

Sighișoara (Romania)

No 902

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Historic Centre of Sighișoara
<i>Location</i>	Region of Mureș
<i>State Party</i>	Romania
<i>Date</i>	29 June 1998

Justification by State Party

The old town of Sighișoara is a site which reflects the German civilization of Saxon settlers in Transylvania. It reveals a way of building which exerted a considerable influence throughout the Middle Ages on the subsequent development of towns in Transylvania, the type of dwelling houses as well as traditional architecture.

Criterion ii

The urban fabric, with its geometric and spatial structure, and the numerous monuments of indisputable interest, developed in organic symbiosis with the landscape, give this group of buildings, the value of an outstanding achievement.

Criterion iii

The town is a very typical example of the specific medieval structure of a small-sized urban site, with a homogenous architecture and unique geographic position. **Criterion iv**

It is the best preserved town in Transylvania, a testimony to all that is characteristic of the building tradition of Saxons who settled here in the Middle Ages, a tradition expressed by the conservation of architectural styles, construction methods, and forms of urban housing which have survived until present days.

All these factors prove that Sighișoara is a site typical of both the medieval and the modern German civilization in Transylvania, threatened by social and cultural changes which have occurred in the last decades following the massive exile of the German minority. **Criterion v**

Category of Property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the historic centre of Sighișoara is a *group of buildings*.

History and Description

History

Sighișoara, which lies in the heart of Transylvania, developed on a plateau, dominated by a hill overlooking a bend in the river Tirnava.

In the 13th century, German craftsmen and merchants, known as Saxons, were ordered by the Hungarian sovereigns to colonize Transylvania and protect the border of the Carpathians against the steppe peoples. They settled on a hill, called the City Hill, which has revealed traces of occupation going back to the Palaeolithic period.

Following incursions by the Tatars in 1241, the fortified settlement on City Hill was reinforced with walls, guarded by towers, which were extended to surround the entire plateau at the end of the 14th century. The town, which was known in 1280 as *Castrum Sex*, developed commercial activities thanks to the powerful guilds of craftsmen. Each guild was responsible for the construction of a tower and its defence. The importance of the town was recognized in 1367 when it obtained the title of *Civitas* and became the second national political entity of Transylvania (the *scaun* of Schässburg, the original Germanic name for Sighișoara).

Under pressure from the Turks between 1421 and 1526, the fortified city raised its walls. At the same time, a settlement grew around the Church of the Saint Anthony hospital (existence attested by documents in 1461), situated at the foot of the plateau. The core of the Lower Town, protected by walls with defensive gates, gradually expanded to the east and west, and now stretches to both banks of the Tirnava.

During the XVIIth century, the town of Sighișoara suffered from a succession of tragic events. The population was reduced by almost half as a result of two plague epidemics. In 1676, a fire destroyed three-quarters of the town (although the buildings on City Hill survived), but it was rebuilt over the old foundations. The Lower Town was also damaged by two fires (1736 and 1788) and floods (1771), and the entire town was shaken by an earthquake in 1838.

In 1840, the merchant guilds lost the monopoly granted to them in the 13th century, and they disappeared. Although Sighișoara remained somewhat on the fringe of economic development in the 19th century, it was able to safeguard its historic centre from extensive transformations. However, occasional interventions led to the loss of a few towers and a section of the wall. In 1866, when Hungary transferred the constitution of the *Komitat* (district) to Transylvania, Sighișoara/Schässburg became the capital of the Tirgu Mares/Neumarkt district, and the Dominican monastery was pulled down to make way for the new town hall.

In the 19th century, the upper part of Sighișoara continued to function as an administrative and cultural centre. The commercial and craft activities were moved to the Lower Town which lost its fortifications in a subsequent expansion phase.

Description

The historic centre of Sighișoara, proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List, is composed of a fortified site spread over a steeply sloping plateau and dominated by City Hill, and the Lower Town with its woody slopes lying below. These two sectors form an indissociable group corresponding to the historic boundaries of the medieval town.

Apart from 19th century settlements, the historic centre of Sighișoara has kept its original medieval urban fabric with its detailed allotment of buildings plots, with some variations depending on the successive development

phases of the site, as well as its network of narrow streets lined with closely aligned rows of houses.

