", 2021, nr 9, 76, p. 1.

4 T. Křížková, *Vývoj rodových sídel na Moravě jako projev reprezentace ve středověku*, bachelor thesis, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, Filozofická fakulta, 2020, p. 37.

5 *Atelier-r*, <https://atelierarchitects.net/> [access date: 05.11.2023].

6 České noviny, *Památkoví odborníci kritizují rekonstrukci hradu Helfštýn na Přerovsku*, 2022, [https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/pamatkov-i-odbornici-kritizuj-i-rekonstrukci-hradu-helfstyn-na-prerovsku/2155361?fbclid=IwAR3PsWCZUgsrnij\\_Qom-kvUwJwgbX3ptz3rGmV\\_6mLX5nm6v4xUH0wCDyaU](https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/pamatkov-i-odbornici-kritizuj-i-rekonstrukci-hradu-helfstyn-na-prerovsku/2155361?fbclid=IwAR3PsWCZUgsrnij_Qom-kvUwJwgbX3ptz3rGmV_6mLX5nm6v4xUH0wCDyaU) [access date: 05.11.2023].

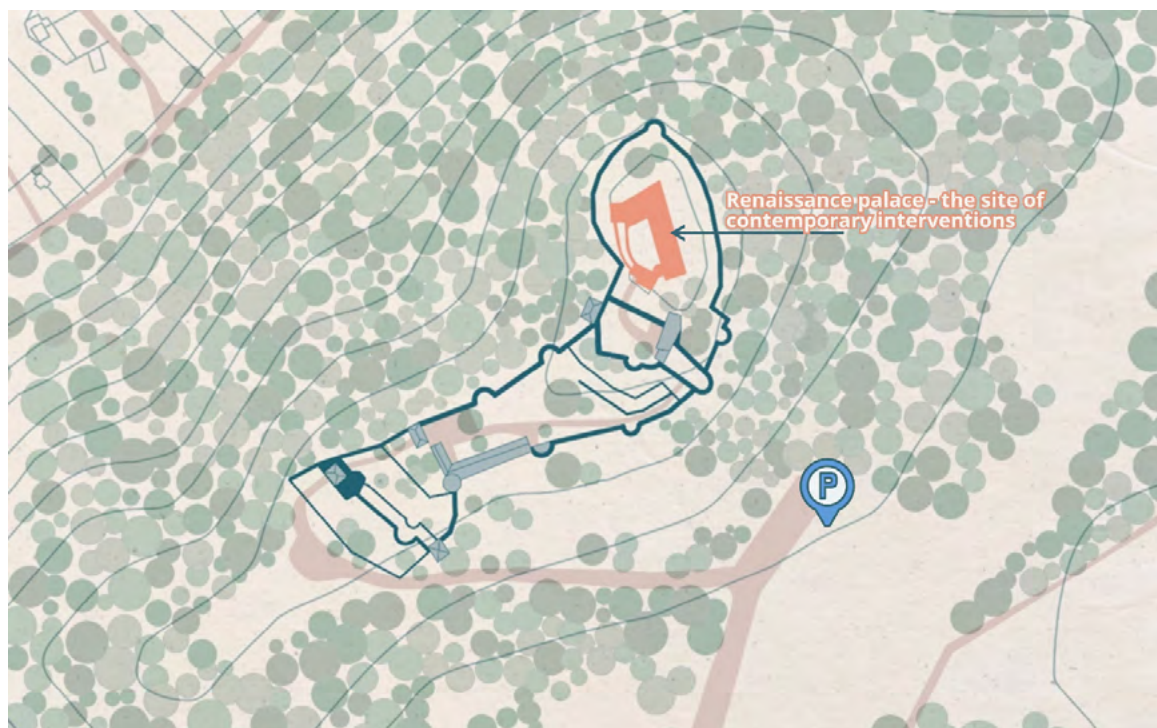
7 J. Filippová, P. Filippov, *Svahy u hradu Helfštýna – zelený drahokam Moravské brany*, „Živa“, 2005, nr 2/2005, p. 89. pp. 89–91.

8 P. David, V. Soukup, *Dějiny hradů a tvrzí v Čechách, na Moravě a ve Slezsku*, Praha, Knižní klub, 2012, p. 344.

9 M. Šudová, *Analýza rozsáhlosti zřícenin v ČR*, bachelor thesis, Univerzita Karlova, Přírodovědecká fakulta, 2016, p. 213. <https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/80834> [access date: 05.11.2023].

10 M. Plaček, *Ilustrovaná encyklopedie moravských hradů, hrádků a tvrzí*. 2. Praha, Vyd. Libri, 2007, p. 213.

11 M. Šudová, *Analýza rozsáhlosti zřícenin v ČR*, bachelor thesis, Univerzita Karlova, Přírodovědecká fakulta, 2016, p. 213. <https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/80834> [access date: 05.11.2023].



