The Evolution of Architectural Space in the Castles of The Mureș Valley, Transylvania, Romania, in the 20th Century: Transformations and Conservation Challenges

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Abstract

The Mureș Valley, historically significant for its economic and strategic role, has been home to numerous noble residences—castles and mansions—since the 16th century. These estates, reflecting a blend of architecture and nature, followed the architectural trends of Central and Western Europe. However, the 20th century brought significant transformations, particularly after the establishment of the communist regime in Romania, which led to the nationalization of many noble residences. Castles were repurposed for public functions, such as hospitals, schools, and administrative buildings, resulting in major architectural alterations, with a shift toward Soviet-influenced design that eroded the historical identity of these sites. This paper investigates the architectural transformations and conservation challenges faced by the noble residences in the Mureș Valley during the 20th century, focusing on two case studies: Urmánczy Castle in Toplița and Teleki Castle in Gornești. The primary objectives are to explore the evolution of architectural spaces in these castles, examine the effects of political and socio-economic changes, and evaluate their potential for conservation and restoration. A multidisciplinary approach was employed, involving on-site investigations, archival research, and comparative analysis with similar European cases. The findings highlight significant alterations in the castles' architectural integrity due to nationalization and urbanization. Urmánczy Castle, Toplița: Originally designed in the Art Nouveau style, Urmánczy Castle dominated the town center until 1956, when Toplița was reclassified as an urban locality. Following nationalization, the castle was repurposed as a hospital, leading to significant structural modifications, including the partitioning of the central reception hall into smaller rooms; the addition of a new level to one of the towers, disrupting the original volumetric composition; and a reduction of the castle park, diminishing the historical relationship between architecture and landscape. These interventions, typical of mid-20th-century functionalist adaptations, have made full restoration of the original spatial composition nearly impossible. Teleki Castle, Gornești: Teleki Castle, a representative Baroque residence, was nationalized and repurposed as a TBC sanatorium. Unlike Urmánczy Castle, its architectural fabric remained largely intact, and the castle park was preserved. However, communist urbanization policies impacted the surrounding landscape, leading to the construction of apartment blocks in the castle's immediate vicinity, disrupting its historical setting. Functional changes that affected interior spatial configurations were largely reversible. Today, restoration efforts aim to recover the castle's original 18th-century architectural character and reintegrate it into the cultural and tourist circuit. The research underscores the impact of political and urban transformations on the architectural spaces of the Mureș Valley's noble residences. While Urmánczy Castle faces limitations in restoration due to irreversible changes, Teleki Castle offers greater potential for conservation, highlighting the importance of sustainable heritage management. These findings emphasize the need for integrating historical architectural research with modern conservation practices to safeguard the cultural and historical value of these sites.

Keywords: *Noble Residence, Mureș Valley, Teleki, Urmánczy, Transformation of Architectural Space*

1. Introduction

The Mureș Valley represents a complex cultural landscape shaped by the interplay between natural topography and a diverse architectural, ethnographic, and historical heritage. As the region's principal geographical axis, the Mureș River has historically influenced settlement patterns and territorial development, structuring both the built environment and the spatial organization of noble residences.

Traversing a varied topography, the river flows through mountainous and plateau regions, rolling hills, and expansive plains 'Fig. 1'. This geographical diversity has influenced the evolution of architectural ensembles, where built structures maintain a strong connection with the surrounding landscape. Spanning a total length 776 km [1], the Mureș River extends approximately 712 km within Romania before merging with the Tisza River near Szeged, Hungary. For 21 km, it forms a natural border between Romania and Hungary, reinforcing its historical significance in defining territorial boundaries.

The aesthetic value of the Mureș Valley has been acknowledged by numerous authors. In the 19th century, Auguste de Gérando described its scenery:"The Mureș flows through beautiful valleys. It meanders lazily through plains shaded by trees and golden cornfields, bordered by green, rolling hills. Elegant manor houses appear at intervals, their gardens extending to the water's edge. Mountains in the distance frame the landscape, inspiring calm and tranquility. Gradually, the scene becomes more austere; the river narrows, then suddenly surges between mountain walls covered in ancient forests, with outcrops of carniolan stone and marble. A historical significance still clings to these shores." [2]. Similarly, John Paget, an English author, described the "extraordinary and seldom-visited beauties of the Mureș." [3]. In the next century, another British writer, Patrick Leigh Fermor, in "Between the Woods and the Water", captured the valley's charm: "Every detail sticks in my mind (...) the Maros meandered downstream in its mist of poplars (...) and thousands and thousands of sunflowers." [4].

Over centuries, this region became home to numerous noble residences—castles and mansions—built between the 16th and 20th centuries. These architectural ensembles, commissioned by aristocratic families, reflected contemporary stylistic trends, incorporating elements of Renaissance, Baroque, Neoclassical, and later, Art Nouveau aesthetics ‘Fig. 2’. Beyond their role as elite dwellings, these residences functioned as administrative, economic, and cultural centers, often integrating extensive landscape designs that articulated a harmonious relationship between architecture and nature.

