

UNESCOCIDE

IT IS DEVASTATING to witness the death throes of so many cities. Splendid, opulent, hectic, for centuries, sometimes millennia, they had survived the vicissitudes of history: war, pestilence, earthquakes. But now, one after another, they are withering, emptying, becoming reduced to theatrical backdrops against which a bloodless pantomime is staged. Where once life throbbed, and cantankerous humanity elbowed its way, pushing and shoving, now you will find only snack bars and stalls—all of them the same—selling ‘local specialities’: muslins, batiks, cottons, beach wraps, bracelets. What was once a living torrent, full of shouts and fury, is now safely enclosed in a travel brochure. The death sentence is delivered from an elegant building in Paris—Place Fontenoy, Seventh Arrondissement—after a long drawn-out bureaucratic process. The verdict is a label that cannot be removed—a brand, stamped on forever.¹

UNESCO’s ‘World Heritage’ listing is the kiss of death. Once the label is affixed, the city’s life is snuffed out; it is ready for taxidermy. This urbicide—horrible word—is not perpetrated deliberately. On the contrary, it is committed in all good faith and with the loftiest of intentions: to preserve—unaltered—a ‘legacy’ of humanity. As the word suggests, to ‘preserve’ means to embalm, to freeze, to save something from temporal decay; but here it also means halting time, fixing the object as in a photograph, protecting it from growth and change. There are, of course, monuments that need to be looked after. But if the Acropolis had been under a conservation order in 450 BC, we would not now have the Parthenon, the Propylaeum or the Erechtheum. UNESCO would have been horrified by the Rome of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which produced an admirable potpourri of neoclassicism, mannerism and the baroque.

It is not impossible to strike a balance between construction and preservation—to live in cities full of museums and works of art, rather than in mausoleums with dormitory suburbs. Not long ago I went back to San Gimignano for the first time in thirty years. There was not a single genuine butcher, greengrocer or baker within its walls. But in fact, once the bars, restaurants and souvenir shops had closed for the night, none of San Gimignano's inhabitants were to be found in the old city—they all live outside its walls, in modern apartment blocks close to shopping centres. Within them, everything has become a set for a medieval costume movie, with the inevitable products of 'invented tradition' on commercial display. The smaller the city, the quicker its demise.

The Laotian city of Luang Prabang has suffered the same fate. Its historic centre is now a tourist trap. Its houses have been converted into hotels and restaurants, with the usual street market—identical the world over—selling the same necklaces, woven bags and leather belts. Paradoxically, the unintended consequence of wanting to preserve the uniqueness of a place is to produce a 'non-place', one that is replicated at World Heritage sites across the planet. Just as one has to leave the medieval walls to find the true inhabitants of San Gimignano, so one has to cycle a mile along the Phothisalath Road, beyond Phu Vao, to find where the Laotians live. Or take Portugal: walking through Porto, the invisible frontier of the World Heritage quarter is immediately perceptible: the heterogeneous humanity of its urban fabric gives way as if by magic to a monoculture of innkeepers, bar-tenders and waiters, touting for customers who will be instantly recognizable by their clothes—shorts, hiking boots—which are radically unsuitable for city wear. In Britain, few places are as deadly as the historic centres of Bath and Edinburgh.² Notably, both host festivals, the inevitable function of a World Heritage city. Venice has the film festival and several biennales, Avignon a theatre festival, Spoleto, in Umbria, has its Festival dei Due Mondi. In other cases—Salzburg, Bayreuth—a prestigious festival provides the rationale for UNESCO listing. These

¹ A shorter version of this article appears in the July–August edition of *Domus*, the Italian architectural magazine. Thanks to Enrico Alleva, Daniella Ambrosino, Alessandro Fallavollita, Andrea Forti, Anna Nadotti, and Ambros Waibel for their criticisms and suggestions.

² Strikingly, of the 28 World Heritage sites UNESCO has listed for UK territory, only five are in cities: Bath in England, Edinburgh in Scotland, and St. George in Bermuda, as well as those post-imperial staples, the Greenwich and Liverpool docks. The rest are castles, landscapes and stone-age monuments.

towns are given World Heritage status because they are already theatrical backdrops, picturesque still-lives; conversely, the theatrical or musical performances the label attracts can afford them a semblance of vitality.

