

THE NECESSITY FOR RUINS

AND OTHER TOPICS

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Revivals and new forms of piety continue to recur, and, whenever the existing spatial order proves too restrictive, new sacred groves or their equivalent will be discovered and used. Each such episode will reveal the link which has always existed between various forms of religious belief and the manner in which space and time are perceived.

The Necessity for Ruins

NOT LONG AGO Mr. Dillon Ripley of the Smithsonian's Museum of History and Technology happily announced the acquisition of the armchairs used by Archie Bunker and his wife Edith in the TV serial, "All in the Family."

The price was not mentioned, but commentators went out of their way to say pleasant things about the event. I have never liked the program, so I failed to share their enthusiasm. The Smithsonian, as I understand it, collects objects not only important in themselves — like the first typewriter, the first bicycle, Lindbergh's *Spirit of Saint Louis*, but also objects having some historical association, like the dresses worn by the wives of Presidents at inaugural balls. Under which heading did the Bunkers' two armchairs belong? Did Mr. Ripley suppose that a visitor to the Museum in the year (say) 2079 would find the armchairs inspiring to look at?

I am quite unable to guess; but as I look around the contemporary American scene I am puzzled by what seems generally to pass for a historical object or a monument. We admire and try to collect things not so much for their beauty or value as for their association with a phase of our past; and that is understandable, every generation has done the same. But with us the association seems to be not with our politically historical past, but with a kind of private vernacular past — what we cherish are mementos of a bygone daily existence without a definite date. Archie Bunker's armchair will recall — at least to the present generation — not only the many hours agreeably spent watching television, but also the environment, the setting, of a popular program, though not necessarily the program itself.

Much of our enthusiasm for historical preservation seems to

be prompted by the same instinct: history means less the record of significant events and people than the preservation of reminders of a bygone domestic existence and its environment.

What interests me is how this novel interpretation of history carries over from the museum or private collection into the wider rural and urban landscape. Anyone who travels through the United States must, I think, be aware of the widespread delight in what we can call reconstructed historical environments. Even in small and comparatively new communities there are groups eagerly organizing to save and restore old buildings and old neighborhoods and to have them registered as landmarks. But, in addition to these more or less legitimate examples of public piety, we run across numerous examples of Colonial Villages and Pioneer Villages and Frontier Villages and Army Posts which are in fact brand-new, and which we can visit for two dollars; the price allows us to watch the scheduled Indian raid or the stagecoach holdup or the noonday shootout.

There is hardly an enterprising town located on the more popular tourist routes that does not have some kind of reconstructed historical environment. Some are reasonably conscientious attempts at reconstruction; some of them are entirely make-believe. Fort Worth, which has an abandoned and decaying downtown stockyard area dating from the 1920s, is restoring it in the style of the 1870s. Another town in Texas, worried that a new bypass would ruin Main Street businesses, redecorated itself as a town of the 1890s and went into costume — every man, woman and child. Near where I live in New Mexico is a brand-new 18th Century Spanish Colonial village, with 18th Century harvest festivals and folkdances, that is hoping to achieve landmark status.

It is easy to expose and make fun of synthetic villages and roadside museums of junk from the recent past, just as it is easy to deplore Mr. Ripley's action in acquiring the Bunkers' chairs, just as it is easy to point out that much contemporary urban restoration is little more than a ploy to boost real estate values, or a way of keeping out undesirable neighbors. But the American public is not so gullible as we sometimes suppose, and it is not always easy to discern the motive behind the restoration.

There are examples which are in fact cultural achievements, contributions to our national heritage, and even the simplest of the reconstructed historical environments often betrays a respect for our past. People of intelligence and discernment admire not only Williamsburg and Sturbridge Village, but Old Town Albuquerque and Disneyland. The best explanation I can find for the nation-wide popularity of these environments is that they appeal to a radically new concept of history and of the meaning of history, and that they represent a radically new concept of the monument.

A traditional monument, as the origin of the word indicates, is an object which is supposed to remind us of something important. That is to say it exists to put people in mind of some obligation that they have incurred: a great public figure, a great public event, a great public declaration which the group had pledged itself to honor.

