September 2007

RBC Letter

Discovering Our Heritage

Perhaps no more than a dozen buildings in the world have achieved iconic status. Instantly recognizable symbols of cities and nations, travel advertising makes intensive use of them to suggest the allure of distant places: the Taj Mahal for India, the Eiffel Tower for Paris, the Houses of Parliament for London. One of the best-known is the Parthenon of Athens. The temple of the virgin goddess Athene rises over her city on the highest point of its citadel. Even half in ruins, its image brings to mind not only Athens or even Greece, but the whole intellectual and artistic achievement of the classical world.

The Parthenon is so beautiful that it seems almost sacrilegious to suggest that it owes some of its fame to its prominent location in a large city. Even more is due to the no-expense-spared policy followed by its builders. Except for the roof beams and the iron clamps holding the stones together, the temple is built wholly of marble - lustrous and long-wearing (until modern air pollution came along), but arduously shaped by hand to the perfect alignments and invisible curves that give this most subtle of buildings its vitality. The Parthenon was also decorated with an unusually large quantity of sculpture, all of a quality that has never been surpassed. The cost - much of it paid by the subject allies of Athens – was enormous. Religious feeling and civic pride fused to build a triumphant monument to the wealth and power of the Athenian democracy.

On the East Coast of Canada, and also in New England, there are many houses of the shape traditionally called “saltbox”, with two stories in front and one behind, so that seen from the sides the rearward slope of the gabled roofs is much longer than the forward. Often highly attractive in its functional elegance, timber-framed and clad, private not public, secular not sacred, devoid of ornament, utterly unpretentious, a saltbox house is about as unlike the Parthenon as any two buildings could be.

Nonetheless, the two have something significant in common. Both have been designated by authority as part of the architectural heritage of their societies, and therefore worthy of preservation.They are not alone. From scattered beginnings in the nineteenth century, the movement to conserve the architecture of the past gained momentum in the twentieth century. Often the destruction of a major building such as Pennsylvania Station in New York was instrumental in arousing public opinion. In recent decades, conserving the national heritage has become official policy in virtually all countries, though the policy’s effectiveness in practice varies greatly. Conservation is now a major factor in the allocation of urban and rural space for human purposes. Government departments, semi-autonomous official agencies, and voluntary associations all prescribe rules and procedures, publish guidebooks and practical suggestions, and above all, prepare lists of buildings, sites and landscapes that cannot be destroyed or altered without the sanction of authority, if at all. The numbers so listed are astonishing. The National Register of Historic Sites in the United States, although founded only in 1966, now includes over 87,000 sites and grows steadily.

As it does everywhere, this growth owes much to the expansion in the concept of “heritage” itself. Once limited to major public buildings, preferably several centuries old, heritage now includes archaeological sites, significant landscapes, industrial buildings, and anything that speaks of a distinctive way of life or a particular historical period, even one within living memory. It has even come to include wilderness areas -

although they are testimony to what people have spared rather than what they have created - and cultural activities, if considered sufficiently representative of a tradition. This elasticity is why saltboxes have joined the Parthenon, along with cave houses on the Loess Plateau of Northern China, Iron Age rock carvings in Sweden, Easter Island statues, the palaces of Russia's czars and the Alaska Steam Laundry in Juneau as part of humanity's acknowledged heritage.

Merely reading the published lists is at once enlightening, bewildering, and a chastening reminder of how much we all have still to learn. Few if any readers can have heard of all 821 places classified as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO, but this super-list does give a good idea of the scope the concept of heritage has achieved in our time. Inevitably, UNESCO's coverage is uneven, influenced by the level of a member nation's commitment to its heritage and also by contemporary politics. Thus Iraq, the oldest civilized country in the world, has only three places on the list. Two of them have been listed since 2003 and the sites of Babylon, Nineveh and Ur are not included, although they are a significant part of the world's heritage by any conceivable standard. But UNESCO makes a praiseworthy attempt to be comprehensive while maintaining standards, and sooner or later time will fill the gaps.

Perhaps more impressive than any list is the universal support for the idea of heritage. It has acquired the enviable status colloquially called "motherhood". Like peace and democracy, no-one is against the preservation of the human heritage in principle, however much they may object to specific instances of it. This is a radical change. Heritage conservation is one of the revolutions shaping the modern world. For most of history, the idea that buildings should be preserved simply because they stood for something significant in the human past would have seemed bizarre. Buildings were often for use, sometimes for status, but were not seen as witnesses to the past. They preserved themselves if they were preserved at all. Substantial structures of stone or brick survived a long time, often for centuries, but they usually did so because it was much easier to adapt them to new uses than to replace them from the ground up. A small minority might survive a very long time because their function or their historic associations gave them a sacred quality. Even then, a successful ruler might easily decide that a deity would be happier or a saint more honoured with a bigger and better temple, tomb or church.

