

***Holding on to the Past, Preparing for the Future:  
Heritage and Depots in Times of Crisis and Transformation***

Dr. David Duindam, Lecturer at the University of Amsterdam

Full text

I would like to thank the organizers for the invitation to speak to you today.<sup>i</sup> The fact that we are standing in Warsaw is not something we can take for granted. The capital of Poland was almost completely destroyed during World War II. Much of the city was badly damaged during armed conflicts, not unlike other European cities. What was unique in the case of Warsaw was the fact that the Nazis had planned this urbicide before the war as part of their goal to completely efface Polish life and culture. After the Nazis had crushed the Polish resistance in 1944, special forces were put in charge to burn down remaining buildings with a special focus on culturally significant sites. There was no military aim: it was a form of cultural genocide. When the city was liberated, 85% of the historic center was gone. One can ask how to deal with so much emptiness; but one can also ask how to deal with such an excessive amount of history. There was some talk of relocating the city altogether, but in the end it was decided to meticulously reconstruct the historic center with the help of archives and paintings.

There is an intimate relationship between the words excess and access. The theme of this congress is the role of storage facilities in light of the cornucopian excess of art objects. Ever-expanding collections lead to overcrowded storage facilities. At the same time, there is an increasing demand for public access. More and more, we are dealing with visitors that see themselves as users that want direct access to repositories. The rise of new information technologies has created a new type of citizen that sees itself as both a consumer and producer of knowledge.

A central issue is how to create meaning out of excess. We can rephrase this in two ways that raise different but related questions. How do we go from the excess of the repository, be it an historical archive or a museum depot, to knowledge products such as books or exhibitions? Both historians and museum curators select, interpret, organize, contextualize and present sources and objects: only then does information become meaningful knowledge. Another formulation is, how do we create meaning out of the excess of the past? One way of looking at this issue is the production of heritage: we select objects, buildings or traditions from the past in order to support our identity, be it regional, national, ethnic or religious, in the present. This is the reason why the value of heritage goes beyond the monetary and is often entangled with socio-political conflicts.

In my lecture, I want to address two topics. Firstly, I want to explore the relationship between the destruction, preservation and reconstruction of heritage. What does heritage mean in times of crisis and war? We will look at how the Nazis purged, destroyed, looted, collected and exhibited art, which will allow us to consider why the city of Warsaw was deliberately destroyed by the Nazis and

reconstructed after World War II. Can and should we reconstruct destroyed heritage? And how? The second topic is opening up the museum storage to the general public. Is this an answer to the growing demand by the public of open access and the coproduction of knowledge? And are museums able to provide context at the open depot, or does this imply a fundamental transformation of this institution?

### **Precarious heritage**

Cultural heritage is that part of our cultural repository that we canonize. As a whole, it fosters up an image of a shared history and by extension, a shared present and future. The term heritage wrongly suggests that we inherit this canon and that we are mere custodians that preserve these objects for future generations. But we must remember that what we consider to be our heritage is not something fixed but instead contested and revised; conserved, destroyed and reconstructed; and recontextualized in relation to changing views on the past.<sup>ii</sup> Let me give an example from the field of memory and heritage studies where I work in, namely the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam. This building was almost demolished in the 1950s when its owners wanted to build a new office. The Dutch government argued that it could not intervene because this privately owned residence was not a monument of historic or artistic relevance. In spite of this lack of action from the national government, a local action committee collected money and prevented the former hiding place of the Frank family from destruction. Today, nearly 1.3 million people visit each year, making it one of the most important sites of heritage in Amsterdam.

What we see in this example is that what we consider as valuable heritage depends on our changing notions of the past. The persecution of the Jews only became an outspoken part of Dutch memory culture from the 1960s onwards, and today it is arguably core of the hegemonic discourse on World War II. Furthermore, it is important to observe that the value of this site of heritage was acknowledged only when it was threatened with destruction, and that it was successfully protected by a grass-root movement.