Fig. 1 The Mureș Valley Landscape. Photo sourse: personal archive

Despite their historical and architectural value, the 20th century marked a period of profound transformation for these noble estates. Until 1918, Transylvania was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Following this date, it became part of Romania. Until the establishment of the communist regime in 1947, noble residences remained private property and retained their status as aristocratic estates. With few exceptions, these residences underwent minimal architectural transformation. The nationalization policies enacted under the communist regime (1947–1989) led to the confiscation of aristocratic properties, altering their spatial configurations and functions. Many castles were repurposed for public use, such as hospitals, schools, and administrative institutions, leading to significant modifications that disregarded their original design principles. Additionally, urbanization pressures and shifts in land use disrupted the historical landscapes surrounding these estates, further diminishing their integrity.

Given these transformations, the study of noble residences in the Mureș Valley is essential for understanding the evolution of architectural space in response to socio-political and economic shifts. Analyzing these changes offers critical insights into heritage conservation challenges and potential restoration strategies for these culturally significant sites.

This study aims to examine the architectural transformations of noble residences in the Mureș Valley during the 20th century, with a specific focus on two case studies: Urmánczy Castle in Toplița and Teleki Castle in Gornești. These two sites illustrate contrasting approaches to adaptive reuse under the communist regime—one undergoing irreversible modification, the other preserving much of its original structure. To achieve this, the research addresses the following key questions: **How did nationalization policies and post-war functional changes impact the spatial organization and architectural integrity of noble residences in the Mureș Valley? To what extent did urbanization and shifts in land use affect the historical landscape of these sites? What are the main conservation challenges posed by these transformations, and what strategies can be employed to restore or adaptively reuse these buildings while maintaining their historical value?** The primary objectives of this study are: 1. To analyze the evolution of architectural space in Urmánczy and Teleki Castles, considering alterations in form, function, and spatial composition. 2.To evaluate the impact of political and socio-economic changes on the built environment of these estates. The research adopts a multidisciplinary approach, combining architectural analysis, historical research, and conservation studies. The following methodological steps are employed: 1. On-Site Investigations: Fieldwork includes detailed documentation of the spatial

organization, structural modifications, and material integrity of Urmánczy and Teleki Castles. Architectural surveys and photographic documentation are conducted to assess conservation needs. 2.Archival Research: Historical maps, property records, and period photographs are examined to reconstruct the original architectural configurations and subsequent alterations. Archival sources also provide insights into ownership history, socio-political contexts, and past restoration interventions. This comparative approach contextualizes the findings within broader heritage conservation frameworks.

Fig. 2 Castles in the Mureș Valley: Photo sourse: personal archive: 1. Bethlen–Haller Castle, Cetatea de Baltă (Alba County), 2. Bánffy Castle, Sâncrai (Alba County), 3. Máriaffy Castle Târgu-Mureș (Mureș County), 4. Haller Castle, Ogra (Mureș County), 5. Kemény Castle, Ciumbrud (Alba County), 6. Bánffy Castle, Ciuguzel (Alba County), 7. Săvârșin Castle, Sâvârșin (Arad County), 8. Teleki Castle, Uioara de Sus (Alba County), 9. Haller Castle, Sânpaul (Mureș County), 10. Mikes Castle (Alba County), 11. Tholdalagi Castles, Corunca (Mureș County)

2. Historical Context and Evolution of Architectural Space in Transylvania

In this geographical setting of the Mureș Valley, numerous noble residences were once constructed. Some of these, remarkably spectacular and admired by those who crossed their thresholds, are now in a state of collapse or inevitably heading in that direction, either due to neglect—both from certain authorities and private owners—or due to a lack of the financial resources necessary for their conservation and restoration. Others, however, have regained their former charm and beauty ‘Fig. 2’.

When analyzing the evolution of the architectural space of these noble residences, it is essential to approach the subject from two distinct cultural registers, largely due to the imposition of communism in Romania—unofficially in 1945 and officially in 1947. In the early 20th century, these residences were primarily influenced by Central and Western Europe. Even though, after 1918, Transylvania became part of Romania, it remained closely linked to the cultural values of Central and Western Europe, as Romania itself drew inspiration from these regions in various fields, including architecture. However, following 1947, Romania was subjected to the imposition of the Soviet model, which affected all aspects of life, including architectural design. The architectural space, as a result, underwent substantial changes. These changes were not merely stylistic but deeply intertwined with the ideological shift that sought to align Romania with the Soviet bloc and its principles. The influence of Soviet architecture and urban planning, characterized by monumentalism, functionality, and a rejection of pre-communist aesthetic values, resulted in a significant departure from the refined, eclectic styles that had previously shaped noble residences.

2.1 The Evolution of Architectural Space in the Early 20th Century

Before 1947, these noble residences—castles, mansions, or manor houses—introduced into the Transylvanian architectural space the styles of Western and Central Europe, as commissioned by their patrons, blending with local traditions. This fusion grants these edifices a unique character, making both their preservation and the valorization of their cultural and architectural potential essential.

To a large extent, these residences were built after their patrons returned either from simple travels or from journeys dedicated to study in Western Europe. Thus, the cuoltural landscape that complemented the local geographical setting became integrated into

the broader European cultural landscape, reflecting the influences and aspirations of an elite connected to the major artistic and architectural currents of the time.