**Fig. 1.** Plan of Helfstyn Castle showing the location of the site of the contemporary architectural interventions discussed in the article, compiled by the authors.

The castle was built in the 13th century by the Helfenburks to protect strategic trade routes through Moravia. It flourished in the 14th century when it belonged to the Pernštejn family and became a symbol of feudal power and influence in the region. In the 15th century, it played a decisive role in the Hussite wars, where its defence and strategic location made it one of the most important strongholds. In the 17th century, during the Thirty Years' War, the castle was severely damaged by Swedish troops, marking the beginning of its gradual decline. Despite attempts at reconstruction and renovation, the castle gradually lost its significance and became a picturesque ruin<sup>12, 13</sup>, a source of inspiration for artists and Romanticism enthusiasts. More extensive conservation efforts began in the 20th century. It is worth noting the difference between the early, unplanned changes made in the 1950s, 60s and 70s and the deliberate and well-thought-out changes initiated by Zdeněk Gardavský after 1978<sup>14</sup>. This period, which lasted until the 1990s, uniquely reflects the evolving approach to heritage preservation.

From the original structure of the Renaissance palace at Helfštýn Castle, only fragments of the outer and inner walls have survived, covering both the basement and two upper floors. The original vaulted ceilings that once connected the first and second floors have been demolished in the past, further weakening the structure. The lack of a roof over the centuries exposed these elements to harsh weather conditions, including rain, snow and frost. As a result, the surviving architectural elements showed significant signs of deterioration. Window openings, foundations and wall structures were particularly susceptible to damage, resulting in crumbling mortar, cracks and a weakening of the overall integrity of the structure. The western wall of the palace was in the most critical condition, having tilted 70cm out of alignment and in danger of collapsing completely. Such severe damage posed a risk not only to the longevity of the monument, but also to the safety of visitors<sup>15</sup>.

12 M. Plaček, *Ilustrovaná encyklopedie...*, op. cit., p. 213.

13 Medievalheritage.eu, *Helfštýn – zamek*, <https://medievalheritage.eu/pl/strona-glowna/zabytki/czechy/helfstyn-zamek/> [access date: 05.11.2023].

14 H. Glombová, *Hrad Helfštýn a osobnost Zdenka Gardavského*, bachelor thesis, Masarykova Univerzita, Filozofická fakulta, 2015, p. 7. <https://is.muni.cz/th/tne42/> [access date: 05.11.2023].

15 M. Karlík, *Zastřešení torza paláce hradu Helfštýna spojená s rozšířením prohlídkové trasy*, 2021, <https://www.casopisstavebnictvi.cz/clanky-zastreseni-torza-palace-hradu-helfstyna-spojena-s-rozsirenim-prohlidkove-trasy.html> [access date: 05.11.2023].

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In 2014, it was decided to close the Renaissance palace ruins to tourists due to its deteriorating technical condition. This decision was based on numerous structural problems that required urgent conservation work, including stabilising the walls, repairing the foundations and preventing further deterioration. The technical condition of the building, which is constantly affected by weather conditions, had become so serious that further use of the site was impossible without immediate repairs. Between 2017 and 2020, a major restoration was carried out to stabilise and secure the structure, while adapting the castle to modern tourist needs. The work, carried out by the Atelier-r architectural studio, succeeded in preserving the historical character of the site while introducing modern architectural and technical solutions.

## Contemporary conservation challenges in the adaptation of castle ruins

The preservation and conservation of castle ruins is one of the most challenging aspects of modern conservation practice. On the one hand, ruins serve as living witnesses to history and as tangible elements of cultural heritage, but on the other hand, due to their lack of functional utility, they require modern methods of protection and adaptation that preserve their authenticity while meeting contemporary needs. As a result, modern interventions in historical castle ruins have long been a source of controversy within the conservation community. Important debates revolve around the relationship between historical heritage and modern architecture<sup>16</sup>, particularly in the context of maintaining the authenticity of monuments while adapting them to new functions. Adaptation is often the only way to save historical sites from complete destruction. However, the introduction of new elements into the historical fabric can also disrupt the authentic appearance of the historical structure. It should also be remembered that unprotected ruins are vulnerable to external factors such as weather and vegetation. Modern interventions can ensure the survival of ruins by protecting them from further degradation, which is why adaptations are increasingly considered a valid method of preserving ruined structures. However, poorly executed restoration work can accelerate the processes of decay.