The Citadel is composed of three roads running lengthways, cut by passages at right-angles. The main axis (School Street) links City Square, laid out over the site of a group of houses in 1894, to the two main gates erected in the north, under the Tailors' Tower, and in the south, under the Clock Tower. The latter makes it possible to enter the Lower Town, which stretches along the slope around Hermann Oberth Square (the former Market Square), an intersection for roads crossing the major axis at right angles (Ilari Chendi Street and 1st of December Street).

Archaeological excavations carried out in the Citadel have disclosed remains of wooden houses dating to the 13th-14th centuries. Their foundations were incorporated in the stone houses of the 15th-16th centuries, most of which were rebuilt after the 1676 fire.

The houses, most of them the simple homes of craftsmen of two or three storeys, were built in stone or brick, covered in a coloured roughcast, and topped by a high tiled roof. They have a distinctive plan, with a narrow facade along the street, an L- or U-shaped layout, dwelling tower, linked rooms, etc.

The houses with compact layouts, probably the oldest ones, are characterized by a lateral vaulted entrance gallery. This entrance gallery is sometimes shared by two adjoining houses because of the small plots of land. Many of the houses still have a barrel-vaulted basement, workshops on the ground floor with a wooden ceiling or brick vault, and the living rooms on the upper floors. A few facades (City Square, for instance) have a more aristocratic architectural style of Baroque inspiration (17th-18th centuries).

A group of houses between Citadel Lane and Hermann Oberth Square stand out because of the way the storeys have been arranged to fit the configuration of the sloping ground.

A wall, 93m long and with interval towers, encloses the Citadel plateau. The different phases of construction from the 12th century to the 16th century can be clearly identified. It rises to a height of 8-10m between the Ropemakers' Tower and the Butchers' Tower, the best preserved section. Nine towers out of the original fourteen still stand and can be distinguished by their shapes. The imposing Clock Tower plays a special role as the symbol of the town, for it was placed under the responsibility of the city council, which held its assemblies there until 1556. Situated in the middle of the southern fortification wall, it dominates the three squares of the historic centre and protects the stairway connecting the upper town and the lower town. It now houses a museum.

Among the monuments in the historic centre of Sighișoara, it is worth mentioning the Church of Saint Nicholas, an edifice typical of the Gothic architecture of Transylvania. It is perched on the hill, and can be reached by a ramp staircase of 175 steps, called the Staircase of the Schoolchildren. It has been protected by a wooden roof since 1642. The Church was constructed in different stages between the 14th and 15th centuries over the remains of a Roman building. It has a hall-type plan with a polygonal apse. The decorative sculpture on the facade reflects Central European influences.

The Church of Saint Mary belonging to the Dominican monastery, demolished in 1886, is a 13th century Gothic monument of the hall type with bare facades. Inside is a Baroque altar dating to 1680.

The Dominican monastery and the Coopers' Tower in the south-west of the Citadel, and the Locksmiths' Tower and Church of the Franciscan convent in the north, made way respectively for the huge neo-Renaissance style City Hall (1886-88) and the Roman Catholic Church (1894).

Management and Protection

Legal status

A new preservation law has been under discussion for several years; the draft bill has been altered no less than fifteen times. Particularly difficult is the question of to what extent denationalization should be allowed for historic buildings that up to now have belonged to the state or to communal governments (eg the houses of the Saxons who emigrated to Germany before 1990). A division into two categories is planned. Historic buildings of national significance (category A) are to remain in public ownership, all others may be denationalized. To date there has only been a differentiation between listed historic buildings and buildings that are of significance for the townscape. Thus in the future there will be a third category.

On the map of the Sighișoara conservation district, which constitutes an adequate buffer zone, almost every building in the upper town is recorded under one of the two designations that are currently in use. Two-thirds of the houses are historic buildings, one-third is designated as significant to the townscape. In the lower town the ratio is reversed. The new law would make it necessary to filter out the buildings which are of national significance and thus cannot be denationalized. Basically this category would probably encompass the two churches, the cemetery, the city hall, the town fortifications, and the Staircase of the Schoolchildren.

