

Where Does Our Architectural Heritage Belong?

David Lowenthal, University College London

No heritage issue today arouses greater concern than its appropriate location. Conservators and scholars urge that architectural and other relics remain in situ when possible. But market forces promote and technology facilitates the removal of even the most massive antiquities. Only a small fraction of the time and effort Lord Elgin spent in dismantling and shipping the Parthenon marbles to London would today be needed to reinstall them in Athens. Ever more substantial monuments are dismembered for transport to distant locales - French and Spanish cloisters to New York, St. Mary's Aldermanbury church to Missouri, London Bridge to Arizona, Mayan temples to collectors round the globe. Blurring previous distinctions between movable and immovable heritage, modern engineering and burgeoning demands for antiquities put virtually any relic at risk of uprooting.

At the same time, national attachments to heritage have intensified efforts to keep it in place or to secure its return. First a focus of 19th-century European nationalism, antiquities have become prime symbols of collective identity all over the world. Architectural and other heritage now enhance community and identity in every state. A rich and representative patrimony promotes citizenship, catalyzes creativity, attracts foreign sympathy, and enhances all aspects of national life.

Though these propositions seem self-evident, for much of the world they are only of recent vintage. It is independent nationhood that leads the Third World, like Europe, to emphasize material relics as icons of group identity. Seeking tangible witnesses to validate ancestral antecedents, former colonies find their roots in old imperial collections - as put by the first chairman of UNESCO's committee on the return of cultural property, "the mother country must restore the new state's heritage along with its sovereignty." He saw "the restitution and return of cultural property [as] one of the key problems of the Third World." It embraces architectural structures and along with other antiquities, art works and archives. The rationale is cogently put by UNESCO's Director-General: "The vicissitudes of history have ... robbed peoples of a priceless portion of [their] inheritance in which their enduring identity finds its embodiment. [To] enable a people to recover part of its memory and identity, [other lands should relinquish irreplaceable cultural treasures] to the countries where they were created."

Some losses were especially grievous. West African artifacts crucial to ceremonial observance were purloined as curios. Oceania was bereft of its tangible heritage, most relics ending up in collections thousands of miles away. Few British connoisseurs, dismayed by the sale to Japan of Newcastle University's collection of Pacific tribal art, spared a moment's thought for the Solomon Islanders who could not afford even one of the items

fashioned by their forebears. Impoverished Third World countries are exhorted to earn a decent living rather than hanker after lost heritage; but heritage is inseparable from bread-and-butter practicalities. "Our culture is everything we do and think," explains a Samoan historian, enabling "us to become more reliant and self-respecting; looked at in this way, [heritage] is really 'something we can eat'." And tribal and ethnic minorities deprived of all else - autonomy, land, religion, language - may cherish monuments and sites as last bastions of communal identity.

But concern over heritage loss is not confined to poor or new nations. Europeans enriched by centuries of imperial acquisitions nowadays express similar fears. Tax-compelled sales abroad have unleashed a "drain of British heritage termed "comparable to the damage that Cromwell and his Roundheads caused" in dispersing Charles I's private collection. New losses of the national heritage, including ancient buildings, threaten all the time. French antiquities face similar pressures, and exports of the monumental past in Italy and Turkey proceed apace despite draconian prohibitions.

Repatriation alone could not make good these losses or turn the tide of heritage away from foreign collectors avid for antiquities. Export bans are flagrantly violated, international sanctions against illicit trade dead letters. So numerous and powerful are looters of Mexico's 30 million burial sites that they have their own unions and government lobby. To protect Italy's churches alone against theft would require a police force larger than the Italian army; to prevent illicit exports would take customs surveillance so onerous it would cripple the tourist trade. Most of the African artifacts now in the West have been acquired since African countries gained independence. Under such circumstances, notes a curator, restitution is "like trying to fill a bath tub while the plug is still pulled out."

Nationalism and the market exacerbate conflicts between those who want antiquities kept where they are and those who would move them. But headlines about the high price of heritage conceal the fact that location is much more than a national question; where monuments belong is an issue as significant within states as between them. Most architectural monuments embody local and regional as well as national attachments. Considerations of site integrity, of local sentiment, of regional pride, of balance of wealth may outweigh national symbolism. Should relics and structures that cannot be left in situ go to major national museums or to local and provincial centers? Ought Orcadian Iron-Age treasures remain in Kirkwall rather than swell collections in Edinburgh or London? Should the Greek warrior figures recently found in Calabria remain on display in Florence or return to the obscure museum in their 'homeland'? Should the superabundant antiquities precariously stored at London's Victoria & Albert Museum perhaps be put on display in Wakefield or Wolverhampton?