Some of these residences housed impressive collections, which their owners brought back from their visits to various European or even extra-European regions. In addition to these collections of curiosities, there were also ethnographic collections, while book collections held a place of particular distinction. Unfortunately, most of these collections have now disappeared.

These noble residences played a crucial role as connecting points through which Transylvania integrated into the cultural, artistic, and architectural values of Central and Western Europe. While in the Middle Ages and the early modern period—until the second half of the 17th century—these buildings primarily served a defensive function, their role was redefined in the following period, alongside political and social transformations. They continued to fulfill their primary functions of residence, economic-administrative management, and, significantly, a cultural role.

On noble estates, near these residences, there were also auxiliary buildings serving various functions, such as housing for the estate's staff, stables, and granaries. These architectural ensembles, closely integrated with the surrounding natural landscape, were not only administrative and economic centers of the estate but also symbols of noble power and social status. Thus, these residences not only reflected the social and economic character of the region but also contributed to shaping a distinct cultural landscape in which architecture and nature coexisted in harmonious symbiosis.

„ERDÉLYI KASTÉLY! … Mi mindent fed e két szó s mi mindent tárnak fel a képzetek, mik fogalmukkal társulnak az emlékekben, a gondolatban s a vágyak, álmok s megtanult ismeretek között… Legelébb áll, mi benne általános: a kastély, mint kiváltságos életforma, mely az elkülönülés minden lehetőségét megadja lakóinak; az elvonultságot a világ zajától, teljes magányt, bensőséget és meghittségét – nyujtja az élet minden kényelmét, örömét, szépségét, a természetbe olvadás áhítatát, a művészet kincseiben való gyönyörködést, az anyagiak révén a gond nem ismerését; magasabbrendű szellemi életet s együttélést a múlttal, a nemzedékek letűnt hosszú sorával, a történelemmel, az ősökkel, kik a kiváltságot s módot megszerezték s amely az utódokat, – noblesse oblige – kötelezi." [5]. ("TRANSYLVANIAN CASTLE! … What a wealth of meaning these two words encompass, and what visions they unveil—associations woven from memories, thoughts, desires, dreams, and acquired knowledge… Foremost stands the essence they share: the castle as a privileged way of life, granting its inhabitants every possibility for seclusion; offering withdrawal from the clamor of the world, complete solitude, intimacy, and warmth—it provides all the comforts, joys, and beauties of life, the reverence of blending into nature, the delight of admiring the treasures of art, and, through material wealth, the absence of worries; a higher intellectual existence and a communion with the past, with the long procession of vanished generations, with history, with ancestors who secured this privilege and opportunity—one that obliges their descendants as well—*noblesse oblige*.")

2.1.1 Relationship Between Architecture and Landscape

The parks surrounding these architectural complexes played a significant role in emphasizing the grandeur of the residences, thereby creating a unique cultural landscape in perfect harmony with the architecture of the buildings. These green spaces not only enriched the visual landscape but also reflected the social status of their owners, integrating elements of nature into the architectural concepts of the time.

Noble residences constructed along the banks of the Mureș were not only a manifestation of social prestige but also a product of economic considerations. Their establishment was driven in part by the strategic advantages provided by their riverside locations, which facilitated both trade and transportation. Importantly, the construction of these residences did not lead to the obliteration of the existing landscape; rather, it instigated a transformation that redefined the relationship between built form and nature.

This transformation was achieved through a deliberate integration of architecture and landscape design. The architects and planners of the time recognized that the aesthetic and functional qualities of these grand residences could be enhanced through the careful design of surrounding parks and gardens. These green spaces were conceived as essential elements that not only complemented the architectural structures but also served to harmonize the overall spatial composition. By doing so, the architectural narrative shifted from a focus solely on the edifice itself to one that embraced a broader, more holistic approach to landscape design.

Over the course of time, these parks and landscaped areas experienced transformations that mirrored those occurring in Central and Western Europe. Influenced by evolving design theories and cultural trends, the parks were continually adapted to reflect new aesthetic ideals and functional requirements. From the 17th century onward, noble estates in the Mureș Valley began to integrate formal gardens that drew inspiration from French and Italian landscape traditions. These gardens were meticulously designed according to geometric principles, featuring axial pathways, sculpted hedges, and ornamental fountains.

In the subsequent 18th and 19th centuries, a paradigm shift occurred with the rise in popularity of English-style landscape gardens. This new aesthetic favored naturalistic compositions over the rigid geometries of earlier designs. Winding paths, artificial lakes, and groves of trees were introduced to create picturesque settings, thereby enhancing the visual harmony between architecture and nature.

Overall, these evolving garden designs not only enriched the aesthetic appeal of the estates but also played a crucial role in redefining the architectural space. The transition from formal to naturalistic landscapes reflects both the changing cultural attitudes towards nature and the evolving architectural philosophies that sought to integrate built form with its surrounding environment.

Some of these parks have been preserved to this day, remaining an integral part of the cultural heritage, while others have faded into obscurity, leaving behind only traces of once remarkable landscapes.