A special problem with denationalization is the fact that many houses are occupied by several families, all of whom should have the right to purchase the part in which they are living. Additional regulations will have to be developed to ensure mutual responsibility by all parties for the preservation and uniform treatment of common building elements (roof, staircase, facade).

The national significance of the upper and lower town as a conservation district was already established in 1996, when they were united in a "Zone for the protection of the architectural and urban design heritage"; this conservation district encompasses the entire upper town and the former market square (Hermann Oberth Square) with its surroundings as well as the buildings on the hill side of Mill Lane and Hospital Lane. The city gates (the hospital gate, the mill gate, and the Baier Lane gate), documented on older maps and city views, were used for determining the borders of the conservation district.

These borders become uncertain in those areas where suburbs arose early on outside the fortifications. This is especially relevant for the settlement around the Baier Lane gate (now Street of 1 December). The homogeneous historic development in this area (buildings mostly dating from the 19th century on the exterior, but often with an older core) makes it seem advisable to add this to the

conservation district, thus also including it in the zone that is proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List. The same is true for the short transverse lane that branches off to the south from Hospital Lane, directly west of the former hospital gate, with its two historic buildings from the 19th century (notary's office and former boarding school).

Management

Compliance with the provisions regulating the conservation district is supervised by the municipal building office, which is directly responsible to the mayor. A permit is required for any construction work within the conservation area. In principle demolition is not allowed, with the exception of recent outbuildings at the rear of property lots. The approval of the Historic Preservation Administration in the Ministry of Culture must be ascertained for construction work on historic buildings. Illegally undertaken actions must be undone, and a penalty paid. Since the buildings within the conservation district have all been surveyed and the survey results have been published, no one can claim ignorance of the situation.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Apparently no major preservation work was carried out before 1990 - at least there are no reports about such work. The largest project in the last ten years was the restoration of the hilltop church, in close collaboration between the Romanian preservation office and the Munich-based Messerschmitt Foundation. The latter has set itself the task of preserving the cultural heritage of the Germans in eastern and south-eastern Europe, even after their expulsion or emigration to their ancient homeland. The church was closed and under construction for several years. It has a new roof of small clay tiles and a new floor of sandstone slabs; the building was plastered and painted. Remnants of the ashlar-painted plaster were conserved, as were the Late Gothic wall paintings that survived at several places. Used by the congregation only on holidays, the hilltop church is to house a museum for Late Gothic wall and easel paintings; ownerless altarpieces from churches that are no longer in use are to find a new home here.

Practically no public funds are available for preservation work on dwelling houses or for the urgently necessary renewal of the infrastructure. Since there is no chance that this situation will change soon, planning work is also limited to the formulation of general goals such as the improvement of the living standard in apartments, renewal and burial of electric, gas, and telephone lines, and street paving.

A particularly large problem is presented by the city fortifications. In discussions of Sighișoara as a possible World Cultural Heritage site, the fortifications are one of the most significant features. Other cities in Transylvania, such as Sibiu, had more extensive fortifications which were associated with more important historical events (sieges, bombardments), but none is anywhere nearly as well preserved as that of Sighișoara. However, the wall retains its original height at only a few points. The longest section of the wall surviving to its original height, the part between the Ropemakers' Tower and the Butchers' Tower (at the cemetery gate below the hilltop church), collapsed over almost half its length in the summer of 1998. The

remaining part is also in danger of collapse. Quick and decisive action is needed here if the total loss of this section of the wall is not to be risked.

Authenticity

The authenticity of Sighișoara can be characterized as very high, in terms of both its monuments and its urban fabric, as long as the situation created in the 19th century is taken as the point of departure. If, however, the loss of the Dominican monastery and its replacement by the city hall in 1886-88 is not accepted as a legitimate development in the urban form, then a different, less positive conclusion is drawn. The same applies to the Franciscan convent and the Baroque German School, both of which fell to new buildings in historic revival styles.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Sighișoara in January 1999. ICOMOS also consulted its International Scientific Committee on Historic Towns and Villages.

Qualities

Sighișoara is a small city at the intersection of trade routes that come from western and northern Transylvania, continue to Brasov, and from there lead over the Carpathians to Wallachia. For centuries these routes served the exchange of goods and ideas between the Christian countries of central Europe and the Ottoman Empire.