Integrating new architecture into a historical context requires a deep understanding and respect for the historical fabric of the site. In Europe, a conservative approach to heritage preservation predominates, based on strong theoretical foundations derived from conservation doctrines. Most modern charters, declarations and recommendations are based on the principles of the Venice Charter<sup>17</sup>, a document developed in the mid-20th century but deeply influenced by the conservation ideas and practices of the late 19th and early 20th centuries<sup>18</sup>.

International doctrinal documents establish principles for modern cultural heritage conservation efforts and provide criteria for evaluating such actions, emphasising the need to preserve the historical value, integrity and authenticity of monuments<sup>19</sup>. At the same time, scholars are exploring ways to adapt monuments to contemporary cultural needs, restore them, and find ways to reuse them<sup>20</sup> while adapting them to the demands

16 E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Nowe formy zderzone z historycznymi*, „Technical Transactions”, 2010, R. 107, z. 7-A/1, p. 292.

17 *The international charter for the preservation and restoration of monuments and historic places*, Venice 1964, [https://www.icomos.org/images/DOCUMENTS/Charters/venice\\_e.pdf](https://www.icomos.org/images/DOCUMENTS/Charters/venice_e.pdf) [access date: 05.11.2023].

18 J. Sroczyńska, *Wybrane problemy adaptacji średniowiecznych zamków*, [in:] *Ochrona Zabytków Architektury Obronnej – Teoria a praktyka, T.2*, (red.) M. L. Lewicka, Działdowo, 2008, p. 205.

19 I. Wilczek, *The layers of history: New architecture interventions in castle ruins*, „Frontiers of Architectural Research”, 2021, 10, pp. 351–368. doi: 10.1016/J.FOAR.2020.12.001

20 S. Soldano, P. Borlizzi, M. Valle, *Report on Current State-Of-Art of Use and Re-use of Medieval Ruins*, Interreg Central Europe, 2017

of modern tourism<sup>21</sup>. Regulations that take into account current functional needs aim to secure heritage for future generations.

Interventions in the historical form of ruins can be divided into several basic categories, each with a different approach and impact on the cultural and historical value of the site. Choosing the right approach to interventions in the form of a ruin should always take into account the character of the structure, its historical significance and the needs of future generations. These categories include<sup>22</sup>:

- **Technical and functional adaptations** – These include the installation of modern systems, the replacement of structural elements and the modernisation of interiors to adapt monuments to contemporary uses, such as commercial purposes. Such alterations require care to avoid blurring the distinction between authentic and modern elements.
- **Parahistorical additions** – These involve the reconstruction of missing parts of structures based on historical assumptions. While such actions can reintegrate a space and restore its functionality, they carry the risk of distorting the authenticity of the monument.
- **Ahistorical additions** – These introduce new forms that are distinctly different from the historical fabric. If properly designed, such interventions can harmoniously blend history with modernity.
- **Historical reconstructions** – These attempt to recreate the original form of the castle, often based on incomplete data. Such efforts are criticised for negating conservation theory and sacrificing authenticity in favour of architectural creation.

In the effort to complete the structure, it is crucial to find a balance between modern expression and the preservation of cultural heritage. Interventions in historical ruins require not only in-depth technical knowledge, but also aesthetic, historical and social sensitivity. Any intervention should be preceded by thorough analysis and reflection in order to be appropriate to the site and its context. Contemporary additions and architectural interventions in ruins are a challenge, but also an opportunity to preserve a unique heritage for future generations. If the restoration of historical buildings is based on a conscious dialogue between contemporary and historical architectural styles, it can be considered an acceptable architectural and preservation activity<sup>23</sup>.

However, a major challenge remains the dilemma between contemporary interpretation and maintaining historical fidelity. The key question is whether the new elements introduced into the ruins should be clearly related to modernity, allowing a clear distinction between new structures and historical substance, or whether they should aim to reconstruct the original appearance of the site. Reconstruction can be criticised as potentially falsifying history, especially in cases where insufficient sources prevent an accurate reconstruction of the building's original state<sup>24</sup>. Conversely, overly modern additions can be controversial, perceived as a lack of sensitivity to the historical and cultural context of the site. Ultimately, any action needs to balance these conflicting approaches, taking into account the specificity of the structure in question, in order to preserve its authenticity and ensure its survival for future generations.

Equally important is the issue of functionality. To make significant parts of ruins accessible to tourists, modern additions can make these sites not only more attractive and accessible, but also safer. Stabilising structures, constructing access paths and introducing modern features such as lighting or multimedia can significantly enhance the visitor experience.

Added value in architectural projects should come from respecting and reinterpreting local traditions, textures, materials and the history of the site, taking into account both current and future users<sup>25</sup>. The process of integration must also take into account the historical, cultural and social context of the site. This requires not only aesthetic sensitivity, but also an understanding and respect for history and tradition. The basic principle of

21 *International Cultural Tourism Charter e Managing Tourism at Places of Heritage Significance*, ICOMOS, Mexico, 1999.

