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NOV-DEC 2011



On Demolition

by Françoise Choay

De la démolition, written by Françoise Choay, was first published in 1996 in the collective work *Métamorphoses parisiennes* (carried out for the exhibition of the same name at the Pavillon de l’Arsenal, Mardaga editions). Yet, 15 years later, these lines remain as sharp as ever and represent a stimulating viewpoint on our heritage – in particular in Paris – so much so that AA felt it was worthy of presenting to their readers in 2011. In light of her current work, Françoise Choay has also reassessed the impact that this text had, removed from all controversy, as she explains: “When *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* asked me permission to republish *De la démolition* in this review, I was all the more surprised that I had forgotten this episode of my journalistic career, and the violent controversy that ensued. However, I have not disowned this text even after careful review, and even though its didactic approach needed to be lightened. On the other hand, the lexicographical research that I am carrying out at the moment provides manifest confirmation of the theory defended, identically applicable to:

- Living languages with their own identities, products of the specificity of the cultures to which they belong.
- Material constructions of all kinds (city, village, landscape, detached houses, facilities, wash houses, drinking troughs, stables, etc.) which, through a material location, provide a visible symbolic foundation to the volatility of language.

Similar to the languages whose material expression they are, buildings of all kinds depend on three conditions: a permanent basis that is more or less inalienable, out-of-date and archaic constructions that must be eliminated, and to replace them, new constructions required by the evolution of life.”

At the start of *Civilization and Its Discontents*¹, Freud uses the city, and notably the eternal city of Rome, as a metaphor for memory; memory as the basis of our personal identity. Wishing to make it clear how “nothing belonging to our psychic life can possibly be lost and how everything will, one way or another, be preserved [...] everything is however preserved”, he asks the reader to imagine the coexistence of all the successive stages in the development of the city. “This would mean that in Rome the imperial palaces on Mount Palatino, together with the Septizonium, would still be rising to their former height and that the battlements of Castello Sant’ Angelo would still carry the beautiful statues which used to adorn them up to the siege of the Goths [...] On the site of Palazzo Caffarelli, which would not need to be destroyed for that purpose, would still stand the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, not only as it appeared to the Romans of imperial Rome, but also as the structure originally erected by the Etruscans. On the site of the Pantheon we would find not only the monument we inherited from Hadrian, but also the original one left by Agrippa. [...] The observer would then perhaps only have to change the direction of his glance [...] to call up one of these architectural structures.”

However, here, suddenly the author stops: “There is clearly no point in spinning our fantasy any further [...] If we want to represent historical sequences in spatial terms we can only do it by juxtaposition in space. Our attempt, consequently, seems to be an frivolous game”. A few lines further, he adds: **“The most peaceful development of any city requires the demolition and the reconstruction of some buildings. A city is thus a priori unsuited for any comparison of this kind with a psychic organism.”**

Why then does the father of psychoanalysis play such a “futile game”, and why does he develop at length such an uncanny comparison, just in order to, eventually, denounce its absurdity? In other words, what is the meaning of this enigmatic text which I shall use as the beginning and the end of a brief inquiry in the field of demolition?

I shall begin, therefore, by this truism or this obvious fact stated by Freud: “The peaceful development of any city requires demolition”, or again, using more radical words – mine this time – all cultures and societies have been created and developed by

¹ *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, Vienna, 1929.

demolishing. Demolition is a historical necessity. On the one hand, during the wars and the conflicts in which they were opposed, culture and societies have continued to deliberately destroy the built heritage of their opponents, violating the founding value of the act of building. On the other hand, according to a different logical process, the only one that concerns us here, but with the same violence, they have continued to destroy their own heritage. They have destroyed it on behalf of its uselessness, dilapidation, functional problems, unsuitability, obstruction, lack of comfort and, in positive terms this time, on behalf of modernization. To build it in a different way, they have voluntarily, and frequently without scruples, demolished their ordinary, but also their extraordinary heritage. The paradigmatic Western reference remains that of St. Peter's basilica in Rome: built under Constantine I, the most precious monument of Christianity was demolished during the 16th century, in accordance with the will of popes Leo X and Julius II. However, Paris and Ile-de-France are not to be outdone when it comes to famous cases. It was with full consciousness, as he notes himself in his account of the construction of the new church of Saint-Denis, that pious Abbot Suger ordered the Carolingian basilica to be partly demolished. And, four centuries later, François I had the fabulous chateau of his ancestors deliberately razed in order to build the Louvre.