Threats to the survival even of strongly built structures of course existed. Often the danger was not redevelopment but recycling. Before the coming of railways, the cost of transporting stone from quarry to building site might be as much as a third or even a half of the total cost. This is why Greek temples and medieval castles have become sheepfolds and field walls. The Coliseum in Rome is partly ruined today, not because of the Goths or the Vandals but because successive popes used it as a highly convenient quarry. The major reasons for new building, however, were fires, along with warfare, natural disasters and sheer decrepitude from the passage of time. These were not frequent enough to generate any sense that the past was vanishing, and the new buildings usually looked much like the old ones in any case.

So striking a change in human attitudes toward the past raises questions, especially when, paradoxically, the new orthodoxy is concerned with preserving the past itself. What does "heritage" mean? How is the concept evolving? What in practice can or should we do about it? How much of the past should be preserved? Is the concept threatened by its own success? In particular, how far can preservation and the public's right to access be reconciled? Who should pay the often substantial costs, especially the opportunity costs? Finally, what has brought about this revolution in the way we see what the past has left us?

On one level the meaning of heritage is simple enough. Leaving unspoiled nature aside for the moment, our heritage is everything surviving from the labours of past generations: fields and cities, roads and houses, temples and palaces, and the cultural inheritance we acquire by teaching and example. However, our heritage is both more and less than everything the past has left us. Less, because it is obvious, though seldom said explicitly, that it is neither possible nor desirable to conserve everything we have inherited. Apart from the sheer impracticality of doing so, our generation needs room to make our own contribution to the human story. It is more, because it is accepted that we should conserve only things that have a value or a meaning that makes them especially significant. Deciding what such values or meanings may be is the indispensable first step in any coherent conservation program.

Three broad criteria have been used to decide these questions. They are not mutually exclusive, but they can be distinguished in principle: aesthetic value;

historical documentation; and group identity. A building, an urban district or a landscape is worth preserving if it is beautiful or picturesque; if it documents significant historic events or periods, including styles of architecture; and if it represents a society's concept of its own past or national character. All these are subjective to a greater or lesser degree. Architectural history is perhaps the least subjective, since architectural historians usually agree on assigning buildings to a period or style. Aesthetic qualities, however, are something else again.

Reading the mandates or mission statements of conservation agencies today, it is noteworthy that aesthetic values, which would have seemed paramount to many founders of the heritage movement, are usually only one item on a list, if they are included at all. This is wise. Almost everyone agrees that some buildings are beautiful and some are not, but assigning any one building to these categories is subject both to individual taste - witness the sharply varying reactions to the angular glass-clad museums of the 21st century - and to violent reversals in fashion. A hundred and fifty years ago the English art historian John Ruskin, enormously influential in his time, could pronounce that the "Early English" form of Gothic was not only aesthetically but morally superior to its Decorated and Perpendicular successors. Churches in the Early English style duly rose all over the English-speaking world, only to find themselves, along with the whole range of "Victorian" styles, as thoroughly out of fashion as they could possibly be. Anyone with any claim to sophistication in the 1920s thought Victorian buildings derivative at best and hideously ugly at worst. The classical restraint of Georgian buildings or the audacious minimalism of the "Modern" style reigned supreme.

Again, a reaction followed. A new generation discovered that Victorian styles were vigorous, creative, exuberant and a host of other good things. Such masterpieces as Victoria Terminus in Bombay or Keble College in Oxford suddenly stopped being eyesores and were admired for the undeniable gusto of their architecture and the craftsmanship of their decoration. Decoration began to creep back in new building, along with echoes of Classical, Gothic and Baroque, as people noticed that the Modern style had made cities everywhere look remarkably alike. Nor is architecture alone in these upheavals. Even styles in landscapes change. Mountain ranges were considered barren wastelands in the 18th century (the poet Thomas Gray pulled down the blinds of his carriage so that he would not have to see the Alps). A century later, the same mountains inspired thoughts of aspiration, heroism and even divinity. Today, travellers are simply grateful for a landscape without hydro lines or a housing development that looks exactly like where they live themselves.