22 P. Molski, *Modernizacja i uzupełnienia w zamkach – pomiędzy konserwacją a kreacją?*, [in:] *Zamki, grody, ruiny – waloryzacja i ochrona. Seria Architektura Obronna, T.3*, (red.) M. L. Lewicka, Warszawa–Białystok, 2009, p. 66.

23 P. Molski, *Przekształcenia zabytkowych obiektów – Próba kodyfikacji*, „Ochrona Dziedzictwa Kulturowego”, 2021, Nr 11, p. 23. doi: 10.35784/odk.2767

24 B. Szmygin et al., *Transnational model form of socially useful use of historic ruins: best practices handbook*, Lublin, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Lubelskiej, 2020, pp. 69–70.

25 E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Place of new art and architecture in the historic cultural space “the right of good continuation”*, „Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura”, 2015, Y. 112, iss. 6-A, p. 281.



modern additions should be the clear separation of new structures from authentic elements of the monument, allowing the history of the site to be read. Modern forms should neither imitate nor falsify the historical fabric, but rather enter into dialogue through contrast and complementarity. Contemporary projects often employ minimalism, using simple, raw forms and materials such as glass, concrete or steel, which provide a backdrop to the delicate historical fabric, highlighting its value without overwhelming it.

## Contemporary interventions at Helfštýn Castle

The contemporary conservation interventions at Helfštýn Castle were primarily a response to the poor technical condition of the site, which threatened both the durability of the monument and the safety of its visitors. As a valuable example of defensive architecture, the castle required comprehensive efforts in terms of stabilization, conservation and adaptation. The main aim of the renovation work, which will be carried out between 2017 and 2020, is to protect the historical structure and create a functional and aesthetically pleasing space that will allow visitors to better experience the castle's architecture.

The main challenge was to reconcile conservation requirements with the need to introduce modern interventions, such as roofing and structural reinforcements, while preserving the authentic character of the site. The reconstruction of Helfštýn Castle was essential due to the poor technical condition of the building. A key element of the project was the creation of a roof, a concept that has been under discussion since the second half of the 20th century. Over time, various visions emerged – from historical reconstructions to futuristic concepts – none of which were accepted by the experts at the Institute for the Conservation of Monuments. After extensive discussions, the specialists developed guidelines for future work, including structural stabilization and the possibility of a new roof, provided it did not increase the volume of the building or extend beyond the line of the wall crowns. Another important criterion was the reversibility of any new structural elements<sup>26</sup>.



**Fig. 2.** General view of Helfštýn Castle. Author: Olomoucký kraj, Source: [https://www.idnes.cz/olomouc/zpravy/hrad-Helfštýn-ceska-cena-za-architekturu-pospisil-karlik.A211109\\_123136\\_olomouc-zpravy\\_stk](https://www.idnes.cz/olomouc/zpravy/hrad-Helfštýn-ceska-cena-za-architekturu-pospisil-karlik.A211109_123136_olomouc-zpravy_stk)

26 M. Medková, *Je rekonstrukce hradu Helfštýn povedená, nebo neodborná?*, 2022, <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67053650-je-rekonstrukce-hradu-helfstyn-povedena-nebo-neodborna> [access date: 05.11.2023].

In addition to meeting the technical requirements, the design team proposed a partial reconstruction of the palace up to the level of the ruined second floor. This solution allows visitors to view the historical structures from different perspectives. The designers aimed to create a new visitor path that would be harmoniously integrated into the castle ruins. A key feature of this path was the clear distinction between original and newly added elements, which allowed for a better understanding of the site’s history. The primary design principle was not only to preserve the historical character of the structure, but also to enhance its functionality and aesthetics. The intention was that contemporary architecture would combine with historical structures to create a new, cohesive architectural whole, where value is derived from the harmony between history and modernity. To adapt the castle for tourism, modern architectural additions were introduced which are clearly distinguishable from the historic structures of the castle. Three different materials were used for the different levels of the structure: concrete, corten steel and glass (Table 1). This approach achieved a harmonious blend of modern interventions with the historical heritage of the site. In addition, the newly created spaces increased the overall capacity of the castle’s accessible areas<sup>27</sup>.

As part of the conservation work, the walls were renovated with the aim of preservation and structural reinforcement. Due to foundation problems that caused parts of the walls in the northern corner to detach and the western wall to tilt out of vertical alignment, these elements had to be reinforced with micropiles. The wall crowns were also strengthened. Some sections of the walls were plastered over, while others were left exposed to highlight the different phases of the castle’s development.