However, let us focus on modernity. The coming of the industrial era accelerated the rhythm of this process. The new technical demands of society had to be catered to. Whole areas of cities were demolished cutting into the existing fabric. Haussmann became the symbol of modernizing destruction, the intention of which was to make Paris the first and most important of the three paradigms² of the European metropolis. However, whatever their scale, these demolitions remained partial and selective, aimed at what they could permit; as Haussmann said, the "regularization" of the existing fabric. In this way, the metropolis remained a city, while promoting a new form of urbanity. On the other hand, for the first time, from the inter-war period on, the need for demolition was radically confirmed in theoretical terms. Le Corbusier stated that we must make a "clean sweep" or even create a "blank page", due to the incompatibility of the old and the new. Symbol: the Plan Voisin for Paris. After the World War II, not only did this approach, integrated into the doctrine of the CIAM (International Congresses of Modern Architecture), inspire similar plans, such as that of Albi, but it was to dictate the politics of renovation, particularly in France, i.e. the destruction of the centres of old cities.

And here comes to pass, from the 1960s, a historically unparalleled about-turn: a reversal that does away with the evidence of demolition and which, at least in theory, sets down the principle of the complete conservation of the buildings of the past. We cross the boundary markers laid down by the Historic Monuments protective principles, which, at work behind the scenes since the 15th century, had since the 19th century required selective cultural conservation, in a chronological field limited afterwards by the arrival of the industrial era. The current heritage conservation project vaguely encompasses all types of construction and covers the production of the 19th and 20th century entirely, up until a present that has scarcely had time to cool down. Of course, this is an ideal objective, which the different European countries serve by drawing up more or less detailed and restrictive legislation, which is then subjected to essentially violent or underhanded transgressions and disputes.

Nevertheless – we are at the heart of the problem that I wished to formulate – how can we explain the contradiction to what the two approaches or practices that I have evoked confront us with? On one hand, there is demolition, which appears to be the other face of construction and which has never ceased to be carried out throughout history. On the other, we have the complete conservation of our built heritage, which has never existed historically. Are the two attitudes really contradictory? Is this not, instead, an aporia? Does the truism of demolition, as some still claim to be the principle behind their actions these days, not hide a sophism? In the terms in which they are presented today, do not demolition and conservation have different meanings to their traditional ones, and, once again, does their lexical permanence not mask the emergence of new issues? Answering these questions requires the raising of another related question. What change has come over advanced Western societies, in the last 30 years, that might account for such a reversal?

We cannot deal with this second question without giving due consideration to technology and its evolution, too often ignored by historiography, Marxist in particular, and sociology. Instead of focusing on the forms of production and social relationships, we must centre this problem on all the related technological developments which link the built environment and mentalities in a feedback loop.

However, before sketching a picture of the transformations caused by these factors, I would like to attempt to look more closely at the meaning of demolition and traditional conservation, using two apparently opposite examples. The first is taken from

² The two others being Otto Wagner's Vienna and Cerdá's Barcelona.

