

About historical centers: is the trend towards décor really irresistible?

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The question

The historical centers of the large European cities are more and more adapted to spectacle, changed into a décor which allows feasts, parades, scenography ... Historical monuments can be managed by Internet companies wanting to build an image of entertaining place. The trend is strengthened by the possibility of changing a monument, when it is preserved, into a piece of décor.

What are the limits of this trend?

We try to explain phenomena like these:

- the four Disney Lands in the world attract more visitors in one year than France
- Euro Disney Land attracts 15 millions visitors each year, and Rome... 4 millions
- in the sixties a Cistercian monastery was demolished in Brescia (Italy), to allow building dwellings
- when Riva del Garda in Northern Italy was destroyed by an earthquake in 1976, the choice was between preserving the historical center or demolishing it to rebuild the city completely. The choice made was to preserve the historical center (Reference: Wikipedia Italiano → Provincia autonoma di Trento → sismicita)
- a church in the Netherlands can be changed into an hotel, but changing it into a nightclub has been refused
- etc.

The answer

The metropolis provides individuals with the conditions allowing them constructing their personal experience (Bourdin, 2005). The provided experience has to be pleasant. It implies a formatting of space and behaviors, either for culture (Heritage) either for entertainment (Décor). As the formattings are not compatible, an arbitrage is necessary.

We argue that the choice of some urban project falls inside a triangle authenticity – historical truth – spectacle.

It corresponds to contradictory needs and tastes of individuals. In a democratic, individualistic and egalitarian society (Lipovestsky, 2009), each group of individuals sharing some tastes can obtain decisions which are satisfactory for it.

There are three kinds of discourses in the city (Bourdin, 2005): the obvious discourse (God, metaphysics), the constructed discourse (analyses) and the delivered discourse (attracting individuals with some tastes in a place which is formatted). As there are needs of entertainment (décor) and memory or roots (heritage) the chosen projects in the historical centers will correspond to authenticity, historical truth and spectacle.

References:

- Bourdin Alain. La métropole des individus (“The metropolis of the individuals”)
- Lipotevsky Gilles. Le bonheur paradoxal (“The paradoxical happiness”).

The method

We present four examples. In each case, either historical truth, either spectacle is winning, depending on the local circumstances. The examples are commented. It is useful to understand why some choice is prestigious and winning, or why some way to impose a choice allowed it being winning or not.

Example 1. The birthplace.

It is a short novel by the famous American novelist Henry James. A guide, after hesitations, chooses storytelling to make the visit of the site more attractive. It is a success. The spectacle wins.

Example 2. The House of Slaves.

This place, in the island of Gorée, near Dakar, in Senegal, has been launched by a guide, Joseph Ndiaye, who is dead today. He presented the House of Slaves as the place from which thousands of black people were shipped to America to be sold as slaves. Historians deny. In this case, historical truth is not winning.

Example 3. Illumination of cathedrals in France.

The final choice is a spectacle in accordance with historical truth (See the photo). It has been a success. We attempt to explain the prestige of preserving heritage in the case of Gothic cathedrals, examining the works of the French architect Viollet Le Duc. His doctrine is interesting: he presents Gothic Art at the time, as popular, contributing to the dynamics of the mediaeval city.

Example 4. The French historian Napoléon Peyrat and the touristic places in Ariège

The French historian Napoléon Peyrat was a very talented historian and poet ... but liking to embellish reality, also. He launched two touristic sites in Ariège, his native region, the castle of Montségur and the caves of Mas d'Azil, thanks to serious descriptions of their roles in history. In the case of the caves of Lombrives, he forged a story which was told by the guides, during decades. Finally, historical truth won thanks to a reaction of historians.

Conclusion

In the historical centers of the large European cities today, it is inconceivable to demolish historical monuments. Therefore, to make room for décor, one has to invent new identities for these monuments. Sometimes it implies storytelling. This can be a success or not. It depends of the local circumstances. In general, the projects in the historical centers should be of three kinds, authenticity, historical truth or spectacle. The individuals' needs are contradictory: they need entertainment, but also roots. The goal of the metropolises is to satisfy demand of atmospheres (Bourdin, 2005).

This ambiguity is not specific to the city. We show that it exists in the fields of tourism and architecture.



The House of Slaves in the island of Gorée is a nice house having belonged to a rich black woman.



The cathedral of Amiens illuminated.

The authentic colors are projected on the statues of the façade by a camera. A comment and music are listened to.



The castle of Montségur has been launched thanks to the good arguments of Napoléon Peyrat.



The caves of Lombrives have been launched thanks to stories forged by Napoléon Peyrat. They are no more told.