

Burdens of the past, burdens of the present : reflections on the negotiation of neglect

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Résumé

La restauration et l'utilisation des monuments d'importance historique impliquent plusieurs aspects complémentaires: entre le présent et le passé (histoire ou patrimoine), entre l'avenir et le passé (restauration) et entre le présent et l'avenir (utilisation). L'auteur analyse les débats autour de ces termes en offrant plusieurs exemples de préservation de sites historiques internationaux et mauriciens.

Introduction

This essay is a reflection on a number of issues germane to the restoration and subsequent utilisation of monuments of historic importance. The title 'Negotiating Neglect' signals a fairly significant aspect of the work involved in identifying, restoring and maintaining a monument or site with so much hinging on the negotiations between owner, identifier and restorer - to oversimplify the three categories into which the key players fall. Rather than concentrating on the financial aspects, this paper looks at certain other negotiations: the negotiation between the present and the past which I shall call History or Heritage; the negotiation between the future and the past which I shall call Restoration; and the negotiation between the future and the present which I shall call Use. In all cases, however, it should be reasonably clear that the real negotiation is between Attention and Neglect.

History/Heritage

Andre Chastel, who has given the subject of patrimony a great deal of thought, has underscored the juridical or legal aspect of Heritage.¹ He defines inheritance (*'heritage'*) as the legal and institutional instrument of Heritage (*'patrimoine'*) inasmuch as it regulates the proprietorship of assets,

wealth, property, land, structures and artefacts. He refines this by observing that objects of cultural or national heritage are better defined by custody and possession than by simple ownership. For Chastel, Heritage is as much something that possesses us as something that we possess (*«un bien-qui-nous-possède autant et plus que nous ne le possédons»*). It is a possession or custody because, by its very definition, it precedes and succeeds its present custodian. So that a given fortification, say the Martello Tower or Fort Adelaïde, is both something inherited from those before, and something that will be willed to future generations.² By thus formulating the notion of Heritage, Chastel suggests that Heritage must entail Sacrifice in the two senses of the term:

d'abord ce dont la préservation suppose un effort, une dépense, une perte plus ou moins sensible mais consentie comme nécessaire. En ce sens, les renoncements à la mode, les dépenses souvent importantes, la mobilisation des personnes, etc., qu'occasionne le «patrimoine» signifient pour nos civilisations l'équivalent des renoncements, holocaustes propitiatoires, mort ou mutilation destinés à «sauver» moralement ou matériellement un objet essentiel, phénomènes qui existent partout. Car il s'agit de ce qui n'est jamais condamner à périr sans entraîner un sentiment d'accablement ou de dérèliction. La patrimoine est ce dont la préservation demande des sacrifices, ce dont la perte signifie un sacrifice.³



Fig. 1 Negotiating the future of a forgotten and threatened 18th century French fortification on the construction site of the Oberoi Hotel, Balaclava Bay, Mauritius with the Minister of Tourism (*L'Express* 1st August 1997)

It is in this connection that the role of Government becomes important. It is admittedly not possible for Government to assume the entire financial burden of restoration and preservation but it is up to Government, in consultation with NGO's, parastatals, other institutions, and specialists to lend legal and national weight to proposals and initiatives. Without government backing, in the form of properly formulated, promulgated and enforced laws, properly trained and paid historians, archaeologists, and restorers, more harm is done than good. Regrettably we must fight a paradox (one of many):

that we seem to have a morbid and almost universal fascination with the destruction of that which is valuable. This is something that has been observed by John Ruskin, by Marcel Mauss, by Georges Bataille, by Andre Chastel and others, but perhaps it is Oscar Wilde who best captures it when he writes

*Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard.⁴*

This craze to annihilate what one cherishes, to replace the old with the new, to sell a painting for material gain, to burn old books and furniture as kindling, is a sad corollary to the national and international pastime of neglect. Another paradox is the fact that it is dereliction, abandon and dilapidation that provoke sentiments of responsibility and remorse. In Chastel's words:

L'ame moderne souffre d'une tendance schizophrénique qui ne s'est jamais atténuée, la valorisation des formes anciennes s'intensifiant au fur et à mesure que les développements modernes, mécaniques, industrialisés les dérangent davantage.⁵

But what creates the so-called cult of monuments? What produces this impulse to preserve and restore monuments, to edify the edifice, to (re)build the built? For the German archaeologist Georg Dehio, it is fundamentally nationalism, a notion of national belonging — to that belonging is then attached a sentiment of national belongings, objects that attest to a shared past. The need to authenticate and exhibit the collective memory in and through that which edifies follows naturally: tombs, forts, battlegrounds, stately homes and residences become the obsessive objects of focus. Hero-worship is grafted onto and sustains the cult of monuments.⁶