De re aedificatoria (1465), a treatise on the method of organizing human space, whose author, Leon Battista Alberti, similar to Descartes liberating reason from the philosophical object, grants reason autonomy and creative authority regarding the built object. However, in three brief but fundamental passages³ of this inaugural text, Alberti condemns demolition vehemently. It is a crime, an infringement of rights (*injuria*). In his opinion, the unavowed reason for modern demolition is the incompetence of architects, who do not know how to build if everything that occupied the site has not been eliminated beforehand. For him, the only valid reasons for demolishing lie in irreparable defects and the lack of space, when one cannot raise new buildings unless the old ones are demolished. As for the reasons for not demolishing, for Alberti, there is obviously the savings, but it is more out of human respect for the work of previous generations, whose expression takes on an unparalleled tenor until Ruskin; and, above all, the necessity of creating long-lasting buildings that contribute to establishing the identity and legitimacy of our institutions, beginning with our human condition. **The conservation of our built heritage is therefore linked, in *De re aedificatoria*, to its founding and identifying value, to the seriousness itself of the act of building, of which, I believe, Alberti was the first to have recognized the importance in a fundamental anthropology.** At a time when architecture was entering an era of reflection and self-awareness, we could summarize Alberti's position by the premise: through the conservation of the built frame we can continue together the creation and foundation of the human world. In other words, the creative activity of the architect (legitimized by the supporting discourse of its contributors) and the longevity of old architecture are of equal weight in the continual recreation of institutions in space. They are solidly linked by the ambivalence of time which is both constructive and destructive.

My second example is taken from Japanese tradition. It concerns the ritual demolition of Shinto temples, which takes place every 20 years and which ends with their reconstruction on another site. The temple of Ise has just been subjected to this ritual⁴. Dismantling takes place, because unlike Westerners, the Japanese do not venerate the marks of time on their buildings. To be used for worship, the temple must have a purified site and a new appearance. In reality, this seemingly brutal dismantling is analogous to a living and unhistorical form of conservation. It does not aim to rebuild an exact copy as faithful

to the original as possible. Experience shows the contrary. Each reconstruction carries with it analogous innovations to those we encounter in the transmitting of myths. The identity to be provided is that of a functioning for the faithful and its necessary condition is not only the presence and behaviour of the faithful, but the practice of the craftsmen who must ensure the continuity of their know-how. This is what the Japanese now pay tribute to when they endow these craftsmen with the quality of living national treasures. This denomination recognizes that the know-how of the carpenters of Ise guarantees the longevity of this religious institution, but it also points to the fragility of this treasure whose rarity would appear destined for the museum. In turn, the Shinto approach could be summed up in a premise: the legitimacy of the demolition of buildings which contribute to the founding of human communities has the necessary (but not sufficient) condition of having the know-how ensuring their recreation.

We can see, therefore, that two apparently paradoxical and, a priori, opposed cases; that of a man of progress and innovation advocating conservation and that of a traditional religion demanding ritual demolition are based in reality on identical premises. Conservation can be the condition for innovation and destruction a synonym for conservation. Our two cases both presuppose the continuation and continuity of building. They refer identically to the material foundations of the institution of society.

Our first obvious fact, the Freudian truism, is thus split into two parts. Together, demolishing and conserving are integral parts of the building process in its founding function. This second and double fact sheds light on the Copernican reversal with which technical and societal change confronts us, which has continued and accelerated during the last 30 years and which, at the same time, has transformed the meaning of the relationship between demolition and conservation.

It is true that the development of high-speed transport, multiple forms of telecommunications, increasingly powerful artificial memories, virtualization procedures (synthetically generated images and other virtual realities) generate a technical order, which gradually frees us from the traditional, spatial, temporal and physical restrictions within which the framework of the built environment was produced. It tends to liberate us from taking root, from permanency and time scales that were specific to small-scale settlements, whose interconnected and modulated elements came from the dual physical practices of the builders and inhabitants. The large technical networks,

³ Book II ch. I., Book III ch. I., B X ch. I.

⁴ Cf. M. Bourdier. "Le mythe et l'industrie ou la protection du patrimoine culturel au Japon", in the special issue *Patrie-Patrimoines*, in *Genèses, Science sociales et histoire*, Belin, Paris, 1993.

which now underpin regional planning, among other things, offer an unprecedented freedom of movement and settlement. However, by opening up the city to unrestrained dispersion, which is its own negation, they also open up to architecture what could be its negation as well; a total empowerment in the choice of the locations and scales.

