BÁNFFY CASTLE, SÂNCRAI (ROMANIA) - PROPOSAL FOR LANDSCAPE REHABILITATION

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Abstract: The 200 year old Bánffy Castle exists as architectural evidence of the Hungarian nobility with significant importance in the garden history of Romania. The Renaissance style, late Baroque influence, and Neoclassic accents characterize the landmark, which has surpassed, through restoration, the test of time, and has since revitalized the social life in the nearby village. A cultural and physical message has already been highlighted by reconverting the ruin into a functional space, but a current approach to support the landscape as a local patrimony is lacking. This article discusses a reconstruction study of a green area within the historic garden, by analyzing another example of a Bánffy domain in Transylvania. The need for patrimonial protection of architecture, and landscape has great value in sustaining a local memory. This paper concludes with a discussion on the impact of garden rehabilitation in Modern Age.

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Introduction

In Romania, until the last century, the region of Transylvania has benefited from the Hungarian elite, who enriched the local culture and left a unique mark on the landscape with their architecture. The local secular gardens have suffered in time transformations from one architectural style to another, being closely connected with a fortress, castle, mansion, *curia*, or any other form of noble or cleric settlement. Particularly relevant at this point are the Habsburg historic maps, which capture the plans of the Bánffy domains from the 18th century, both Sâncrai, and Bonțida, and help to identify certain characteristics. This theme has been studied from a historical, cultural, and architectural point of view in maintaining a local patrimony, but the gardens, in both cases, have been lost over time, creating a gap between the past and the present. From Renaissance to Baroque, from ruin to the cultural center, today, the castle from Sâncrai has been restored to its former glory. However, regarding the historical garden, much more can be done. Being the most fragile among works of art, with drought withering the plants, wars destroying their architecture, weeds invading the ornamental plantings, and the hostile nature resuming what was once lost through art (Constantinescu, 1992), restoration is often considered among specialists, stating these matters as architectural and horticultural composition of public interest that should be treated as a monument (Florența Chart, 1982).

The main purpose of this paper is to stress the importance of a green area as part of a complex restoration. Without setting boundaries between the building and the landscape, it is imperative to be aware of the essence of this relationship. *Hortus conclusus*, as gardens are referred to in literature, has lost its origins. There are only assumptions, from comparing historical data, that a particular affinity for this type of art first appeared in Asia (Iliescu, 2008), where the *utilitas* component emerged first, and the evolution of society generated sacred, funeral, imperial, public, and private gardens with changing individual needs. A fundamental aspect of this study is to reveal the history of the Sâncrai garden in connection with Bánffy Castle. The study aims to analyze 20th-century postcards and compare the castle with another Bánffy domain to determine a landscape rehabilitation of the main castle entrance that could be extended to a larger part of the settlement.

Geographical Landmark

Bánffy Castle, placed in Sâncrai village, is part of Alba county, a central region of Transylvania (Romania). Situated seven kilometers from Aiud, a famous historic city in the county, it is accessible via the Ciurbrud-Meșcreac Road (Socaciu & Takács, 2010). Mureș River is present on the west side of the holding, creating a natural and friendly microclimate with characteristic flora disposed as a barrier (Figure 1), in which *Salix* (weeping willow) has been identified. In the cold season, the formation of fog is a meteorological effect often seen here.

The deciduous vegetation and the agricultural land are an essential presence of the local landscape. On the north side, a group of modern buildings stands, while in the southeast, a rural road and a paved

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street delimit the 17 850 m² settlement. At first sight in the historic garden, only a few old trees remain, such as *Fraxinus sp.* (ash), *Platanus sp.* (plane tree), *Juglans sp.* (walnut tree), and *Picea sp.* (spruce). Young trees, such as *Acer sp.* (maple) and *Rosa sp.* (roses), form part of the eco-farm, near the ornamental pond, while other representative vegetation near the castle have disappeared during restoration. The rose culture is popular among locals, especially in Ciombrud, Romania, where each year an exhibition is held during summer.

Figure 1: Aerial view of Sâncrai Castle

Source: Google Maps (2017)

Historical Settlement

Few historically documented facts remain in writings about the castle from Sâncrai, except for the mention of it as belonging to the Kémeny (Fekete, 2007) and the Bánffy families (Iliescu, 2014), while the first mention of Sâncrai was in the 13th century. The First Military Survey (Figure 2) shows the Renaissance settlement and the central symmetry of the building. From 1890, the Baroque castle with Neoclassical elements was extended, due to the Bánffy family (Bâscă, 2016), in two different phases. The manner of the passage from a family to another is not entirely clear. Suppositions claiming the transfer from one owner to another involves three hypotheses: lost at gambling, through marriage, or inheritance. The last one is the most plausible and is associated with Jenő Bánffy, the baron who assigned Pákei Lajos to direct the works, although in the architect's biography there is no such mention (Bordás, 2013). However, Lajos' representative artistic creations from Cluj-Napoca show a certain resemblance to the assembly from Sâncrai.

