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EDITORIAL

Towards a re-characterisation of waste

As preparations for the fifth edition of *Aedificare* draw to a close this April, it is difficult to not mention the fire of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. As the astonishment of the early hours gradually gives way to discussions on the future of the cathedral, we do not intend to propose yet another peremptory opinion on the methods and timeframes of the reconstruction. At the very least, the monument merits enough time being allowed to pass to ensure that emotion is not the only guide or pretext for the future restorations. For, reading the statements that have fuelled newspapers of all types since the catastrophe, one might question what really burned on 15 April: the site of major events that have marked the country “from Saint Louis to de Gaulle”? An emblem? A myth? A source of inspiration for artists? ...

“It’s more than a building that’s up in flames: it’s our history”. These words by an anonymous individual, reported by *Libération* (16/04/19) after the fire, resonate in many ways on account of the polysemy of the word ‘history’ itself. It was indeed part of our history – personal or collective – that the flames attacked as they lashed out at the site of countless international, national and more private events. This cathedral has played its part in a religious, artistic, technical, economic and political history, and very much continues to do so if we consider the current discussions and the stakes attached to its “reconstruction”. The very fact that we speak about “reconstructing” or “rebuilding” – more than repairing or restoring – is significant, stemming from a desire to in some way sublimate the emotions involved and set the restoration within another dimension: that of a “national project”, for example, to use the words pronounced by Emmanuel Macron during his televised address of 16 April 2019.¹

1 « Il nous revient de changer cette catastrophe en occasion de devenir meilleurs que nous ne le sommes (...) Il nous revient de retrouver le fil de notre projet national » (‘It is our

Yet how can we not also see the fire that ravaged part of Notre-Dame Cathedral as an implacable reminder of the materiality of architecture in its most concrete form? Wood, stones, glass, and metals were at the heart of the blaze. It was these materials that were consumed, above all else. I mention this aspect of the cathedral without any touch of fetishism, in line with one of the key objectives of our journal: “to raise awareness among the public and professionals about the materiality of architecture as well as about technical heritage”.² This is an objective which chimes – as chance would have it – with Octave Debary’s fine book, *De la poubelle au musée, une anthropologie des restes* (‘From the Dustbin to the Museum: An Anthropology of Remains’), published in March 2019.³ Insisting on the material character of the monument and endeavouring to take this dimension into account should not – as the definition of the adjective itself suggests – lead us to distinguish between that which concerns things and that which concerns people. For, paying attention to the materials that form a building is one of the ways in which its complexity can be grasped and the multiplicity of actors involved highlighted. One might consider the study of the assembly marks identified by Frédéric Épaud on the framework of Bourges Cathedral,⁴ for example, Jean-Claude Bessac’s analysis of the traces of shaping analysed on the stone blocks,⁵ or the evidence concerning the forming of the metal tie rods of the Palais des Papes in Avignon revealed by the metallographic analyses carried out by Philippe Dillmann.⁶ There is a long list of studies that – for some decades now – have been tracing the remains of the work carried out by people on the objects still with us today. It is a way of tackling that which – to borrow Howard S. Baker’s

job to turn this catastrophe into an opportunity to become better than we are [...] We must recover the thread of our national project’ (*Le Monde*, Thursday 18 April 2019).

2 Robert Carvais and Valérie Nègre, « Á propos de la revue », *Aedificare*, 2017-1, n° 1, p. 34.

3 Octave Debary, *De la poubelle au musée, une anthropologie des restes*, Grane, Créaphis éditions, 2019.

4 Frédéric Épaud, *La charpente de la cathédrale de Bourges. De la forêt au chantier*, Tours, Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2017 (*Collection « Perspectives historiques »*).