Comparative analysis

Because of its exposed location in the arc of the Carpathians, which always formed an endangered border between the Mongols and the Tatars (in the east) and the Turks (in the south), Transylvania was a country in which not only cities but also market towns and villages could only survive if their defences (city walls, castles, fortified churches) were constantly renewed and extended. In contrast to the fortified churches, of which numerous examples have survived, the fortifications of the cities have been lost, except for fragments, as a result of growth in the 19th and 20th centuries -- with the exception of Sighișoara.

Placing Sighișoara in the larger context of all the cities that were founded in the 12th and 13th centuries in what was then the kingdom of Hungary by German merchants and artisans (the so-called Saxons), one also encounters two towns in present-day Slovakia which were inscribed in the World Heritage List several years ago: Banská Štiavnica (Schemnitz) and Spišský Hrad (Zipser Burg). Both are comparable to Sighișoara in size and age, and in both the most important monuments are fortified buildings, but that is all they have in common. Banská Štiavnica grew because of mining; Spišský Hrad is a bishopric: the city fortifications have not survived. In the cultural heritage of the Saxons who settled Transylvania and Spiš (Zips), making an imprint on the cities and villages of these regions from about 1150 until 1990, Sighișoara represents the urban type of an artisans' and merchants' fortified town. It is the best preserved example of this type.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

The issue of ownership must be newly regulated. Together with the possibility of acquiring ownership of the houses they are living in, an incentive must be created for owners

to invest private capital in the preservation of historic buildings. The towers of the city fortifications should remain the property of the city, but contracts for private use could be drawn up.

Endangered parts of the city wall, in particular the stretch between the Ropemakers' and Butchers' Towers, must be provisionally secured to prevent further loss. Detailed investigations must ascertain the cause of the danger and of the recent collapse. Finally, plans for long-term protection of the wall must be developed and discussed with international experts recommended by UNESCO.

The borders of the conservation district (Zone for the protection of the architectural and urban design heritage) should be revised, with consideration being given to the possibility of including lower Baier Lane (Street of 1 December) in this district. The goal would be to prevent large-scale demolition, as has occurred on lower Mill Lane.

An urban design plan should be worked out for the levelled area on lower Mill Lane; this should define where future development can take place (including construction lines, density, height limits, etc). When investors have been found a competition should be held to develop ideas for the future design of the area.

The Bureau referred this nomination back to the State Party, requesting the following additional information:

- When can passage of the historic building protection law be expected? The guidelines for implementation of the World Heritage Convention stipulate categorically that a cultural property proposed for the World Heritage List must be protected by law, by contractual agreements, or by tradition (*Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, paragraph 24 b ii). None of these options is valid for Sighișoara.
- A complete version of the local ordinance for the conservation district (the Zone for the protection of the architectural and urban design heritage of Sighișoara) is requested.
- A statement is required concerning the precautionary measures being taken to prevent further loss of the city wall. If there are plans for reconstruction of the collapsed sections of the wall between the Butchers' and Ropemakers' Towers, these should be submitted.
- A request is made for review of whether lower Baier Lane (Street of 1 December) could be included in the conservation district.

The State Party subsequently provided extensive supplementary documentation which has been studied by ICOMOS and found to satisfy all these points.

Brief description

Founded by German craftsmen and merchants, known as the Saxons of Transylvania, the historic centre of Sighișoara has preserved in an exemplary way the features of a small, fortified, medieval town which played an important strategic and commercial role at the edges of central Europe for several centuries.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria iii and v* :

Criterion iii Sighișoara is an outstanding testimony to the culture of the Transylvanian Saxons, a culture that is coming to a close after 850 years and will continue to exist only through its architectural and urban monuments.

Criterion v Sighișoara is an outstanding example of a small fortified city in the border region between the Latin-oriented culture of central Europe and the Byzantine-Orthodox culture of south-eastern Europe. The apparently unstoppable process of emigration by the Saxons, the social stratum which had formed and upheld the cultural traditions of the region, threatens the survival of their architectural heritage as well.

ICOMOS, September 1999