Dehio believed that nationalist sentiment was the root of the impulse to preserve and to restore but Alois Riegl took it a step further when he suggested that the mere fact of age or antiquity also engendered the impulse for restoration, that moderns liked to collect what was old and venerable. For Riegl, it is only at a (much) later stage of cultural development, one that post-dates nostalgia and cultural imitation, that we can maintain a historically honest position, that is, to preserve monuments in their "present" state, to preserve them without effacing what history has already itself effaced.⁷

Restoration

Restoration is the noun form of restore, the basic meaning of which is to return something to its original form. Chastel argues that in many cases, it goes beyond that:

Il s'agit dans la plupart des cas d'une volonté de restitution intégrale qui va bien au-delà de la restauration prudente. Un symbole doit être complet, explicite, éloquent pour satisfaire la conscience collective, et les impératifs scientifiques passent alors vite au second plan.⁸

An example of this kind of symbolisation is the Mosque of al-Hakim bi-amr Allah in Cairo, currently being "restituted" by the small Shia Gujarati merchant community, the Dawudi Bohoras.. The Egyptian Government has handed over the stewardship of this 5th century AH (11th century CE) Mosque to the Bohoras who earnestly replaced old bricks with new ones and, if my informants are to be believed, sacrificed architectural wisdom for religious zeal. The Bohoras see themselves as the direct descendants of the Fatimids (regn. 909-1171) and are trying to restore and rebuild, literally, that link in stone.⁹

This is the kind of restoration John Ruskin deplored in his 1849 work, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. For him, restoration represents the most complete form of destruction that a structure can undergo. Modern practice for him consisted in neglecting buildings first and restoring them afterwards. He believed that a structure should be cared for and if for whatever reason that was not possible then its last hour should be dignified and not belittled by false and falsifying intrusions. Ruskin's view is seen as extreme. Those who respect it modify it and ask for knowledgeable and sensitive interventions. "*La restauration des edifices anciens n'est pas et ne peut pas etre un travail mecanique: elle demande savoir et sensibilite.... Il suffit d'une juxtaposition maladroite pour annuler proprement un edifice*". This view calls for minimal restoration, a restoration that is silent, invisible, transparent. It brings into serious question the advisability, the viability and even the meaning of "true" or "faithful" restoration.¹⁰

There is, therefore, a need for a guiding principle, a Prime Directive, a series of guidelines about how and what to consider, inventory, restore, or isolate, a charter to bind individuals, communities and nations, a thinking, a right thinking, to direct and decide. These do exist: the creation of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments in 1908; the Venice Charter of 1964; the 1972 UNESCO decision to inventory and protect 'World Heritage' sites, such as the citadel of Bahla in Oman, Quebec City, and the port city of Dubrovnik which, in spite of this "protection" was subject to bombardment and siege several years ago; the French "Inventaire generale"; the Archaeological Survey of India; the National Monuments Act of Mauritius; and so on.

Max Dvorak has identified another issue which contradicts Riegl's non-intervention. He calls for a clean-up of dirty monuments and streets, not in a bid to restore them but to restore the ambience they create. For Dvorak, what matters is not the edifice itself, but the environment of which the edifice forms part and which it informs in various ways. What also becomes important is to situate the edifice within an architectural and spatial history. It becomes important to privilege not the authenticity of the edifice but its personality. A good restoration will then presuppose an interpretation of the object not just a taxonomy.¹¹

Riegl identifies three types of monuments. The first type is the 'purposeful' or 'intentional' monument, a work intended by its creators to commemorate a precise moment or a complex event of the past. The second is the historic monument, a work which also commemorates a historical moment or event but the choice of which is determined by our present-day and subjective criteria. The third type is the ancient monument, any structure, regardless of its intended purpose, that has demonstrably suffered the ravages of time. It is clear that directly implicated are current notions of value, valorisation, "public interest", "historical significance", and so on.