A monument can incidentally be a work of art or a public facility; it can even give pleasure. But those are secondary characteristics. A monument can be nothing more than a rough stone, a fragment of ruined wall as at Jerusalem, a tree, or a cross. Its sanctity is not a matter of beauty or of use or of age; it is venerated not as a work of art or as an antique, but as an echo from the remote past suddenly become present and actual. One of the most impressive modern monuments is the ruined church which stands in the center of the busiest part of West Berlin. It is an enormous ruin, without grace or picturesqueness, but for that very reason it provides a startling reminder of World War II, and is a monument whose message is not easy to forget. But there are in this country political monuments which have the same quality of vividly reminding us of an event or a person. The monument near the bridge at Concord, Massachusetts, is such a one, and I think the arch at St. Louis is another. I am speaking not of their esthetic quality, but of their power to remind, to recall something specific.

We can best understand the impact of the traditional monument by comparing it with that second yellow notice the telephone company sends out when we have forgotten to pay our bill. Our response is not to admire the phraseology of the notice

or to dreamily recall the pleasant long-distance conversations of two or three months ago. We reach for our checkbook, angrily perhaps, in order to discharge the obligation and avoid future trouble.

It is obvious that monuments of this hortatory sort are likely to be numerous in any landscape where the inhabitants share a strong sense of a religious or political past, and moreover are concerned with their beginnings. That is why every new revolutionary social order, anxious to establish its image and acquire public support, produces many commemorative monuments and symbols and public celebrations. That is what we see in the Soviet Union or China or Cuba — or for that matter in Nazi Germany: a proliferation of public symbols of all sorts, not to please the public but to remind it of what it should believe and how it is to act.

That was the case when this country was young; a monument to the Revolution was erected as early as 1796 in Lexington, an obelisk, and for the next half century patriotic monuments and celebrations enlivened the landscape. Even place names helped remind Americans of our political traditions. A typical commemoration occurred in the 1830s when a monument was erected to the mother of George Washington at Mount Vernon. President Jackson and his cabinet came by steamer from Washington; there were cannon salutes, a military parade, poems were recited, and a large crowd was present. We can imagine what we would hear today if the mother of a President were being honored: many touching personal details, sentimentality about motherhood, and the devotion of the son. But in the 1830s the tone was entirely different. The purpose of the occasion was to remind the public of a great figure from the past. The chief orator had this to say: "If we look to the pages of history, or survey the earth we see that monuments have, in every age and every clime marked those spots distinguished by the happening of some great event, or risen as memorials of the once active virtues of departed worth. . . . Thus monuments are lasting incentives, to those who view them, to imitate the virtues they commemorate, and attain, by their life and spirit, glory and honor." President Jackson also

made a speech, but no one made personal reference to Mary Washington.

When I was in school we had to read Webster's Bunker Hill oration, and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Both deal with monuments, and the Gettysburg Address is the most eloquent expression we can find of the classic point of view. The ostensible purpose of the Address was to dedicate a small graveyard where the remains of Northern soldiers were buried; but it can be read as a concise and beautiful description of what a monument means and how we should respond to it in our thoughts and actions.

Let me condense the passage which refers to the purpose of the gathering. "We are met to dedicate a portion of that [great battle-] field as the final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. . . . It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us. . . ." Here in a few words the purpose of the monument is indicated: on a specific occasion a contract was entered into, a covenant was made, and the monument is to remind us of that contract. The monument, in short, is a guide to the future: just as it confers a kind of immortality on the dead, it determines our actions in the years to come.

For centuries that is what monuments and feast days had been for: to remind us of obligations, religious or political, and to keep us on the beaten path, loyal to tradition. Yet even as Lincoln was speaking, a new philosophy of history and the meaning of history was taking form among Americans.