2.2 The Transformation of Architectural Space Under the Communist Regime (Post-1947)

After the establishment of communist rule, however, the architectural landscape of Romania, including Transylvania, was radically altered. The Soviet model introduced a starkly utilitarian approach to architecture, prioritizing function over form and heavily restricting individual expression in design. The noble residences, once symbols of cultural and architectural sophistication, were often repurposed, altered, or left to deteriorate. In some cases, their architectural features were stripped away in favor of standardized, utilitarian designs that adhered to socialist ideals.

This transformation of the architectural space was not merely a physical change but a reflection of the broader societal shift towards collectivism and the rejection of past elites. The new architectural spaces emphasized communal living, industrial efficiency, and the values of the working class, while erasing the symbols of aristocratic culture that had once defined the region's nobility.

On the night of March 2–3, 1949, a sweeping process of confiscation was executed, during which all noble residences were seized by the communist authorities, and the resident families were forcibly relocated to locations predetermined by the regime. These families were allowed to take only a minimal selection of personal belongings. As a consequence, the interior architectural spaces of these estates underwent profound and irrevocable transformations. The original art collections, book collections, and period-specific

furniture gradually vanished, leaving behind only vestiges of their former splendor—most notably, the tiled stoves and lighting installations, which serve as enduring markers of the estates' historic architectural character.

Following nationalization, these noble residences were repurposed for a wide range of public and institutional functions, leading to significant alterations in their spatial configuration and architectural integrity. The new uses imposed by the communist regime included: a. **Medical Facilities**: Numerous castles were converted into hospitals or sanatoriums, often requiring extensive modifications to their interiors. b. **Educational Institutions**: Some estates were adapted for use as schools or boarding facilities, necessitating substantial reconfigurations of their interior spaces to accommodate classrooms, dormitories, and administrative offices. c. **Administrative Offices**: Several noble residences were reassigned as headquarters for government institutions, requiring structural adjustments to facilitate bureaucratic operations. These changes frequently disrupted the original spatial organization of the buildings. d. **Industrial and Agricultural Uses**: In certain cases, castles were incorporated into agricultural cooperatives or repurposed as storage facilities, often leading to neglect, structural deterioration, and the loss of decorative architectural elements.

Although these new functions ensured the continued use of many noble residences, they also resulted in irreversible spatial transformations. The original architectural compositions, carefully crafted interiors, and historically significant layouts were frequently compromised or entirely lost, diminishing the cultural and heritage value of these estates.

With the abolition of the aristocracy, these estates ceased to function as social and cultural hubs of elite patronage, leading to a profound rupture in their historical continuity. The forced removal of noble families not only resulted in the displacement of their former inhabitants but also led to the loss of the specialized knowledge, traditions, and intangible heritage associated with these spaces.

The systematic appropriation and redistribution of assets further contributed to their decline. Many decorative elements, period furnishings, and historically significant archives were either destroyed, looted, or transferred to state institutions, severing their connection to the original context.

Moreover, the ideological agenda of the communist regime actively sought to erase architectural and spatial manifestations of the aristocratic past. This deliberate cultural and political reconfiguration resulted in widespread neglect, the destruction of key architectural features, and the intentional simplification of decorative elements deemed “bourgeois” or “elitist.” These actions not only altered the physical fabric of these estates but also reshaped their identity, stripping them of the symbolic and aesthetic values that had once defined their presence within the built environment.

2.2.1 Architectural Space Alterations and Functional Changes

The repurposing of noble residences for public functions necessitated extensive architectural modifications, often resulting in a profound transformation of their spatial organization. These changes were primarily dictated by the utilitarian and austere principles of communist-era architecture, which prioritized functionality over historical preservation. The adaptations aimed to accommodate new programmatic requirements, frequently disregarding the original design intent and aesthetic value of these estates.

2.2.1.1 Interior Reconfigurations.

a. Partitioning of Large Reception Halls: the grand salons and ceremonial halls, originally designed for social gatherings and elite patronage, were frequently subdivided into smaller compartments to serve institutional needs. These alterations disrupted the spatial hierarchy and openness that characterized noble residences

b. Removal or Concealment of Decorative Elements: to align with the new functional requirements and ideological aesthetics, many refined architectural details were either obscured or completely removed. Elaborate stucco ceilings, frescoes, carved wood paneling, and ornamental moldings were often dismantled or covered with layers of plain plaster or paint. This systematic erasure not only stripped interiors of their artistic richness but also severed the connection between the space and its historical narrative.

c. Addition of Service Areas: the adaptation of noble residences to new public uses necessitated the integration of modern amenities, such as kitchens, bathrooms, and storage facilities, into structures that were never designed to accommodate such functions. These additions frequently led to invasive modifications, including the installation of plumbing and electrical systems that compromised the integrity of original walls, flooring, and decorative surfaces. In many cases, these interventions caused irreversible damage, further diminishing the authenticity of the architectural space.

Through these extensive interior modifications, the noble residences lost much of their original spatial logic and aesthetic refinement, becoming fragmented structures that bore little resemblance to their initial design. These interventions, motivated by the pragmatic needs of the time, not only altered the physical fabric of the buildings but also contributed to the erosion of their historical and cultural identity.

