

Uncertain Future for the Past's Treasures

By HERBERT MUSCHAMP

Stranded! That's how I feel each time the World Monuments Fund releases its list of 100 most endangered sites. As if the present were a beach onto which every artifact of humankind will eventually wash up. A vast inventory already lies there, waterlogged on the sand, with flies buzzing around: mosques, palaces, little mud-baked villages, tombs to die for, temples, rock paintings: much of this in advanced states of disintegration.

And here we go stumbling around, pressed into service as the dutiful custodians of all this stuff when we barely have time to pick up the apartment and schlep our shirts to the laundry. And just when we think we're close to getting the last lot tagged, numbered, debarnacled and cataloged, another wave hits the sand bringing more stuff.

Another wave came crashing down a few weeks ago, with the arrival of the 2004 list. The list is compiled every two years from sites nominated by individuals, preservation groups and government agencies. Sites can be relisted, and those reappearing this year include some in Lower Manhattan and ancient palaces at Nimrud and Nineveh in Iraq. The connection illuminates a cultural framework that transcends discord, a scaffolding also in need of constant repair.

The 2004 list has some surprises. Antarctica appears for the first time. The polar caps may be melting, but surely protection can be found for Ernest Shackleton's expedition hut. The hut is infested with microbes. I can testify that the ruins of Ephesus, the ancient pilgrimage city with the Temple of Artemis, now in Turkey, are infested with tourists. I felt like a total pest when I visited that site six years ago. The place was crawling with us.



A minaret in Ghazni, Afghanistan, nearly 1,000 years old.

The list also features sites that straddle national boundaries, like the Jesuit missions built to indoctrinate the Guarani Indians in Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. Perhaps the most haunting addition is Perm 36, the only intact gulag in Russia. Built of timber by prisoners in 1946, its camp buildings are near collapse. The Ghazni minarets in Afghanistan. Strawberry Hill, Horace Walpole's pioneering venture in Gothic Revival near London. The Ennis Brown House in Los Angeles, one of Frank Lloyd Wright's landmark textile-block houses from the 1920's. And my poor Battersea Power Station,

designed by Giles Gilbert Scott and completed in 1932: the puffing stacks of this abandoned monument to industrial power in London greeted me with great yellow Art Deco clouds each morning when I left the house for school.

You see what I mean. The salvage is overwhelming, the size of it a painful reminder of our inadequacy as cultural stewards. One is strongly tempted to withdraw into comic fantasy: the grand heritage of civilization with laugh track as an "I Love Lucy" episode.

Architecture is a luxury. Preserving it is a double luxury. And if the World Monuments Fund were restricted to advocating architectural preservation, its mission would be one luxury among many.

But the fund stands for something much greater than that. It represents the cosmopolitan virtues of tolerance and aesthetic discrimination. This set of mental attitudes is not a luxury at all. It is a precondition for peace, and has been so for at least 4,000 years, first with individual cities, now with the entire globe. More than a scrapbook of monuments, the 2004 list is a workout for global consciousness: a cultural equivalent of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. My holiday wish is that a copy of the list be placed beneath each sparkling tree.

It will take more than superior military intelligence to prevent future catastrophes like Sept. 11. Cultural and psychological intelligence will be required as well. The responsibility for negotiating boundaries does not lie exclusively with nation-states. It also rests with cultural structures that support transnational goals. The World Monuments Fund is a model of this type.

At the same time, though, preservation groups are overdue for a major leap of consciousness. Preservation was not born 40 years ago, the day after Pennsylvania

Station was demolished. Nor, except in localized conflicts, has this movement been the strategic opponent of modern architecture it is often taken to be.

The preservation movement has a history as important as any monument, dating at least to the 18th century. It is sometimes said to begin with the unearthing of Herculaneum in 1709 and of Pompeii 1748. As a philosophy, preservation served the needs of Enlightenment thinkers to cast doubt on religious faith and provide aesthetic alternatives to Rococo style.

The obsolescence of pagan beliefs was used to undermine the idea of religion and thereby serve the cause of reason. The simplicity of classical forms served that period's new taste for geometry.

Preservation grew out of archaeology and the notion that history can be practiced as a form of science. In the 19th century this notion morphed into the linear view of the past known as historicism. Flipped around by the century that followed, historicism produced the idea of progress. When the new Pennsylvania Station replaced the old, one form of modernity devoured the other.

The meal left a bad taste in the mouth, the taste of crisis. By the mid-1960's historicism was finally breaking down. The Modern movement, whose pioneers believed themselves to be progressing beyond the 19th century, were actually perpetuating it.

The idea that each epoch should produce its own distinctive style of art was one of historicism's fundamental tenets. The collapse of Modern architecture signaled that this idea had run out of steam. The rest has been a comedy of trend stories and unveilings of the next big thing.



Battersea Power Station, London, United Kingdom

The World Monuments Fund list strikes me as an inadvertent parody of these journalistic genres: a cover story on the next hot neighborhoods, or a list of the Top 100 getaways, or a special advertising section sponsored by American Express. I do not mean this as a put-down. The fund's list holds a libidinous appeal that is oddly lacking from most preservationist appeals. Where does it come from?

Partly it is the venture's global scale, which is sexy in the way Alexander the Great was sexy (at least as portrayed by Richard Burton), potent with the aphrodisiac of power. This appeal is combined with the maternal instinct to protect vulnerable offspring from attack.

The exoticism of travel is another element. The fund's list is sponsored by American Express, perhaps partly as an expression of corporate conscience. Tourism does potentially jeopardize the attractions off which it feeds.



Perm 36, Perm Region, Russia

But the core of the list's appeal, I believe, is the power of narrative. We miss historicism, even if we have never heard of it. We miss the coherence that the linear view of culture conferred on seemingly random events. We miss the March of Progress, even if we hate the destruction it has wreaked. The craving for new buildings that look old, the ludic delight in Jules Verne technofuture tales projected by publications like Wired magazine: these apparent extremes satisfy nostalgic longings for an unrecoverable 19th-century view of ourselves in relation to time.

The watch list by itself has not resolved the crisis precipitated by historicism's collapse. But it points the way toward a resolution: it provides an interpretive framework suitable for the era of globalization. The list speaks not of history but of histories, a multitude of stories now available for our edification. There is no end to them, it seems. We like Babel, it turns out. We enjoy the many shapes of language, in words and images, especially when the storytellers are ancient and perhaps even wise. Listeners wanted.

And from within the multiplicity of shapes there does emerge a narrative thread. It leads episodically from ancient times to the present. It is the story of cosmopolitan life, the tale of the cultural marketplace, a saga that has driven urban development from Damascus to New York.

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Tolerance of others, discrimination between cultural authority and other forms of social power: these are the leading concepts of the cosmopolitan story.

How are they holding up in your part of the world?