A mystery engulfs the historical context of this subject. In the 20th century, Sâncrai Castle, like many other noble mansions, has had its function dramatically changed to a school for disabled children, and was even at one point abandoned. The damage caused by these actions was permanent until the local authorities decided to recover a valuable treasure of the past through restoration. An inventory from 1953 presents details of the castle's garden as having various floral species, and fruit and deciduous trees (Bordás, 2013). This aspect reinforces the authenticity of a postcard view from the same century, presented in the subchapter, Landscape Rehabilitation. Since 2013, the building once known as a castle had its glory successfully restored and hosted many cultural and educational activities that now enrich the local social life, but still with minimum intervention in the perimeter of the garden. A culture of roses was established as part of the eco-farm and some young *Acer sp.* (maple) were planted. The only built element in the garden that still stands is an ornamental pond that is out-of-use, almost lost in the spread of vegetation (Milea, 2011). This is the landscape that welcomes the visitors of the Cultural Center of Sâncrai in 2017, which is administrated by the local council (Moga & Rustoiu, 2013).

Figure 2: First Military Survey (1763-1787) - Sz. Kyrály (Sâncrai) and Bontzhida (Bonțida)

Source: Mapire (2017)

Bánffy Domain, Bonțida (Cluj)

Many noble families preferred the Transylvania region (e.g. families of Wessényi, Bethlen, Kendeffy, Ugron, Mikes, Haller, and Brukenthal). Its picturesque scenery, rich soils, and proximity to a water source were probably the main reasons to build their large and luxurious castles in this area (Narcis, 2002). The Bánffy name occurs in the history of Cluj county from the 14th century. At 30 km from Cluj-Napoca, one can observe the imposing castle at Bonțida, which is a remarkable example of a complex architectural ensemble, with Renaissance, Baroque, Neoclassical, and Neogothic features, comparable with Versailles or Schönbrunn (Hegedüs et al., 2015). The building is primarily said to have had curtain walls disposed in a U-shape, which can easily be confirmed by comparison with the First Military Survey of the Habsburg maps (Figure 2).

Generally, the noble families have shown a particular interest towards art being transposed into their gardens as the driving force to transform and adapt the landscape according to the brilliant minds of the landscape architects of those times. An occidental Baroque influence emerged through the personality of Dénes Bánffy VI (Jurnalul Național, 2015), a descendant who inherited the castle in the 18th century. Educated at the Imperial Austrian court, he transformed the landmark into a French parkland making of Bonțida a Transylvanian Versailles (Hegedüs et al., 2015). Iosif Biro describes in his writings three long narrow paths measuring almost one kilometer each, adorned with Linden trees that converged to the north side and united into a fourth path. The park had all the main features of the mentioned style: floral beds, obelisks, fountains, and sculptures (Marcus, 1958). Although these characteristics were transformed in the 19th century into a romantic garden, according to the plans from 1831 of Lazlo Ianoș and the works of Herman Samuel (Marcus, 1958), some large old trees from the avenues remain today, with severe pruning interventions, but as proof of an extraordinary landscape settlement created by artists, such as Johann Kristian Erras.

War World II had negative effects on the settlement, not only were works of art within the building destroyed but valuable documents were stolen during this period (Scholten, 2010). In the following years, one by one the famous trees were cut down, based on the information presented in Castle Break (2016). The garden silently disappeared, becoming only grassland and a local memory. In the 20th century, degradation became such a problem that the monument was included on the List of the Most Damaged Historical Monuments of the World, with funds being directed for the conservation of the castle, since 1999. Today, through the hard work of the Transylvania Trust (1996–2017), the cultural and social spirit is being rebuilt. For a few years now, a pioneering project, the Electric Castle music festival, has attracted many tourists during summer and the income from this event helps achieve the restoration, due to be completed by 2026, as estimated by the trust. A recent study visit, in March 2017, at Bonțida, helped acknowledge the connection between the past and the present between castle and garden (Figure 3). With many examples of similar monuments from Europe, the future is promising for restoring the green area as it was intended for the built environment.