An important characteristic of the Western conception of heritage is its focus on material authenticity: buildings or artworks are deemed important because they are unique, original and irreplaceable.<sup>iii</sup> What follows from this is a discourse of vulnerability and protection: because heritage is directly linked to our self-image, we must safeguard it from destruction. One could even argue that heritage becomes more valuable in times of contestation, conflict or transformation, as it then becomes part of public and political debates. The possibility of being destroyed is therefore part of the inner logic of heritage.

### **Heritage in time of conflict**

The importance of protecting heritage is most imperative in times of conflict. Two months ago the UN Security Council passed resolution 2347 that makes it possible to class the willful destruction of heritage as a war crime and cements earlier resolutions that prohibit the illicit trafficking of cultural

property. Irina Bokova, director-general of UNESCO briefed the council with the following statement: 'The deliberate destruction of heritage is a war crime, it has become a tactic of war to tear societies over the long term, in a strategy of cultural cleansing. This is why defending cultural heritage is more than a cultural issue, it is a security imperative, inseparable from that of defending human lives.' UNESCO was conceived during World War II in the wake of Nazi violence and after it was established in 1946 held crucial conventions to prevent the destruction and trafficking of cultural heritage. Bokova's speech is therefore not surprising. What was unprecedented was the fact that the UN Security Council adopted a resolution concerning cultural heritage. It was a move towards securitizing the issue. The resolution also explicitly lists the actions of terrorist groups such as IS and Al-Qaida.

The statement by Bokova ties the fate of cultural property to that of human lives. It naturalizes heritage as something that is inherently valuable and foregrounds its material over its construed nature. But can we really equate human lives and cultural property? The role of UNESCO has stirred angry reactions in Syria and Iraq because it seems the West cares more for archaeological sites than the people in these countries. Furthermore, the question is whether the label of World Heritage turns sites into highly visible targets rather than protect them. Besides UNESCO's moral appeal, the resolution targets the monetization of heritage by terrorist groups. Though IS deliberately destroyed heritage, the trafficking of artifacts is reportedly their second source of income after smuggling oil and is carefully organized by a structure that resembles the organization of a ministry.<sup>iv</sup> It likely was this more pragmatic issue that implored the Security Council to accept the resolution.

### **World War II: purging, looting and cultural genocide**

The role of heritage in times of war is decidedly more complex than just that of cultural cleansing. This becomes apparent when we look at the paradoxical Nazi dealings with art. They had ideological, political, military and financial motivations that led both to the destruction and preservation of cultural property.

For the Nazis there was an almost direct link between a people and its art. In 1937, museum collections were purged and 20.000 modernist artworks were confiscated. The infamous shaming exhibition *Entartete Kunst* was visited by over 3 million people. It was much more popular than the pendant exhibition *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung* that showcased so-called 'true' German art. Rather than destroying the confiscated works, most of them were sold abroad for profit. Some works were taken by Nazi officials for their private collections. 5.000 works that were not considered valuable were burned away from the public eye. Though this destruction of art was part of the Nazi ideology, it was not part of the propaganda machine.

Considering the destruction of built heritage, the most infamous prewar event was the so-called *Kristallnacht* on 9 November 1938. In reaction to the shooting of a German consul in Paris by a Jewish German citizen, a large-scale pogrom erupted in Germany and Austria. Hundreds of Jews

were murdered and thousands of Jewish-owned stores, buildings, of synagogues and Jewish graveyards were demolished. This extreme violent attack on Jewish heritage was not part of a preexisting larger plan to purge German cities from Jewish buildings; it was an semi-organized outburst of anger made possible by years of anti-Semitic policies and propaganda. Fueled by Joseph Goebbels, his rivals Heinrich Himmler and Göring expressed their doubts about this attack as it damaged diplomatic relations and destroyed valuable property. Heritage was targeted as an extension and instead of Jewish lives. The *Kristallnacht* is considered by many as a turning point in the persecution of the Jews towards their physical destruction and murder. In the years to come, Nazis focused on murdering Jews and monetizing their property rather than destroying it.

