Divergent heritages

Cédric Avenier

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Divergent Heritages: Holes in the Ruins

Cédric Avenier asks whether we are brave enough to leave our heritage alone

Patrimony, from the Latin *patrimonium*, relates to what is inherited from one's father or ancestors, and is better conveyed through its synonym, heritage, a term more commonly used in English. But the concept of heritage is probably one of the most difficult to define, as heritage reflects the image of the society from which it stems.

THE RISE OF HERITAGE

Heritage was first considered in the 18th century. The Enlightenment foresaw a change of civilisation, but it was the French Revolution that brought about the protection of cultural properties as castles were burned down, even though churches and castles were not immediately protected for they symbolised a society that was being rejected. After the devastating First World War, the philosopher Henri Bergson introduced the concept of 'cultural heritage' at the International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC), an advisory organisation to the League of Nations, itself a precursor to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). During the Second World War 'tangible heritage' was defined, and later in 1972 in the midst of the Cold War and social protests, 'cultural and material heritages' were also defined as important categories. In 1992, the UNESCO's *Memory of the World Register* was set up and, with the emergence of the Internet, together with the increase in the global appeal for all things industrial, uniform and easy, the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity distinction was proclaimed in 2001.

1 Palace of Versailles, France. Photograph by Ninara, via Flickr

When Marcel Duchamp's 20th century view took painting out of its golden frame, removed sculpture from its pedestal and released artwork from its museum case to place it in the eye of the viewer, everything became art or everything could be claimed as such. Similarly everything can be seen as heritage.

But heritage does not boil down to just well-known built structures or artefacts; it encompasses almost the totality of what has been passed down to us, which results in great dilemmas: should we restore, protect or even destroy it? Because choices do need to be made. Ever since heritage started to be inventoried, choice-related issues have been raised, and even more so in the context of the definition of broad heritage themes. Unfortunately, restoration and even conservation projects are generally derived from utilitarian agendas, as nobody fully knows how to do projects which lack a specific practical purpose. The weight and priority of public subsidies and political will is becoming more and more enmeshed in such projects.

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USE IT OR MISS A TURN

The 20th century saw the invention of functionalism in architecture, and we have looked for a profitable, pecuniary and, above all, immediate use for everything that we have produced ever since. Such is the identity of our time.

How can a remarkable building be demolished? Why does a building fall apart? When those responsible for it no longer know its meaning and are unable to find a use for it other than practical, they do not know how to wait and miss their turn. Why is it so difficult to say that we do not know what to do and even if we did, we do not have the means to do it, but we can keep and protect it, and we will pass this asset onto the next generation, who may know what to make of it?

The world is a great nebula in constant evolution. Today, buildings undergo quick transformations and when they reach their limit, Man, this revered hermit crab, quickly gives up. It is tragic that we do not know how to wait anymore.

HOLES AND RUINS

Ruins, perfect allegories of an expiring world in the midst of a social crisis as creative and as sanguine as other eras, teach us a lesson, which is probably why we get attached to them. Ruins are the vanity of civilisation.

But why is the Palace of Versailles so compelling? Everything is perfect, in an admirable, mint-condition, and over-subsidised, over-publicised state: luxurious details, quantifiable in their full glory, and full of Cartesian pleasure for the left side of the brain. And for the right side of the brain, the free mind that sees what others do not see, what is there to be found? Emptiness! Versailles has taken everything, holes appear in the old walls through which one can peek.

When you look through a hole, a gap in a ruined building, you just look into the void. Gaps appeal to memory, to the imagination, and the act of thinking is infinitely more sensitive, deeper, more penetrating and more poetic than mere matter or physical action. Ornaments can make an impression, but absences can stir the heart.

And so holes, in their emptiness, make the ruin. Holes show the greatness of a building and the history it contains, communicating the reflection of man on man, when it would take volumes for a historian or a philosopher to describe the same building with equal precision, through the study of its decors and archives. Holes give evocative power to the ruin.

To contemplate a ruin – not to study, analyse or read it, but to contemplate it, to live it perhaps – allows us to detach ourselves from the materiality in which we are currently held. The ruin is not merely a 'setting for elegiac poetics' but instead, as explained in 1940 by Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, it represents 'the visibility of societies in times of distress'. The ruin is an architectural vanity, especially since architecture, sometimes intended for eternal glory, is probably one of the most ephemeral arts. Architecture is a tool, an inhabited machine art, used, modified, rearranged, transformed and even violated, then abandoned and ruined. As structural as it may be, the colossus of stone, concrete or metal ends up collapsing, and from its death a feeling emerges.

Modern man is enough of a historian to hold memories of the present and of times past. The ruin, even as it collapses, locates a civilisation. Before disappearing completely, the ruined body of the building says:

'You have forsaken me, though I have protected you from the storm of winter, the sun of summer, and the rains of dead seasons. You leave me to die alone, devoured precisely by the hostile nature that I have protected you from. So take a look at me and remember: *sic transit gloria mundi*'.

The building takes its revenge and its skeleton remains to haunt our cowardly defeat. It leads us into an experience of loss, reminding us of our own frailty.

ARTIFICE AND CYBORGS

Yes, it is hard to keep our responses simple, and even harder to not do much. And yet, as buildings are abandoned, rather than letting them die a peaceful death, our era invariably ends up recovering them and keeping them alive artificially, with more means than would have been necessary to maintain them before, unless they are linked to ultra-technological life support systems, thus becoming cyborgs. This is actually a characteristic of our time, the idea to 'never die'. Are we not already starting to accept and sometimes even to appreciate, even within historic monuments sector, highly visible, radical or technological extensions to our ruins?

Ruins can become the foundations of a new society in the making, and this seems logical. The architectural heritage we are bestowed with is being remodelled in the image of our society. We are scared of death and we pack and sell fast. Eternity is getting shorter by the day. ●

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2 Ruin of ancient Kaunos on the Aegean coast of Turkey