

## RIGHT TO CULTURAL HERITAGE AS UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHT

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On December 10, 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [and...] called upon the Member countries to publicize the text of the Declaration.

Fifty years later the General Assembly proclaimed the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms [...]."

"Everyone, as a member of society, [...] is entitled to realization [...] of the economic, social and cultural rights [...] for his dignity and the free development of his personality." "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community." (From articles 22 and 27 of the Declaration).

The right to culture includes rights related to cultural heritage, too. Built heritage is the shape that national, or even more *cultural* identity takes. It is the tool with which a community or an individual express themselves. Preserving this framework means resisting the passing of time.

Conservation is always resistance. Why do we have to emphasize and codify the right to preserve cultural tradition in the first place? There are several other phenomena, not just the obvious passing of time, which damage it. As "by-products" of wars battering rams and atomic bombs cause damage, but people engaged in the war gamble can also find other, shrewd ways: ravaging the symbols that are the enemy's source of identity and security in order to frighten, demoralize and decapitate the nations: a Roman conqueror, ordering the town be besprinkled with salt; a Nazi banning the re-building of a city as capital. The iconoclasm of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, which was advocated by fanatics in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century again; the Maoist vandalism shamefully called "cultural revolution" and the recent destruction of the giant-Buddha statues is not only an immense artistic loss, but also an infringement of basic human rights, because it aims at weakening a human community by depriving it of its past. (We know other examples from history, examples even more disgusting in their infernally wily way: bombing a city if the inhabitants do not surrender, and if patriots still put up resistance - skulking in basements and cellars - then they are bombed again. What better compass for this than the only church tower left intact in the town sized ruin field exactly for this purpose!) However, there are further twists in this story. What should a human right campaigner do if he is

confronted with the total destruction of a city by the enemy, which is not simply done as a result of the enemy's military might, but it is done in order to avoid the raging of another, even more devastating force?! What if a block of flats is demolished, but it is bulldozed away in order to discourage potential perpetrators of a terrorist attack?!

The treasures of our culture are also destroyed by natural disasters involving almost all the elements; earth, water and fire. We can only hope that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not add 'air' to this list - it has already started to! (what is vicious self-destruction on the part of mankind, too).

Being negligent, ignorant and uneducated could result in the loss of our heritage, too. We do not look after our heritage and do not preserve it. Instead, maybe because of a misinterpreted sense of modernity, transform it till it is unrecognizable. We feel obliged by the new, fashionable trend, which may create something that is mediocre, worse than the original, or stands out from its environment in the best case.

Resistance, we said. Mankind extends its own existence by fighting against passing time, devastation and destruction by protecting itself, its culture and cultural traditions, preserving tangible traces of its activities. Man re-builds and reconstructs of course, because he needs that shelter, that roof above his head and that security so that he is protected from his enemies and adverse weather conditions and has a place to live, gather and pray. There are a few animal species that build their own home and rebuild it after a disaster. However, there is something peculiar to mankind: that **just because** attitude is a human approach. The Grand Palace of Peter I the Great in Petrodvorec was used as a stable by the intruders at first, who, when they were cleared out, set it on fire. The building now stands in its old glory. The proud bridge in Mostar will stand, just like the Church of Our Lady (Frauenkirche) in Dresden. It is not a modern palace, a modern bridge or a church in the latest fashionable style that are being built, but exact copies of the old constructions. The silk tapestries in the palace were made by hand on looms constructed especially for the purpose and the benches in the church are made after baroque models. This is to show that no matter how powerful the forces of destruction are, mankind's will to live is much stronger. Some of the examples above symbolize the culture that created them; had they not been symbols, they will be from now on, only with a richer message, expressed by more than one layer: they advocate two phases of a culture at the same time, the continuous or at least reviving creative power of a culture-creating nation.

