

# A multidisciplinary investigation of the Konopi mansion in Odvos, Romania

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**Abstract.** Architectural heritage represents one of the most important assets of a local community, as it embodies their authenticity and spirit of place. This paper takes a look at the nobiliary manor houses in the extra-urban area of the county Arad, which is located in the western part of Romania, close to the border with Hungary. Along the Mures River, there are many manor houses and the interest and curiosity for this type of former residences of the nobility in Romania has increased in the last few years, whether we are talking about entrepreneurs who want to restore them to their former glory or passers-by curious to discover hidden treasures in rural areas. This architecture, that of the extra-urban noble residences, is a particular feature of the Modernity, very valuable in terms of cultural heritage because it was the result of a culture of the European area. It can be said that the noble architecture of the region Banat-Crişana is a result of the regional interpenetration of Central European canons. Early modern noble residences –known by their classical architecture – are characteristic of rural landscape of the Mures Valley, with more than ten such mansions and buildings of high historical value. Of these, the Konopi mansion, whose architecture makes its presence felt in the consciousness of the community, as it marks the silhouette of the Mures valley. The aim of this paper is to study the manor house and the ensemble Konopi and the way in which the residences were thought of and perceived at the time, both from the point of view of their function as a dwelling and as a symbol of the family power in the countryside. The overall objective of this paper is to identify the ways to intervene on the Konopi Castle complex and to generate a strategy for its long-lasting functioning so that the historical monument of regional and local interest can be left for future generations.

## 1 Introduction

The value of a historical monument is given not only by the original materials that compose it, but it is also a combination of cultural values, the memory of the place and its significance for the community. Architectural heritage represents one of the most important assets of a local community, as it lays base for their authenticity and spirit of place. The reutilization and conservation of historical buildings should be by far our duty, in order to ensure their

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preservation for future generations. This is thus an essential process for sustainable development by ensuring that the current generation can understand and enjoy the physical expression of their antecessors.

The minimal interest shown during the past decades for historical buildings in rural areas is on the one hand the result of globalization, which led to a continuous degradation of existing buildings. Aside from this phenomenon, the changes of the political regime that came after the Second World War had worsened the situation of the numerous historical buildings: because of the process of nationalization of the private properties, and their transformations to be suitable for their new purposes followed, in many cases the properties had been abandoned for a long time and consequently degraded further due to the lack of funding for the restoration.

The main subject of this paper is Konopi castle, a former extra-urban manor house which is located in Arad County, in the western part of Romania, at the border of historical regions Banat and Crisana, on the north side of Mures river. In the rural landscape of Mures Valley the modern or even pre-modern manor houses are a frequent feature and the classical architecture is specific to this type of buildings and ensembles. The architectural program of former extra-urban manor houses represents a particular feature of the modern era, regarding cultural heritage as the result of a common culture of central Europe [1]. In the last few years, the interest in this type of residential ensembles has strongly increased, whether we are talking about entrepreneurs who want to bring them to their former glory or are simply curious to discover the hidden treasures in the rural areas [2].

The main intention and objective of this study is to identify the right modalities to intervene on the Konopi castle ensemble and to find a strategy that allows this architectural complex to have a long-lasting life in order leave this historical monument of regional and local interest to future generations.

The first time I came into contact with a former noble architectural ensemble was in summer of 2020 through an emergency intervention of the Mocioni Castle greenhouse located also along the Mures Valley. From that moment, my interest for this type of architecture and the willingness to take it into the public eye has increased due to the fact that the extra-urban noble residences are less known by the wider public.

The chosen theme of this paper is scientifically relevant considering that the subject of the former noble residences located in the extra-urban area at the border of Banat and Crisana were less studied along the time. The motivation of choosing this subject comes from my willingness to identify the ways through which an asset located in an area with cultural and economic potential can help its regeneration process.

## **2 The hypothesis and the objectives of the study**

Architectural heritage faces multiple, complex challenges such as abandonment, vandalism, insufficient funds for restoration or their alteration through non-compliant interventions. Unfortunately, in many cases, these actions are altering the identity and the memory of the place in an irreversible destructive way.

