

# Tour des Villes in Idrija

18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> May 2017



## Meeting minutes

### Tour des Villes: 2<sup>nd</sup> study visit in Idrija

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**Excused:** Claire Simon (Secretariat)

➔ For fast reading:

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## Introduction

Idrija's miners' houses of 19<sup>th</sup> Century were nestled on slopes with its front facing the valley, built almost entirely of wood. The roofs were covered with fir boards and very steep. In general, houses were tall, with four floors, and used to inhabit more families, usually up to 16 people. Each house had a small vegetable garden that provided the owner of the house with home-grown vegetables and fodder for a goat or a sheep.

After the Second World War most of miners' houses were abandoned, demolished or transformed beyond recognition. Only few remain, nestled on slopes around Idrija, waiting for better times. The main challenges the town of Idrija would like to address in the Tour des Villes project are:

- How to **involve inhabitants and owners** in the processes of revitalisation?
- How to **encourage private owners to renovate these houses**?
- How to **assist owners in renovation** with respect to the heritage?
- How to approach the **heritage as an inspiration and an added value** not as detractor and a barrier?
- How to **enable good living standards in 19<sup>th</sup> century wooden houses**?

## Excursion

Short tour of Idrija's UNESCO heritage by feet, explanation of the architecture of the typical Idrija's miner's houses by Janez Podobnik in a renovated house and visit of an abandoned house.

Idrija miners' house is in many aspects similar to the old farm houses typical of Idrija, Cerklje and Trnovska plateau region. Nevertheless, the architecture is profoundly different as it is not a farmstead but a block of flats for miners' families.

Main characteristics are:

- Multi-storey construction
- Facade usually facing the valley, backside dug into the slope
- Very steep roof, in some cases over 60 degrees
- Simple floor plan, similar to farm house, yet repeated in every storey
- Typical distribution of small windows (usually 3-3-4-1)
- Two types of roof piers (ajkrl and periunk)
- Wooden balcony, called »gank«, connecting the house and outside toilet
- White facade (made in lime plaster)
- Almost fully wooden construction (apart from cellar, kitchen and chimney)
- Vegetable garden near the house

Idrija miners' houses were the dominant housing typology until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when they were gradually substituted by newer typologies. Many miners' houses have been demolished and many have been renovated without professional assistance, which did indeed improve the living conditions, yet altered the image beyond recognition. Only a few typical Idrija miners' houses remained. They were kept untouched mostly due to their location at the edge of the town where road access and location are unfavorable.

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As a part of his master thesis, architect Janez Podobnik has identified around 50 abandoned houses in Idrija, half of which are Idrija miners' houses that still have the typical characteristics. Although not all of them are protected by the law, they remain an important element of Idrija architectural heritage. Thus it is utmost important to preserve and renovate as many buildings as possible and keep the memory of the mining tradition – and often harsh life of Idrija miners. The goal of renovation should not be ideal, sterile museum, but revitalization and integration of such houses in the urban tissue of Idrija.

### Common discussion on Thursday's visits in plenary

Vernacular or traditional houses in Idrija should be saved as many as possible. Future with all that materialized knowledge demolished is a no-go.

Šturmajce farm house could serve as a model house not just how to preserve/restore architectural heritage site but how to develop it sustainably. Perhaps as a retreat accommodation lodge. But it should still be kept “true”.

Traditional houses contribute to the quality of open space and cultural environment that can be public or private. That consist not only of buildings but also landscape, as gardens. This quality should be emphasized, and also identity. Awareness should be raised.

We should think of traditional houses as a product. Not just Šturmajce farm house and not just Idrija old miner houses, but all “old houses” should be included in one or more local strategies (tourism, entrepreneurship, culture).

It is clear that the Municipality can't buy every single one of them (temporally the Municipality of Idrija owns two of them), there is a need for the Municipality to find its own way how to raise awareness and stop the decay of buildings and its visual, psychological, and physical effects of the place.

“Money should not be an excuse because money follows to a good idea. A real problem is an approach.”

Reconstruction works should be done with embedment, usage of local materials and self-sufficiency.

A question was asked why old miner's houses are not protected by Unesco? Unesco protects the city center, meanwhile, the old miner's houses are on the edge of buffer zones. Maybe this is the reason why some of them still stand. The municipality has also its own protection acts but they reply only to individual buildings and architectural features. Owners of protected buildings see the protection as a burden and not an opportunity or value. They have problems with refurbishments to install new infrastructure that makes old house suitable for nowadays living. Those refurbishments can't be done according to protection restrictions. Example: more eco-friendly windows can't be built in, so people don't decide to refurbish and the building is eventually at risk to decay.

Positive sites of old miner's houses:

- Traditional architecture tells history of people living there (identity),

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- Wooden construction remained intact after a long time,
- It is earthquake proof better than stone ones.

Open questions showed no available grants from the state or municipality even if this is not entirely true because of our state and EU co-funds for restorations of protected buildings.

Restoration rules are very strict and in a discussion was a comment that if the building is in private ownership it is outside of the building that should matter and be kept as it is and renovation of the indoor spaces shouldn't be under such strict regulations.

## Workshop on suggested three challenges and finding solutions

### 1) Group 1

The municipality should look for a solution of more than one or two houses that are in its possession already and it should tend that rehabilitation of the property would support owner/business. For example, in Idrija's old houses we should make a net of old houses transformed into the accommodation facilities (and/or in some cases even residents for artists) and on the ground floor, there could be a restaurant for hotel guests and others, which would use only local food. Some of it could be produced even in the gardens of the houses. In others could be small craft and art shops and workshops, etc.

