

Deconstructing post-conflict reconstruction

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To reconstruct or not to reconstruct, that is the question facing worldwide conservators in post-conflict situations. Since John Ruskin wrote “Do not let us talk then of restoration. / The thing is a Lie from beginning to end,” reconstruction has remained one of the most controversial topics in heritage management. In peacetime, heritage reconstruction is often used as a public interpretation device or as a promotional tool for tourism; it is ‘performed’ on a past which might be seen as safely ‘dead’. However, war and conflict complicate the social role of historic preservation and reconstructions and bring underlying ethical issues into fine relief.

Monuments mediate cultural and social change through active and continuous (re)construction and negotiation of identity, place, and memory. All reconstruction projects are directed in the hope of achieving certain ‘social outcomes’. Such social outcomes have ranged from the desire for: religious revival, social dominance, public education, social exclusion, maintenance of traditions, maintenance of use values, and reconciliation, etc. In post-conflict situations, ‘reconstruction’ is often a crucial concept and activity. Whole social and physical landscapes, architecture, and objects are ‘put back together,’ often with the explicit goal to be reconstructed ‘as they were before.’ In most internationally sponsored post-conflict reconstruction projects today, the functioning paradigm is that reconstruction helps maintain diversity and advances possibilities for reconciliation. The ‘conservation fetish’—the assumption that the remains of the material record should be preserved—takes hold. Yet, does restoration fill this need, and for whom—particular ethnic groups, survivors, future generations—or is the lacunae between the piecemeal remains left by war and the reconstructions they spur unbridgeable? Does reconstruction, to paraphrase Clausewitz, become a continuation of war by other means?

How can we move beyond a myopic scientific approach to reconstruction, one which envisions reconstruction something akin to a medical treatment? Such a view personifies the object, implying that the conservator is ‘just doing what the object needs’. However, as Pye points out, the object is not the client and the conservator is not accountable to ‘it’. The failure of this ‘positivist’ approach in post-conflict situations has resulted in the recognition that decisions about reconstruction need to be made on a case-by-case basis, as there is no one-size-fits-all best practice. However, if this is the case who is accountable for the results of the conservation interventions?

Some indicative questions we hope to address are:

- In communities divided by war, which sense of local identity or experience of the past can or should be 'preserved' or restored?
- Can heritage management help the process of reconciliation, or does restoration merely mask an unwanted past(s) and reify a new 'geography of the excluded'?
- Who should conduct and/or monitor post-conflict reconstruction of heritage?
- How can we help reconstruction projects meet the needs of today's population and yet function as sustainable solutions?
- Individuals make individual interventions in post-conflict situations, but they operate within a larger corporate framework or within a shared collective experience. Should people or institutions be held accountable for the effects of their work? How would they be held accountable? Who has the authority to decide?
- How do we deal with the often conflicting needs of present, past and future generations?

Please send 200-word paper abstracts and poster proposals to Tera Pruitt or Britt Baillie at bab30@cam.ac.uk. Proposals should be sent as Word documents and should include full contact information and a brief academic biography. Deadline for proposals is May 31, 2008.