**Table 1.** Main areas of architectural interventions at Helfštýn Castle: objectives and solutions used, prepared by: the authors

Architectural intervention area	PURPOSE	SOLUTIONS APPLIED
<b>New tour routes</b>	Increasing accessibility and providing new perspectives for visiting the ruins	Viewing footbridges and railings made from corten
<b>Use of contemporary materials</b>	Highlighting the contrast between new and historical elements	Corten on platforms, glass in roofing, concrete on pavements
<b>Partial roofing</b>	Protection of selected parts from weathering	Use of glass roofing over key spaces
<b>Introduction of exhibition spaces</b>	Presentation of the history of the castle and artistic blacksmithing	Exhibition spaces located within the existing walls, galleries of polished concrete and gravel paving display works of corten



**Fig. 3.** General view of the Helfštýn Castle palace, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 4.** View of the courtyard, 2022, by K. Drobek

<sup>27</sup> Regiony nas bavi, *Propojení historie a moderní architektury na hradě Helfštýn*, 2023, <https://regionynasbavi.cz/clanek/hrad-helfstyn/> [access date: 05.11.2023].

Helřtřyn Castle is an example of a conscious dialogue between history and modernity, where architectural interventions preserve the character of the historic ruin while enhancing its functionality. From the outside, the perception of the site as a ruin dominates, emphasizing its historical character. A key element in the integration of the contemporary intervention with the historic structure is the corten steel footbridge that crosses the gate passage (Fig. 3). From a human perspective, the footbridge remains the only visible element of the modern addition, and its presence does not disrupt the distinct historic silhouette of the building.

A much stronger contrast between the new elements and the historical structure can be seen in the courtyard (Fig. 4). The corten footbridge, which runs along the perimeter wall, stands out as an example of modern architecture. Despite the use of the same material as the exterior elements, the solid form of the railings creates a sharp contrast with the historic background. This design choice is deliberate and aims not only to emphasize the presence of modernity in a historical space, but also to provoke reflection on contemporary methods of preservation and adaptation of heritage.

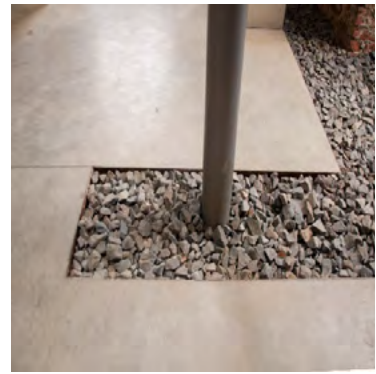
At ground floor level, the primary material is polished architectural concrete, giving the pathways a minimalist and neutral appearance (Figs. 5–6). The walkways have been separated from the historical walls with corten edging and gravel surfaces (Fig. 7). The interiors on the ground floor have been converted into exhibition spaces, displaying artistic blacksmithing and the history of the castle.



**Fig. 5.** Interior of the former chapel, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 6.** Concrete pathways and corten exhibits, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 7.** Concrete pathways and gravel pavement expansion joint, 2022, by K. Drobek

On the second floor of the palace, new structures have been introduced to reflect the levels of the former floors, allowing visitors to view the palace and its surroundings from unique perspectives. Corten steel was deliberately chosen as the construction material for its aesthetic and functional qualities. The special properties of this material, such as its ability to patinate naturally, made it possible to create harmony with the texture of the historic walls, while subtly referencing the tradition of artistic blacksmithing that is deeply rooted in the castle's history<sup>28</sup>. The design of the floors was conceived in such a way that the beams were arranged irregularly, making the most of the existing wall elements while minimising the impact on the historic fabric.

28 Muzeum Komenského v Přerově, *Blacksmithing at Helřtřyn*, <https://helfstyn.cz/en/blacksmithing-at-helfstyn> [access date: 05.11.2023].





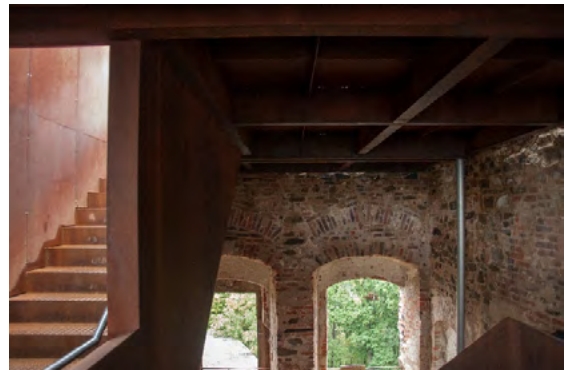
**Fig. 8.** Corten footbridge on the second level of the palace, glass room roofing and roof drainage, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 9.** Corten footbridge on the second level of the palace, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 10.** Corten footbridge on the second level of the palace, glass room roofing and roof drainage, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 11.** Staircase made of corten steel, 2022, by K. Drobek

On the highest level of the building there are glass roofs (Fig. 12) and two viewing terraces (Figs. 14–15). The roofing of the palace was only partially completed, covering five selected chambers, while the remaining spaces were deliberately left open (Fig. 2). The roof structures are supported by steel profiles with sandblasted glass panels installed on top (Fig. 12). The frosted glass diffuses the light, providing softer interior lighting and making it easier to maintain cleanliness. An exception is the roof of the chapel, where transparent glass has been used to emphasize its unique character. The staircases are covered by corten steel platforms, which also act as viewing terraces (Fig. 14).