When the Nazis invaded other countries, their art collections were meticulously plundered. There were several, and often intersecting motivations: to create new collections as part of state-building; personal and financial gain; and cultural genocide. Hitler himself was personally invested in creating what he saw as the greatest museum collection the world had ever seen. To this effect, he intended to build the *Führermuseum* in his Austrian hometown Linz. In 1939, he commissioned Hans Posse, director of the Dresden gallery, to create a large collection. Posse focused on early German, Dutch, French and Italian paintings by artists such as Rembrandt, Hals, Vermeer, Da Vinci and Raphael. In total, between seven and nine thousands art works were collected for a museum that was never realized.

Many more artworks were taken for personal and financial gain, both by individuals and competing organizations. The organization of this plundering was different per country. The Dutch were considered a Germanic people and the Nazis unsuccessfully tried to appease and incorporate them culturally, among others by appropriating Rembrandt as the epitome of the German artist who fell from grace because of his dealings with Jews. In the Netherlands most art was bought – often but not always under duress – or taken from confiscated collections of Jewish owners. The looting in Poland was of a different sort altogether. The Polish people were considered Slavic and were to be either Germanized, enslaved or murdered. The plunder of art and other valuable objects was part of a larger plan to completely annihilate Polish culture. This was done ruthlessly and without any form of compensation. Different decrees from 1939, only months after Poland was invaded, legalized the confiscation of all properties of the Polish state and art of ‘public interest’. In 1942, Nazi officials claimed that 90% of all artworks that once were in Poland were now in their possession: here the plunder of art was a toxic mix of financial gain and cultural genocide.

An estimated 20% of all art in Europe was looted by the Nazis. Many works were hidden in underground repositories to protect them from armed conflicts. After the liberation, a special allied unit searched for these places. One of the most spectacular discoveries was that of a salt mine near Altaussee, where among others the Ghent Altarpiece and Michelangelo’s Madonna of Bruges were found. Millions of art works were returned after the war, but an estimated hundred thousand artworks are still lost and restitution remains to be a thorny issue in the international art world.

In Germany, Nazis purged public art collections; abroad they plundered in order to create new and complement existing collections. Sometimes, this plunder was an effort to eradicate other cultures, but it was always motivated by greed. Individual artworks were rarely explicitly destroyed as part of an ideological and public action; instead they were either appropriated or trafficked. This was more difficult when it came to immobile heritage. In the air war against Great Britain, Germany targeted buildings with cultural and historical value instead of military significance. These so-called Baedeker raids had the military aim of inducing terror, not an ideological one of cultural cleansing.

This was different from the planned destruction of Warsaw: the city was to be completely demolished and rebuilt as a provincial town with only ethnic German citizens and enslaved Poles. During the war, the city was damaged badly when the city was taken by armed forces in 1939, during the Ghetto Uprising in 1943 and during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. This last operation was an attempt by the Polish resistance army to liberate the city awaiting the arrival of the Soviets. The red army however did not advance and after two months of intense fighting, tens of thousands resistance fighters and nearly 200.000 Polish citizens were killed. After combat was over, special forces were put in charge to systematically burn down Warsaw block by block: an estimated 35 % of the city was annihilated in this act of aggression, with a strong emphasis on cultural heritage such as libraries and historical landmarks. As the Soviet army approached Warsaw, there was no military aim for the Nazis: this cultural genocide was meant to completely eradicate Polish culture and life from the face of the earth.

### **After the conflict: reconstructing Warsaw**

After the war, Poland was bereft of one-fifth of its population: 5 million citizens, 3 million of them Jews, were killed. Art collections were looted, cities and towns were badly damaged, and Warsaw had suffered the worst. The reconstruction of the city was not just a practical matter to accommodate residents and offices, it was a prestige project. The old center had been the stage of bloody fights and its effacement was proof of the Nazi assault. Rebuilding Warsaw was thus an act of assertion by a new and unpopular government heavily influenced by the USSR. The result was not a modernist urban plan that took the city as a tabula rasa, but instead a nostalgic reconstruction of the historic center to win popular support with the Polish population. It was the first attempt in history to reconstruct an entire cityscape rather than isolated historic landmarks.

