

## BOOK REVIEW: THE PRACTICE OF BUILDING FABRIC INVESTIGATION<sup>1</sup> IN HUNGARY

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*The book under review here contains expanded and edited versions of the papers given at the conference organized by the Association for Historic Building Conservation (Régi Épületek Kutatóinak Egyesülete) at Budapest in February of 2020. The volume, which includes all the presentations given at the event, was already available in printed form at the conference and clearly demonstrates the diligent work of the association. Ten of the most experienced and proficient Hungarian experts in the field of historic preservation contributed to the volume with papers concentrating on various general challenges in the examination of the fabric of buildings. It could be said that this work obviously fills a gap in our knowledge, although this statement is often a meaningless cliché in reviews. Nevertheless, I will try to show that this designation is not a worn-out exaggeration in the present case. I will argue this as an archaeologist who, despite having participated in a few archaeological investigations into buildings with the authors of the volume, has never conducted research involving this special type of methodology.*

As with all collections of papers based on conference contributions, this volume also stimulates professional discourse between experts by publishing expanded and more developed versions of the presentations, allowing the new findings and concepts to circulate and influence the broader field of scholarship. However, these papers carry a message on a much wider scale, far beyond professional researchers conducting everyday investigations into building fabric (in Hungary, these are primarily scholars from the fields of art history, archaeology and architectural history). The layout of the volume is straightforward, with each paper following one another almost as chapters of a well-structured monograph. None of the nine studies are simple field reports, they each clarify general issues, and when taken together shed considerable light on the actual circumstances, methodology, significance and potential of this special type of research on built heritage. The book is obviously not for internal use only, as its scope is far beyond the few historic preservation experts in our country. Accordingly, the entire volume is available at the Association's [website](#) without any restrictions, and also contains a brief English abstract.



Fig. 1. István Bardoly & Andrea Haris (eds.), *A falkutatás elmélete és gyakorlata a műemlékvédelemben* [The Practice of Building Fabric Investigation in Hungary], Budapest: Régi Épületek Kutatóinak Egyesülete, 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hungarian term, “falkutatás”, literally means “research into walls”.

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During recent years, the legal background for historic preservation has deteriorated in Hungary and the historic preservation agency itself was even abolished in 2012. Consequently, professional work in this field has become restricted or even impossible. Due to these serious difficulties, this volume could have easily turned into a sad memorandum reflecting on past glories and the field's own former significance, but to the contrary, it fortunately focuses on the future. As the preface states, "... *the institutional framework for obtaining professional experience has recently completely ceased to exist. Our association considers its most important task to be the effort to pass on the techniques of building fabric investigation as a complex historical method. This is why we have attempted to summarise the theory and practice of this method in this volume.*" This book will indeed play a major role in the education of new generations of historic preservation experts, in terms of both practical learning and the shaping of a general approach. It is the first broad Hungarian volume that deals in detail directly with the general principles and methods of researching the structural fabric of historic properties, covering both invasive and non-destructive methods of investigation.

As both the title and the preface of the book indicate, both theoretical and practical aspects are discussed, naturally with differing amounts of emphasis in each paper. The study of Pál Lővei summarises the relative short but varied history of the research method in Hungary as the first paper of the volume. It is not only instructive and inspiring to read about the emergence and development of the methods, but also getting to know the process is clearly indispensable to gain an understanding of its present circumstances and future potential. The paper of András Koppány also provides a primarily theoretical message. The author deals with the intertwined relationship between the investigation of building fabric and the excavation of archaeological sites, while also highlighting some inconsistencies in the legal framework for the research. The issue of this relationship is highly relevant, since archaeologists regularly face the problem of unearthed remains being interpreted without utilising the essential information encrypted in the nearby walls preserved above the ground level at the same site. This discrepancy is only in part the result of the shortcomings in the legal environment (and the resulting financial problems), while also being caused by a conventional improper attitude that starkly separates the processes for interpreting wall remains that are either above or below the ground level.

It is somewhat of a necessity that investigations into the building fabric are conducted during rehabilitation projects, although ideally it would be much more favourable in terms of historic preservation and architectural history if research on all surfaces affected by later work would precede the project. However, this is not feasible, which is why the paper of Judit G. László is an essential contribution to the volume. Through a series of indicative case studies, she clearly demonstrates the great potential of closely documenting the restoration work day by day at the site. This method results in a huge amount of data as well as substantial benefits for the building contractors, owners and later users or visitors to the historic property.

Klára Mentényi discusses seven decades of research into building fabric in the historic town centre of Kőszeg, a town that is particularly rich in historic properties that are relatively well preserved and professionally researched (mostly townhouses, fortifications and ecclesiastical buildings). As a field researcher for the town for over four decades, she provides a first-hand summary that includes important general statements and takes an admirable approach. Perhaps the most instructive message of the paper is the invaluable significance of teamwork. The job of a historic preservation researcher can never be truly successful without close cooperation with the related professions mentioned previously (such as experts in history, art history, archaeology, restoration, architecture, etc.), and without effective interaction with the building contractors and owners. The case of Kőszeg also convincingly demonstrates how architectural history and the inventory of buildings of an entire town can be outlined based on scattered but plentiful data from field surveys and investigations combined with archival and pictorial sources.