No sooner was the Civil War at an end than there was a widespread desire to declare the Gettysburg battlefield a monument. This was something unheard of: an immense, populated landscape of thousands of acres of fields and roads and farmhouses becoming a monument to an event which had taken place there. It was in effect a reconstruction of the environment. It was no longer a reminder, it no longer told us what to do; it simply explained the battle. I do not mean to say that this battlefield as a monument is not extremely impressive; I

merely suggest that it is not a monument in the traditional hortatory sense.

One reason for this change was that the American public no longer thought in terms of heroes, of the generals who had commanded the two armies as the only individuals deserving to be honored. There were tens of thousands of soldiers, many of them volunteers, who had fought and died and deserved a collective monument.

The history of American monumental art deserves to be studied, if only because it represents a very radical change in public attitudes. The most familiar expression of that change is the Civil War memorial we see in almost every American town. Some are elaborate, with many allegories, but the average memorial is a statue not of a local hero or of a famous commander, it is simply a statue of a Civil War soldier in uniform, with his rifle. It is an anonymous figure, a statue to what was literally an unknown soldier.

It would be interesting to know more about the origin of this simple but very effective memorial. It seems to have been well received, and before long America put up more monuments and statues to other anonymous figures — to men and women who had no specific accomplishment to their credit and who were identified with no outstanding event, but whom the American public was fond of, because they had been part of everyday existence. Probably the first was the statue of the anonymous Minute Man, by D. C. French, erected on the Lexington Green in 1876. We have all seen other examples: the anonymous Cowboy, the anonymous Newsboy, the anonymous Gloucester Fisherman. In the town of Enterprise, Alabama, there is a statue to the anonymous Boll Weevil. What is the purpose of these monuments? They do not remind us of any obligation, they suggest no particular line of conduct. They dignify certain obscure persons who had been useful and picturesque members of society, and to that extent express a very decent impulse. But I think there is more than that: I think this kind of monument is celebrating a different past, not the past which history books describe, but a vernacular past, a golden age where there are no dates or names, simply a sense

of the way it *used to be*, history as the chronicle of everyday existence.

It is more than coincidence that at the same period — the last decades of the 19th Century — the average American public building began to lose some of its monumental, palatial quality. It is hard for us to see those florid courthouses and post offices and city halls as even remotely functional in design. But evidently people of the time sensed a change. Leopold Eidlitz, a celebrated American architect, the designer of the New York State Capitol, wrote more than eighty years ago: "We are busy in improving the material conditions of mankind and are apt to look upon ethical relations not so much as paramount in themselves but as adjuncts to material well-being. The priest and the soldier no longer govern the world. They are relegated to positions of servants of the people, and the merchant, the manufacturer, the builder of railroads and ships . . . have taken the place of kings, bishops, and generals. . . . The majority of buildings which command the attention and services of the architect at the present time and in this country are strictly business buildings . . . railroad stations, insurance and office buildings, stores and new offices. . . . Of course we build courts of justice and capitols; they . . . represent vital social and political ideas. . . . But these ideas have been deprived of their poetry. . . . A judge no longer performs the functions inherent in his office in the past, he has sunk down into a referee who decides upon the cogency of contending lawyers. . . . Hence it is a fact that a courtroom is nothing more than a convenient apartment for legal discussion and a number of such apartments are habitually packed into a rectangular structure which can in no way be distinguished from surrounding business buildings."¹

Eidlitz was saying that we no longer had the traditional heroes to honor, or the traditional kind of leaders; that public life was no longer ruled by traditional religious or political principles, and that private decisions had become the important ones.

Quite possibly he was right, even though many more statues to heroes were erected after his day. But they have become less and less popular. Over the last decades public scandals and

reappraisals of figures from the past have shown us that many heroes and many events did not deserve to be celebrated, and at the same time we have developed a lively interest in the common man and his contribution to American history; indeed his way of living and working and celebrating inspired many of those historical restoration projects I mentioned earlier.