Even without restitution, heritage location involves

complex questions of entitlement, display, safety, and conservation. To whom does an antiquity or monument 'belong' in law or in equity? Where can it be seen to best advantage and by whom? Where is it most likely to be safe from harm and well looked after? A brief résumé of such issues must suffice here.

Entitlement. Rightful possession concerns several matters. One is legal ownership. Many antiquities have been (as they still are) acquired by dubious means, but legal standards cannot be retroactively applied, especially where present possessors hold title in good faith. And museums too willing to relinquish treasures to antecedent claimants would soon alienate benefactors. But restitution advocates consider heritage inalienable by definition, and hence all transfers, including gifts and sales by former rulers, ipso facto invalid. Should cultural need and moral principle override legal instruments that debar the return of antiquities to former colonies?

Even if accepted in principle, national claims to heritage may be hard to effectuate after millennia of migration and territorial turmoil. Both Iraq and Iran have sought the return of the Code of Hammurabi from the Louvre, but the legitimate heirs, if any, of the long-extinct empire from which the tablet comes today inhabit many other lands as well. Such ambiguities abound.

A larger question is how to balance national against global concerns. Sovereign states are not always the right spokesmen for or guardians of heritage: international considerations may take precedence. The monuments of world art and architecture are the common heritage of all mankind, not just of one nation, and comprehensive comparative collections are essential to its understanding and appreciation. The diffusion of ancient Greek and Roman culture throughout the Western world makes the monuments of classical antiquity as much the patrimony of France, Britain, Germany, and the United States as of their Mediterranean heartlands. Recognition that heritage interests are global as well as national complicates questions of its proper location. No state has proposed, or could wish, that all heritage be reallocated by nationality. But if not all, then how much, and which parts?

Display. Where heritage can best be seen is another criterion of its location. Numbers favor the West's great museums: they are open more of the time, have better display facilities, and are more widely accessible than provincial, local, or Third World centers. But sheer numbers take no account of the significance of the experience. Ready access for a few devotees to a revered heritage may matter more than multitudes of casual visitors. And the concentration of global treasures in the West handicaps the rest of the world: unlike Americans and Europeans, few Asians or Africans can travel abroad in search of heritage. Other questions of display depend on type of ownership. Antiquities often become more

accessible when they move from private into public collections. Yet many works held in great museums are seldom displayed. Are they more useful stored in London or Paris than on show in Leeds or Lyons, Lagos or Lucknow?

Safety and conservation. Where can heritage best be looked after? Only the best endowed museums command the skills and facilities needed to minimize and repair the ravages of decay. Advocates of restitution suggest that conservation funding and expertise should accompany returned heritage to help compensate for past imperial plunder and neglect; the very principle of restitution entails supplying, such facilities and training locals to use them. But practice lags behind principle. "When once a mummy ... is lodged in the British Museum," judged a turn-of-the-century keeper noted for acquiring them, "it has a far better chance of being preserved there than it could possibly have in any tomb, royal or otherwise, in Egypt." Mummies now kept in Egypt still find refurbishment not in Luxor but the Louvre.

Safeguarding monuments against civil strife and looting also depends on their location. Heritage in war-torn countries - Angkor Wat is a sad example - often lies at the mercy of brigands and of the elements. Yet the Third World has no monopoly on such threats. Terrorist bombs may make the British Museum as risky for heritage as Cambodian jungles. Iconoclastic vandalism is commoner in the Louvre than in Lesotho. And conservation expertise is confined to a small fraction of Western holdings. The Victoria & Albert Museum recently rejected a Sikh request to return a 19th-century throne as "too fragile to be moved" - an ironic circumspection given the subsequent flooding of Asian antiquities in that museum. Location prospects rest on manifold conservation criteria.

Each heritage location issue must be judged on its own merits. But to examine conflicting merits in the light of agreed principles could save time and resources, promote amity and maximise heritage benefits for all claimants. Let me suggest a few such considerations:

1. Widespread recognized value. Architectural monuments comprise only one strand of the valued past exemplified also in the search for roots, in the amassing of archives, in the collecting of memorabilia, and in the re-enactment of historical events. But in many cultures if not most, architecture and related antiquities increasingly stand for the vital collective heritage.

2. Multiple claimants. Architectural more than most relics engender rival claimants. Such monuments are treasured not only by the cultures that gave them birth and the states that now house them, but also by individuals, by localities, and by the world as a whole. The Parthenon is precious not only to Greeks in general and to Athenians in particular, but to all admirers of classical culture; Jerusalem is sacred alike to Jews, Christians and Muslims. Overlapping allegiances and changing attitudes toward heritage make rivalry unavoidable; while many claimants may each justify possession or guardianship, a monument can

inhabit only one place at a time.