The Konopi Castle ensemble enclosed almost 556 hectares and it consisted of the manor house, the Roman Catholic church, three secondary buildings, a dendrological park, forests, and fields for agricultural purposes. Due to the nationalization process that started in 1948, the whole architectural ensemble was divided and as a result, these properties have different landlords and the buildings are in an advanced stage of degradation. Moreover, due to the regime changes and the state policies over time, this historical monument like many others underwent modifications to be suitable for its new functions. In the communist period, Konopi Castle served as a pioneer camp. Beside the fact that the interventions made were not compatible with a patrimony building, as incompatible materials were used, the former manor

house was not even properly maintained over this period of time. After 1989, the year when the communist regime fell, the manor house remained unused and it started to increasingly degrade. This fate was experienced by most of the former noble residences in the studied area, and these experienced an even faster rate of degradation. Today, only two manor residences are being used in the Mures Valley region of Arad county.

The premise of this study consists in this project's potential to become an example of good practice for the revitalization of such an extra-urban noble mansions and ensembles in the area of the Mures Valley. There is an impressive number of such architectural groups, and most of them in an advanced state of degradation and used improperly or not at all. The area where Konopi mansion is located has a significant touristic potential due to the diverse natural setting, rural landscapes and historical sites along Mures valley. There is a possibility to include this former noble ensemble into a thematic circuit of the former extra-urban noble domains from Arad and Timis Counties and to include it in the tourist's routes in Zarand Mountains.

This project it is aimed at identifying a way for the remaining intact parts of the former noble domain to be reunited through a coherent process of reuse. The purpose is to end their accelerated degradation and the imminent destruction of the buildings and the natural areas within it.

Current polices and principles regarding the natural and built environment lead to an overall vision with a strong sustainability component that envisages the adaptive reuse of built cultural heritage. The re-inclusion of a heritage goods in the social and economic circuit can lead to its preservation over time through its continuous use. This situation finds Konopi Castle a good candidate for its revitalisation and reintroduction into the social, cultural and economic life of the society.

### **3 The contextual analysis and the ensemble description**

#### **3.1 Context analysis**

The studied area is restricted to the Mureş Valley, both to the north and south, with a focus on the settlements located between the river's floodplain and the slopes of the Zărand Mountains. The natural framework of the area is complex and varied. A unique characteristic of this area, which develops parallel to the Zărand Mountains in an east-west direction, is the abrupt transition between the plain and hilly zone, through a difference in altitude of approximately 300-400 m. The two forms of relief constitute the natural protective elements of the area, which have ensured a relatively safe environment for inhabitants over time. In addition to the safety provided, the area was rich in natural resources, particularly in terms of food procurement and building materials. Another important factor in the development of these settlements was trade, with the river itself serving as a transportation route [1].

The hereby presented area has a unique character given by the silhouette of the manors and castles that rise along the Mureş Valley. The Mureş River can be seen as a connector of these noble residences, which together complete the character of the area. On both banks, there are manors that differ from each other, but that are brought together by both common characteristics and influences, as well as by this natural element, the Mureş River, which has practically attracted them, forming a unique corridor. In addition to the Konopi ensemble, other notable ensembles found in the area are those of the Mocioni family in Bulci and Căpâlnaş, the Royal Castle in Săvârşin, and the Salbek family castle in Petriş (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** The network of manor houses in the study area.

The Konopi Castle is situated in the village of Odvoș, within the Conop commune, which is around 50 km away from Arad. The landscape of the area is characterized by a valley with a unique feature, where its corridor is defined by a sudden transition between the floodplain and hilly zone. The Zărand Mountains and hills offer a variety of tourist routes that link the Mureș Valley to the opposite side, even reaching Lake Tauț. The Konopi ensemble can be introduced into these routes as a starting or ending point and can be part of thematic routes that connect it to the Șoimoș fortress or the Radna Monastery.

### 3.2 The relationship between the castle and the landscape

The Konopi Castle, like other noble estates in the plain region, has the privilege of being visible from afar. Its location at the base of the hills further enhances this image, as the forested hills create a picturesque backdrop.

All the elements that compose the image of the ensemble were carefully studied at that time to achieve their purpose: to become a landmark at the settlement level. Extra-urban noble ensembles were seen as signs of the power of a family, and therefore, they were meant to impose themselves on the surrounding setting. This feature has remained until the present day, as the castle dominates the surrounding space through its size and position. The manor has an unusual position in its context, being obliquely situated in relation to the main road. This was likely a deliberate decision when the ensemble was constructed in the 19th century, and may have had a clear purpose at the time. Its location at the intersection of two roads and oblique to the main road allows those approaching from both directions of the main road to view it from a corner position, making the castle the endpoint of perspective.