There was a solution made how to start raising the awareness of architecture heritage. Idrija should start branding campaign with an involvement of a primary school. Children should enlist interesting old houses that are in public or private ownership and are in danger to decay. Then they should have a competition to name them with personal names, for example, Marija, Franca, and children should have some kind of role of being their ambassador. On this was social acceptance and empathy to the buildings would be raised and owners would feel a pressure to take care of them or revitalize them.

Even a suggestion how to visually brand them was given: there should be made a row of those enlisted buildings in a row and it should be named "Idrija's [number of houses] houses". For each demolished house there would be a gap on the logo and the number lower.

With such a good idea also funds would be found.

COMMENTS: People from Idrija like "funny" names of the buildings as it shows the past [folklorization; note by Janja Hiti]. Revitalization and keeping people in the town is necessary for Idrija because it is an employment center and in the rush hours they leave town even to other municipalities to invest (even to build) their earnings. The municipality is already working on plans and actions how to make Idrija attractive place to live.

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### 2) Group 2

Challenges: You and Me, Renovating by gardening?

Idrija needs more accommodation capacities for tourists and in this place cooperation with private owners is necessary. It should be developed a concept for a net of miners houses or Albergo diffuso to build a brand and participative processes help with awareness raising. Local food and drink should be served, also places for artisans could be included.

Renovation could include also gardens as part of sustainable agriculture. Outdoors of the branded houses are also important and vegetable gardens could offer a unique experience of gardening and eating freshly picked vegetable. Šturmajce farm house could be a model for this.

In a long-term, net cooperation with other towns could be established. Common platform as well.

Idrija has a low unemployment rate in comparison with other Slovenian municipalities, but it has uniform employment structure. With this actions tourism sector would be enforced.

1st accommodation for youth to rent is also a possibility as a revitalization plan.

The model that it is possible and how.

#### Comments:

Making a model house could be a multi-layered model: as a renovation model, as revitalization and business model ... to bust private investments and activities. This passiveness is a reflection of employment in other (industrial and technological) sector, others often leave the municipality.

### 3) Group 3

Challenges: Renovation and new life, how to face challenges in accordance with other town's problems, how to use global trends

The renovation is not just about a structure of buildings, but the one who renovates should think about usage first.

How to renovate: students could be learning from the craftsmen, setting an example with a model house.

Flats for young people. In old miners houses rooms are small so for their firs apartment it would still be appropriate and a good solution to a lack of small apartments to rent.

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Other flats in those houses could be used as tourist accommodations. Location of old miners houses could be problematic for placing restaurants and wine stores as they are not in the town's center.

Renovation can be done only in two ways: strictly traditional or other. For easier reconstruction artisans and builders familiar with old building techniques should be connected or a manufacture of prefabricated building elements (walls) could be established. From urbanistic point of view, architecture would still be preserved and old materials and new techniques combined.

Soft social pressure technique always works - if there are for example four houses to renovate and only one is left, then the owner of the last one will soon do it as well. The municipality should invest in public places around those locations.

Participation is also a method how to involve owners if we want broader impact.

### Comments:

1st accommodation and young people were often mentioned, but we shouldn't forget elders. They already live here, nowadays they are "fit" to the high age and they have means. It was answered that we have established a system of a care for elders to help them at home or in an institution. Young people, on the other hand, can't rent, because empty places are in private hands and therefore not available.

It was pointed out that for investors to the idea we could look outside of our region, even on the investment fairs.

## Global impression

- How to involve people to the potential of the place
- Many ideas, but they may take time.
- Articles about houses in a local newsletter.
- Different views: the first renovation or first launching the idea and branding activities?
- Miners houses are a value itself in connection to the Mine, and new contents need to be developed through a strategy(ies).
- Raising awareness and finding private investors necessary.
- A question of a quality public space.
- Houses are still here and the problem is actually a gift.
- Do we have too many things to protect?
- Good experiences give potential to the future.
- Last opportunity? Houses are disappearing.

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## Programme

|  |       |   |
|--|-------|---|
| <b>Thursday,<br/>18<sup>th</sup> May</b> | 14:00 | <b>Welcome and introduction to Idrija, its history and its possible future</b><br>[Town hall]   |
|  | 15:00 | <b>Short tour of Idrija's UNESCO heritage</b>   |
|  | 16:00 | <b>Idrija's miners' houses: once and today (and the future?)</b><br>Visits of sites with background information on the project (architecture, history of the project, ideas and challenges for the town, expectations of the population, enterprises, politicians, etc.) and presentation of the main challenges. |
|  | 18:00 | Short break   |
|  | 19:00 | <b>Evening programme</b><br>Dinner at Šturmajce – presentation of traditional food in a renovated homestead   |

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| <b>Friday, 19<sup>th</sup><br/>May</b> | 09:00 | <b>Workshop</b><br>[meeting in front of town hall, stop at Idrija Townspeople Apiary on the way to the Youth Centre Idrija] |
|  |       | <b>Common discussion of the project of the town</b> (peer-to-peer counselling)<br>[Youth Centre Idrija]                     |
|  | 12:00 | <b>Summary of results and next steps</b><br>[Youth Centre Idrija]   |
|  | 12:30 | <b>Lunch</b> [Škafar] and trip home   |