2.2.1.2 Exterior Modifications

The adaptation of noble residences to new public functions during the communist period extended beyond interior reconfigurations to significant exterior modifications. These changes were often driven by ideological, functional, and economic considerations, resulting in the loss of architectural authenticity and aesthetic coherence. The interventions aimed to simplify decorative elements, increase efficiency, and accommodate the new institutional roles assigned to these buildings.

a. Simplification of Facades: many noble residences underwent deliberate alterations to their external appearance, as ornamental features deemed excessive or “bourgeois” were systematically removed. Stucco decorations, sculptural reliefs, elaborate cornices, and intricate window frames were either stripped away or concealed beneath layers of plaster and paint. These measures sought to align the buildings with the austere and pragmatic aesthetic favored by the communist regime, erasing the visual markers of aristocratic heritage and reducing façades to utilitarian surfaces devoid of historical embellishments.

b. Addition of New Structural Elements: the functional repurposing of these estates frequently led to major structural interventions that disrupted their original proportions and architectural harmony. New floors, annexes, and service wings were constructed to expand capacity or introduce new facilities, often in stark contrast to the historical style of the buildings. A notable example is Urmanczy Castle, where an additional level was added to one of its towers, permanently altering its volumetric composition and silhouette. These expansions, executed with little regard for historical integration, frequently diminished the overall aesthetic balance of the structures.

c. Changes to Access Points: the reconfiguration of entrances was another common intervention aimed at improving accessibility for public and institutional use. Grand ceremonial entryways, originally designed as focal points of architectural composition, were often replaced or relocated in favor of more functional but architecturally discordant solutions. Secondary entrances were expanded, new doorways were inserted, and staircases were reoriented, fundamentally altering the circulation patterns and spatial logic of these residences.

These exterior modifications, though intended to facilitate new functions, significantly impacted the architectural integrity of noble residences. The loss of decorative detailing, disproportionate structural additions, and alterations to access points resulted in a visual and spatial fragmentation that distanced these buildings from their original design intent. Consequently, many historic estates emerged from this period as hybrid structures, stripped of their aristocratic character and reshaped by decades of pragmatic, often irreversible, interventions.

3. Case Studies: Architectural Evolution in the Mureș Valley – Teleki Castle and Urmánczy Castle

For this study, two castles were selected as representative case studies: Teleki Castle in Gornești, Mureș County—a Baroque residence built in the Grassalkovich style 'Fig. 3' —and Urmánczy Castle in Toplița 'Fig. 4', Harghita County—an architectural landmark of the Art Nouveau movement. These two estates provide key insights into the evolution of architectural space in the Mureș Valley, as well as the cultural heritage transformations that have shaped the region over the centuries.

Teleki Castle, constructed in the 18th century, stands as a testament to the influence of Central European Baroque architecture in Transylvania. Built on the site of a former Renaissance fortress, the castle was designed by the Austrian architect Andreas Mayerhoffer, in collaboration with Jozsef Mayerhoffer, both known for their work on several noble residences in Budapest and its surrounding areas. The architectural model for this castle was the Royal Palace of Gödöllő in Hungary, a significant example of the Grassalkovich Baroque typology, characterized by a symmetrical layout, a dominant central pavilion, and elegantly curved wings enclosing a cour d'honneur. Teleki Castle thus illustrates the architectural transfer and adaptation of Western European stylistic trends within the local noble estates of Transylvania.

In contrast, Urmánczy Castle in Toplița represents the early 20th-century architectural tendencies, marking a departure from the classical Baroque idiom toward the expressive and organic forms of Art Nouveau. Designed by the Tyrolean architect Vigilio Giacomuzzi, this residence embodies the ornamental fluidity, asymmetry, and decorative motifs characteristic of the Secessionist movement in Central Europe. The castle's intricate façade detailing, curvilinear forms, and integration of artistic craftsmanship reflect a broader shift in noble architecture, aligning with the evolving aesthetic and functional principles of the early modern period.

Together, these two castles illustrate the diverse stylistic influences that shaped noble residences in the Mureș Valley. Their comparative analysis sheds light on the continuities and ruptures in the architectural landscape, influenced by political transformations, cultural aspirations, and historical contingencies over time.

Fig. 3. Teleki Castle, Gornești (Mureș County). Photo sourse: personal archive.
1.The Royal Palace of Gödöllő (The castle serves as a model for the Teleki Castle in Gornești.) - The main facade. 2. Teleki Castle - The main facade, 3. The Royal Palace of Gödöllő - The court of honor, 4. Teleki Castle - The court of honor, 5. Teleki Castle- Grand salon, 6. Teleki Castle - The main facade with the arched bridge, 7. Teleki Castle - Rococo ceramic stove in the Grand Salon. 8. Teleki Castle - The castle park, featuring the lake and the arched bridge, 9. Teleki Castle - Reconstruction of a room in the castle, 10. Teleki Castle - The castle park, detailed with the statues in front of the court of honor.