In a word, aesthetic values have proven to be the most shifting of shifting sands. The idea that one architectural style is inherently superior to any other now seems indefensible. This may help us to enjoy more buildings but is little use in deciding which buildings posterity will thank us for preserving. History and identity appear to offer firmer ground, but they too are subject to change and worse, to conflict. To the 19th-century pioneers of architectural conservation, it seemed self-evident that cathedrals and palaces were worth conserving but barns and cottages were not. This was consistent with the writing of history at the time, still largely devoted to kings and battles. As the concept of history broadened to include social, economic, and cultural change, and ultimately the daily lives of "ordinary people", the buildings in which such people had lived and worked took on new meaning. This was especially true in countries newly settled by Europeans, where cathedrals and palaces were often nothing like their 'old-country' predecessors. This shift has contributed to the expansion of the heritage concept already mentioned, enormously increasing the range of potentially conservation-worthy buildings.

Of the three criteria, identity heritage is for good or ill, by far the most emotionally charged. During World War II the British Government actively promoted an image of England consisting of picturesque villages, complete with church, manor house, village green and meadows full of sheep. This image had only minimal relation to reality. Not one English person in twenty lived in a village, picturesque or otherwise. It did not matter. The image gave the English an idea of what they were fighting for, in sharp contrast to the repellent vision of an urban and industrialized Germany, full of poisonous fumes, clanging machines and jackbooted police.

This was a highly successful use of heritage for the creation of identity. It has had many imitators. In some countries governments use the image of historic buildings to reinforce a fragile sense of national identity. In democratic countries it has long been realized that heritage creates identity and that identity can sway both voters and shoppers. Politicians are photographed in front of buildings that suggest a

simpler, quieter life. Travel brochures, if not simply selling sun and sand, create a world with few cities and no suburbs, consisting of picturesque buildings, attractive landscapes and the occasional cathedral or palace. Trouble, of course, begins when the same building or landscape suggests different things to different groups, but here too times can change. The Georgian mansions and pseudo-medieval castles of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy were symbols of oppression in the newly independent Irish Republic. Many were torched in the troubles of the early 1920s and many more subsequently fell into decay. As the memory of subjection became less acute, the elegance of the Irish Georgian design style came to be seen as a valuable part of the national heritage. The nineteenth-century "castles" have been pressed into service by Ireland's flourishing tourist industry, their past tactfully forgotten. A similar change of heart has led to the restoration of the walled mansions of China's scholar-gentry, once threatened with obliteration by the Cultural Revolution.

Faced with these difficulties, governments tend to make choices through a process with three components. They begin with officially mandated standards, usually drafted in highly general language, of which Parks Canada's is a good example:

> "Heritage value: the aesthetic, historic, scientific, cultural, social or spiritual importance or significance [of a place] for past, present or future generations".

This is nothing if not comprehensive. Aesthetics have reappeared, and "spiritual" adds a whole new dimension at which more firmly secular countries might balk. When it is time to apply such high-level definitions to individual cases, governments rely on the advice of experts – architects, historians, scientists and archaeologists – and increasingly, on public or "community" opinion, marshalled through a consultative process and intended to include both any individuals directly affected and volunteer groups active in the field.

This threefold formula of standards, expertise and consultation is not a perfect solution. Its complexity can make it difficult to cope with the emergency situations that frequently arise. Like much of modern government, the process gives perhaps undue power to pressure groups in the name of community involvement. And while it dilutes the subjectivity inherent in making value judgments, neither this nor any imaginable process can eliminate it. Even experts are human, and all of us in some degree are prisoners of the values and attitudes of our own time. In practice the decision is often made by events, when an arguably significant building or site is threatened with demolition or development. But it is hard to think of a better method. The threefold process certainly brings much more historical fact and informed opinion to bear, and public involvement does reduce the risk of behind-the-scenes manoeuvres in situations where large sums of money may be at stake.

So far the words "conservation" and "preservation" have been used in this letter as if they were synonymous, but in today's usage, preservation - maintaining the physical integrity of a building or site – is simply one form of conservation. Rehabilitation, more ambitious, attempts to make a building useful while preserving its heritage value – a goal that presents some tricky problems in practice. More ambitious still is restoration, returning a building to its appearance at a given point in the past.