But something more than disillusionment with established heroes accounts for the change in our attitude toward monuments, and one of the most revealing episodes in recent history occurred a few decades ago when there was a question of honoring Thomas Jefferson and later of honoring Franklin Delano Roosevelt. At the time it was generally agreed that each of them deserved a monument in Washington. But the debate as to the *kind* of monument revealed that few had any clear idea of the traditional monument or of the purpose it served. Artists and critics argued as to the appropriateness of each style: classical or contemporary? Simple or ornate? There were liberals who said (as they always say on such occasions), why spend so much on a pretentious building with no practical use when the same amount of money could provide several places of public recreation? And most significantly a number of prominent architects and designers publicly admitted that they did not know *how* to design a monument. They were not ashamed of this deficiency; on the contrary, they offered it as evidence that they were down-to-earth, practical men, impatient with worn-out tradition.

The final proposals were either open-air environments — places where the public could wander, sit down, eat lunch, and relax — or vast displays of the writings and utterances of the two heroes, great tablets where quotations were inscribed in letters two feet high. I am no sort of architectural critic, but I am inclined to believe that when a designer relies on inscriptions to make his point he is tacitly admitting artistic incompetence.

Since that time, more than twenty years ago, it appears that the average American community has pretty well abandoned the traditional monument and has found new ways of celebrating past events. The manner in which we commemorated the

Bicentennial is strong evidence. Let me try to illustrate the change by contrasting the traditional — one might almost say the Latin — attitude with our own.

The Latin community or nation decides to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the birth of President X. After long debate it chooses as the appropriate day the anniversary of the president's assassination. On that date it inaugurates a splendid marble shaft supporting a bronze statue of President X holding in one hand a bronze scroll labelled "Constitution of 1953." The shaft is adorned with allegorical statues of Industry, Agriculture, Education, and Social Welfare. There is a company of soldiers in dress uniform, a formal parade up the Avenue of the 27 of July (the date of the president's birth), and several speeches recounting the hero's accomplishments with emphasis on the wisdom of following his policies. The public sings the national anthem. That afternoon a model housing development — named President X Village — is inaugurated, and a new political party is formed, dedicated to keeping alive the principles of President X.

But how do we celebrate history in the U.S.A.? The town of Centerville suddenly realizes that it is approximately one hundred and fifty years old. (No one knows the year when the first settler arrived, or who he was.) A mass meeting is held in the high school gym to discuss how to celebrate the event. It is finally agreed that it would be nice to feature the arrival of the first train, sometime in the 1850s, and the Indian raid of 1847, and at the same celebration to inaugurate the new senior citizen housing project. On a lighter tone it is suggested that all the men in Centerville grow beards.

So Centerville sets to work. Hitching posts are installed along one block of Main Street, gas lights substituted for electricity, the front of the town hall is restored to its original 1890 appearance. In the window of the drugstore old prescription ledgers are displayed; the library shows a collection of ancient photographs. Finally a log cabin is built in the new Pioneer Memorial Park near the river on the outskirts of town; it is eventually to be used and maintained by the Boy Scouts. On the 4th of July there is a parade of antique automobiles, a

barbecue in the new park, followed by square dancing with everyone in costume, though of no particular period. The town historian reads an amusing poem about the good old days, bringing in as many local names as he can.

The celebration is pronounced a great success. Centerville puts up a large sign on the highway saying "Welcome to Centerville — Historical Pioneer Village."

The comparison is not much exaggerated; each celebration indicates a distinct approach not only to monuments but to history. The Latin version — the one we used to prefer — sees the past as highly structured, highly political in the real meaning of that word. Past and present are linked by a contract, a covenant between the people and their leaders, and this covenant is given visible form in monuments and a temporal form in a series of scheduled holidays and days of commemoration. The present is the continuation, the re-enactment of the past, modified of course by intervening events, but the community is constantly reminded of its original identity and its ancient pledges. The emphasis is on the continuity of history.

On the other hand the contemporary American celebration suggests that the past is a remote, ill-defined period or environment when a kind of golden age prevailed, when society had an innocence and a simplicity that we have since lost; a period usually referred to as The Old Days, or as (Eliade calls it) *in illo tempore* — in those days — a time without significant events, and a landscape without monuments.