The Konopi Castle and its surrounding estate belonged to the noble Konopi family, of Hungarian origin. The last descendant of the Konopi family was Baron Kálmán Konopi (b.1880 - d.1947), an engineer and farmer by profession. According to the List of Historical Monuments, the castle dates back to the period of 1650-1700, and underwent significant transformations in the 1800s. As for the park, it was listed as a 19th-century monument [2].

The transformations in the 1800s were related the residence's reconstruction in the early 19th century in the neoclassical style. Many details about the first settlement are unknown, but it was likely built by Andras Forray de Savarsin at the end of the 17th century. The noble ensemble's church, dedicated to Saint Mary, was completed in 1774 [3]. The first manor on the site was destroyed during the Horea, Closca and Crisan uprising, besieged by the rebel peasants in 1784. According to writings from the time and descriptions from the peasants in Odvos, several buildings were set on fire during the uprising, including Mr. Forray's residence, as well as its annexes and stables [4]. The Forray family owned several residences in the Mureș Valley, including the one in Savarsin.



**Fig. 2.** The relationship between the ensemble and landscape.

### 3.3 The history of the noble ensemble

The Roman Catholic church of the noble estate was the only building that survived the peasant uprising without being destroyed. Its construction began around 1769 [4]. According to sources found in the archive of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Timișoara, the sanctuary of the church (the altar) was blessed in 1769, and the construction was completed in 1774 [3]. Despite being in an advanced state of decay today, having been abandoned for a relatively long time, it remains the only witness to the original noble ensemble. Above the apse of the altar, there is another element that attests to the presence of the Forray family on this estate: the coat of arms of the marriage between a male member of the Forray family and a female one, possibly from the Brunszvick family [4].

Unlike the period preceding peasant uprising when the estate belonged to the Forray family, the early 19th century saw a reversal in the hierarchy of high-ranking residents and social status. These noble residences can be considered both central elements of rural landscapes and engines of the local economy, as they represent the power and status of the family. The noble estate remained unused and uninhabited for a long period of time, passing from one family to another. Eventually, it was acquired by the Czigler de Konop family, who purchased it from Count Lipót Nádasdy. Although the exact date is unknown, it is believed that the Konopi family took possession of the estate around 1852 [4]. Based on the castle's architectural style, it can be inferred that its construction occurred after the time when Antal Czigler was entitled as a noble (1837) [4], but prior to 1870.

Kálmán Konopi (b.1880-d.1974), the grandson of Antal Czigler de Konopi, was the last family member to have a significant impact on the entire estate. He was responsible for transforming the vacation home into a significant cultural landmark. This is supported by the writings of the time, as in 1912, the cultural newspaper edited by Miklós Bánffy described the manor as a model, entitled "the castle under the woods" [4]. The house was often visited by writers and artists, as the owner himself was a writer. Kálmán Konopi and his wife, Vilma Boér, were predominantly surrounded by people from the world of art, having a strong connection to the Hungarian Art Nouveau/Secession movement [4].

Kálmán Konopi was not only an artist, but also an engineer and researcher in the field of agriculture, particularly interested in wheat cultivation, soil improvement and animal breeding. Upon his return from studies, he established a modern laboratory in Odvoș after 1911, where he created several hybrid wheat varieties that proved to be successful, adapted for cultivation in Banat, Crișana, Transylvania and even Oltenia. Despite his achievements,

Kálmán Konopi passed away in November 1947, shortly before the Soviet regime took over the noble estate. Before his death, he legally adopted his collaborator, Gheorghe Lenghyel, and granted him the title of baron. Kálmán was buried next to the Roman Catholic church within the complex, and a cross monument in his honor was placed on the eastern side of the church.

After the communist regime was established, the noble complex was confiscated in the spring of 1948. Its first use after confiscation was as an agricultural cooperative but during the communist period, the main function of the manor house was as a camp for pioneer children, as confirmed by some locals who were employed at the camp. Although this period did not bring about significant changes to the monument, inappropriate interventions were made, such as the use of concrete in the basement (floors and wall cladding). In addition to the negative effects of these interventions, this period of continuous use of the building had a great benefit, managing to preserve it largely as it was. After the fall of the communist regime, started a long period of abandonment.

### 3.4 Stylistic analysis

Regarding the volumetric composition and the exterior's plastics, the Konopi Castle, built in a neoclassical style, recalls a classicizing spirit. There is no information available about the architect or the builder of the castle. The castle is characterized by typical features of 19th century constructions, such as axuality, symmetry, hierarchy, and rhythm. Within the entire complex, the castle is surrounded by other buildings with cultural value, such as the Roman Catholic Church (Fig. 4) and annex buildings (Fig. 5).