The World Heritage rescue operation all too often cures the disease by killing the patient. The old city of Rhodes and the acropolis of Lindos, on the same island, are cases in point. Saving a heap of stones does not mean saving a city and an urban culture. In this respect, the analogy between cultural heritage sites and natural parks is misleading. Nature reserves are created to multiply the existing fauna and flora, whereas the human fauna of World Heritage cities are forced to flee as the practicalities of daily life become impossible. The citizens of Dresden, 'the Florence of Germany', recently rebelled against this fate. The city and the surrounding Elbe Valley were awarded World Heritage status in 2004—but there was a snag: the good people of Dresden wanted to avoid traffic jams as they crossed the Elbe, so they needed a new bridge; UNESCO was opposed, claiming it would ruin the landscape. The matter was put to a referendum: a majority of the inhabitants voted in favour, even at the risk of losing World Heritage status, which was duly rescinded in 2009. In August 2013 the citizens celebrated the inauguration of their new bridge.

An obvious objection could be made here. Whatever the problems of the World Heritage label, is there not an opposite and perhaps more dangerous threat to the chaotic bustle of urban life—namely, the insensate greed of developers, who tear down anything in their way to build hideous banks, apartment blocks and shopping malls? A trip to China is a vivid illustration of this other plague. In Latin America, the only capitals that have not yet been mauled in this fashion are decaying Havana—although the arrival of *gusano* capital from Miami could quickly change that—the colonial heart of Quito and the *beaux quartiers* of Buenos Aires; in Rio, the districts of Ipanema and Leblon have been entirely destroyed. True, it is difficult to choose between living in a museum or in the shadow of a giant bank. But in reality, the opposition between the touristic and the financial is a false one. Tourism is an inexhaustible cash machine, its assets endlessly extracted and reinvested by high-speed algorithms, among the glass-and-steel skyscrapers of the financial sector. The utopian environment dreamed of by the corporate elite—illustrated by the glossy weekend supplements of the *Financial Times* or *Sole 24 Ore*—is composed of both financial districts and cultural-heritage

museum-cities. Both empty out at sunset; both are fundamentally inanimate. In the prevailing view, tourism is still seen as some sort of postmodern ‘frill’, something superstructural, as opposed to the mines, foundries and shipyards of the ‘real’ economy. Yet tourism, along with its related sectors, is one of the heaviest industries of the twenty-first century, in the sense that it generates the most cash. It would be interesting to devise a Leontief matrix of its input–output flows. Without tourism, the car industry would be much reduced, as would aerospace (most planes are manufactured for tourist transport), shipbuilding (cruise ships), construction (hotels, holiday homes, motorways) and, of course, the catering industry. Tourism is the primary source of income for the world’s financial capital, New York.

Selling authenticity

Mass tourism is the most enduring legacy of the post-war economic boom. It began in the 1950s, accelerating in the 60s and 70s. The case of Greece is exemplary: in 1951 only 50,000 tourists visited the country; ten years later this figure had risen to half a million; in 1981 it stood at 5.5 million and by 2007 it had reached 18.8 million, nearly twice the country’s native population.³ No surprise, then, that the World Heritage label was created in the 1970s. In 1972, after many years of discussion, the General Conference of UNESCO adopted the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, which has since been ratified by 190 countries. In 1976 the World Heritage Committee was established, and two years later it identified its first site. In other words, the brand was ‘launched’ at the take-off of the world tourist revolution, representing both its achievements and the key to its continuing self-promotion.⁴ The UNESCO brand allows the tourist industry to cash out the market value of authenticity, in the manner of a designer-fashion label or the Grand Cru AOC wine classification; in fact, the producers of Burgundy are seeking to acquire World Heritage status for their wines. It was Adorno who coined the phrase, ‘the jargon of authenticity’; the critique of tourism, as an aspect of the culture industry, is closely connected with the ideas of the Frankfurt School. In this regard Dean MacCannell,

³ For 1951–1981, see Orvar Löfgren, *On Holiday: A History of Vacationing*, Berkeley 1999, p. 179. For 2007 see UNWTO Tourism Factbook.

⁴ As of 2014, UNESCO has identified 779 cultural heritage sites, including 254 cities, the majority of which are situated in Europe, with almost half of them in just four countries: Italy has 29, Spain 17, France and Germany 11 each.

in his indispensable essay on tourism, queried Walter Benjamin's thesis by arguing that the aura of an original work of art arises only after, and not before, it is copied: technical reproduction confers the aura.⁵ In this sense, UNESCO's function is precisely to provide aura certification.

