

*Coventry Cathedral 1942 after site clearance*

Coventry, Katedrala 1943. godine nakon raščišćavanja ruševina, © National Monument Record, United Kingdom

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# War Damage to Historic Buildings

Teze – Theses

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## Introduction

It is our intention to write a short series of articles describing the effect of war on historic buildings, and their subsequent protection and repair. These articles will cover four main topics:

- Protective measures
- Causes of damage and damage assessment
- Repair strategy and repair techniques
- The particular importance of vernacular buildings.

There is inevitably an overlap between these topics and so it is sensible to begin with an attempt at a statement of general principles. In fact, I would go further and argue the necessity of having an underlying philosophy for the repair of historic buildings. In any circumstances it is important to have a guide to action; to decide the purpose of repair before beginning work on an important historic artefact. War damage, by its very nature as an attack on a culture, prompts an emotional response and, in deciding on a course of action, care must be taken to prevent emotion dominating our decisions.

## Valuing Historic Buildings

Since the mid-nineteenth century, since the conservation of historic buildings became a conscious process, we have been struggling to find, and arguing about, the best philosophy of repair or restoration. It is unlikely that real agreement will ever be reached as there will always be differences about the relative values of what we are trying to preserve and why. These differences cannot simply be explained as changes in taste, although these do of course happen, the most obvious being brought about by time – by a shift in our historical perspective which particularly affects our view of the relatively recent past. But, more important than taste, are the differences which stem from our own feelings about what is important. These differences are more likely to colour our view of how to preserve rather than what to preserve. Knowledgeable people, unless they are prejudiced by politics, religion or emotion, are likely to agree to a large extent about what cultural monuments should be preserved. So why might we disagree about how to preserve them? I think because historic monuments contain three different values each of which may be given more or less weight. These values can be defined as memory, history and design.

Memory is our concept of the past, it is that which puts the present in context: together with history it provides a sense of continuity. Memory can be nostalgic and needs to be treated with caution but the eradication of the past, particularly selective eradication, can be positively dangerous. The best known example of memory as the motivator of restoration is the post-war reconstruction of Warsaw but, in many similar reconstructions, the buildings provide little more than a comforting backdrop to everyday life. At least in those cases there is little likelihood of scholarly confusion.

Design, aesthetic value, is the most tangible, and the easiest to research and record of these values. Art historians will be interested in influences on and by the design of particular

## Summary

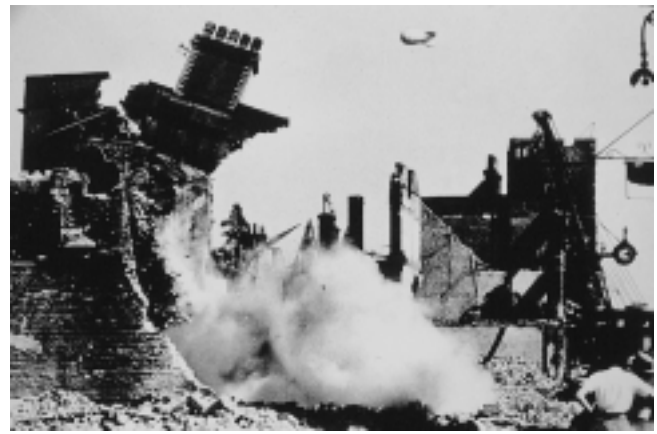
*In order to successfully repair historic monuments it is necessary to have an underlying philosophy to guide our actions. The first step in the repair process must be assessment of the relative values of the object to be repaired.*

*There are four levels of protection of historic monuments from war damage; political, military, physical and documentary. Each has its part to play and must form part of a protection plan. A protection plan must be transmitted to all concerned, it must contain the means of enforcing it, it must be based on a careful assessment of what is to be preserved and the likely causes of damage, and must deal with the training of those involved and how they will be made available when needed.*

*Other articles in this series will deal with damage assessment, repair techniques and the particular importance of vernacular buildings.*



*Canterbury Cathedral standing with city buildings cleared around it*  
Canterbury, Postojeća katedrala nakon uklanjanja okolnih građevina,  
© Canterbury City Council, United Kingdom



*Historic buildings in Canterbury City centre being demolished after bombing*

Canterbury, Rušenje povijesnih građevina u gradskom središtu nakon bombardiranja, © Canterbury City Council, United Kingdom

buildings, placing them within the career of a particular architect, tracing the line of architectural development. Architects will be fascinated by the process of design itself, the use of geometry, proportion, materials, light and space.

In some ways history, which has two distinct elements, has been the least valued of these factors. The first element is the effect of the passage of time, partly by the weather but, more importantly, the way in which the adaptation and alteration of buildings over time tells something of their history and informs our view of the society which formed and altered them. Secondly there is the way in which buildings are monuments to the skills of those who made them. Buildings are documents which can be read and interpreted, and add to our understanding of history.

In my view the first step in the repair process must be an assessment of value. All three of the values described above need to be respected and no one value should dominate to the extent that it destroys the others. The relative weight to be placed on each of them will vary depending on particular circumstances.