3. Multiple criteria of evaluation. Various and often incompatible principles underlie claims to possession: legal and moral rights, physical security, display, ambience, environmental and cultural context, historical associations, personal linkages. None of these takes inherent precedence; no rating scale could ever be agreed. Moreover, each principle rests on criteria that fluctuate. Atmospheric purity in Athens, compared with polluted London helped justify the Greek request for the Parthenon marbles a century ago; those circumstances today are reversed.

4. Multiple bases of valuation. Not only are site-specific values in flux, so are the reasons we prize architectural heritage. Esthetic quality, symbolic import, patriotic inspiration, pedagogic utility, historical and archeological understanding, tourist and other revenues - heritage entails a wide range of largely incommensurable spiritual, scholarly, and instrumental values.

5. Shifting estimates about the patrimony. No final list of heritage items integral to a nation's identity can ever be drawn up, for time and circumstance continually alter priorities - not to mention state boundaries. Some national treasures have only recently been identified as such; others will be later; still others will lose that status. Often a threat of loss fixes attention on previously neglected monuments. Heritage allocation requires some consistency of national interest, but no community's priorities can be irrevocably bound by the choices of past generations.

6. General principles govern few location decisions. No blanket rules can settle heritage disputes or could be enforced if imposed. Military conquest and market demand govern most heritage removals; law and social justice can affect only a small fraction. But of these, established principles suggest that at least a few be kept where they are, and that others be moved elsewhere.

7. In situ criteria. Monumental relics in particular are so wedded to locale that removal would despoil both relic and site, and relocation benefit no one. Moving the Grand Canyon to New Jersey or Stonehenge to Kew Gardens would be meaningless; only their continued presence in Arizona and Wiltshire validates their unique histories. Integral fragments sundered from monumental sites also deserve repatriation.

8. Relocation criteria. Not every removal is iniquitous or ill-advised. Most relics, including some buildings, were created to be portable. Many others now face neglect, decay, or imminent destruction if left in place. Great structures like Abu Simbel are shifted to save them from demolition in the wake of development. Others are relocated because time and change so transform their original surroundings that they can now be appreciated only elsewhere. Still others, like the Statue of Liberty, were conceived far from their intended homes; no one would propose 'returning' Bartholdi's statue to France.

Issues of heritage location are more delicate and difficult than the ownership and distribution of most other commodities, because heritage benefits are largely spiritual and intangible. But agreement on the fundamental uses and perils of heritage may help resolve particular issues, bearing in mind that no solution is permanent. For nations like individuals are mortal, inheriting as temporary stewards rather than absolute owners.

Nor is custody an unmixed blessing: patrimony not only enriches but burdens and may corrupt its possessors. "When the oldest son inherits the family mansion," writes a British conservator, "he inherits both the Old Master over the carved surround of the salon fireplace ... [and] the peeling wallpaper in the servants' bedroom." And too ample or awesome a heritage may cripple initiative and stifle creativity. Modern attachment to monuments makes unfashionable such sombre reflections as Hawthorne's, wandering through the British Museum in 1856 "with a weary and heavy heart, wishing (Heaven forgive me!) that the Elgin marbles and the frieze of the Parthenon were all burnt into lime, and that the granitic Egyptian statues were hewn and squared into building-stones, and that the mummies had all turned into dust; ... in fine, that all the material relics of so many successive ages had disappeared with the generations that produced them. The present is burthened too much with the past I do not see how future ages are to stagger under all this dead weight."

But Hawthorne's point remains cogent. The pulling down of the Bastille marked a moment in French history more crucial for national identity than the erection of the Arc de Triomphe. It may seem better to destroy than to preserve a returned heritage, as Australian Aborigines and American Indians feel about some ancestral skeletal and artifactual remains sullied by centuries of alien possession.

Moreover, a material heritage far away may enrich more than were it close at hand. Given the option of its return, the Maoris let their widely dispersed historical artifacts remain abroad; they felt it more important for the rest of the world to have the means of appreciating Maori culture than to repatriate those objects to New Zealand. Israel encourages the export of ancient artifacts as symbolic expressions of the rebirth of a modern nation in an ancient land; like early Christian relics, their usefulness lies in their wide dispersal.

No people are more concerned with the past or respectful of tradition than the Chinese. But they are supremely uninterested in most aspects of material heritage, whose possession seems to them pointless. As one scholar puts it, "the Chinese have never asked the question, 'Who owns the past?' They would not have seen the need to." Heritage to the Chinese is like wilderness to Americans: control and possession destroy its ambience and negate its worth. Heritage's ultimate location is not in any physical milieu but in all the minds of men.