Between 1945 and 1951, the main plan was drawn up and in 1953 the market square and several adjacent streets were reopened. Reconstruction efforts continued throughout the 1960s and the last great project was finished in 1984, when the Royal Castle was reopened. The rebuilding of this particular building had long been delayed by one of Poland's leaders as it reminded people of the 1939 attack made possible by a pact between the Nazi's and the Soviets. Only in the 1970s, when the leadership changed, the castle was rebuilt in thirteen years' time. The Warsaw Castle – the adjective royal was unacceptable in socialist Poland – was used for state events and became an important

tourist attraction.

The question is, what was reconstructed? It was not a return to the prewar Warsaw of 1939, but to an composite image of the late 18th century capital, a period that the communist party considered as Poland's enlightenment not yet spoiled by the capitalist tendencies in later years. The reconstruction was based on historical records, the expertise of academics and the memory of those involved. Much of the less desirable elements of the inner city were left out, such as the dark and crowded courtyards that were now turned into light and spacious areas. Historic ornaments that had disappeared for decades were restored and façades were dressed with depictions of old crafts and even of the reconstruction itself.<sup>v</sup>

An important source for the reconstruction was a series of paintings by Bernardo Bellotto (1722-1780). This Italian painter was made court painter of the King of Poland in 1768. Twenty-two of his cityscapes survived the war and were used to bring back a city once destroyed; currently they reside in the Royal Castle. When you walk around in Warsaw, you find reproductions of these paintings that emphasize their crucial role in the reconstruction. These copies of paintings produce a questionable form of authenticity: they intent to emphasize the resemblance of the urban space with these artistic renderings and at the same time point out the artificial nature of the old town.

Furthermore, the choice to reconstruct the Warsaw of the 18th century also begs the question what is *not* being reconstructed in a city where so many Jews perished. The former ghetto in Warsaw was not rebuilt and instead Muranow, Warsaw's main Jewish district just next to the old city center, was turned into a socialist-realist housing complex where the past was nearly invisible. Large and monumental buildings were to demonstrate the victory of socialism over fascism and capitalism: Muranow now stood for a bright socialist future rather than the death and destruction that lay underneath. For decades, the persecution of the Jews was not part of the hegemonic Polish memory discourse. Just after the war, the ghetto fighters were celebrated as heroes, but the victimhood of Polish nationals overshadowed that of the Jews. The multiethnic prewar society was transformed into a mono-cultural country where relatively few Jews resided, and only after the fall of the wall was the persecution of the Jews gradually acknowledged.

The reconstruction of Warsaw was a patriotic act that evoked the past, reflected contemporary social and political realities and aimed at the future. It was recognized as UNESCO world heritage in 1980 as a reconstruction. At the same time it erased certain parts of the past. But is it ever really possible to reconstruct something without transforming it radically? The notion of erasure implies the possibility of its opposite, namely a complete and 'authentic' reconstruction that goes back in time. This is of course impossible: a reconstruction will always be partial and incomplete and claiming it is a perfect reconstruction would negate the destruction and reconstruction alike. The new Warsaw was an dreamt-up city and by using Bellotto's paintings it was already part of Poland's cultural repository before it was even realized.

Both Jewish life and the former ghetto have not been completely erased from the city. Rather than a complete reconstruction akin to the old city center, residents and visitors have to rely on scarce and fragmented traces of the past: a few Jewish tenement houses remain in Prozna Street, the Nozyk Synagogue survived the war and parts of the old ghetto wall are still visible, which some of you may have seen during the walking tour yesterday. Otherwise, the former ghetto is made present by pointing out its absence: dozens of memorials throughout the city commemorate the past and simultaneously point out that Jewish life is no longer part of the urban texture of Warsaw. The most important one, the Ghetto Heroes Monument designed by Nathan Rapaport, was established in 1948, and remains an important site for foreign heads of state who come to Poland. German chancellor Willy Brandt famously fell to his knees in 1970 out of penance, an event that itself has been memorialized at the Willy Brandt Square in 2000.

