



ECOVAST – European Council for the Village and Small Town - Austrian Section

Traits of Historic Towns – Today

Revised paper presented at the Potsdam, 16.Nov.2010
“ASSET-Conference”

Introduction

This paper is not designed to serve as a correct picture of historical construction. Rather it throws light on the characteristic elements the historic small towns carry through time into our days, and on to the role they are still playing to day and hopefully will do so in the future for their regions, landscapes, the countries and all Europe. [Brasov ,RO, \[III. 2\]](#). Since the first Middle European Symposium on Small Towns, Austria, held in the remote Styrian historic small town [Murau ,AT, \[III.3\]](#), not much has changed for the better, sorry to say. Still the small towns have no lobby, are not sufficiently observed from science, authority and policy and they can not rely on specific funding from Europe and Member States. Many, especially the small ones (less than some 10.000 inhabitants), suffer from loss of population and desolation of their town centres (loss of retail shops in favour to big markets at the towns rim).

What do we understand by a “historic small town”?

The simple most answer would be: a town up to some 50.000 inhabitants with historic constructions in its centre that can be perceived also to day. This historic core today mostly is embedded in recent dwellings. Though a small historic town never can be defined alone on the number of its inhabitants, nevertheless it seems practical to agree commonly on a ceiling of some 50.000; we suggest this number as being reasonable and to achieve European comparability. If there should be a demand of further division, one can divide in “big small towns” (25.000 to 50.000), “middle sized small towns” (10.000 to 25.000) and “tiny small towns with less than 10.000 inhabitants (there even might be “micro towns” with less than 5.000 or 2.500 inhabitants). But to our experience one clearly should avoid to postulate a “bottom limitation” at 10.000 inhabitants. All small historic towns where the four symposia in Austria took place in this case would be drop outs: [Murau](#) less than 2.171 inhabitants, [Waidhofen a.d. Ybbs, AT, \[III. 4\]](#) (5767 inh.), [Retz](#) (4.114 inh.) and [Grieskirchen ,AT, \[III. 5\]](#) (4.841 inh.). This is inconceivably.

Identity

Of greatest importance is the fact that every historic small town is of unique identity [Oberwölz, AT, \[III. 6\]](#). Of the more than hundred small towns I have visited there are not two that look alike! The towns gain their identity either by their specific or unique fabric, or near by specific places like historic bridges in [Bascara, Catalonia, ES, \[III. 7\]](#) or mines related to the towns history and name: [Hallstatt, AT, \[III.8\]](#)

ECOVAST AUSTRIA & INTERNATIONAL www.ecovast.org

1

Representative of landscape working groups: Arthur Spiegler, PhD,
Pötzleinsdorfer Strasse 34, A-1180 Wien
Tel.: +43-(0)1-479 78 35, E-mail: a.spiegler@reflex.at

ECOVAST Austria and International

Secretary general: Brigitte K. Macaria, PhD,
Sobieskigasse 9/14, A - 1090 Wien
Tel.: +43-(0)1-317 37 26, E-mail: b.macaria@chello.at

ECOVAST Austria

ZVR 66 49 61 390



ECOVAST – European Council for the Village and Small Town - Austrian Section

Furthermore there is the fact that small towns form an unbreakable unit with their hinterland, landscape and region [Murau town, AT, \[III. 3\]](#) and its [hinterland \[III.9\]](#). This is why ECOVAST always deals with small towns in context with their landscapes, villages and regions [Retz centre, AT, \[III. 10\]](#) and its [hinterland \[III.11\]](#). And finally, small towns play an important role – though often without receiving gratitude – role in the field of sustainable rural development; they are (small) centres of economic development, social and cultural life for their region and often beyond.

Criteria of quality, architecture and functions of small historic towns)¹

From workshops with post graduate students and talks with architects the following six main criteria have been elaborated that we believe to be the most important ones:

- 1a** (“a” stands for architecture). Specific town centre of historic buildings, perceptible also to day.
- 2a** Historic buildings compressed in the town centre, mainly multi-storeyed buildings and the network of narrow lanes.
- 3a** The “central place” often beginning again to serve the “social life” of the town.
- 4a** Dominating historic facades at least around the central place.
- 5a** Dominating historic building (town hall), public or of worship (cathedral, mosque, synagogue)
- 6a** Existence of a Castle or ruin or fortress (wall) or its (remarkable) remnants. A historic small town at least should fulfil the majority of these criteria.