3.1 Teleki Castle, Gornești

In 1685, the fortified castle at Gornești became the property of Count Mihály Teleki (1634–1690), a key political figure of 17th-century Transylvania and the true founder of the Teleki family lineage. Between 1686 and 1687, Count Teleki undertook significant

modifications to the existing structure, including the construction of a new wing, the elevation of towers, and the addition of carved stone decorations in the Transylvanian Renaissance style. [6].

The Baroque transformation of Teleki Castle occurred between 1772 and 1782, when László Teleki demolished the existing Renaissance structure and commissioned a new castle. This architectural transition placed Gornești among the most significant Baroque constructions in Transylvania. Bíró József described the new castle as "one of the most important Hungarian Baroque buildings in Transylvanian art." [7]. It was built on a promontory of the left bank of the Mureș River, integrating elements of the former fortifications, including a defensive moat supplied by the river. The U-shaped layout, with an inner honor courtyard facing the park, was characteristic of Baroque castle planning. The ensemble included 52 rooms and 365 windows, symbolizing the calendar year. The castle comprised a basement, ground floor, and upper floor. Access to the castle was from the northern side of the park via a three-arched stone bridge spanning the former defensive moat. This passage led through a vaulted corridor in the main (northern) facade into the honor courtyard, which opened southward toward the landscaped park.

At the end of World War II, the castle and its library suffered significant destruction. While portions of the book collection were salvaged and relocated to the Teleki Library in Târgu Mureș and the Arad Museum, the estate itself faced a radical transformation. In 1949, the castle was nationalized, and by 1956, following a tuberculosis outbreak, it was repurposed as a children's TBC preventorium. Between 1961 and 1962, renovations adapted the building to its new medical function, including internal spatial reconfigurations that altered its original architectural integrity.

The estate remained under state ownership until 2006 when it was restituted to the Teleki heirs, officially coming into their possession in 2011.

3.1.1 Integration into the Cultural Landscape and Evolution of the Architectural Space

3.1.1.1 Relations with the Mureş River and the Settlement

In the early 20th century, the castle and its landscaped park represented integral components of the region's cultural landscape, establishing a direct spatial and functional relationship with the Mureș River and the settlement's development. The strategic siting of the castle on a river terrace was informed by both aesthetic and pragmatic considerations, particularly the necessity of ensuring a reliable water supply, which was sourced directly from the Mureș. This positioning not only reinforced the estate's visual and symbolic dominance within the landscape but also facilitated its operational sustainability.

The castle's placement within the cultural landscape was intentional, emphasizing both aesthetic and functional considerations. The estate was positioned in the central-western part of Gornești, directly adjacent to the main road, with the Mureș River flowing along its western boundary. To the east, a roadway provided access to the property, while the surrounding land consisted of built structures and agricultural fields.

The village of Gornești largely retained its historical structure, as it was not subjected to the extensive transformations characteristic of the communist regime's large-scale urbanization policies. However, in the 1980s, a series of residential apartment blocks were constructed in close proximity to the castle. These additions introduced a contrasting architectural typology, disrupting the visual and spatial relationship between the noble residence and its historical setting. While the new constructions addressed the growing housing needs of the period, they also altered the cultural landscape, diminishing the estate's prominence within the settlement and fragmenting its original spatial composition.

The estate maintained a direct spatial and visual connection with the 15th-century Gothic Reformed Church of Gornești, linked by a pathway extending from the northern side of the park to the church entrance. This was a defining element of the historical landscape—the relationship between the castle and the church, which were initially integrated into a coherent architectural ensemble. As the proprietors of the estate, the Teleki family played a crucial role in the construction and patronage of the church, which was situated near the noble residence. However, this spatial relationship, once a fundamental aspect of the village's architectural fabric, has since been lost due to later transformations.

Similarly, the connection between the castle and the Teleki family crypt has also disappeared. The crypt, originally positioned outside the village on an elevated site overlooking the estate, once formed an integral part of the noble domain, reinforcing the familial and territorial identity of the Teleki lineage.

3.2 Urmánczy Castle, Toplița

The Urmánczy family, of Armenian origin, settled in Toplița after 1830 [8]. At the beginning of the 20th century (1903-1906), Jeromos Urmánczy decided to construct a residence for his family on one of the terraces of the Mureș River, following the designs of the Tyrolean architect Vigilio Giacomuzzi [9]. The castle was surrounded by a landscaped park, with several annexes located in its southern area. These included buildings for administrative staff, a water pump house, and a stable. In the northern part of the park, a family crypt was situated, which also served as a chapel.

During World War I, the building was used as the headquarters of the 14th Infantry Division of the Romanian Army. The Urmánczy family returned to the castle in 1920, and it remained their residence until 1945, when it was confiscated. Under the communist regime, the estate underwent significant transformations. Starting in 1952, the castle was repurposed as a hospital, housing a surgery department and a maternity ward [10].

After 1971, major alterations were made to the structure: the main entrance located beneath the tower was removed, and the northwest courtyard access was sealed off and redeveloped. Additionally, the northwest section of the castle underwent structural modifications, including the addition of a new roof level. Interior changes also impacted the original spatial configuration— the grand ceremonial staircase was eliminated, and the main salon was subdivided into two separate rooms. The stables were converted into an infectious diseases ward.