The World Heritage *marque* is not the cause of tourism but rather its stamp of legitimacy, the do-gooding institution providing the industry with ideological cover. Here we enter the world of medieval scholastic philosophy: the problem of universals, the relation between names and things. The label is not the thing; but as J. L. Austin argued, words have performative power, and a certificate can be a potent instrument. World Heritage is the Hegelian *schöne Seele* of the tourist industry, the beautiful soul that allows us to accept tourist devastation in the name of aesthetic conservation. There has never been an antithesis between culture and tourism, conservation and capital; there have been no titanic clashes between the tourist operators who, umbrellas held high, lead the attack of the tourist hordes upon our ancient ruins, and the heroic enlightened guardians who salvage the priceless treasures of our past. If minor contradictions between the two appear, we should bear in mind Pierre Bourdieu's lesson on the role of cultural capital as a sub-fraction, dominated by the larger and more powerful fractions of economic and financial capital, even as it fights to win a greater degree of autonomy and self-determination from them. Yet ultimately cultural capital owes its own power over society's dominated strata to economic capital. It is a struggle among the dominant that never calls into question the limits and power of domination.

Nevertheless, the World Heritage brand suffers from two potentially damaging contradictions. The first is what we might call chronological fundamentalism, whereby anything older is deemed more worthy of conservation. Thus the excavation of a Roman wall is justification for tampering with a magnificent medieval cloister, as with Lisbon Cathedral. The second contradiction is of a more philosophical nature: since UNESCO is multiplying its World Heritage sites, and humanity continues to produce works of art (or so we hope), if parts of the globe are already immobilized by 'remains', what will its condition be like in another thousand years' time—will we all be living on the moon and

⁵ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* [1976], Berkeley and Los Angeles 1999, p. 48.

buying tickets to visit the World Heritage planet? Underlying this is the question of the rapport this process establishes between past and present. It is obvious that the present produces monsters; but then it always has. The same was said in Rome during the Baroque period: ‘Quod non fecerunt barbari, fecerunt Barberini’—what the barbarians didn’t do, the Barberini family did. And time has not been kind: we have been left with piles of third-rate classical literature while countless masterpieces, including the entirety of Classical Greek painting and most of its equestrian bronzes, have disappeared.

In the seventeenth-century Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, Fontenelle pointed out in his *Dialogues of the Dead* that the ancients were modern in their time, and that the only virtue of contemporary moderns was to have come later; the horrors of the time were, perhaps, no worse than the then-modern horrors of the ancients. In their day, Greek temples—with their solid wooden roofs and red and blue columns and frontispieces—would have looked squat, shoddy and garish: far removed from the celestial aesthetic of their ruins. Today, the Paris skyline would be unthinkable without the Eiffel Tower, but when it was erected for the 1889 World Fair, it was denounced as an abomination that defaced the landscape—a mortal wound for the city. Who can tell whether, in 2,000 years’ time, today’s shopping malls will not be spoken of as architectural masterpieces? This has already happened to the 1st-century harbour warehouses in Ostia Antica.

Italy has indeed suffered most from UNESCO branding, with the world’s highest density of Heritage sites. In 1909, Marinetti announced that he and his comrades were issuing the Futurist Manifesto here because, ‘We want to deliver Italy from its gangrene of professors, archaeologists, tour guides and antiquaries. For too long Italy has been a market of second-hand dealers. We want to liberate it from its innumerable museums, which smother it like so many cemeteries.’ Unlike Marinetti, I do not have anything against museums. I am simply opposed to museumification as a universal category that—to use the Kantian expression—subsumes the entire life of a city and a society. One might have thought that, after forty years of UNESCO’s operations, all of Italy’s heritage would have been branded by now. But the process has been almost exponential: one site in the 1970s, five more in the 80s, twenty-five in the 90s and a further twenty in the new millennium. Towns and regions are now queuing up, canvassing UNESCO officials. Like the countries aspiring to host the

Olympics, who seem unaware of the consequent ruination that will drag them into the abyss, Italy's mayors, councillors and tourist offices strive to obtain World Heritage status.

Tourist cities are an extreme example of a more general urban problem. Postmodern capitalism has only intensified the reductive, modernist-rationalist notion of zoning, which came to govern twentieth-century urban planning. Zoning is based on mono-functionality: you don't sleep where you work, you don't go out to have fun where you sleep, you don't engage in trade where you have fun. Thus the city is segmented into districts—'tourist', financial, commercial, residential, industrial—that never intersect or overlap (you will never find a bar in a North American residential suburb). The problem with zoning is that cities arose for exactly the opposite purpose: as places of interconnection and articulation between diverse human activities. UNESCO's well-intentioned urbicide is a further step in what has already been accomplished through mono-functionality. Detroit has gone under but Chicago has survived because, while Motor City was mono-occupational, totally dependent on the automobile industry, Windy City has a mix: agriculture, food-processing, chemical and steel industries, finance and culture, several university and research institutions. Any city that depends on a single industry—be it tourism or finance—is doomed to die.

Translated by Nicholas Dines