In the last decades there has been a renewed interest in Jewish culture throughout Eastern Europe, what some have called a renaissance without Jews.<sup>vi</sup> In cities such as Budapest, Prague and Krakow, sites of Jewish heritage have become popular tourist destinations. In light of this development, the Holocaust has gained more attention as well. In Warsaw 22 memorials have been erected since 2008 that mark the boundaries of the former ghetto, such as this one at the location where the small and larger ghettos were connected by a footbridge.

The most important addition however is the state-of-the-art POLIN museum that exhibits the 1000-year history of Polish Jewry. It was established in 2013 across from Rapaport's memorial and emphasizes the importance of Jewish culture in the history of Poland. This museum had to build up a collection from scratch and the permanent collection display uses virtual techniques and reconstructions to build its narrative, as there are not many original objects that can tell the complex story of the history of Polish Jewry.

There is a big difference between reconstructing and memorializing. One can even argue that the latter makes the past more palpable than the latter. Traces of the past are indexical signs that demand an imaginative and affective investment on the part of the public; hence a ruined building across the former ghetto wall evokes a stronger sense of historicity, of being at a site where something has happened, even if you don't know *what* precisely took place here, than a reconstructed market place. In that sense, the former ghetto has a kind of ghostly presence in the urban texture of Warsaw.

Today, the reconstruction of heritage is heavily influenced by new technologies. In reaction to the destruction of Palmyra, both drones and digital tools are used. One such initiative is New Palmyra, an organization that collects data from international partners and through crowd sourcing – you can upload your own photographs to their website. This information is used to create models of buildings that have been destroyed. These are available online for free and anyone with a 3D-printer can produce their own replica. It implies that heritage is not just about material authenticity and

should not be limited to state-involvement, and that it is not just about *in situ* reconstruction. Another project employed drones to make digital models of over twenty important archaeological sites. Last year, a large exhibition was held at the *Grand Palais* in Paris that showcased these models. The exhibition was opened by president Hollande who argued that saving lives and saving stones are inseparable efforts. So again, we see that the threat of destruction musters up initiatives of preservation and new technologies, and cultural and political support. The question is whether these digital reproductions will be used in the future for an exact copy of prewar Palmyra and other sites. As stated before, a reconstruction can never be complete and can erase an important part of the past. It will be interesting to see whether these models will ever be used for an *in situ* reconstruction of sites in Syria and Iraq, or that these are mainly projects aimed at Western countries.

### **The museum as public institution: the open storage facility**

The public nature of these digital initiatives points at an important transition in the preservation of heritage. Everyone can help by uploading their own photographs of these sites: photographs taken during a vacation can help save these sites from total destruction. Furthermore, the public is encouraged to share data, models or code that might help. This form of crowd-sourcing can also be found in museums without collections such as the newly established National Holocaust Museum in Amsterdam: here, visitors are asked to donate objects to help build the new permanent exhibition. This appeal to the public is not only meant to expand the collection; it also encouraged visitors to join an active museum community. This strategy can be seen in light of a changing attitude towards museums and public institutions in general.

As argued before, the production and consumption of knowledge has been greatly influenced by new information technologies. Archives and museum collections have been or are in the process of being digitized and made available online. Easy and open access to large amounts of data and information through the internet has given the general public a more assertive role. Anyone with an internet connection can use this almost infinite supply of information to create new forms of knowledge, without an institutional gatekeeper that actively supervises or controls the content of this process. This begs the question regarding the quality of this knowledge: if sources or images are used without a proper context this can result in biased or wrong descriptions. Wikipedia is a good example of this: it is an acceptable source for dry facts, but the entries often fail to produce a coherent and knowledgeable narrative.