Regardless of any allegiance to the theories of the Modern movement and the CIAM, architects and urban planners are currently submerged in the permissiveness of the electronic culture, and through this are solicited to respond more instantaneously and directly than the theoreticians and practitioners of the previous generation, by a demolition prerequisite, which they justify on the basis of two different arguments. According to the first, their creativity would at last be liberated through a new technical logic. Architecture schools, administrations and the general press establish the emergence of a radically new order, the independence of creators and the freedom from contextual constraints as truth. This pseudo-truth can be summed up in a sophism which I will call the sophism of creation *ex nihilo*, since, just as for 50 years, all the findings of the linguistic and semantic disciplines have shown that established societies do not have absolute beginnings, that the most brilliant creator is only slightly innovative, and that intercontextualization is the condition for the development of meaning.

Translated into terms of the built environment, these words mean that no architectural, urban or rural culture has ever grown on virgin soil, that architectural genius only blooms occasionally every century and that the vast majority of architects are a product, as Serlio was the first to understand, of an ordinary standard, and that throughout history, the most prestigious buildings have always been a part of a contextual dialectic.

Could it not be argued, however, that today we are faced with a historical rupture similar to those that have periodically marked the major phases of the evolution of human society, and which, in the end, could lead to a change in our species? Whatever the nature of the psycho-sociological transformations evoked, the sophism of creation *ex nihilo* refutes the role of the reference in the institutionalization of human societies.

Furthermore, the current supporters of demolition rely on a second kind of argument, founding a second, better concealed, sophism this time, since it is based on a misuse of language, and which I will call the sophism of demolition. The demolition that we claim is justified today in the name

of historical necessity is now no longer that of tradition and it is not the reverse of construction. Its negativism comes with no positivism. The *tabula rasa*, once reinvested by new objects – renovated and rebuilt, we are told – is not structured nevertheless, nor does it bring with it urbanity. It remains a *tabula rasa* forever, as the Paris ZACs (urban development zones) demonstrate *ad nauseam*.

The hegemonic development of technical networks and territorial development scales tend to supplant and condemn the implementation of the local and urban construction scale, whose deployment contributes to founding our identity, as well as our anthropological legitimacy. Every day, we unlearn and forget this scale a little more, which a false historical conscience and a false sense of modesty must not deter us from qualifying as human. To us, Eupalinos' prayer has become both strange and a stranger: "Oh my body [...] take care of my work. Teach me the requirements of nature silently [...] Help me to find in your alliance the feeling of real things"⁵ and we can no longer understand his maxim "that there is no detail in the execution."⁶ We are losing both the know-how-to-do and the solidly linked know-how-to-occupy, whose manifestation it conditions, and which in turn are necessary for its continuation. By taking up the Freudian metaphor we started with, we find ourselves in the situation of the individual accidentally and pathologically deprived of his memory and condemned to live a dissociated and fragmented identity, in the fleetingness of the moment.

The revelation of this loss and this sophism explains the astonishing project of the complete conservation of our built heritage. This project, which is virtually an institution today, results from a traumatism and constitutes a response to a threat, which is obscurely perceived as lethal. Wishing to conserve everything is a defensive reaction, whose real purpose our societies do not understand. It is in ignorance of the reason that they instinctively challenge the advice of Élie Faure, who said very soundly: **"We must leave the ruins to die... Restoring ruins is as useless as putting makeup on old people [...]. Let the ruins die the death of men, creatures and plants [...]. Other statues and other temples will grow from the fertilized dust."** Societies have not yet understood that if the advice is no longer right (and doubtless it still was in 1902, when these lines were written), and if we hang on too tightly to this heritage, a part of which is condemned by time, it is because we no longer know how to replace or continue it,

5 P. Valéry, *Eupalinos*, Gallimard, Paris, 1923 (pp. 45-46 of the 1944 edition).

6 *Ibid.*, p. 19. To be compared with the phrase by Mies van der Rohe: "God is in the detail".

remaining loyal to our anthropological vocation; we no longer know how to accept the violence of a legitimate demolition. We can destroy or abandon the foundations – whether institutional or material – provided that we know how to rebuild them.