Historic small towns do not exist purely on themselves, but today are embedded in younger and recent urban dwellings that often/mostly will be more extensive than the historic part. Therefore it is of similar importance to add a list of “functional criteria”. Further more let us for a moment put light on a linguistic problem between English and German:

The term “town” is not used in quite the same meaning in the two languages. In English a lot of (rather small) settlements are called “towns” that would be called “villages” in German. In addition, “market towns” are called “Marktflecken” or “Marktgemeinden” in German but never anything connected with “towns”. On the other hand, many (Austrian and for sure also German) “market towns/Marktflecken” or “Marktgemeinde” fulfil criteria of the “small historic European towns” [Oberberg, AT; \[III.12\]](#).

The differentiation between these two terms is not a thoroughly clear or exact one.

¹ It can be expected that these criteria will satisfy the requirements of identifying Middle and West European small historic towns including the western European part of the Mediterranean region, but not necessarily will cope with those of Central and East European towns.

ECOVAST Austria and International



ECOVAST – European Council for the Village and Small Town - Austrian Section

This is one of the reasons, why the “Austrian register of small towns” also comprises the market towns)²

An example for this affirmation is the Styrian “market town or “Marktgemeinde” Neumarkt on the one hand, on the other there are the district capital Tamsweg in the province of Salzburg which is “only” a market town, the same as the district capital Reutte in the Tyrol; all the other Austrian district capitals are called towns by law. A further significant role of the historic small towns is to act as “origin of identity” for the whole region and, in addition, they are a distinguished part of the European cultural identity.

Functional criteria of (historic) small towns

Functional criteria have nothing to do with architecture or heritage but with the role of economy and supplementation the small towns are carrying out for their hinterland and region; but these functions in most cases are also rooted in their history. These specific functions have been distinguished by the German Geographer W. Christaller (1893 – 1969) and the Austrian Geographer H. Bobek (1903 – 1990) from the University of Vienna in their research on “central places” (“zentrale Orte”); we added three more.

They are:

- Centre of education (higher schools)
- Centre of medical care (hospital and special doctors)
- Residence of the regional authority (some times also of justice)
- Centre of commerce (sometimes also of industry)
and
- A significant greater amount of higher or academic professions
- A “place of culture” and/or tourism and finally they provide
- A greater number of jobs (compared to their hinterland) and of higher qualification even if they suffer of the loss of population they still are a place positive commuting.

Some additional remarks

It is interesting trying to apply these functions to (small) villages to clarify the difference between small towns and villages. This seems necessary as there often exist villages with a higher population than a nearby small town.

² The “Austrian Register of Small Towns” [Extract of the Austrian Small Town Register, \[III.13\]](#) is a compendium elaborated by G. FASCHING and S. MAYER 2010 for ECOVAST Austria to get an overview and better dealing with small towns on the national level of Austria.

ECOVAST Austria and International



ECOVAST – European Council for the Village and Small Town - Austrian Section

I take the opportunity to enlighten a severe problem in the field of historic small towns. As an example I chose the renowned Carinthian historic small town [St. Veit, AT, \[III.14\]](#). As claimed above, a historic small town never should be identified alone on the number of its inhabitants. But on the other hand, this number is one of the very rare “hard facts” on small towns we have at hand.

In the official Austrian statistics and therefore also in the “Small Town Register of Austria” the town community of St. Veit counts 14.500 inhabitants. Of this number 7.500 live in the town itself, whilst in the historic centre only some 1.400 people are resident. This means, that the total number of 14.500 people living in the town community does not define how many people are living in its historic centre.

Finally two more numbers: Of the 172 small towns in Austria, about 107 can be quoted as “historic small towns” in the sense of the criteria as mentioned above.

All this makes clear that there is a lot more to learn and to do about this asset, our precious historic small towns.

Thank you for your attention and your interest,

Arthur Spiegler PhD
ECOVAST Austria and International
Potsdam/Vienna 2010/2011
a.spiegler@reflex.at

Potsdam/Vienna 2010/2011

ECOVAST AUSTRIA & INTERNATIONAL www.ecovast.org

4

Representative of landscape working groups: Arthur Spiegler, PhD,
Pötzeinsdorfer Strasse 34, A-1180 Wien
Tel.: +43-(0)1-479 78 35, E-mail: a.spiegler@reflex.at

ECOVAST Austria and International

Secretary general: Brigitte K. Macaria, PhD,
Sobieskigasse 9/14, A - 1090 Wien
Tel.: +43-(0)1-317 37 26, E-mail: b.macaria@chello.at

ECOVAST Austria

ZVR 66 49 61 390