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Author:

[Fleming, Ronald Lee](#)

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CASTLE AND CONTEXT

Owning a small and very ruined castle in the Swiss countryside puts in focus the different sensibilities about the meaning of place that can pit the preservation proprietor against state preservation interests.

The castle of Schauenburg (which means “viewing point”), perched on a rocky outcropping in a saddle of hills overlooking Basel and the Rhine valley, was originally the residence of toll-taking barons, ancestors of my wife’s family who taxed travelers attempting a short-cut around Basel. A massive earthquake destroyed it in 1386, but Schauenburg was rebuilt and reinhabited before it gradually became a ruin and pleasure ground. In the 1780s, the family reacquired the castle and the surrounding farmland, added the *Pavilion de Plaisir*, where the belfry used to stand and transformed the courtyard into a garden.

Today, both the crumbling twelfth-century walls and the picturesque, late baroque pavilion are of some historic interest; their unorthodox juxtaposition creates a strange marriage that can hardly be called a textbook example of preservation. This melange adds charm and complexity to our understanding of the past; yet, it also creates problems when dealing with a cantonal preservation office principally interested in securing public access to the ruins as a viewing point and in pursuing an archaeology program that would destabilize the grounds.

The current generation of owners uses Schauenburg as a community cultural center, staging summer concerts and family parties in the courtyard where their grandparents grew roses. But the family’s efforts to sustain a “Friends of the Schauenburg Society” lost momentum in recent years as it grew tired of cultural programming.

The family cannot afford to brace up the castle’s ruined walls, which are continually eroded by a steady stream of hikers who take advantage of a cantonal policy that encourages an accessible countryside of walking trails, marked with careful directional signs, though the castle is marked “private.” Accepting public funding for restoration could require excavation in and around the ruined castle, a search that could last until archaeologists decide it has been exhaustive. This work could take a decade and thus make the castle impossible to use or at least unattractive and dangerous to young children.

In case ownership went to a public body, the cantonal preservation office would strip the hirsute walls of their sprouting trees and ivy and secure the ruins for foot traffic. Like other castle ruins in the canton’s care, Schauenburg would be left stark and white, like a pile of bones on the hillside, celebrating the medieval period. The canton shows less interest in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romantic additions and adaptations as illustrated in prints and drawings that the family collects and which anchor its sense of identity with the castle.

Since only the agricultural buildings are permitted within current zoning regulations, even the 1799 pavilion and the landlord’s residence, a 1930 copy of a medieval vineyard house in the fields below, could not be rebuilt should they burn down. To overcome this risky impasse, the owners recently

decided to list these structures on the national historic register even though it may mean further restrictions beyond already tight design review laws.

The owners do not wish to *freeze* the place either as a medieval wall sculpture (too barren) or as a romantic pleasure garden (too labor intensive for them). To ensure an ongoing life force, they believe Schauenburg must continue to adapt and change, paying respect to previous epochs yet not being stifled by purist conservation policies. Therefore, the owners believe this time and the century to come could also leave a mark on this landscape, with new uses that will secure Schauenburg as a living ruin open to future generations, rather than preserve a sterile monument.

Below Schauenburg, the forests and fields remain quiet at night because strict agricultural zoning still maintains the countryside as a vast country park. But from the crumbling parapet of Schauenburg one can see the tiara of Basel lights and sense how this city (with France and Germany touching it) will put continued pressure on the castle. Now there is only the glow of the camp fire by the commune’s hut and yodels echoing from it on a Saturday night to remind us that in Switzerland, for better or for worse, no one’s house is an entirely private castle.

—Ronald Lee Fleming