I had the opportunity to denounce a narcissistic⁷ attitude in the systematic conservation of our heritage. We know that narcissism is a stage in psychological development, essential to the constitution of the individual's identity. However, we also know that this stage must be temporary in the development of the individual, as the word itself indicates, and must be gotten past, failing which it is transformed into sterile neurosis. Narcissus dies through self-contemplation. Therefore, the radical conservation of our heritage permits us to recover an identity that has escaped us and whose threats weighing on it create a state of anxiety. This conservation permits us to remember our identity and our institutional status. However, this conservation, which has become obsessive self-contemplation, turns sterile and dangerous when it is cut off from action, and relinquishes the continuation of construction which founds all anthropological and societal identity.

To describe nature and the consequences of this conservation process, we can use another metaphor from *Civilization and Its Discontents*. **The Freudian theory of memory shows that the inflow and co-presence of all past memories in the field of consciousness is as pathological as their exclusion. The function of forgetting, and notably concerted forgetting, is as necessary to action as creation.**

These two references to Élie Faure and Freud will have made understandable that, in principle, the radical conservation of the buildings of the past is supported by a third sophism. I will call it the sophism of the conservation of the past. Exactly as in the case of demolition in which we saw that, today, this term is no longer used in the traditional sense, when we set out, in the current technical and societal context, the need to conserve all our past heritage, we give the word conservation a different meaning to that which it assumes in our liminal definition, shed light on by two examples taken from Alberti and Japanese culture. It is no longer a question of the concealed face of demolition; the notion is deprived of its share of negativity. In the name of the values with which the history of historical conservation has gradually endowed heritage, in other words in the name of knowledge and art, it confuses museum existence

with existence in time, history with historicity, the knowledge of art with the art experience, and the risk-free memory of historiography with the dangerous memory of incarnate life.

The notion of demolition thus enters into relation with that of conservation, according to different meanings. In other words, for the current historian and critic, the concepts of demolition and conservation form two couples, one of which applies to the traditional behaviours of our societies and the other to those of the technical civilization that is emerging.

In the first couple, demolition is a practice inherent in all composed societies and its reverse side is that it is recreated, which is a form of conservation, insofar as it aims to assert a difference in the continuity and the continuation of an institutional work. In this inseparable quality of the conservation/demolition couple, the consubstantial relation which links these two terms today accounts for the value that we attribute to the configuration of certain old or very old cities, some of whose strata have disappeared to be replaced over time. Their quality – we do not have a word to describe it, urbanity is now too hackneyed to express their fascinating hospitality – is due to the fact that successive generations have known in their own way, and each time differently, how to continue the city of previous generations. Such is the symbolic case of Rome *intra muros* that Georg Simmel, justifiably marvelling that “the disparities of time, styles, and content [...], much greater than anywhere else in the world, intertwine in a unity, harmony and homogeneity as nowhere else in the world, was unable to understand that it was not, in this case, an incomprehensible unity and even less a fortunate coincidence”, but that his total organic unity was the never-completed result of this twofold knowledge of how to demolish and conserve.⁸

All things being equal moreover, Paris, which admittedly cannot rival Rome, either in age or in its role in universal history (or in the art of building), also demonstrated this same type of physical quality, like many other cities. And Haussmann, who was no doubt the greatest demolisher of the French capital – since, except to make it a historical centre and a museum ahead of its time, there was hardly any alternative to this violence – Haussmann, I repeat, had to continue Paris as did Philippe-Auguste, Charles V, François I, Louis XIV and their contemporaries.

Doubtless, the Haussmannian recreation finds its most accomplished form in the public squares, gardens and parks, which connect the old spaces of the city to the new, welcoming and reinforcing new behaviours. And this recreation is identical. It combines

7 *L'Allégorie du patrimoine*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1992.

8 G. Simmel, “Rom, eine ästhetische Analyse”, in *Zur Philosophie der Kunst*, Potsdam 1922 ; trad. fr., Payot, Paris, 1989, pp. 54-55.

the same invention and the same careful attention to detail, whether it was to create the Parc des Buttes Chaumont on wasteland which collective memory associated with the mediaeval gallows and which was only occupied by abattoir workshops and waste dumping grounds⁹, or to reshape for a changed public either the Marie de Medicis Luxembourg Gardens or the Tuileries Garden that Charles Perrault convinced Louis XIV to leave open to the people of Paris.