Symbol, we said. In most cases, however, we do not express our obstinate right to cultural heritage by rebuilding what has been demolished. Every nation has its history as its own heritage, together with the good and the bad. We have to show the bad to those who come after us as a memento, and not just the bad that has been committed against us, but also what we ourselves committed. This is because everyone has the right to know about what had happened and see the traces, since self-protection and the protection of humankind are both basic human rights. If these mementoes are integrated into how future generations see the world, then these generations will also be armed against this. UNESCO has declared Auschwitz that precisely working death-factory, the symbol of all genocides to be part of the world's heritage, to be a reminder of **never again**. That is just how a part of the town hall in a beautiful square in the old town centre in Prague is still standing, unreconstructed, just like the walls of the old cathedral in Coventry (in the conservation work of which a group of German volunteers born after World War II participated!), which stand beside the new building. The preserved memento is connected to the house of God that propagates the will to live.

What happens if the culture that created the built heritage and the community preserving it have been irrecoverably lost? The few remains of Carthage survived beneath ground level, regardless whether the plundered city had eventually been besprinkled with salt or not. Still, humankind is one race, and we, late successors have the right to learn about this common treasure, to see at least what we can see excavated and conserved today. There are Roman ruins in my homeland, too, some are hardly ankle-high, still, they are interpretable, instructive, even beautiful.

It is also worth examining the situation when an element of a common cultural heritage that means the same to every member of the community can be brought to life as a symbol. The experiment could be dangerous. Caution is necessary here, one has to find the narrow lane that is between the trash and the retrograde; in addition, it is difficult to refer to roots without excluding others, since this can be a proud ownership of the past, but can also express senseless isolation from the common heritage of humanity.

Let's think about whether we have the right to change our heritage. Naturally, we have, it would be unreasonable to say otherwise. Had we not the right, or had we not done it continuously, humanity would live in caves. No matter how beautiful and embarrassingly stirring the caves decorated 30,000 years ago are, we only wish to visit them as tourists. Every generation wants to see itself reflected in its surroundings and continuously changes and shapes these surroundings accordingly, takes elements over and modifies them. With the impoverishment of Roman society, or rather, the increase in the numbers of the well-off middle-class inviting their friends to lavish feasts in their villas, a problem

occurred. People wanted to keep the custom of wasting a lot of food by throwing pieces that they just tasted once behind their backs. The solution? Floor mosaic, into which pre-manufactured virtual waste had been incorporated in advance.

Some may try to turn trouble into an advantage. A Mongolian invasion causing a lot of suffering ravaged my country in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. When, only a year and a half later the Tartars left the country, the survivors came back from the swamps where they had been hiding from the cruel invaders and continued the building or rebuilding of a series of churches originally started in the Romanesque style, now in the Gothic. These people preserved the buildings of their own culture. They had an incontestable right to do this, but also to build these churches in a different form. I do not think that the following assumption is too daring: taking over the most advanced style of architecture from Western Europe was a strong expression of the fact that Hungarian leaders wished to join civilisation rather than the nomadic conquerors in the mid-1200s.

As it can be concluded from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to culture, to his own cultural heritage. Sadly, not even those who implement this declaration with the utmost seriousness can guarantee opportunities to go with these rights, for example, material possessions necessary to enjoy these, because that is another part of life. Still, the declaration of these rights is a significant achievement and we must insist on it.

What a whole lot of rights we have! Yes, we do, if... we know that our rights are written on one side of a paper the verso of which contains our duties. We do have the right to protect this heritage, to insist on it, to use it, to boast about it, to teach about it, if...we protect, preserve and use it for good ends, if we do not hurt others with it and wisely pass it on to the next generation.

Heritage should advocate our rights to our rights, the right to deny the rights of the destroyer, to resist by it the forces of evil.

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I have been a member of ICOMOS since 1979, I used to be the president of Amnesty International in Hungary for five years, and I used to be the Hungarian president and still am a member of the presidency of the International Federation of University Women.