Acts of destruction in Cultural Heritage

From vandalism to cultural appropriation

Extended Abstract

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Introduction:

Destruction acts on cultural heritage date, at least, from the Roman Empire period (27 B.C-476 a.D), with the barbaric invasions. But such acts were not always intentional, rather a consequence of armed conflicts and social or political convolutions. Understanding it, depends essentially of its historical, social, political and economic context. The aim of this thesis is therefore, to define and distinguish the acts that are considered vandalism and, consequently reprehensible, from the ones that can be considered a part of our cultural heritage. In this work a group of key factors are proposed as a useful tool for such distinction.

Origin and Evolution of the Destruction Acts:

The first documents relating to vandalism date from IV and V A.D. Due to the destruction and pillage carried by people from east Germania, post-roman kingdoms or tribal people from Scandinavia in Gaul, Spain, Rome and North Africa, these became known as “vandals” (Pohl, 2004).

However, it was only in the Renaissance period that the first official documents for the protection of historical monuments were created. For instance, the papal document “Cum almam nostrum urbem” (“In the soul of our cities”), edited by Pope Pius II (1405-1464), claimed that it was extremely important to preserve historical monuments to future generations, and therefore a continuous effort was essential. Moreover, this document recalls a previous law that forbids and prevent any kind of inflicted damage or destruction to old structures from antiquity and condemns severely those who do not follow it (Choay, 2013).

Image 1: Vista do Forum Romano painted by Hieronymus Cock (1518- 1570), 1551.
Similar documents with historical monuments as theme were edited later, demanding their protection, namely the ones against the removal of stone for other buildings construction. However, while Pope Sixtus IV (1414-1484) edited a document in 1474 ("Quum provvida"), which prohibited damage, destruction or removal of any part from roman historical buildings, Pope Leo X (1475-1521) allowed the reuse of great amounts of marble and stone from historical roman buildings in the construction of St. Peter's Basilica. Nevertheless, the Renaissance proved to be a period where a new set of mind emerged, recognizing the great value of historical monuments and the importance of their conservation for future generations (Jokilehto, 1986).

Another turbulent, yet significant historical period for the importance of monuments’ conservation was the French Revolution, due to the excessive damage to monuments and works of art. It was in this context that the term “vandalism” was firstly used in 1794 by Henri Grégoire (member of the Commission of Public Instruction): “Barbarians and slaves detest knowledge and destroy works of art; free men love and conserve them.” (Jokilehto, 1986: 116).

The fall of the Absolutism political system which started with the invasion of the Bastille prison in 1789, led to the destruction of art representing that political regime. Works of art, such as paintings, sculptures or monuments, perceived as instruments used by the previous regime to control and impose beliefs upon the French people was another motivation to the immense destruction of such heritage (Idzerda, 1954).

![Image 2: La Prise du palais des Tuileries painted by Jacques Bertaux (1745-1818), 1793.](image-url)
Along the years, several Commissions were created to prevent such destruction, however with little success due to some contradictory laws that came out from the National Assembly: “…(…) Whereas, the sacred principles of liberty and equality will not permit the existence of monuments raised to ostentation, prejudice, and tyranny to continue to offend the eyes of the French people (…) All monuments containing traces of feudalism, of whatever nature, (…) shall, without the slightest delay, be destroyed by the communes” (Idzerda, 1954: 16).

The Monuments Commission created in 1790, for instance, was in charge of preserving several works of art finding them guardians; another commission named Commission of Public Instruction and created in 1791, was assigned to protect national monuments. The first one was dissolved in 1793 mainly because it couldn’t prevent the destruction due to its lack of power in front of the laws edited by the National Assembly; while the second issued several laws in which forbade any kind of damage or destruction from happening, with a punishment of two years in prison (Idzerda, 1954). Although these and other measures only proved effective decades later, the French Revolution prompted a new awareness and attitude about historical monuments, with new laws and conservation theories being developed simultaneously (Idzerda, 1954).

In the Second World War occurred a massive destruction of cultural heritage. Even though not all destruction can be considered deliberate and intentional, some episodes especially in the WWII are presumed to be acts of vandalism. It is argued that Hitler had several heritage targets that he wanted to see destroyed so the patriotic spirit of the nation could be also shattered, using the German air force Luftwaffe raids which played an essential role in conquering Europe. One of the most famous episodes occurred in Poland with the Warsaw Castle in 1939 and 1944: Hitler bombarded Warsaw Castle not once, but twice. The first occurred in 1939, however the tower’s Castle remained standing and as the old polish saying says “While the Warsaw Castle is standing, Poland isn’t lost” (Berge et al., 2006).
After that attack, Nazi soldiers dug holes in its foundation and filled it with explosives, which ended up exploding in 1944 when the Nazi forces were leaving Warsaw. The same happened in Florence with the planned collapse of numerous historical monuments, namely some of the most iconic bridges of the city (Berge et al., 2006).

