

9/18/94 'Each Town Its Own Face'

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Valtice, Czech Republic

In the Palava Hills of Southern Moravia is a breathtaking landscape of unspoiled farmland, protected forests, tree-bordered roads, church-steepled townscapes and hillside vineyards—all connecting medieval towns, baroque castles and classically designed follies built as picnic sites for European aristocracy of an earlier age. It's Vermont with castles; Versailles without formal gardens; a hikers', bikers' and equestrians' paradise. And, best of all, it's still undiscovered by hordes of trampling tourists.

The extraordinary landscape of this southern section of the country just over the Austrian border is a powerful testament to communism's failure to eradicate cultural distinctions, to produce a homogeneous pulp. For 40 years, the communists tried. But the Czech culture and landscape persisted with a vengeance.

Now looms a new danger. The unfettered sprawl of victorious capitalism may just succeed where the communists failed. Highways, malls, fast food and suburbs could mark the end of the 1990s.

If, instead, an entrepreneurial economy grows out of a novel partnership between historical preservation and economic development, a great deal of credit will be due a modest effort called the Czech Greenway. Funded by the New York-based World Monuments Fund and run by a Czech-born American with local Czech partners, the Greenway Project is giving capitalism a human face. Since its inception in 1992, Greenway has been introducing the ideas of small entrepreneurial efforts to show local officials how the culture and landscape they revere can make money without being ruined.

Greenway projects include non-automotive tourism, bed-and-breakfasts, farmers' accommodating tourists and offering them a working farm experience, dance and music performances in castles, and partnerships with Hudson Valley wineries and ceramic producers. Step by step, a preservation-development ethic is taking root, a locally based economy emerging.

The possibility remains that the goal of President Vaclav Havel can be achieved: "Each town and city will have its own individual face and its own inimitable spiritual climate." Contrary forces, however, guarantee a long and uphill battle.

In the middle of this cobblestone Greenway town, for example, is a grassy 17th-century square rimmed by mostly two-story stucco buildings in muted tans and grays with red or white trim, some with recently opened retail businesses. A two-towered church, a cupola-topped town hall and a school interrupt the steady building line. Bikes lean against sidewalk trees and

occasional parked cars dot a gently curved street. Other than a fountain sculpture of a young woman pouring wine, a few scattered benches and a number of full-grown chestnut trees, the center patch of green seems unthreatened. But here, the town's unraveling could begin: The pressure is on to replace half of the square with parking.

Just off the Valtice square, an arched passageway leads up to an elegant baroque castle dating from the 18th and 19th centuries and built by the Liechtensteins, major landholders here for 500 years until they decamped in 1945 to the alpine duchy that bears their name. Down a slope from the castle are the red-tile-roofed homes of the 3,000 villagers, tightly placed on angled streets adding up to an intimate, viable and long-established community that, even with its need for some updated amenities, functions as well as some of the world's most modern communities.

The castle's surrounding park is a peoples' park, well-used, cared for, never locked. The village, the park and the castle are inextricably bound together. Within a small portion of the castle, every village child attends nursery school. And again the unraveling potential appears: The pressure is on to remove the school children to make room for tourists' quarters.

Wouldn't removing the school from the castle be the first step to putting tourism ahead of local interests? In so large a castle, surely there is enough room for a museum, performance spaces, tourist accommodations and children.

All over the Czech Republic similar castles confront the same challenge—of raising money for restoring and vitalizing local economies. Medieval squares still hold working town halls, surrounded by buildings filled with retail, office, residential and service uses. Elaborate and efficient mass-transit systems—trolleys, buses, long- and short-distance trains—serve downtowns and communist-built satellite communities. Pedestrians prevail. Farmland and rolling hills start where communities end. There is no urban sprawl; few billboards, gas stations or rest stops intervene.

But some market squares in larger Czech cities are already filled with cars instead of vegetable markets. How long before parking garages replace the town's integral buildings? How long before streets are widened, sidewalks narrowed, historic landscapes lost, economies destabilized—before rail service is cut, bus routes cancelled, trolley lines closed?

The first billboards here advertise German cars and American cigarettes. Trucks are starting to overwhelm some towns and villages. The first McDonald's sits on a road outside of Prague. Is this the inevitable road to the future?

Ms. Gratz is author of "The Living City."