Further modifications extended beyond the castle itself. In the surrounding park, administrative buildings and residential blocks were constructed, and in 1987, a hospital was added to the site. Following this period, the castle housed an ethnographic museum. In 2009, the estate was restituted to the heirs of the Urmánczy family. Until 2013, the building functioned as a cultural center. Currently, the castle is managed by the Positive Transylvania Association and, as of July 2020, is open to visitors on weekends.

Fig. 4 Urmánczy Castle, Toplița, Harghita County. Photo sourse: personal archive.
1.Main facade, facing the park, 2. Façade facing the Mureș River, 3. The castle park, detail, 4. The castle park, detail, 5. The castle park. The hospital built next to the castle can be seen, 6. Postcard featuring the castle in the first part of the 20th century. 7. The castle tower, which once served as the main entrance to the castle. 8.The Grand Salon, the ground floor room, 9. The Grand Salon, detail with the concrete staircase and the ceiling that divides the room into two sections, 10. The Grand Salon, the room on the upper floor, 11. Reconstruction of a room in the castle.

3.2.1 Integration into the Cultural Landscape and Evolution of the Architectural Space

3.2.1.1 Relations with the Mureş River and the Settlement. At the beginning of the 20th century, the castle and its surrounding park were defining elements of the region's cultural landscape, maintaining a direct connection with both the Mureș River and the development of the settlement. The castle's location on a terrace near the river was determined by both aesthetic and economic considerations, including the necessity of securing a water supply, which was sourced directly from the Mureș. The water tower, positioned on the main facade, served a dual purpose—both functional and architectural—while also marking the principal entrance to the building. Over time, the cultural landscape of the locality evolved alongside the expansion of the village, yet the castle remained a dominant landmark. Houses were built around it, and the castle park was linked to the village center through a network of pathways, reinforcing the connection between the noble estate and the rural space.

The destruction caused by World War II bombings affected the cultural landscape of the place; however, its overall structure was preserved. Major changes occurred after the settlement was elevated to city status in 1956, triggering large-scale urban transformations. In the 1980s, the historical center was demolished and replaced by a new administrative center, significantly altering the visual and functional identity of the area.

Another defining element of the cultural landscape was the relationship between the castle and the church, initially integrated into a coherent architectural ensemble. The Urmánczy family, the castle's proprietors, played a crucial role in the construction of the church, which was near the noble estate. However, 20th-century urban planning interventions reshaped the original configuration of the settlement, and today, the two buildings are no longer perceived as part of a unified ensemble.

4. Discussion –Results

In the Mureș Valley, within a 30 km. radius on both sides of the river, 236 noble residences have been identified. Today, these residences are located in the counties of Harghita (HR), Mureș (MS), Cluj (CJ), Alba (AB), Hunedoara (HD), Arad (AR), and Timiș (TM) (tabel 1). Of the 236 residences, 183 are still preserved, while 53 have been lost.

Tab. 1. Former noble residences in relation to the Mureș River. Distribution by counties

County	0-3 km.	4-10 km.	11-20 km	Lost	Total
HR	3	5	2	2	16
MS	20	15	16	24	83
CJ	0	3	4	2	15
AB	9	7	6	4	28
HD	16	1	4	2	28
AR	15	4	6	6	38
TM	0	3	4	13	28
TOTAL	63	38	42	53	236

4.1 Architectural Transformations of Teleki and Urmánczy Castles

The evolution of both Teleki and Urmánczy castles reflects broader architectural and socio-political transformations that have shaped Transylvania's built heritage (table 2). Teleki Castle in Gornești, originally a Renaissance fortress, underwent a significant transformation between 1772 and 1782 when it was reconstructed in the Baroque style. This reconstruction introduced a U-shaped plan, a ceremonial courtyard, and refined interior decorations, including frescoes and Rococo-style elements. In contrast, Urmánczy Castle, constructed between 1903 and 1906, was designed as an Art Nouveau residence, characterized by asymmetrical volumes, decorative wooden elements, and stained glass. Unlike Teleki Castle, which evolved from a defensive structure to a residential estate, Urmánczy Castle was conceived as a noble residence from the outset.

4.2 Historical and Political Context in the Evolution of the Castles

Both castles were significantly impacted by the political shifts of the 20th century. Teleki Castle, after centuries of noble ownership, was nationalized in 1949 and repurposed as a tuberculosis preventorium in 1956, resulting in structural alterations and a decline in maintenance. Similarly, Urmánczy Castle was repurposed as a hospital, leading to interior modifications that disrupted its original spatial organization. While Teleki Castle remained in a predominantly rural setting, Urmánczy Castle experienced a more dramatic contextual shift, as Topliţa was elevated to city status in 1956, altering the surrounding urban fabric. The post-communist era facilitated restitution processes, and both estates were returned to their historical owners, allowing for contemporary restoration initiatives.