However, the allies also played an important role in what concerns the intentional destruction of cultural heritage. Several historical German cities were constantly attacked by the allies, destroying them completely. Dresden, known as “The Florence of the Elbe” is a great example. This city contribution to the war was minimal compared to other German cities, however the allies used the strategy of “saturation bombing” and within a short period of time, this German historical city was totally devastated (History Channel, 2009).

**Charters and International Conventions of the XX Century:**

To prevent such acts of destruction from occurring, international organizations promoted conventions and laws in the second half of the 20th century. The first document to deal with armed conflict was the Hague Convention in 1954. In it, was decided that the country that occupies other, has to respect and protect its monuments, as well as cooperate with the national authorities in the protection of such heritage. It was created as well an international organization, the Blue Shield, as a network of international organizations that work together to answer as fast as possible to emergency situations, whether from human or natural cause. Besides this convention, there were others which also addressed the problem of deliberate destruction of cultural heritage. From the Venice Charter in 1964 to the European Charter of the Architectural Heritage in 1975, most of these documents pointed out education of younger generations as the key factor to value and protect cultural heritage, and also to avoid its damage and destruction (ICOMOS, 2004).

**Controversial Cases throughout History:**

From another perspective however, the act of destroying cultural heritage (in itself reprehensible) can be perceived as being part of history itself. Examples from the Greek Elgin marbles exposed today in British Museum, or Napoleon and his art pillage throughout Europe or Egypt, are still quite controversial because they are viewed by society as part of history despite the dubious circumstances in which they occurred. On the other hand, more recent events such as the art theft by the Nazis in WWII, the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in 2001, or the destruction of Palmira by Isis in 2015, are universally condemned and rejected by society nowadays. Time distance seems to be crucial for a new perspective to emerge, or possibly the cultural evolution, related to the values of heritage can differ from generation to generation. Take for instance the example of the Reichstag, the German Parliament. In this case, the Cyrillic inscriptions done by the Red Army in this monument after the end of the war, were preserved and valued as history within the building itself (Baker, 2002). Despite criticism, Norman Foster, the architect responsible for its reconstruction in 1999 decided to preserve these inscriptions because they were more powerful than any other exhibition about the
same matter. Thus what was seen as a reprehensible act became part of the cultural heritage of that same place (Baker, 2002).

Possible Origins and Motifs:

Above all, it is essential to know the origin and the reasons behind an act of destruction so society can determine if it is an unjustified act or another historic layer that can and should be preserved for future generations.

In order to synthesize the origins of these acts, some types are suggested:

- Theft or illicit trade of cultural heritage: cases in which there is the illicit trade of cultural goods without the approval of the state that it is its right owner.
- Inscriptions: cases in which there is permanent inscriptions of words in buildings or statues with cultural value.
- Graffiti: it features two cases, the first is scratching scribbles on walls or facades, as for the second is related to the graffiti technic in mural paintings.

Damage or Destruction: cases in which is inflicted significant damage or completely destruction in cultural heritage.

Furthermore, it is essential to understand the motifs behind such acts; its particular context (armed conflict, economic crisis or a revolution). Only then it is possible to understand and evaluate. A possible list of motifs is defined:

- Ideal: to destroy or damage cultural heritage because of political, religious or cultural differences.
• **Strategy:** to destroy or damage cultural heritage in an armed conflict as a way to shatter the identity and memory of a nation.

• **Profit:** cases in which architectural elements or different materials, such as metal, are removed to make profit.

• **Politics:** illicit trade of works of art or architectural elements as a way to empower a nation in front of other.

**Strategies and plans to avoid and condemn acts of destruction:**

Creating and developing not only strategies, but also a network of programs is indispensable to prevent and diminish the occurrence of acts of heritage destruction. However, it is necessary to consider the cultural differences, since applying the same strategy may not be effective in all countries. It is important to analyze each situation individually, the political, religious, social and economic factors, as well as the traditions, in order to adapt the more suitable strategies and programs.