The broadest outlook (at least in geographical terms) is provided by the paper of Miklós Rácz, which offers an interesting outline of the current standing and practice of European historic property research, based mostly on relevant guides, manuals and general literature. For Hungarian experts, it may be encouraging to read about well-known challenges and difficulties that have at times also appeared in similar forms in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the Czech Republic. However, it is even more enlightening to learn

that the methodology applied in different countries is far from being unified. Getting to know the various foreign guidelines, approaches and practices for historic property research can provide a perspective for a common reconsideration of the accepted methodology.

While the aforementioned studies are important mainly for their theoretical messages and the shaping of general attitudes, the paper written by András Fülöp has greater practical implications. He summarises the changes in the Hungarian legal environment related to research on the fabric of historic buildings throughout the past two decades. By doing so, he not only facilitates the critical interpretation of the documentation and records made by researchers during this period, but also presents the features and pitfalls of the current legal framework. Since – as he notes – an ideal, overarching set of regulations is simply inconceivable, proper solutions will always depend on judicious cooperation between the participants. The paper of István Feld also deals with both theoretical general questions and practical guidance concerning documentation methods. Regarding the former, he also mentions the relationship between research on the fabric of buildings and archaeological excavation, underlines their importance as special historical sources, and questions the credibility of results from small-surface probe investigations as compared to invasive research on complete facades and wall sections. Although he does not provide a comprehensive overview of the requirements for traditional textual, photographic, graphic and modern digital documentation methods, he does determine some important guidelines and suggestions of general validity for the varied characteristics of the diverse built heritage.

One of the papers in the volume that is the most adapted to direct practical utilisation in everyday research is the contribution by Márta Velladics. Perhaps this will be the most frequently sought-after study by researchers beginning their careers, since it provides an extensive and accurate overview of the most important Hungarian collections that contain indispensable pictorial and written sources that are a necessary starting point for understanding research on the fabric of buildings. She also summarises the main features and divisions of each collection, adding online and traditional search strategies and possibilities. The paper written by Lajos Bozóki and Andrea Haris analyses the great changes in Hungarian architecture from the eleventh to the nineteenth century in a similarly comprehensive way. It describes the constantly transforming characteristics of architectural technology, materials, motifs, structures, arrangements, decorative methods, engineering, etc. throughout the centuries. Although this is the longest paper in the collection at almost 50 pages, it is obviously only enough to outline of the most important trends within this topic. Nevertheless, the paper achieves its goal, and just like Márta Velladics's summary, it will certainly be a most useful starting point for new generations of historic property researchers, serving as a chapter from a non-existent textbook for investigating the fabric of buildings. This role of this study is also underlined by the fact that its structure is adapted to the aspects of on-site research, while pointing out some important principles of research practice as well.

Overall, this volume is a significant achievement not only for its scholarly discourse on historic property research and conservation but also due to its ability to pass on the accumulated knowledge and experience to the experts of the future. However, a further step could perhaps be taken in two aspects. Modelled on the latter two papers, a textbook on building research could be compiled in which each facet of the process would be treated in a comprehensive way, reflecting the everyday challenges of the profession and describing in detail suitable special methods for the various types of historic properties. The second aspect would concentrate not on current and future historic preservation experts, but rather on the other people who participate in restoration work. This volume has already done a great deal to reveal the methods, significance and benefits (direct and indirect) of building research to building contractors, investors, owners and managers involved with historic properties. Several of the papers highlighted excellent examples of how scholarly research has augmented a building's inherent value or resulted in substantial financial savings, and how reasonable co-operation profited both sides in various further ways. Ten brief but exemplary case studies added at the end of this volume on diverse types of historic properties further enrich the pool of positive examples. Perhaps a later compilation of similar case studies described in greater detail and illustrated by more abundant and impressive images would also be useful. A volume such as this, which might simply be

available online, could address people such as architects, civil engineers, financial managers, state officials and decision-makers, who necessarily encounter issues related to built heritage. Displaying the cases of successful co-operation projects, explaining the principles of building research, and sharing the personal experiences of architects and restoration experts could perhaps promote better decision-making and a collaborative attitude in the future.

The conference of the book reviewed here took place only two weeks before the early spring COVID-19 lockdown in Hungary. However, the activities of the Association for Historic Building Conservation did not come to a halt during the restrictions. In addition to advocating for the preservation of built heritage at a national level, it also organized online professional forums. Apparently, despite all the challenges, work is moving forward and thus we can hope that this third volume for the year 2020 will soon be followed by new publications and conferences of a similarly high-standard.