Both points of view celebrate the past and seek to make it a part of daily life. No phrases are more common in America than "safeguarding our heritage" or "keeping alive our cherished traditions"; but it is clear, I think, that most of us have ceased to see the basis of our historical existence as a sequence of political events: Revolution, Declaration of Independence, Constitution, Civil War. I live in a town which with some justification is known as the most historic area in the West. It dates from the early 17th Century. There are, however, only two monuments in the region to individuals, and I doubt if one resident out of ten could identify three dates in the town's

history. And yet there never was such a place for restoration and preservation and the cult of the old days as Santa Fe.

I confess that I find myself entirely out of sympathy with this romanticization of history, but the question remains: why do so many people derive pleasure and even inspiration from the deliberate re-building or invention of historical environments, even when they recognize the artificiality of most of these? Is it simply nostalgia, is it simply a touristic instinct in search of the unusual, or does it have a deeper significance? I know of no easy answer, but one answer, like the answer to so many questions related to the environment and how we perceive it, lies in different religious attitudes.

Several years ago, the geographer of religions, Erich Isaac, wrote an article in *Landscape Magazine* entitled "The Impact of Religions on the Landscape." Most geographers have discussed this topic largely in terms of orientation, sacred mountains, sacred wells, the taboo on certain plants and animals, and so on. But Isaac had a different approach. In the article he described the landscape of a small, remote tribe in southern Rhodesia, and noted the impact — or rather the lack of impact — of religious practices and beliefs on the environment. He came to the following conclusions: religions which conceive of the creation of the world as marking the beginning of human existence and human society have a much greater impact on the landscape than religions which perceive the real beginning of existence as deriving from a divine charter or covenant.² To phrase it differently, Isaac said that a society which dates its beginning from the very creation of the world, which sees itself as the direct product of the cosmic plan, is likely to believe that the way to achieve harmony with the environment is to transform — or restore — that environment in imitation of its original condition. We are familiar with the elaborate cosmic symbolism in the houses and towns and fields of the Dogon of Africa, but the same kind of symbolism has existed in parts of South America; and in China, if I understand it, the doctrine of *feng-shui* is also essentially the celebration of an unchanging cosmic order.

But this attitude is by no means universal. When a religion like Christianity or Judaism or Islam assumes that the true meaning of existence derives not from the beginning of the world but from some extraordinary event or revelation, from a covenant between man and the divinity, then that religion is concerned not with reproducing any cosmic symbolism on the landscape, it is concerned with man's keeping the terms of the covenant, with his obeying the divine law.

Can we translate these religious concepts into social concepts? Can we say that a society which sees itself as having had a definite political or legal origin — like the United States — with its own birthday and birth certificate and contract in the form of a semi-sacred Constitution, is likely to be attached to monuments or dates which are reminders of political covenants? But a society which sees itself as having slowly evolved, beginning with the very first settlements in its own environment, is more likely to celebrate its legendary, half-forgotten origins in the landscape; it looks back not to a specific event, but to a golden age when it was at one with its environment.

The question of course is why and when did Americans abandon the old covenant approach to their history and take on an evolutionary approach? That is for historians to explain, but I can only suggest that such shifts are not rare, and that every culture, even the most archaic, shows signs of overlapping or contradictory interpretations of existence. The evidence suggests that around the middle of the last century America began to think of itself as a unique society which had evolved over two centuries of time — a notion in line with other theories of evolution becoming widespread in that period.

And this is more or less the way we see ourselves now: as a society which has grown and expanded over most of a continent, a kind of elemental force. There are certainly traits in our present attitude toward our history — and toward monuments and holidays — that suggest that there is something in common between our enthusiasm for restored (or invented) historical environments and that other concept of the origin of existence. It is probably not necessary to point to the current movement to preserve wilderness or natural

areas as fragments of what we might call the original design of creation. The instinct behind the drive is very similar to that which inspires our architectural restorations: to restore as much as possible the *original* aspect of the landscape. It is perfectly true that to restore part of a town to its mid-19th Century appearance is not in fact to restore it to its original form. But anthropologists tell us that, in the thought of most peoples, primal time — the golden age, that is to say — begins precisely where active memory ends — thus about the time of one's great-grandfather. Perhaps this accounts for our present fascination with the 1870s and 1880s. That was in fact a period of great change, but it is now remote enough to be perceived as part of the old days and in consequence to be the theme of countless small town restorations.