Besides, strategies can range from legislation to organizations and programs. To be more effective, they need to have the support of government as well as the community, establishing a communication between them to upgrade the level of awareness and protection of cultural heritage. Before applying any kind of strategy or program it is necessary to understand the dimension of the problem within the country, being essential to conduct a survey of the cases of damage and destruction throughout the years. In this thesis, the strategies followed by countries such as Portugal and England are analysed, as well as their legislation. In England several organizations and programs were developed over the years, like ARCH (Alliance to Reduce Crime against Heritage) or the National Heritage Protection Plan or the Heritage Crime Programme, in Portugal a few programmes were initiated such as “SOS Azulejo” or the Carta de Risco do Património Arquitetónico (Building’s at Risk Register). Portugal does not have a national network so developed as the English one. Education and public awareness are an essential part to value and protect cultural heritage, and while the set of mind of a nation is not directed to those ideas, it is quite difficult to avoid acts of damage or destruction from happening.

**Case Studies:**

Two case studies were chosen: the Berlin Wall (Germany) and the 25th of April Murals (Lisbon, Portugal) in order to explore the different approach towards preserving new additions and making new memories. These additions add a new historical layer to the building or structure, making society think otherwise and interpret them as part of the history of the monument itself. Also, these acts can as well give a new meaning to the historical monument, renewing it and making them visible\(^1\) in society. This

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\(^1\) Concept created by Robert Musil (1880-1942). A monument is built to be visible and get attention, however, the obsession towards its conservation in the original condition can make it static in time and imperceptible in the societies’ day life (Musil, 1936).
new approach can promote the conservation of such monuments, avoiding its oblivion and abandonment (Robert Musil, 1936).

Regarding the Berlin Wall, this structure was not built to be a monument but a barrier. This barrier was the image of the political division in Europe after WWII. While the west side was divided between USA, France and England, the east side was monitored by Russia. The Berlin Wall was not only a barrier, was system that controlled who passed from the west to east and vice-versa. Many people died trying to cross this system and, to express people’s disapproval, the wall became a canvas of the freedom revolution that came in 1989, with the falling of the Wall structure (Feversham & Schmidt, 1998). One of the most famous outdoor galleries, the East Side Gallery, was part of this barrier and became part of history. Nevertheless, right after the fall there was a time that this structure suffered severe damage and destruction, not being immediately recognized as historically significant (Baker, 2005). At the end, the Berlin wall which was not built to be a monument became one, and especially due to the graffiti and several freedom and revolution messages that were drew and written on them. What is most interesting is that a structure that is a symbol of suffering and death could achieve a place of memorial, thus being valued and preserved.

Image 6: The East Side Gallery (2009), Berlin.

The other case study is related to another ‘freedom’ revolution, the 25th of April of 1974 in Portugal. After a period of nearly forty years of a dictatorship political regime, the 25th of April opened the way to democracy. Even though murals against the regime were beginning to be painted before the revolution, in the early 1970’s, those who painted it were condemn (Simões, 2013). The revolution brought freedom of speech and new political and social ideas, and so the public space, namely the city walls became a privileged scenario for political statements. These murals were essentially commissioned by political parties conveying their ideals of a better future for the country (Aurélio, 1999).

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2 Alois Riegl (1858-1905) concepts of an intentional and unintentional monument: an intentional monument is built to commemorate a human action or event, being its aim to overcome time; as an unintentional monument was not build to commemorate a human action or event, but because its irreplaceable value to the Humankind is acknowledge as a monument, in “The modern cult of monuments: its character and origin” (1903).
However, none of the original murals survived to the present day, being seen by some as ephemeral but missed by others. Over the years, several projects with new graffiti technics and materials, came to remember the original murals. These new murals have the essence of the old ones, but yet with criticism to contemporary culture and politics. Thought and executed by a new generation, the new murals want to celebrate the values of the revolution and show the views of a new generation (Lopes, 2014, Soares 2014 and António Alves interview, 2016). Again, what could have been seen as an act of vandalism (the mural painting and now the graffiti) was reinterpreted as an act of freedom with cultural significance.

Image 7: Salgueiro Maia Mural (2014), Lisbon.

**Conclusion:**

This thesis is aimed at analysing destructive acts towards heritage, discussing if those should be preserved or erased. Conclusions point to the need to acknowledge the difference between acts that provoke feelings of rejection and therefore are highly condemnable, and acts that are accepted and preserved for future generations. An act of destruction can be defined as damage or destruction planned and inflicted intentionally in historical monuments, not being socially justified. As for the ones that are accepted, these came to be socially justified by time distance or a particular context which can lend new and significant meanings to it. Moreover, these add a new and significant layer to the monument’s history and consequently, society finds the need to preserve it for future generations.
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