The roof drainage system is based on a flat roof design with a slight slope, which directs water into concealed gutters between the steel sections. Despite the functionality of the system, its design has been controversial due to the placement of the downspouts, which in some areas run through the interior of the palace, giving an impression of randomness (Figs. 8 and 13). For example, in some places the drainage runs through the centre of the walkway on the second floor, creating an aesthetically questionable element.



**Fig. 12.** Glass roof hidden below the wall topping line, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 13.** Roof drainage pipe to the inside of the building, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 14.** Large panoramic terrace with balustrades made from corten and glass, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 15.** Viewing terrace at the spiral staircase, 2022, by K. Drobek

The courtyard of the Helfstýn Castle features elements of small-scale architecture such as information boards (Fig. 16), benches and lighting installations. The glass information stands, mounted on minimalist steel structures, can also be found inside the building (Fig. 18). The benches, made of monolithic wooden blocks and set directly on the courtyard ground (Fig. 17), are in keeping with the historical context. While their simple form harmonizes with the surroundings, the material used shows little resistance to the climatic conditions of this geographical region. Less than three years after the completion of the project, the benches show considerable signs of wear. The direct contact of the wood with the ground facilitates the absorption of moisture, which accelerates its degradation. A lighter form of bench can be found inside the building (Fig. 18).

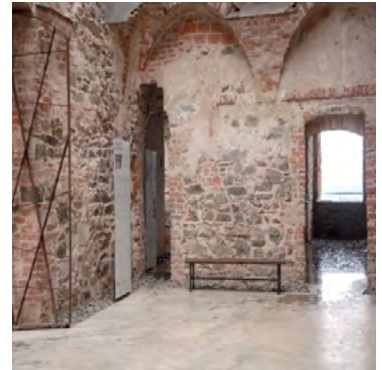
The railings and other elements designed to protect users from falling in the palace take various forms (Figs. 19–21). In the accompanying figures (Figs. 18–19 and 21) we can see the use of corten steel elements, both in openwork designs (Figs. 19 and 20) and in solid railings (Figs. 8–9, 15 and 22). In addition, glass balustrades have been installed in selected rooms (Fig. 21) and on one of the viewing terraces (Fig. 14). Although glass can be challenging to maintain, it blends in effectively with the surroundings without detracting from the perception of the preserved historical elements. The transparency of the material, particularly on the viewing platforms, not only allows unobstructed views of the surrounding landscape, but also ensures safety for visitors of all ages, in keeping with current trends in heritage preservation and the adaptation of historic sites to modern needs.



**Fig. 16.** Information board and outdoor lamp located in the courtyard area, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 17.** Benches located in the courtyard area of the palace, 2022, by K. Drobek



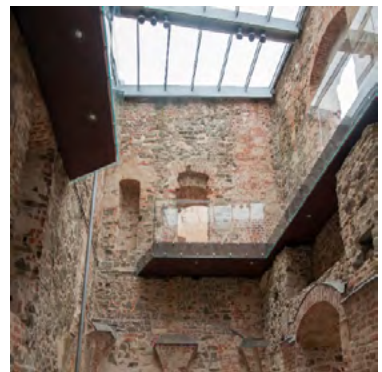
**Fig. 18.** A bench located in one of the chambers of the palace, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 19.** Guard rail at window opening, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 20.** Openwork railing outside the palace outline, 2022, by K. Drobek



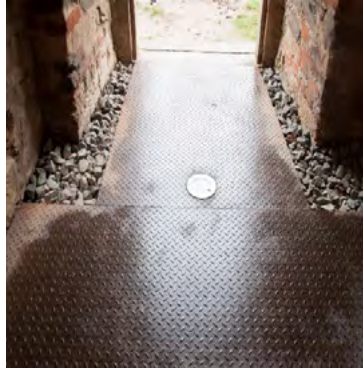
**Fig. 21.** Glass railing in the interior of the palace, 2022, by K. Drobek

There are also several types of lighting (Figs. 16, 22–24). The railings incorporate integrated LED lighting which, together with recessed floor luminaires (Fig. 23) and spotlights mounted on the roof structure (Fig. 23), create a functional exhibition and communication space that meets modern presentation and safety requirements. The overall design is complemented by details such as steel gates and doors, which enhance both the visual and functional aspects of the reconstruction. Exhibition elements (Fig. 25) located in the exhibition rooms further emphasize the integration of modern interventions with the historical context of the site.