Figure 3: The Park of Bánffy Domain, Bonțida (Cluj)- in the Past Century and at Present

Source: (a) Hegedüs et al. (2015); (b) Author

Landscape Rehabilitation

A possible landscape proposal of a small area within the restored castle from Sâncrai, accompanies the *in-situ* study of the landmark in 2015 and 2016, to acknowledge the true potential of the Cultural Center, which has been operating since 2013. The method used in this case study of a historical rehabilitation (more so than a landscape one), started with retrospective 20th century postcards that showed the castle's surrounds. This involved comparing etchings illustrating the Bánffy domain (Bonțida), as seen in the 19th and 20th centuries (Figure 4).

These remarkable drawings showed a preference for floral beds, groups of shrubs, individual plantings, and a rose culture. The species that could be identified, conclusive for Sâncrai, was the *Agave sp.* (century plant), which is considered an exotic species that needs protection indoors during winter due to the meteorological conditions of Romania. Climbing plants observed on the building's main façade were associated with wine species or ivy but without any certainty. On the lawn area, conifers such as *Abies sp.* (fir) adorned the garden and roses on the opposite side made the lateral path visually pleasant. Near the entrance, two pots stood symmetrically, as a reminder of the Renaissance age.

On the opposite side, the Mureș river creates a microclimate for specific water vegetation. This information gathered from the aesthetic analysis of the past is considered fundamental for the future landscape proposal. Although documented historical facts of the castle outnumber those of the garden, the concluding images provide a glimpse of the past for more tangible evidence.

Figure 4: Postcard views (a) from Bánffy (Sâncrai) and Engravings (b) from Bánffy (Bonțida)

Source: Monumenteuitate.org (2017)

The landmark of Bonțida is by far a landscape architecture that deserves to be among Transylvania's most outstanding works of art. The etchings (Figure 4-b) show luxurious vegetation and an accurate sense of proportion, rhythm, and harmony, creating an extraordinary composition. From the drawings, corresponding to the garden's romantic period, the study established there was a particular preference for deciduous species, possibly *Fraxinus sp.* (ash), *Populus sp.* (aspen), and *Quercus sp.* (oak), with a narrow upright form.

Near the western wing of the castle a small wooden bridge connected the rustic paths, while, in front of the main building, the lawn was enriched in its design with floral species. These aspects revealed an attentive perception and organization of space. Analyzing and comparing the photos of the two Bánffy domains helps one understand not only the history but the essence of the *topos* (place). The proposal for a hypothetical landscape intervention had a simple pattern, imitating the style in the etchings (Figure 5).

It was considered appropriate to propose a pleasant area in front of the main entrance due to the many cultural and educational activities that were likely to be held throughout the year (conferences, workshops, competitions, expositions, and concerts). The portrayal included an option for enlargement, with future studies. The historical background, strengthened by accurate documentation and relevant illustration formed the base of conceptualizing the idea into a visual graphic.

The conceptualization included an open space that would allow the visitors to admire the architecture of the building without vegetal obstruction. Considering the 20th-century image of the landmark and the Bánffy's possible affinity for plants, a couple of Baroque look-alike pots with roses were chosen to define the vertical lines in the composition at a smaller scale from that of the historic building.

An exotic accent was established with the central piece of an *Agave sp.* (century plant), and variety was shown with a simple mosaic made of *Senecio cineraria* (dusty miller) and *Petunia sp.* It formed a natural passing from vertical lines to horizontal ones, which are not that easily perceived by the human eye unless viewed at the correct angle. This minimal intervention presents a great opportunity for continuous development in the historical landscape field and completing the final level of restoration, uniting the castle and garden in the 21st century.

Figure 5: Landscape Rehabilitation Proposal for the Castle's Main Entrance

Source: Author

Conclusion

The past cannot be changed, but the present is an opportunity for a 19th-century garden rehabilitation to stand as a testimony of Hungarian culture and society into the future with positive implications for Transylvania. This study highlights the natural evolution of world heritage and provides an impression of Romanian historical landscape. By understanding Sâncrai Castle's settlement from an analytical point of view and comparing it with the domain from Bonțida, a simple landscape rehabilitation proposal was developed.

The connection between the building and the garden has a history of its own, adapting and transforming into different styles. Overall, specialists in the 21st century still have much to learn from the forgotten monuments. Only acknowledging the true spirit of a landmark, can it be restored to its former glory. A first step has been made for the Bánffy Castle; the same should be done for the landmark garden closely related to the castle, and from which could emerge a unique work of art. Landscape architecture is designed to be contemplated and protected in time.

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