A 19th century fantasy of the Bavarian King Ludwig II has become the 20th century child's Disney-reality

Nathalie Heinich has noticed three "enlargements" (Fr. "*extensions*") in the conceptualisation of historical monuments. The first is a straightforward chronological one that necessarily enlarges one's purview from the unicity of the unicum or individual edifice to the series or cumulative ensemble, which Chastel has described as follows:

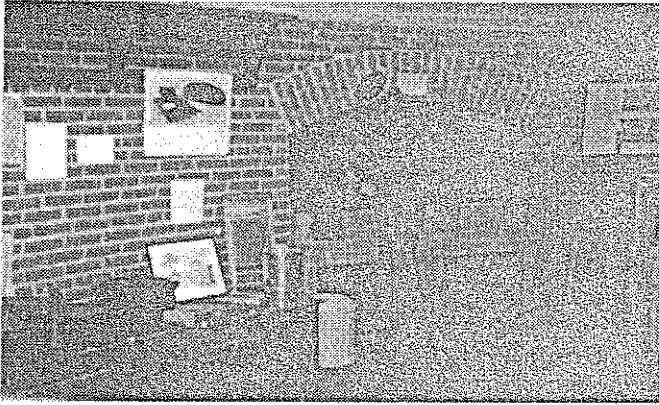
*Mais pour nous qui nous intéressons maintenant au «contenu» de l'histoire, au vécu des générations, aux pratiques de la vie et de la mort, aux constantes et aux ruptures de l'expérience, au «non-événementiel» ... n'est-il pas temps d'ajouter au récit historique la considération de l'espace, de saisir dans le patrimoine une organisation précise du sol, un système de forme et de structures qui surplombe la durée?*¹²

Resistance to the restoration of the isolated monument in a move to privilege architectural areas or historic sites is nothing new. Williamsburg, Virginia has, since 1926, been the object of a scholarly and expensive restoration and reconstruction. The entire city has been reconstituted, complete with period costumes and the use of colonial English by the inhabitants/employees. It is a massive monument to, and slice of, American colonial history and life. A similarly comprehensive - and spectacular - preservation is that of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy of Frank Lloyd Wright's 'Fallingwater' and its surrounding grounds. The second enlargement, according to Heinich, is the shift of attention from grand and prestigious objects to include also objects that are more mundane, more everyday (and more numerous): crafts, furniture, signs, mines, factories and so on.¹³

Some forms of preservation and restoration are extreme. The Temples of Kyoto, for instance, have been repeatedly restored and kept identical throughout the ages. They are an eloquent example of so-called permanent or occult restoration. The opposite extreme is remembering through effacement. For instance, the Saudi government has transformed (some would say deformed) a number of Islamic religious monuments in order to prevent veneration of and at the sites. What is interesting is that the authorities are not oblivious to the historical value of the sites but have chosen to preserve the memory of events in time-and-place by effacing the place, by dissociating cosmic event from worldly structure.

Utilisation

When a car or any machine breaks down, we repair it, to the extent that we are able; when that is no longer possible, it is consigned to the junkyard. The motives behind restoration are very different: here, we are guided by the cultural value of the object, not its utility. But the utilitarian argument does have to be considered. Indeed, naval bases, forts and other installations still occupied and utilised by the military seem to have had a better fate than those turned over to non-custodial organisations. This immediately provokes the question: should structures, especially ones that are still or easily occupiable, be preserved through use. Is it then a problem that Fort George is a



The re-created past in Murney Tower, Canada

Mauritian government storehouse, Fort William the Headquarters of the Coast Guard, Fort Victoria a Central Electricity Board installation? And what of the use of Fort Adelaide's courtyard as a concert venue? Or for that matter, the ruins at Balaclava as the venue for an Indonesian fashion show? It is obviously not always possible (and sometimes undesirable) to return buildings to their original purpose. But sometimes a building had many and sometimes quite unexpected uses. Saladin, for instance, is said to have used the splendid Mosque of Ibn Tulun, completed in 266 AH (879

CE) and still standing, as a stables during the Crusades. Knowing this may help us overcome the impulse for a purity of restoration.¹⁴

In a world and environment where, despite the national interests at stake, the preservation and restoration of monuments is rendered cost-effective through tourism, several other important issues must immediately be addressed. Can one responsibly allow access to fortifications and ramparts to a potentially overwhelming number of tourists. Can the rule "take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints" be applied or even enforced? Are footprints not enough to cause damage? Pictures certainly are. Countless museums and monuments do not permit snapshots. What about Fort Adelaide? Should we continue to use it for reggae concerts? Is the intention behind the building relevant, essential, important? Buildings surely do not obligatorily need to be turned into memorials.

