



RECONSTRUCTING MEMORY: SAVING PRAGUE'S HISTORIC RAILWAY LINK

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The Vyšehrad Railway Bridge stands at the convergence of infrastructure modernization and cultural heritage preservation—an increasingly urgent crossroads for historic cities worldwide. Situated within Prague's UNESCO-listed historic core and protected by law as a cultural monument, the bridge is a critical transportation link and a symbol of the city's architectural legacy.

Currently facing the threat of demolition, the bridge has become the subject of an alternative proposal by the Vyšehrad Bridge Foundation. This coalition of engineers, architects, and philanthropists has delivered a technically and economically sound feasibility study that argues for the bridge's restoration rather than replacement. This expert-driven initiative shows that heritage preservation, urban connectivity, and sustainable construction are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually reinforcing.





Conducted by renowned engineers Ian Firth (COWI) and Andreas Galmarini (WaltGalmarini), the feasibility study proposes a modular, low-impact reconstruction plan. Key findings indicate that:

- 85% of the bridge's material can be preserved, with only minor replacements needed.
- The restored structure will have a 100-year lifespan, matching that of a new build.
- Railway traffic will continue uninterrupted throughout the process via temporary support structures.
- A third railway track can be seamlessly integrated into the existing design, enhancing capacity without compromising visual integrity.
- The proposal uses three times less construction material than a full rebuild, aligning with the

EU's sustainability directives.

These findings have received a favorable review from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich), reinforcing the study's technical credibility.

The project is spearheaded not by state authorities but by a coalition of civic actors, led by the Vyšehrad Bridge Foundation. This bottom-up initiative reflects a growing global trend in grassroots urbanism, where citizen-led movements influence major planning decisions. Founders include philanthropists Tomáš Bistrický, Martin Vohánka, and Jan Barta, along with architects Petr Janda, David Vávra, and Petr Lešek. Their mission is not only to protect a historic bridge but also to propose a replicable model for sustainable urban development rooted in local expertise and civic engagement.

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In April 2024, a joint UNESCO/ICOMOS Advisory Mission concluded that the bridge contributes significantly to the Outstanding Universal Value of Prague's World Heritage status. The report stated unequivocally that its demolition would compromise the authenticity and integrity of the entire site. The mission endorsed the preservation and rehabilitation plan proposed by the foundation, lending institutional weight to the movement against demolition.

The preservation proposal extends beyond the structure itself. Plans include:

- Activating unused spaces beneath the bridge for community and cultural use.
- Revitalizing the Výtoň and Smíchov districts, enhancing public space and local business

opportunities.

- A potential new or modernized railway station at Vyšehrad, with integration into the broader city transport network.

These interventions mirror successful urban reuse models seen in cities like Berlin, New York, and London, where historical infrastructure has been reimagined as public space.





The restoration approach involves:

- Sequential removal and restoration of the three steel spans at a shore-based facility.
- Use of Self-Propelled Modular Transporters (SPMTs) and floating pontoons to facilitate efficient logistics.
- Application of advanced anti-corrosion coatings and structural reinforcements.
- Reduced emissions, recycling of existing steel, and minimized urban disruption during construction.

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In contrast, the state's demolition plan would result in nearly three years of railway service interruption.



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The Vyšehrad Bridge preservation project highlights a fundamental question: how should modern cities reconcile the demands of infrastructure development with the responsibilities of cultural stewardship? By choosing adaptation over erasure, Prague can set an international precedent. The project proves that with rigorous planning, technical innovation, and community engagement, it is possible to preserve history while building for the future.