■ In the second present-day case, which I said is based on a sophism, since it is assumed on the basis of words that do not correspond to their traditionally held meaning, we are dealing with a demolition freed from all attachment to the past and to a passive conservation which has lost its life by breaking with violence. Demolition and conservation are no longer the two sides of the same practice, but two diverging approaches, claimed by contrasting ideologies and practices. This demolition lacking background and this conservation with no horizon, which have developed since the 1950s, have remained connected, but linked by an antagonistic and no longer interdependent relation.

■ **Officially recognized, institutionally proclaimed, the new conservation continually clashes with the new demolition, triumphant or masked, joyful or insidious.**

For insidious demolition see the Louvre, where we succeeded in demolishing simultaneously both the vistas¹⁰ which gave the building a meaning in the Parisian context and the palace listed as a Historic Monument, now reduced to the level of a sham. For concealed demolition (under conservation or restoration), see Place Vendôme, now the logo for an underground car park.

■ Let me be understood. I am not backward-looking. It is not a question, here, of crying over the past and the lost traces of old Paris. Neither is it a question of crying over Baltard's Les Halles, which no longer had a use, nor over the 19th and 20th arrondissements, in which some of the houses were falling to ruins, nor over the Louvre Museum, whose layout was anachronistic. It is a question of shouting out a truth that no one wants to see, as we would if the emperor had no clothes: that no one has been able to transform or replace these spaces, that they have disappeared as instituted and instituting places. Les Halles has become the Forum for drug-dealing, the Belleville and Menilmontant districts are eaten away by the increasingly virulent leprosy of gentrification, the Louvre is a banal cultural supermarket and not the symbolic (not necessarily great) site that our period called for.

■ Admittedly, we will find counterexamples. Since I enjoy gardens, we can start with the Luxembourg, maintained with careful innovative piety, which would be worthy of a long analysis. However, here I must limit myself to denouncing a trend which displays its hegemony. This trend comes with the emergence of a new technical civilization, which we struggle to recognize under the permanence of words – city, countryside and so many others that are no longer fitting – and which, simultaneously, open wonderful treasures and threaten to deprive us of the founding dimension of human space, which no juxtaposition of technical objects will ever allow to unfold.

■ The force of the antagonism that now opposes the two terms of the new conservation/demolition couple is an eloquent indicator of the sheer scope of this emergence and its dangers. However, it is not sufficient to be informed and warned. This indicator solicits action. It requires us, on the path of loyalty to the anthropological vocation founded us, to which give an identity to and establish our societies over time and in space through a verbal practice and physical commitment. Consequently, the question which arises is that of the subversion of the new conservation/demolition couple.

■ Let us start with neo-conservation. Two preliminary operations are required, but are not sufficient. These are to restrict the selection to objects that we no longer know how to make (in particular, the minor urban fabric) and to define them and study their fundamental characteristics (scale, proportions, relation and connection between elements). Then the real problem arises, going from passive and museum-like conservation to a dynamic conservation in tune with negativity: an objective that can only be achieved through an approach that we will call, unreservedly, memorial, heuristic or pedagogic, since it is part of these three registers, and involves, on the same terms, both inhabitants and men of art, designers and users.

The precautions we should take: not to be taken in by the mirages of the culture industry, and, above all, not to fall into the trap that false historical memory sets for our real organic memory, transformed today, when there are practically no real Parisians left, primarily and fundamentally into a memory of gestures.

■ What can then be said about neo-demolition? How, in turn, can it be undermined? To what field should it be assigned? One answer seems to be obvious. In the continually renewed, better performing and more efficaciously developed hegemonic area

9 *Mémoires du Baron Haussmann* (1893) Paris, Vol. 3, p. 234.

10 Main east-west axis from the Cour Carré to the Place de la Concorde, first truncated by the pyramid, then broken by the bump (due to the treatment of the subgrade) into two second-rate spaces separated by a tangle of walls and steps.