4.3 Current Conservation State and Restoration Efforts

Both castles are currently undergoing restoration, funded by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan within the Attractive Romania program, along with European funds dedicated to cultural heritage. Teleki Castle is expected to be fully restored by 2026, focusing on structural consolidation, the conservation of its frescoes, Rococo stoves, and chandeliers, as well as the rehabilitation of its historic park. Urmánczy Castle, under the management of the Positive Transylvania Association, is undergoing structural stabilization and the recovery of lost Art Nouveau elements, including stained glass and decorative woodwork. These efforts aim to reintegrate the castles into the cultural tourism circuit while ensuring their long-term preservation.

Tab. 2. Comparative Analysis: Teleki Castle vs. Urmánczy Castle

Aspect	Teleki Castle (Gornești)	Urmánczy Castle (Topliţa)
Architectural Style	Baroque (Grassalkovich variant)	Art Nouveau
Architect	Andreas Mayerhoffer, Jozsef Mayerhoffer	Vigilio Giacomuzzi
Construction Period	1772–1782	1903–1906
Original Function	Noble residence	Noble residence
Modifications after 1949	Converted into a TB preventorium (1956), interior partitions modified but frescoes, stoves, and chandeliers preserved	Converted into a hospital (1952), major structural modifications, original decorations lost
Decorative Elements Preserved	Frescoes in the central hall, Rococo-style stoves, chandeliers, statues in the park	Under restoration with PNRR and European funds, expected to open in 2026
Current Status	Under restoration with PNRR and European funds, expected to be completed by 2026	Under restoration with PNRR and European funds, expected to open in 2026
Relationship with the Landscape	Maintains its original spatial relationship with the park and church, but some urban development has altered its surroundings	Originally integrated into the cultural landscape, but urban expansion and hospital additions disrupted its setting
Rural/Urban Context	Located in Gornești, a rural settlement, but a few apartment blocks were built nearby in the 1980s	**Initially located in a rural environment, but in 1956, Topliţa was transformed into a town, altering the castle's context**

5. Conclusions

The evolution of architectural space in Transylvanian noble residences is deeply intertwined with the political and ideological transformations that marked Romania's modern history. From the early 20th century, when these spaces were still shaped by the opulent architectural traditions of Central and Western Europe, to the dramatic shifts during the mid-20th century, when the imposition of Soviet-style architecture led to significant alterations, the architectural trajectories of these residences reflect the broader cultural, political, and social changes in Romania. The juxtaposition of these two cultural registers—one steeped in aristocratic European heritage and the other shaped by the authoritarian forces of the communist regime—offers a layered understanding of architectural space. This dual narrative allows us to appreciate not only the historical value embedded in the estates but also the ideological impositions that transformed their original identities.

The integration of noble residences with their natural surroundings along the Mureș River is another defining aspect of the region's architectural evolution. The relationship between architecture and landscape was not merely incidental; rather, it was a carefully constructed dialogue between aesthetic considerations and economic imperatives. The positioning of these castles within the landscape was both functional and symbolic—designed to enhance the aesthetic experience while also ensuring practical needs such as water supply. This harmonious integration of architecture and nature contributed significantly to the development of a unique

regional identity, with the landscapes around castles like Teleki and Urmánczy becoming integral to the cultural and historical framework of the Mureș Valley. Today, this relationship continues to inform ongoing discussions on architectural heritage and landscape preservation, emphasizing the importance of maintaining both elements in a balanced and sustainable manner.The comparative study of Teleki and Urmánczy castles offers valuable insights into the diverse architectural expressions of Transylvanian noble residences. While the Teleki Castle represents a Baroque reconfiguration of an older Renaissance fortress, symbolizing the grandeur of the 18th century, the Urmánczy Castle exemplifies the elegance of late 19th-century aristocratic architecture through its Art Nouveau design. The historical trajectories of both castles are marked by significant interruptions, particularly during the communist period. The nationalization of these estates and their subsequent transformation for state use led to considerable alterations in their structure and function, with both castles suffering from the loss of architectural elements and degradation of their original forms. However, despite the challenges faced, both castles are currently undergoing restoration efforts. These efforts, supported by European funding under initiatives like the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, aim to return these historical sites to their former glory, ensuring their preservation for future generations.

Restoration projects at both castles are emblematic of a broader effort to safeguard architectural heritage in the face of modern pressures. Both castles will be open for visitors starting from 2026. These efforts are part of a broader strategy to reintegrate the castles into the cultural and tourist landscape, making them accessible to the public while preserving their historical significance. However, the future of these sites depends on the careful balancing of conservation with public accessibility, ensuring that the castles are preserved not only as monuments of architectural and cultural heritage but also as living parts of the contemporary landscape. Thus, the future of these noble residences, like many others in the region, lies in a sustainable approach to heritage management that allows them to continue to tell their stories while being accessible and meaningful to modern audiences.

In conclusion, the architectural evolution of the Teleki and Urmánczy castles serves as a powerful lens through which we can examine the broader transformations in Transylvanian society, culture, and politics over the past several centuries. Their restoration represents not only a technical effort to preserve architectural forms but also a cultural endeavor to reconnect with the past, allowing future generations to engage with and understand the complex layers of history, culture, and identity embedded in these remarkable buildings.

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