

Overview

OUTRAGE

Vandalism in the land of patrimony

In the sorry age of the celebration of in-your-face bling, the real architectural gems of 20th-century France face abandonment and desecration, decries William JR Curtis

The Ministry of Culture in France makes a big deal out of the notion of *patrimoine* or patrimony. The word implies a collective heritage handed on from generation to generation and applies to many other things than just architecture. It is a concept which has vaguely political overtones to do with the very idea of a republic – *res publica*, the public thing – and it implies the role of the state in the protection of objects, sites and places considered to be in the general interest of society in the long term (*biens publics*). Of course many of these sites and buildings are ‘inherited’ forcibly from previous aristocratic, royal and religious properties: châteaux, monasteries, churches, gardens, palaces. In recent years the concept of patrimony has been extended internationally under the aegis of UNESCO to apply to a more universal framework: the patrimony of humanity. This now includes sites of great natural beauty all over the world and even, bizarrely, ‘the Gastronomic Meal of the French’ (whatever that is). This last one is quite hilarious especially at a time when more and more French people are in reality indulging in ‘le fast food’.

The architectural patrimony of France requires massive upkeep and the sums of money that the state invests in restoration and maintenance are impressive. Beyond a duty to the past there is no doubt a strong appreciation of the income derived from tourism and from the attractiveness of a country combining great natural beauty with an overall commitment to *la culture*. By comparison Britain is grubby and money grabbing: what a horrendous experience it is to try to visit Westminster Abbey or St Paul’s and be presented with tickets which for an entire family may lead to a total of more than £50. Roughly a decade ago I went back to the cathedral of my childhood, Canterbury, and in addition to being harassed for money at the entrance, was confronted inside by an official

panel stating that Christianity more and more resembles running a business. The privatisation of public space and the reduction of the sacred to mercantilism go hand in hand in declining Britain. It is time to chase the moneylenders from the temple. The State, instead of wasting lives and millions on aimless wars, should look after the family silver.

In France, architectural patrimony is overseen in part by the Monuments Historiques and their related architects, craftsmen and consultants including art historians and scientists. Among these custodians of the past are the *compagnons* who are trained in traditional skills of masonry, carpentry and handicraft. The restoration record is largely positive where old, pre-industrial buildings such as châteaux and cathedrals are concerned but it is less glorious when it comes to 20th-century buildings made out of concrete and steel. There is nowhere near the same scholarly rigour and level of expertise.

The Monastery of La Tourette by Le Corbusier is a case in point. It has been under restoration for four years and there have been grave errors, especially in the musical glazed panels or *ondulatoires* originally designed with the input of Xenakis, the engineer and avant-garde musician. The subtle rhythms between the concrete struts (laid out according to the Modulor) have been badly disturbed by replacing slender brass fillets with gross aluminium and plastic pieces which utterly destroy the magic of the original glazed membranes. It is as if one were to change the thickness of the black lines in a Mondrian or the notes in a Bach fugue. I raised the roof about this in a letter with the title ‘Tutta Quella Musica’ (a reference to Leon Battista Alberti and divine proportions) and the work was stopped while inspections were made. Matters were improved somewhat in similar windows in the inner court. But

the west facade has been sacked and will have to be redone.

Where the smallest Romanesque chapel in the middle of the Massif Central is concerned, the Ministry of Culture, its Direction de l’Architecture and the Monuments Historiques are vigilant concerning the possible intrusiveness of nearby construction. But they are much less so where 20th-century masterpieces are concerned. This was well demonstrated with the case of Le Corbusier’s Chapel at Ronchamp and the problematic project by Renzo Piano for a convent and entrance pavilion nearby. Piano’s original scheme was obviously far too close to the Chapel and in conflict with it in form and scale, but it was only after much pressure was exerted that the scheme was moved slightly further away (albeit not enough). But the Ministry of Culture was not on the side of the angels in this dispute and turned a blind eye, or maybe has eyes which do not see? My own approach to this problem was to avoid the petitions for and against (which were largely caricatural), to publish a balanced piece in *The Architectural Review* (October 2008) and to write directly to the architects requesting politely that they quieten down their jagged roof forms and make the buildings as invisible as possible. Only now with the landscaping going in can the result be properly assessed (this will be the subject of a future AR critique).

The Musée de l’Arles Antique (AR February 1994) was designed by Henri Ciriani 30 years ago to house Roman statues, mosaics and archaeological fragments, and to serve as an introduction to the rich ancient history of the region. Ciriani deliberately avoided direct reference to Antique architectural figures such as the nearby Roman arena and selected a triangular form to address the different directions of the site next to the river Rhone. He orchestrated a free



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A prime example of modern French cultural heritage being fatally compromised: the Musée de l'Arles Antique, designed by Ciriani 30 years ago, will be beyond repair when 'restored'

plan with ramps, pilotis and skylights, and clad the exteriors in bright blue glass panels. He brought the triangle alive by extending abstract planes into the surroundings, overlapping them at the corners in a way that created voids and incited a pinwheel action. The Musée took a long time to complete but in retrospect clearly belongs to a period when there was maximum support for modern architecture in France: the early Mitterrand years which also saw the launching of the Parisian Grands Projets. Ciriani's work was rightly shortlisted for the European Mies van der Rohe Prize in 1996. I recall visiting the completed building in the summer of 1995 and writing a short piece about it for *Progressive Architecture*. Ciriani's

Corbusian dogmatisms can be irritating but here was a building of lucid spaces and well-handled light which merited respect.

But respect is exactly what the Musée and its architect now lack. The catastrophic additions and demolitions under way have been carried out without the slightest consultation with Ciriani – a slap in the face anywhere but a double insult and scandal in a country where architectural creations are supposed to be protected by copyright and *droits d'auteur*. By demolishing part of the facade at the northern corner and cutting into the triangle, the architects of the Département (who seem to remain anonymous) have done more than ruin a single piece of the scheme, they have totally disrupted the overall form and its action in space. Imagine slicing

off a corner of the Villa Savoye for example, or smashing up a wing of the Petit Trianon.

The Sarkozy-influenced media rather enjoy painting the picture of the Midi, Marseilles and the Bouches du Rhône as a land of gangsters and dealers, but they forgot to mention that the land of banditism now extends into architecture. In the era of bling, vast sums are spent placing gold leaf on the gates at Versailles and on exhibiting art market kitsch in the gardens there, while modern buildings are being ruined by clumsy official interventions in the provinces. Wake up Frédéric Mitterrand, Monsieur le Ministre de la Culture, the modern architectural culture supported by your uncle Président Mitterrand is under threat and

you need to do something about it! Those sacred principles of *patrimoine* should apply to modern and ancient alike.

The AR's original coverage of this endangered scheme is at architectural-review.com/Ciriani

REYKJAVÍK, ICELAND

Design marching forward

David Liddicoat

Every year since 2009, Icelanders have descended on Reykjavík for Hönnunar Mars (Design March). This four-day festival is a riposte to the collapse of the Icelandic economy in 2008: its singular purpose is to broadcast Iceland's new-found confidence, embodied in the youthful energy of its