When we think of the immense changes still being made by the growth of population and by technology in the American landscape it seems absurd to say that we are at the same time reproducing or restoring the *original* landscape, the image of creation. But even in the case of the Dogon and similar societies the area transformed in a symbolic manner was very small, only a few significant spots were given symbolic treatment. The same is true with us. Even so, over the last years a vast number of historical environments have come into being: outdoor museums, roadside museums, wilderness areas, historic zones and neighborhoods; and we should not overlook the new and widespread interest in the industrial landscape — 19th Century mills and factories and railroad stations and bridges and mines. There is even a society of commercial archeology which seeks to preserve old gas stations and storefronts.

It seems clear that the whole preservation and restoration movement is much more than a means of promoting tourism or a sentimentalizing over an obscure part of the past — though it is also both of those things. We are learning to see it as a new (or recently rediscovered) interpretation of history. It sees history not as a continuity but as a dramatic discontinuity, a kind of cosmic drama. First there is that golden age, the time of harmonious beginnings. Then ensues a period when the old days are forgotten and the golden age falls into neglect. Finally

comes a time when we rediscover and seek to restore the world around us to something like its former beauty.

But there has to be that interval of neglect, there has to be discontinuity; it is religiously and artistically essential. That is what I mean when I refer to the necessity for ruins: ruins provide the incentive for restoration, and for a return to origins. There has to be (in our new concept of history) an interim of death or rejection before there can be renewal and reform. The old order has to die before there can be a born-again landscape. Many of us know the joy and excitement not so much of creating the new as of redeeming what has been neglected, and this excitement is particularly strong when the original condition is seen as holy or beautiful. The old farmhouse has to decay before we can restore it and lead an alternative life style in the country; the landscape has to be plundered and stripped before we can restore the natural ecosystem; the neighborhood has to be a slum before we can rediscover it and gentrify it. That is how we reproduce the cosmic scheme and correct history.

Are we perhaps trying to re-enact some ancient myth of birth, death, and redemption? I sometimes think I see the logical consequences: the return of a kind of pageantry or ritual in connection with many of these new historical shrines. The parade as an art form or as a political symbol is all but dead. Like the political monument it has ceased to have any symbolical impact. But a kind of historical, theatrical make-believe is becoming increasingly popular; not only the noonday shootouts and other roadside attractions, but costumed guides in historical show places, candlelight concerts of period music, historically accurate dinners and feasts, re-enactments of historic episodes are gradually changing the new reconstructed environments into scenes of unreality, places where we can briefly relive the golden age and be purged of historical guilt. The past is brought back in all its richness. There is no lesson to learn, no covenant to honor; we are charmed into a state of innocence and become part of the environment. History ceases to exist.

The Domestication of the Garage

TO BE INTERESTED IN THE popular culture of contemporary America is to be interested in our popular architecture; the architecture of those buildings in which we live or work or enjoy ourselves. They are not only an important part of our everyday environment, they also reveal in their design and evolution much about our values and how we adjust to the surrounding world.

That is why the study of vernacular (as opposed to "polite") architecture is more and more appreciated as a source of fresh insights into the social history of a period or a people. The question is (and always has been) which architectural forms are we to choose? Until about a century ago, little uncertainty existed; historians and cultural geographers told us that vernacular architecture meant the dwelling and its dependencies, public works such as bridges and mills and fortifications, and even sometimes the church. These were the products of craftsmen, members of a predominantly rural or pre-technological society, using traditional methods and locally available materials and working with practical ends in view. Folk or vernacular architecture was thus largely interpreted in terms of structure and (by extension) in terms of the exploitation of local natural resources.

But since the 19th Century there have been many changes; we have learned to see the dwelling as a much more complicated thing, and the architectural scene has immensely expanded. Innumerable new forms have evolved, not only in our public existence — such as the factory, the shopping center, the gas station, and so on — but in our private lives as well. The home