5 Jean-Claude Bessac, *L’outillage traditionnel du tailleur de pierre de l’Antiquité à nos jours*, Paris, CNRS, 1986.

6 Philippe Bernardi and Philippe Dillmann, “Stone Skeleton or Iron Skeleton? Provision and Use of Metal in the Construction of the Papal Palace at Avignon in the Fourteenth Century”, in Robert Bork (éd.), *De re metallica. The Uses of Metal in the Middle Ages*, Aldershot-Burlington, Ashgate, 2005 (*Avista Studies in the History of Medieval Technology, Science and Art*, vol. 4), p. 297–315.

metaphor of cinema credits⁷ – Octave Debarry has noted in relation to art, which “in its modern form, often reduces its list of credits to a single author, the artist. These credits often conceal many of the actors and interventions required to produce art, all of which are involved in the production, diffusion and reception process”.⁸ This is the objective of the current edition of *Aedificare*, in its way, which Valérie Nègre and Sandrine Victor have dedicated to the contractor: an individual who struggles to find his/her rightful place in credits more likely to include sponsors, creators and practitioners than these sorts of intermediaries, whose undertaking is centred on money. The plethora of actors convened on the building site helps us anchor construction in the society of its time, while also highlighting the diverse range of motivations that may have come together and contributed to the production of a work.

In this sense, by taking an interest in the materials that form a building, we consider not only the creation process, but also the actions and toil undergone by individuals, switching from a single history to a plural one.⁹

Considering the material aspect of the monument also implies a reflection on the issue of the remains of the ancient cathedral: not of the parts that have remained as they were, but of all the materials affected by the flames and which the photographic reports show strewn across the sides of the vaults or the floor of the cathedral. While we can only grieve the loss of the evidence the materials consumed by the flames may still have provided on the many interventions that have shaped Notre-Dame over the centuries, it is important to ensure that those that have remained are not dismissed as waste. The aspiration to rebuild the cathedral “more beautiful than ever” reveals a desire to move beyond the disorder caused by the fire, to eradicate its every trace and memory to recover a form of integrity and order. There is thus more at stake here than the restoration of Notre-Dame.

The danger is thus that the tenuous traces still presented by the charred remains might also be irremediably lost, thrown away, sacrificed to the desire to cancel out every blemish, to overcome the ordeal

7 Howard S. Baker, *Les mondes de l'art*, Paris, Flammarion, 1988.

8 Octave Debarry, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

9 On this point, see the introduction by Sabina Loriga, *Le petit X. De la biographie à l'histoire*, Paris, Seuil, 2010.

by moving towards something new, something “more beautiful than ever”. However, even if it is lessened, evidence of these remains persists provided that enough efforts are made to recover it. Torn-up masonry and materials damaged by the flames can still teach us something about the history of the construction of Notre-Dame, and the people that built it.

It is of course not a question of opposing necessary restoration work and turning these remains into ‘heritage’, but rather of taking the time to gather the information spared by the fire, even revealed by it. Like the waste workers who “are working hard to reinvent, to rebuild something out of these remains”,¹⁰ historians can set about reclassifying the rubble by studying and analysing it. The challenge, here, is to transmit a history or, more precisely, communicate a material history of the building that considers the evidence of the toils of human beings. Because a monument cannot be reduced to a space of representation.

This is one of the objectives of the *Association des scientifiques au service de Notre-Dame de Paris* (Association of scientists working in the service of Notre-Dame de Paris)¹¹ set up on 17 April, and which the journal’s team readily supports. The emotion aroused by the fire has highlighted the importance the public attaches to these built traces of our past. With events such as this, we touch upon the fragility of the evidence available and the imperative necessity that falls upon the historian to record it as best possible so as to endeavour to transmit the associated knowledge.

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10 Octave Debary, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

11 Association des scientifiques au service de la restauration de Notre-Dame de Paris. Email address: scientifiquesnotredame@gmail.com; telephone no. (+33) 6 11 76 95 63. <http://scientifiquesnotre-dame.strikingly.com>; <https://m.facebook.com/Scientifiques-au-service-de-la-restauration-de-Notre-Dame-de-Paris-427032084537200/>, accessed 10/20/2019.