The building, originally designed to have only one level and situated over a high basement, follows a rectangular plan, with interior spaces arranged symmetrically around a central axis. At the top, the building is finished with an attic with a considerable height. The volume is compact, and the symmetry is further emphasized by the planimetric setbacks, which can be seen both in plan and on the main facades. The entrances to the building are positioned on the central axis and are treated distinctly: the "honorable" entrance from the southeastern side is marked by the presence of a monumental porch, which leads directly into the main hall. On both main facades, the entrance is at a higher level than the ground level: on the street side, two ramps on the side connect to the porch (Fig. 3), and on the opposite side, the access is through a single ramp positioned on the central axis of the building.



**Fig. 3.** The main building of the ensemble, Konopi Castle.



**Fig. 4.** The Roman Catholic Church. **Fig. 5.** The annex building.

The façades of the manor house are divided into three distinct horizontal registers (Fig. 6): the base register, located at the bottom and defined by a pronounced belt course; the middle register at the level of high ground floor register with a rhythmic pattern given by the windows; and the upper register composed of the field with the openings of the attic and a not very pronounced cornice. The three horizontal registers are delimited by median elements with a rather simple decorative plasticity. The ground floor windows have a wide opening and are carefully treated, those on the southeast side having pedimented frames. The basement openings are relatively small, devoid of decoration, and present original ironwork elements.

The entrance portico, positioned in the compositional center of the longitudinal façade, reinforces the monument's symmetry. It is enclosed by four Corinthian columns and shafts treated differently: the two in the middle have fluted shafts, while the marginal ones are treated differently, with square plan and decorative elements in relief, similar to the corners of the building. Historical-photographs analysis suggests that over time the façades underwent some interventions, in which the decorative plastic was slightly modified.



**Fig. 6.** The main façade.

The main façade facing the street on the southeast side with direct access to the main salon through the portico, has the richest decorative plasticity: it features pediments above the windows, corner ashlar blocks in the area of the setbacks, projecting elements, and slightly pronounced window frames which were made in a later stage, as initially the frames were made only with a lighter shade of plaster [5].

The internal constructive logic of the building is based on partial symmetry, with the three main rooms positioned in an enfilade in the center of the functional scheme. In terms of interior decoration, it was quite simple, with the interior plaster being predominantly decorated with abstract motifs created with roller paint. The central salon features wooden panels on the lower part, and the living room floors are made of wooden parquet with a geometric pattern, preserved under another layer of added parquet in certain spaces, probably during the period when the manor served as a children's camp. In high traffic areas, such as the access hall and service spaces, the flooring is made of natural stone. Several original elements are still present inside, such as the flooring, window frames, doors, multiple layers of plaster, wooden panelling on the walls, and a metal speaking tube for communication between the hallway and the kitchen area on the lower floor. Unfortunately, no pieces of furniture or stoves have been preserved.

Regarding the exterior design, there are unfortunately no traces left of the landscaping and the few pieces of information about it come from historical images. In the park area, facing the street, there used to be a circular roundabout in front of the access portico, with an inscription probably made of stone. Sinuous paths can be seen leading to the access area on both main sides. The landscaping, like the models of the time, was carefully designed to highlight the central element of the composition, the noble residence.

#### **4 The strategy of intervention**

The former noble estate Konopi is facing with a major challenge related to territorial fragmentation, caused by a combination of factors such as agrarian reforms, nationalization under the communist regime, and the process of restitution. To address this issue and activate the area, a holistic approach on a larger scale is needed, as restoring a single building is not enough. By leveraging the architectural potential of the estate, it can become a catalyst for the area's development, attracting interest and offering numerous benefits in this rural landscape.

The approach is to develop a comprehensive project that encompasses all the remaining intact buildings and natural areas of the former noble estate, with the goal of both revitalizing and preserving it.

From the beginning, the noble estate could be seen as a multifunctional center: it was involved in political life, had a leading role in managing the entire estate, played a strong representative role for the family, had cultural and educational functions, and served as a leisure destination, combined with agricultural activities and agricultural research in its later period. Although this multifunctional aspect has diminished due to the fragmentation of the estate, it appears to be a sustainable solution for revitalizing the estate today, as it can ensure its self-sufficiency over time.