**Fig. 22.** Corten footbridge with lighting, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 23.** Recessed lighting in the floor, located on the tourist route, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 24.** Lighting mounted on roof steel beams, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 25.** Exhibition located in the palace chambers, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 26.** Openwork door made of corten, 2022, by K. Drobek



**Fig. 27.** Solid doors made of corten, 2022, by K. Drobek

## Contemporary interventions at Helfštýn Castle

The architectural interventions at Helfštýn Castle are an excellent example of the complex dialogue between the preservation of historical heritage and the introduction of modern elements. This issue is particularly relevant for sites such as ruins, where the authenticity of the historical fabric and its picturesque, raw character are key aspects of its cultural value. At the same time, the needs of today's users, such as safety, functionality and increased accessibility, require the implementation of new and often controversial solutions.

In the case of Helfštýn Castle, design decisions were based on the principle that new architectural elements should not imitate the historical substance, but should remain clearly distinct and visibly contemporary. The use of Corten steel, glass and architectural concrete reflects this approach. These materials, while contrasting with the authentic structure of the castle, have been introduced in a way that does not overshadow the historical context, but rather creates a subtle dialogue. Corten, with its characteristic rusty surface, will integrate visually with the surrounding historical structures over time, while glass and concrete act as neutral backdrops and protective elements.

One of the main dilemmas in such projects is defining the boundaries of intervention. Can the introduction of new elements be at the expense of the authenticity of the historical fabric? The example of Helfštýn Castle shows that in conservation practice this boundary is difficult to define. Criticism of the removal of late Gothic wall fragments during the installation of new structures highlights the complexity of this issue. On the one hand,



such actions were necessary for the stabilisation and accessibility of the site; on the other hand, they result in irreversible changes that may affect the perception of the authenticity of the site.

Another important aspect of the dialogue between history and modernity is the protection of the site from further degradation, while preserving the raw character of the ruins. Helfštýn Castle remains partially open to the elements, a deliberate design choice to preserve its original aesthetic. The partial roofing, while protecting key areas from further damage, leaves other parts of the site exposed to erosion, which has become one of the main points of criticism.

The interventions at Helfštýn Castle also pose challenges in the context of public perception. Modern architectural forms may be perceived by local communities and tourists as too far removed from traditional expectations of what a castle ruin should look like. This raises the question of how far the new architectural elements should take into account the aesthetic expectations of users and how far they should adhere to conservation principles based on international standards.

The introduction of modern elements, such as viewing platforms and exhibition spaces, may enhance the tourist experience, but it also changes the way the ruins are perceived – as a place of transience and history. These choices raise the question of whether ruins should invite reflection on the passage of time or be adapted to contemporary needs. In the case of Helfštýn Castle, this dialogue unfolds on several levels – both aesthetic and functional.

The example of Helfštýn Castle highlights the need for ongoing discussion about the principles and limits of modern conservation efforts. Achieving a balance between heritage preservation and adaptation to contemporary needs requires not only technical expertise, but also cultural sensitivity and social awareness. It is a process that does not end with the completion of the project, but continues through its evaluation and ongoing use.

## Conclusions

The integration of new architecture with historical monuments is a process that requires a balance between respect for the past and the need to express modernity. It is a task that requires exceptional sensitivity to ensure that new architectural interventions not only harmonize with the heritage, but also add value and functionality to serve future generations. The example of Helfštýn Castle in the Czech Republic illustrates these challenges perfectly, revealing both the potential of contemporary solutions and the controversy they can generate (Table 2.).

The renovation project of the palace section of the castle, carried out by the Atelier-r architectural studio, has been widely acclaimed in the architectural community, as evidenced by prestigious awards such as Building of the Year 2021 and recognition in the Czech Interior Award of the Year 2020<sup>29</sup>. The introduction of modern materials such as Corten steel, glass and concrete, the minimalist design of the visitor routes and the partial roofing of selected parts of the palace made it possible to protect parts of the historical structure while creating spaces that are attractive to visitors. In addition, the expansion of the castle's accessible areas contributed to improved functionality and enriched its cultural and tourist offerings. The project also achieved success in the Czech Interior Award of the Year 2020 competition, winning in the Public Interior category, and received international recognition from the readers of Dezeen magazine, winning the Rebirth Project Award<sup>30</sup>.

A key strength of the project is its emphasis on the distinction between modern and historical elements, in line with the principles of international conservation charters such as the Venice Charter. In this way, the project represents a conscious attempt to promote dialogue between the past and the present, creating a space that combines protective, educational and cultural functions.