Such a goal poses problems for any building that has been in use for a considerable period. First, what point of the building's history is to be chosen for restoration? As has been seen, we no longer believe in the superiority of "classical" periods, but all restoration must, to some degree, reflect the values held at the time the restoration is made. There is a danger of falsifying the buildings as historical documents for the sake of what may prove to be a passing fashion or ideology. As an example, consider the Pantheon in Rome. Built by the Emperor Hadrian (117-135 CE), it is the oldest intact monumental building in Europe and one of the most remarkable of all time. In the 7th century it was converted into a church and still is one. In the 19th century the kings of Italy, a little presumptuously, decided to be buried there and their tombs still remain. Both church and tombs would be a great surprise to Hadrian, but no one suggests removing them in the name of "restoration". To do so would be to rewrite history rather than explain it.

Restoration remains popular all the same, and so does complete reconstruction, such as was undertaken at the Cape Breton Fortress of Louisbourg. Both arguably enhance the educational value of historic places. They certainly increase the value of sites as tourist attractions, drawing people who would be baffled by acres of dusty ruins. Some, unwilling to rely on their visitors' imaginations, even use actors to represent the people who once lived in them. And in some contexts

these rebuildings may, like heritage in general, serve to strengthen a sense of group identity rooted in a shared past.

Unfortunately, both restoration and reconstruction can also serve personal and political agendas. Sir Arthur Evans, excavator of the Palace of Minos at Knossos, was so proud of his achievement (and so well off) that he rebuilt much of the palace at his own expense, probably adding several stories that King Minos never saw. The Mexican government in the decades after the Revolution (which ended in 1920) was deeply committed to promoting Mexico's pre-Columban past as a touchstone of national identity. Large sums were spent restoring temples and pyramids, possibly not always accurately but with great benefit to Mexico's tourist industry as well as its national pride. More dubiously, the late Saddam Hussein not only began to restore Babylon itself, but did so with bricks stamped "Saddam son of Nebuchadnezzar" as if he were a Babylonian king. In case anyone missed the point, visitors to the site were greeted with an enormous billboard showing Saddam and Nebuchadnezzar side by side.

Another danger of restoration, perhaps especially in North America, is a creeping Disneyfication, making the past seem a much cleaner, tidier, and healthier place than it really was. Such sanitized versions are one of the many issues created by the link between conservation and tourism. Tourism has certainly been a potent factor in making heritage conservation popular and feasible, especially in the eyes of the official bodies that have to foot its costs. It is also hard to criticize in principle. Why preserve humanity's heritage if none of humanity is to see it? But there are inescapable conflicts. Few buildings smaller than a cathedral have room for hundreds or even thousands of visitors at once. Many were not designed for visitors at all. Busloads of tourists were the last thing the architects of Egypt's tombs had in mind. Even in less extreme cases the best-behaved tourists still cause wear and tear. The famous painted caves at Lascaux in France had to be closed because visitors were damaging them simply by breathing. Nor are all tourists well-behaved. Stately homes have to be cleared of anything portable or pocketable before being opened, which gives them the "feel" of a museum rather than a place where people have lived and often, are still living.

Most fundamental, and insoluble, is simple lack of space. The historic section of Venice is a city of 70,000 people. Built on islands, it can grow neither upwards nor outwards. It also receives more than seven million visitors a year. Not surprisingly, those not engaged in the tourist industry – cooks, waiters, museum guides and the surviving gondoliers – or in government and education have tended to move away. In effect, the city is becoming a gorgeous cross between a museum and a theme park. Even so, it is appallingly crowded in high seasons of spring and fall, with litter and pollution to match. Prices have risen with demand, as anyone ordering a cup of coffee in Saint Mark's Square soon discovers. Hotel charges are so high most visitors stay on the mainland or come only for a day. Such a trend is fundamentally undemocratic. Why should only the well-heeled be able to enjoy one of the world's most magical sights? But the only possible alternative is some form of rationing entrance. Many other famous sites such as Stratford-upon-Avon in England, have the same problem, where mass tourism is in danger of defeating its own purpose. Whatever the answer may be, it is easy to foresee a time when deciding who sees our heritage will be an even thornier question than what our heritage is in the first place.

All the same, tourism has one overwhelmingly positive result. It helps pay the bills. This is particularly true in Europe, where countries typically find themselves with large numbers of buildings, archaeological sites and landscapes that are of indisputable heritage value but also expensive to protect, maintain, and staff. That towering Gothic cathedrals are still intact after eight hundred years or more is a tribute to their builders, but many of them would not be standing without constant maintenance by highly skilled workmen. Tourist spending and contributions, along with often generous state funding, help foot the massive bills, as well as helping hard-pressed aristocrats to keep up their ancestral homes and cities to provide facilities for the annual hordes. A possible partial answer to the problem of overcrowding is the imposition of a "congestion charge" like that recently created for central London traffic. Having all comers pay equally, with the usual reductions for students and senior citizens, could combine the principle of open access with the need to pay for maintenance and to preserve the quality of the visitors' experience.