The strategy envisions the creation of a hub that attracts people from different fields who can contribute to the development of the entire area, by establishing a multidisciplinary center with cross-sectoral activities that provide the possibility of organizing various types of events and activities, such as artistic, cultural, social, educational, and business-related. The goal is to restore the usefulness of the architectural ensemble, making it accessible to a wide range of users and ensuring its ongoing functionality.

The functional strategy for each individual building has been developed with the aim of complementing one another and working in harmony with the surrounding outdoor space, leveraging the natural landscape that envelops the ensemble.

As the centrepiece of the entire site, the manor house has been specifically designed to offer visitors memorable experiences that cater to the demands of contemporary society. To achieve this, the project proposes adapting the manor to host a range of social and cultural events, as well as business meetings, complemented by refined gastronomic experiences. The interventions on the manor house, which is a monument for regional interest, aim to highlight its aesthetic and historical characteristics. The monument still retains numerous authentic elements, ranging from carpentry to finishing elements hidden under successive layers of plaster. Moreover, it is fortunate that the manor house has not undergone significant modifications over time, in terms of both its structure and interior partitions. The proposal for adaptive reuse is compatible with the characteristics of the mansion, as the newly proposed functions can adapt to the existing structure with minor interventions that do not alter its specificity. The guiding principle behind the intervention on the manor house is that of minimal intervention, with the intention of restoring its authentic image. Regarding the church, that has been out of use for a considerable time, the strategy is to partially convert it into a cultural space for performances: theatre, symphonic concerts, shows that do not contradict its initial religious function,

while still having the option of occasionally holding religious services.

One of the annexes will host the non-formal education program intended for both students and pupils through the organization of creative workshops such as painting, sculpture, ceramics, and thematic workshops focused on restoration and traditional crafts or thematic summer camps. It will also provide a center for the local community, such as creating a training center for senior citizens in digital skills. In addition, to support the idea to organize summer camps, the attic of the annex will accommodate around ten units of accommodation spaces.

In addition, to enhance the touristic appeal to this area and to the architectural ensemble, it is proposed to build a belvedere tower at the base of the hill, which will serve as a sign in the wood for the starting point for the touristic routes in Zarand Hills. One advantage of this historical ensemble is the fact that it benefits from a generous outdoor space that can support the idea of self-sufficiency through the possibility of organizing numerous outdoor events, ranging from social events, small festivals, plays, recitals, to historical re-enactment events which are of significant interest for the castle owners.

Speaking about the intervention process and timeline, the proposal is to have a phased intervention according to the scale of the required interventions and the current status of each object on the site. The primary targets of intervention are the church and the manor house, but due to the extensive work required, it will take a relatively long period of time before they can be fully operational. Therefore, after the safety measures for the church have been implemented, a feasible approach is to first focus on the annexes so that they can begin their activities. The annexes will host spaces for workshops and accommodation. This will support the ongoing efforts to restore other heritage objects by accommodating teams of professionals and making it possible to organize research camps for students.

Regarding to the impact of the project and considering the diversity of the proposed functions for the reutilization of the castle ensemble, the project's potential influence is significant. Firstly, it can have an impact on people's and property owners' awareness of such heritage assets, serving as an example of good practice and a pioneer for revitalizing the network of manors along the Mureş River in Arad County. Additionally, the development of this complex could contribute to the area's economic development by creating new jobs, attracting investments, tourists, and residents from nearby cities.



**Fig. 7.** The strategy axonometry.

## 5 Conclusion

The valuable natural setting and the Mureș River that defines it, the classical architecture, and the specific features of a former noble residence outside the city have constituted the starting premises for this project. The proposal to repurpose the entire architectural ensemble and convert it into a multidisciplinary center that combines intersectoral activities from the cultural, social, educational, and business spheres has been validated because it ensures the continuous functioning of the ensemble. In addition to verifying the feasibility of the investment, it also ensures its preservation over time.

All the proposed functions are inspired by the history of the manor and were designed to highlight the importance of each stage it went through. The idea of multifunctionality played a crucial role since the beginnings of noble domains, which were involved in political, cultural, and social life. However, this characteristic gradually faded as the site became fragmented, but nowadays, it is seen as a way of revitalizing such an architectural domain with significant architectural and historical value for the area.

As a conclusion to this research, we can confirm that the revitalization of only one building, in this case the Konopi Castle, is not enough to reactivate the entire area and ensure its prosperity. A holistic approach is necessary, which incorporates the whole estate of the former noble complex through a coherent strategy, being in the same time a sustainable method of conservation.

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