However, the project has also sparked controversies that highlight the difficulties of reconciling different conservation priorities. The Czech National Committee of ICOMOS was critical of the destruction of a late Gothic wall during the installation of the new structures, which in their opinion violated the principle of preserving the integrity of the monument. The decision to only partially cover the site was also criticized, as it left significant

29 Česká cena za architekturu, 170 projects in Czech Architecture Award 2021, <https://ceskacenaazaarchitekturu.cz/en/years/2021> [access date: 25.12.2023].

30 Dezeen, *Dezeen Awards 2021 architecture project category winners revealed*, 2021, <https://www.dezeen.com/2021/11/22/dezeen-awards-2021-architecture-category-winners/> [access date: 25.12.2023].

parts of the site exposed to the elements<sup>31</sup>. Critics argued that such solutions could lead to further degradation of the historic fabric, contradicting the long-term goals of heritage preservation.

**Table 2.** Analysis of the positive and negative aspects of architectural interventions at Helfštýn Castle, prepared by: the authors

Aspect	Positive impact	Negative impact
<b>Use of contemporary materials</b>	Emphasises the difference between new and historical elements, in accordance with the principles of the ICOMOS Charter.	The apparent contrast can be perceived as dissonance, especially with materials such as corten.
<b>Minimalistic design of footbrid</b>	Harmonizes with the historical character of the ruins and minimizes visual intrusion.	These structures can be perceived as being too contemporary, which disturbs the perception of the authenticity of the building.
<b>Partial roofing</b>	Protects the most valuable parts from the elements, keeping the ruins open.	Leaving parts of the building unroofed leads to further erosion of the unprotected parts.
<b>Introduction of sightseeing paths</b>	Provides new perspectives and safe tours for tourists, increasing the accessibility of the site.	Physical interference with the historic fabric during the installation of footbridges can lead to the destruction of original elements.
<b>Introduction of exhibition spaces</b>	Increases the functionality of the site, enabling the presentation of the castle's history and enriching the cultural offer.	Adding new features may alter the original function of the site as a picturesque ruin.

The debate surrounding the Helfštýn Castle project reflects the complexity of modern conservation and architectural practices. The introduction of contemporary interventions always requires difficult decisions to be made, balancing the preservation of authenticity with the adaptation of the site to the needs of modern users. Positive outcomes, such as increased functionality and the protection of selected sections, are intertwined with challenges, such as the visible contrast of materials or the risk of further erosion in unprotected areas. This case also highlights the importance of dialogue between various stakeholders – conservators, architects, historians and local communities – in the process of creating sustainable solutions.

Ultimately, the renovation of Helfštýn Castle represents an attempt to combine tradition and modernity, which, although not without controversy, provides valuable lessons for contemporary conservation practice. The conclusions drawn from this project are relevant to ongoing discussions about the limits and possibilities of integrating new architecture with historic monuments. They underline the need for a flexible approach and continuous reflection on the preservation of historical values in a changing social context.

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## Dialog między historią a współczesnością w ochronie historycznych ruin – przykład zamku Helfštýn

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**Streszczenie:** Artykuł analizuje współczesne interwencje architektoniczne na zamku Helfštýn w Czechach, które ilustrują próbę pogodzenia ochrony historycznego dziedzictwa z wymaganiami współczesności. Zamek, będący jednym z największych w Europie Środkowej, przechodził w latach 2017–2020 kompleksową renowację prowadzoną przez czeskie Atelier-r. Prace te obejmowały m.in. stabilizację konstrukcji, naprawę murów, zadaszenie z piaskowanego szkła oraz wprowadzenie nowoczesnych elementów architektonicznych, takich jak platformy widokowe i ścieżki. Projekt zyskał uznanie za kreatywne podejście i zdobył liczne nagrody, m.in. „Building of the Year 2021” w Czechach. Jednocześnie wywołał kontrowersje, szczególnie w kręgach konserwatorskich, takich jak Czeski Komitet Narodowy ICOMOS. Krytyka dotyczyła m.in. ingerencji w oryginalną substancję zabytkową, ograniczonego zadaszenia narażającego ruiny na degradację oraz zniszczenia późnogotyckich elementów budowli. W artykule podkreślono złożoność dialogu między tradycją a nowoczesnością w kontekście ochrony dziedzictwa. Zamek Helfštýn stał się symbolem poszukiwania równowagi między zachowaniem autentyczności a wprowadzeniem współczesnych funkcji i form. Przedstawione studium przypadku zawiera wnioski na temat współczesnych wyzwań i możliwości konserwatorskich, akcentując potrzebę delikatnego balansu między ochroną a adaptacją historycznych obiektów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** historyczna ruina, zamek, ochrona dziedzictwa, współczesne interwencje architektoniczne

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