Difficult though this question may be, it seems soluble when placed beside the issue of opportunity costs. A building or landscape which must remain substantially unaltered is not available for other purposes. In particular, it cannot be "developed" in the sense of intensifying the site's use and increasing the income or

capital value it provides. If the site is in private ownership, this restriction often means a substantial loss of potential wealth for the owner. This will not trouble everyone. Developers are seldom popular figures, especially when they are large corporations, and for committed heritage conservationists they are the enemy incarnate. But it is hard to see why a citizen should be allowed to sell his home for development and pocket any capital gain (free of tax in Canada, if the home is a "primary residence") while his next-door neighbour cannot do this simply because authority has classified his home as a heritage site. Arguably, if society wants the neighbour's home preserved, society should compensate the neighbour for his loss. The potentially enormous costs of doing this, however, have so far kept this policy largely in the realm of theory, although an owner faced with expensive repairs and nineteenth-century plumbing may receive tax breaks and sometimes direct grants for maintenance.

This is a complex and evolving area of law and practice. There is arguably a moral difference between owners who may have designation thrust upon them, and a developer who buys a designated property in the hope of overturning the designation. It is awareness of these issues that has made so many heritage designations subject to judicial review, and in turn sometimes – not always - makes judges or arbitrators sympathetic to owners who in effect have had their property confiscated without due process of law. Often the most important effect of the heritage designation is to alert the public to a possible heritage loss. Sometimes public opinion can induce developers to propose compromise solutions, such as preserving a single building or placing a nineteenth-century classical façade on a twenty-first century building. But there is no clear-cut solution in this policy area, certainly no cheap one, and the present system – a kind of muddling through – is likely to endure if only because more logical alternatives are politically unviable.

In conclusion, what lies behind all this activity? Why have so many people all over the world become deeply concerned about the preservation of the legacies of the past?

Two motives have already been suggested. Firstly, that heritage is a potent source of individual and group identity in a steadily more homogeneous world. Like all symbols, heritage buildings, cities and landscapes stand for something beyond themselves. They sum up better than the most eloquent words what it is to be an American, a Russian or a Mexican. They are a link with the past in times of unsettlingly rapid change. In almost every country, some have achieved an untouchable, even sacred status. No-one is going to redevelop the site of St. Paul's Cathedral in London or that of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, although their potential value would be colossal. More, such is the human need for a sense of identity that often buildings are rescued from oblivion and neglect because they can stand for a glorious period or a cherished national trait.

The second is more practical. Heritage is big business. The designation, conservation, operation and study of sites large and small employs many highly skilled people, funded by government, voluntary bodies and income from fees and sales. It is joined at the hip to the travel and tourism industry, reputedly now the largest industry in the world. Tourism can be a curse as much as a blessing, but no government can ignore it and most spend large sums promoting it. Tourists, by definition, want to see something they cannot see at home, and the conservation of heritage fits that bill perfectly.

Both these motives owe a great deal to a third, the spread of education both formal and informal. Schools and universities make their students aware of the past and of the existence of distinct societies both past and present. Television reinforces this with images of the world's wonders, both man-made and natural. In doing so, they help individuals interpret their own identity in terms of symbolic buildings and places. They also arouse their curiosity about the wider world – along with the need to escape from the daily grind, one of the fundamental motives behind the mass tourism of our times.

The last motive is perhaps the most obvious, and also the most fundamental. It is a cliché, but a true one, to speak of the pace of change in our time. Most of us who are past forty have had the experience of returning to a once familiar place and being unable to recognize it. We are aware, as earlier generations were not, that the past will not preserve itself. If we value it, we must defend it against the pressures we have ourselves created. Perhaps at a deeper level we are also aware that we do not own the heritage of the past, but are merely its trustees. We have a responsibility to future generations to leave them as much as we can of the legacy we have received. This is how we pay our debt to those who gave us so rich a heritage.

Published by RBC Financial Group. All editions from the RBC Letter collection are available on our web site at http://www.rbc.com/responsibility/letter.
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Publié aussi en francais.