Where Does Our Architectural Heritage Belong?

David Lowenthal, University College London

No current monument issue evokes more impassioned discussion than their location. Modern conservation tenets require that antiquities be left in situ wherever possible. Yet modern technology blurs distinctions between movable and immovable artifacts and makes the removal even of major monuments increasingly common. Virtually no antiquity rests wholly secure against potential uprooting.

Profound questions of national identity are affected by the removal of monuments from countries of origin. New nations especially need items of cultural heritage to validate their historical antecedents and continuities. Hence they press for the restitution of such antiquities from Western museums and collections. The restitution campaign addresses entire buildings and parts thereof as well as other antiquities and art works. Although disputes over possession may engender acrimony and promote partisan misreadings of the historical record, they also draw attention to the importance of protecting previously neglected structures. Yet architectural monuments never play an exclusively national role. They all embody local and regional attachments as well, and many boast worldwide heritage significance.

To determine where such monuments belong is one of the gravest problems confronting our heritage community. The in situ principle alone cannot resolve many pressing issues. Monumental structures - the French cloisters in New York, St. Mary's Aldermanbury in Missouri, the Parthenon frieze in the British Museum, the Mayan temples clandestinely exported - are often removed from original locations, sometimes dismembered in the process, for fame or profit, reverence or nostalgia. Others, like Abu Simbel, are moved to avoid destruction in the wake of development. Still other structures are removed because time has transformed their original locales - to retain a monument in situ when everything around it is altered or new may be contextually meaningless and esthetically disastrous. Still others, like the Statue of Liberty, were conceived far from their intended sites.

Each case must be viewed on its own unique merits. But to examine those merits in the framework of general principles would save time and resources, promote harmony among rival claimants, and help maximize heritage benefits for all concerned. This paper proposes a basis for such principles.

A quel lieu appartient notre patrimoine architectural ?

David Lowenthal, University College Londres.

A l'heure actuelle, aucune question concernant les monuments ne soulève de polémique plus vive que leur emplacement. Les principes modernes de conservation exigent que les antiquités soient maintenues in situ partout où cela est possible. Cependant la technologie moderne estompe les distinctions entre objets mobiliers et immobiliers et rend le déplacement de monuments même majeurs chose de plus en plus courante. En fait aucun monument antique n'est totalement à l'abri d'un éventuel déracinement.

De profondes questions d'identité nationale sont mises en cause par le déplacement de monuments hors de leur pays d'origine. Les jeunes nations en particulier ont besoin d'éléments de leur patrimoine culturel pour valider leur passé historique et leur avenir. Aussi font-elles pression pour que leur soient restituées ces antiquités qui se trouvent dans les collections et les musées occidentaux. Cette campagne de restitution concerne aussi bien des bâtiments entiers ou partiels que d'autres antiquités et oeuvres d'art. Bien que les discussions sur la possession puissent engendrer de l'aigreur et susciter des interprétations erronées et partisans des documents historiques, elles attirent aussi l'attention sur l'importance de préserver des édifices jusqu'ici négligés.

Cependant les monuments architecturaux ne jouent jamais un rôle exclusivement national. Ils possèdent également des liens locaux et régionaux et beaucoup prétendent à une dimension de patrimoine universel.

Déterminer le lieu d'attache de tels monuments est l'un des problèmes les plus sérieux de notre patrimoine collectif. Le principe d'in situ ne peut à lui seul résoudre plusieurs questions urgentes. Les cloîtres français à New-York, St. Mary's Aldermanbury dans le Missouri, la frise du Parthénon au British Museum, les temples mayas exportés clandestinement - tous ces édifices monumentaux sont souvent retirés de leur site d'origine, parfois démantelés dans l'opération, pour des raisons de prestige ou de profit, de respect ou de nostalgie. D'autres, comme Abu Simbel, sont déplacés pour éviter que la marche du progrès ne les détruise. D'autres édifices encore sont déplacés parce que le temps a transformé leur environnement original. Maintenir un monument in situ quand tout ce qui les entoure est changé ou nouveau peut lui ôter sa signification contextuelle et entraîner un désastre esthétique. D'autres encore, comme la Statue de la Liberté, furent conçus loin du site auxquels ils étaient destinés.

Chaque cas doit être considéré selon sa valeur propre. Mais examiner cette valeur dans la cadre de principes généraux épargnerait temps et argent, favoriserait l'harmonie entre revendications rivales et aiderait à mettre en valeur les avantages d'un patrimoine commun à tous. Cet article offre une base pour de tels principes.