### Protective measures

One of the specific characteristics of the war in former Yugoslavia was the extent and precision of attacks targeted on cultural artefacts. All wars cause damage to the built heritage, mostly as a result of the pursuit of military objectives, but also as a result of deliberate action. The so-called 'Baedeker' raids on Britain in World War II and the Anglo-American destruction of Dresden served no fundamentally military purpose; whether they achieved their objective of reducing civilian resistance is open to question, but that does not alter the intention behind the attacks. That such attacks contravene international conventions does not seem to prevent them hap-

pening but it should have an effect on our response. Because such attacks are potential war crimes then recording their causes, their motivation, their perpetrators and their effect takes on a considerable significance; however such recording, although perhaps serving in some way as a deterrent, has far less significance in determining the course of action to be taken in trying to protect cultural monuments

For those of us concerned with the preservation of historic buildings motivation is of interest only in so far as an understanding of motives enables us to plan a strategy for protection. If a historic building is used for military purposes then, in international law, it becomes a legitimate target; if a church tower is used as an observation post then no international convention can be invoked in its defence. The first level of protection therefore is political. Cultural monuments must be identified, their use for military purposes, or as targets, must be prohibited and that political decision must be transmitted through the military command structure. This political protection must also extend to offensive operations. Quite clearly the political will to protect monuments was often absent in the war in former Yugoslavia; indeed it is obvious that in many cases a political and military decision was taken to target cultural objects. This is an interesting contrast to what happened on some occasions and in some parts of Europe during World War II. With the exception of Coventry, Britain's cathedrals were not seriously damaged in bombing raids, the great abbeys at Caen survived the ferocious bombardment following the D Day landings and Rome was declared an 'open city' to prevent its destruction. Notwithstanding these examples, most combatants will find it easy to condemn attacks on their own culture and find it almost as easy to find good reasons for the necessity of attacking cultural monuments on the other side, or excuses for having done so.

The second level of protection is at the level of military planning. Both defensive and offensive plans need to be drawn up with as full a knowledge as possible of the locations of



*Coventry Cathedral 1948 and surrounding city streets*

Coventry, Katedrala i okolne gradske ulice 1948. godine, © National Monument Record, United Kingdom

cultural monuments and in ways which minimise the risk of damage to them. If protection is to succeed at this level then there have to be means of enforcement. I suspect that such planning is rare and enforcement of plans for cultural protection rare still. Military formations of the US army in World War II were required to have a cultural officer whose duty it was to ensure the protection of cultural artefacts. The success or failure of this policy would make an interesting research topic. The attack on Monte Cassino is a spectacular example of military expediency taking precedence over cultural protection, but it is worth noting that the destruction of this great monastery took place only after a debate which took place whilst the Anglo-American advance through central Italy was halted, and in the belief that the building served as the headquarters of general Kesselring.

The third level of protection is the physical measures to be taken by the military and civil authorities. The questions which need to be answered stem from an assessment of the qualities of the object to be protected and from an assessment of the likely causes of damage. Can the object be moved to a place of safety and is such a place of safety available and accessible? Is the monument small enough to be fully protected in-situ and, if so, what are the likely risks it needs protection from? Is the object near enough to a potential military target to put it in danger from near misses; if so can the military target be moved? Should the external shell of a building be strengthened to protect a more valuable or vulnerable interior?

A second set of questions arise from the need to be prepared to mitigate any damage which may occur. Are protective materials near at hand in case of danger? Is fire fighting equipment available and do staff know how to use it? Is shooting available to cover holes in roofs and walls? Where are the sandbags kept? Who is going to assess structural stability and

make sure collapsing roofs and walls are properly supported? Do people know how to implement protective measures and are they aware of the plan for protection and mitigation?

What all these questions point to, and the list is by no means exhaustive, is that careful planning is needed long before disaster takes place to ensure the best possible protection and mitigation measures are available. This sort of planning may, in times of peace, seem unnecessary and expensive but it is the same sort of planning that is needed to protect buildings from natural disasters such as flood, fire and earthquake and, if this is taken into account, will be seen to be more cost effective.

The final level of protection is not protection of the physical object at all, but the protection of its memory. All historic monuments should be recorded and documented to the best of our ability. In this way at least some of the knowledge they give us about their past will be retained and their artistic and historical significance recorded. In the event of damage taking place these records will be invaluable if it is decided the monument is capable of repair.

From the above discussion it will be seen that the best means of protecting historic monuments is to have in place, before disaster occurs, a protection plan. This plan should be at national, regional and local level; it should be formed within a political and legal framework which sets out the limits of military action and if necessary alters military planning; it should identify safe places for the storage of artefacts and the particular means of protection for individual monuments; it should identify those responsible for implementing the plan and ensure all those involved understand the plan and are trained in the necessary techniques of protection and mitigation.

## **Sažetak**

**John Sell**

### **Ratna oštećenja na povijesnim građevinama**

U nastojanju da se uspješno obnove povijesne građevine neophodno je odrediti smjernice za djelovanje. Prvi korak u procesu obnove treba biti procjena relativne vrijednosti objekata o kojima je riječ.

Zaštitu povijesnih spomenika oštećenih ratnim razaranja moguće je podijeliti u četiri razine – političku, vojnu, fizičku i dokumentarnu. Svaka od njih jednako je važna i mora biti obuhvaćena projektom zaštite. Projekt treba biti dostupan svim zainteresiranim čimbenicima, a valja predvidjeti i načine njegove provedbe. Projekt treba, nadalje, sadržavati pomne procjene o tome što u stvari treba zaštititi, a isto tako i o uzrocima šteta. Nužno je, napokon, uzeti u obzir i obučavanje i osiguravanje potrebnih stručnih kadrova.

U predstojećim člancima bit će više riječi o procjeni šteta, tehnikama popravka i posebnoj važnosti ambijentalnih građevina.