There is obvious virtue in the proposal to return the wind-driven wheat grinding mill built by Mahé de Labourdonnais at Port Louis to its original working condition. Of course, this project does not consist in restoration alone, but also reconstruction and construction. Indeed, the relationship between those three forms of recovery must be carefully evaluated and, I fear, costed before responsible decisions can be taken.¹⁵

And what do we do with objects and edifices already restored? Is it our responsibility, then, to de-restore, as it were, to excise all embellishments? Do we put in new bricks? remove new bricks? In an 1874 article, Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu averred, «Avec un sage entretien, un monument peut être éternel grâce à la substitution d'une pierre neuve à une pierre usée». Do we scrape the newer paint, break the new stained glass? And if we do, can we still be faithful to our initial aim of being faithful to the historical? What, in fact, are our responsibilities? Do we do our utmost to prevent vandalism? Is there not a paradox, however, in prosecuting the writer of last week's graffiti yet thanking the writer of last century's?¹⁵

Whatever we do, it seems fairly clear that we must educate the collectivity, and restore with conscience and circumspection. I would like to suggest that what we must do is described by the antonym of neglect, namely Attention. We need to 'draw attention', for example identifying, cataloguing and providing inventories of monuments. Robert Musil has observed that «entre autres particularités dont peuvent se targuer les monuments, la plus frappante, est, paradoxalement, qu'on ne les remarque pas. Rien au monde de plus invisible».¹⁶ We need to 'pay attention', for example provide for and train restorers, especially in our institutions: the Ministries of Works, Tourism, and Culture, of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, of the University, of the Mauritius Institute, of the various Museums, of the regrettably ill-defined and ill-funded Cultural Centres, and of the future National Library. And we need to 'be attentive', by producing the correct social environment for the work that lies ahead in restoring our Heritage. Focusing on the word 'attention' is appropriate seeing that the word 'monument' derives from 'monere', to remind, admonish, warn, advise, instruct...

Acknowledgements

I should like to record here my thanks to the Hassam Toorawa Trust for having sponsored my participation in this Conference.

References

1. Andre Chastel, 1990. 'Le Patrimoine' [Heritage], in Encyclopaedia Universalis, Symposium: Les Enjeux, Paris: 220-22. Many of the formulations in this paper are indebted to Chastel's perceptive observations. See also his 'La Notion de patrimoine', in P. Nora (ed.), Les Lieux de memoire, vol. II: La Nation (Paris, 1984); and Jean-Pierre Babelon and A. Chastel, 'La Notion de patrimoine', in Revue de l'art, no. 49 (1980).
2. In this way, Heritage becomes a marker and constituter of identity. I am a Mauritian because the Martello Tower at La Preneuse is an artefact that belongs to me (as a Mauritian) and to which I alone (as a Mauritian) belong.
3. Chastel: 220.
4. Oscar Wilde, 1898. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, part 1, stanza vii.
5. Chastel: 221.
6. "Le culte de heroes soutient celui des monuments" (Chastel: 221).
7. Alois Riegl. 1903. *Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen und seine Entstehung*, Vienna.
8. Chastel: 221.

9. See my '*Tahir Sayf al-Din*' in Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition, vol. VIII (Leiden, forthcoming).
10. See especially '*The Lamp of Memory*', ch. 6 of John Ruskin, 1849, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London, repr. New York, 1989), reprinted in J. Evans, 1959, *The Lamp of Beauty: Writings on Art* by John Ruskin, London: Chastel, 223.
11. Max Dvorak, 1926. '*Denkmalkultus und Kunstentwicklung*', in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kunstgeschichte*, Vienna: 12. Chastel: 225.
13. Nathalie Heinich, 1990. '*Les monuments historiques*', in *Encyclopaedia Universalis, Symposium: Les Enjeux*, Paris: 246.
14. University of Pennsylvania Undergraduate Academic Bulletin, 1994-1996: Course Register, 193-195; Philippe La Hausse de Lalouvière, '1996. 'Le patrimoine historique à préserver est à promouvoir', in WEEK-END (Sunday 16 June, 1996); Jacques Achille, 1996. 'Semaine Indonésienne au Maritim: Mélange de tradition et d'exotisme', in Week-end SCOPE, no. 386 (14 June, 1996), 8-9. The Mosque was restored ten times between 995 and 1524 CE. In 1890 CE, it was restored by the Committee for the Preservation of Arab Monuments. On this, and the Mosque in general, see Antoine Fattal, 1960. *Ibn Tulun's Mosque in Cairo*, Beirut.
15. "L'Hôtel de la Tour à la Tour Koenig — L'ancien nightclub deviendra un centre culturel", in 'Vibrations', supplement to L'Express, 15 June: 2.
16. Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, 1874. '*La Restauration de nos monuments historiques devant l'art et devant le budget*', in *Revue des Deux-Mondes*. It is in France, in 1790, that the term "monument historique" is first recorded; in the same period, l'abbé Grégoire coined the term "vandalisme". It is, in fact, in the context of the destruction and pillaging associated with the French revolution that consciences were first pricked (See Heinich: 243).
17. Cited in Heinich: 251.