

- [Contact](#)
- [Advertise](#)
- [Subscribe](#)
- [Phineas Harper](#)

**You are a Subscriber**

- [My Account](#)
- [Sign Out](#)



## Vandalism and Neglect at Ronchamp

22 January 2014 | By William JR Curtis



Ronchamp has once again been vandalised, not by Renzo Piano this time, but by thieves who forced entry by breaking a pane of glass painted by Le Corbusier. It all highlights the scandalous neglect by the owners and a

## lacklustre policy towards national patrimony

On the evening of Friday 17 January, the Chapel of Notre-Dame du Haut at Ronchamp was vandalised by an intruder or intruders who smashed the one glass pane hand-painted by Le Corbusier, entered the building, then took a weighty collection box (virtually empty) and threw it on the ground outside. As part of the same raid, the thief or thieves tried to force entry into the tourist entrance pavilion designed by Renzo Piano, no doubt hoping to steal money and merchandise from the bookshop and restaurant. The broken painted window was discovered by one of the nuns of the Community of Pauvres Clarisses living in the rather luxurious convent also designed by Piano and situated to the west of the Chapel on the descending slope. The news hit the press the next day under the headline ‘Ronchamp Vandalisé’, often with a photo (the one used in this article) showing the jagged outline of broken glass and the shards scattered across the window ledge inside.

For the moment the culprits have not been found and the motives have not been fully established. There was some speculation in the French press that this might be a ‘communitarian’ affair, an anti-Catholic aggression. More likely it was a petty burglary aimed at the relatively prosperous structures on the hill-top of Ronchamp in a part of France that is suffering desperately from poverty and unemployment. But perhaps there is more to this than meets the eye. For 60 years the Chapel at Ronchamp existed in relative peace and quiet on its remote site surveying the horizons, easily accessible through a gate up a meandering pilgrim’s path. But now the site has been transformed and commercialised as a tourist destination, even with a sliding electric gate barring the route to the Chapel. In effect it has become a sort of gated community with outward signs of prosperity. Nor should one forget the sums involved: over €10 million to build the ensemble of the Piano project. The ‘Pauvres Clarisses’ in fact enjoy an environment which is far from poor in a material sense.

*The chapel is in urgent need of restoration but investment seems unlikely in an era of commodification and cultural neglect. Photo: William JR Curtis*

On French railway crossings you find the sign ‘Un train peut en cacher un autre’: ‘A train can hide another one’. At Ronchamp, ‘un vandalisme peut en cacher deux autres’: ‘a vandalismation can hide two others’. First of all there is





the 'vandalism' of neglect. The Association de l'Oeuvre de Notre-Dame du Haut which owns and runs the site has done little to preserve the Chapel itself which is quite literally falling apart, with the white pebbledash cracked and crumbling away and the bare concrete eroding at the edges. Given the huge sums paid for the Piano project and the income from roughly 80,000 tourist tickets a year, this is scandalous, as is the failure to guarantee security. The building urgently needs restoration. Then there is the implicit 'vandalism' of the Piano project itself which was 'sold' behind a smokescreen of sanctimonious incense as enhancing the religiosity of the place. In fact it has done the opposite by treating this universal masterpiece as merchandise, de-sacralising the landscape and destroying the aura. When you visit Ronchamp today you have the impression of a mass tourist site and a 'machine à sous', a money-making machine. The Chapel itself has quite literally been undercut and trivialised by a host of surrounding mediocre architectural gestures. Far from becoming more 'spiritual' the place has become more materialistic.

Somehow all of this is typical of our time: a desire to exploit and achieve profits on the back of an 'iconic' building, promoted behind the veil of an official religious discourse, but with the result being cultural and artistic impoverishment. The 'marketing' of 'culture' proceeds apace and attains spectacular levels of vulgarity, especially in France where Lady Gaga is currently on show at the Louvre and where Jeff Koon's kitsch was strewn all over Versailles several years back. The recent 'vandalisme' at Ronchamp needs to be seen against a backdrop of the reduction to commodity of objects and sites that once enjoyed an automatic social respect, and that were once integrated with daily life in a more normal way. At Ronchamp, several forms of intrusiveness seem to overlap, and it may be that there is one form of vandalism for the prosperous, and another one for the poor? As for the vulgarisation of the site of Ronchamp it should not be forgotten that those who should have protected the patrimony of Le Corbusier were far from effective. In fact the Ministry of Culture gave the go ahead to the destructive Piano project. More than just a broken glass pane painted by Le Corbusier, the 'affaire de Ronchamp' reveals scandalous neglect on the part of the owners and an incoherent policy for the safeguard and protection of both national and universal patrimony.

## Photographs

**Detail of window:** Benoît Cornu, Assistant Mayor of Ronchamp

**Exterior:** William JR Curtis

## Footnotes

See also William JR Curtis, 'Vandalism in the Land of Patrimony', AR May 2012, Curtis, 'Ronchamp Undermined', AR August, 2012, and 'Your Views' in ARs September and October 2012, with letters overwhelmingly critical of the Piano intervention.

See also Curtis, 'Ronchamp défiguré', *D'Architectures*, December 2012.

For immediate reaction to recent calamity see 'Ronchamp Vandalisée' <http://www.darchitectures.com/index.html> which quotes from Curtis circular 'Un vandalisme peut en cacher deux autres' 19 January 2014. On 20 January, the Fondation Le Corbusier issued an official communiqué signed by its President Antoine Picon, deploring the lack of security and insisting upon restoration of the Chapel. The most fervent defender of the integrity of the Chapel and its site was the architect Michel Kagan (1953-2009), see for example the perceptive article, Michel Kagan and Nathalie Régnier-Kagan, 'Ronchamp: l'acoustique du paysage', in *Manières de penser Ronchamp*, Fondation Le Corbusier and Editions de la Villette, Paris, 2011.

## Readers' comments (2)

•

Anonymous | 24 January 2014 7:15 pm

Why can't we remove all these ridiculous and wasteful tourist/interpretive centers. I was fortunate enough to visit Ronchamp in the 1980's prior to the present desecration as designed by Renzo Piano ( who ruins so many things with his additions btw). John Hejduk prophetically



cautioned me that the natural and man made monuments of my native Ireland were soon be destroyed, not by vandalism but, by the greed of tourism and building of their associative interpretive centers. Sadly this all came to pass and was evident to me when I toured two visiting friends around the country this past summer. By making the experience and places accessible to more people only serves to denigrate and destroy the beauty of such cultural and religious monuments. At risk of loosing them to decay we need to keep them "real"!

---

•

Anonymous | 25 January 2014 11:19 am

We might almost say as well, that the two faces of vandalism mirror the era of globalization with its desperate local poverty and massive architectural re-landscaping, which the Ronchamp hooligans and Renzo Piano all too aptly personify.

---

Pin it

Like 14

Tweet