The wide availability of information has created the expectation of open and easy access to public repositories. If information is not secret and can be digitized, people expect it to be just a mouseclick away. In combination with the monopoly of google, this means that if something does not exist on google, it does not exist at all for the generation born into the internet age, the so-called digital natives. Online presence, especially on major platforms such as google, is essential for museum institutes. This can conflict with the way institutional online repositories provide proper context: if you use google to look for images or other sources, the institutional interface may be circumvented.



Furthermore, once digital images circulate, it is impossible to ensure proper contextualization.

The expectation of open access also impacts the general attitude towards museums: people want full access to the collection. This seems to go against the function of storage facilities. These were traditionally off limits to the visitor and spaces where curators and other experts were allowed to research and select art works for public presentations. However, the storage facility is not a closed system, but rather a transitional space that is based on the possibility of making objects available upon request. It preserves objects for future use and there is a constant exchange due to new exhibitions, acquisitions and loans to other institutes. In spite of this, to some visitors they symbolize the black box of the inner workings of the museum who feel that certain 'treasures' are hidden from the public. In the last decades, museums have attempted to battle this image by being more transparent and opening up their backstage areas. A good example is the restoration of artworks in public spaces. Similar to the open kitchen concept, this strategy aims at informing the public about preservation techniques, accounting for financial costs and thereby taking away possible distrust on part of the visitor.<sup>vii</sup> However, it must be said that the public backstage is always partial that will only give a glimpse of the inner workings of a museum. It is a contextualized performance and never, thank god, a participatory practice.

A similar rationale underlies the idea of opening up storage facilities to the general public. It aims at showing the inner workings of the museum and seems to be a radical move akin to making your entire collection available online. However, the access to these repositories can never be unconditional and is always already placed within a certain context. The Schaulager in Basel, opened in 2003, only allows researchers and people with a special interest that have registered online to go into the depot. The Public Art Depot under construction in Rotterdam will have a greater but still not unfettered accessibility for the general public, as guided tours will be organized through those parts of the depot that are not openly accessibly.

I started this lecture with the question whether open depots still provide a context for the public to understand the art works. I argue that these open depots are radical and structural examples of backstage performances that have been around for several decades. The 'open access' is conditional and partial, and the artworks are always already placed in the context of the repository. Lay visitors will not try to understand them as part of a narrative exhibition, but instead look at works as indexical fragments that are meaningful because they are part of the overall collection. They will most likely not be looking for particular information, but instead stroll around like Walter Benjamin's urban flâneur. It is precisely this figure that dealt with the excess of the past through wandering around that might prove to be a model for the future visitor of the open depot.

---

i This lecture was given on 22 May 2017 at the CODART TWINTIG conference in Warsaw. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Gerdien Verschoor, Friso Lammertse and Marringje Rikken for their input, guidance and feedback. I have not provided a full biography, but listed only the most important works I used.

- ii Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge, “The Uses and Abuses of Heritage.”
- iii Smith, *Uses of Heritage*.
- iv De Cesari, “Post-Colonial Ruins.”
- v Crowley, “The Ruins of Socialism: Reconstruction and Destruction in Warsaw.”
- vi Gruber, *Virtually Jewish*.
- vii Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*; MacCannell, “Staged Authenticity.”

### **Selected biography**

- Crowley, David. “The Ruins of Socialism: Reconstruction and Destruction in Warsaw.” In *Power and Architecture: The Construction of Capitals and the Politics of Space*, edited by Michael Minkenberg, 208–26. New York: Berghahn Books, 2014.
- De Cesari, Chiara. “Post-Colonial Ruins: Archaeologies of Political Violence and IS.” *Anthropology Today* 31, no. 6 (December 1, 2015): 22–26.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956.
- Graham, Brian, Gregory John Ashworth, and John E. Tunbridge. “The Uses and Abuses of Heritage.” In *Heritage, Museums and Galleries. An Introductory Reader*, edited by Gerard Corsane, 28–40. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Gruber, Ruth Ellen. *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- MacCannell, Dean. “Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings.” *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 3 (November 1, 1973): 589–603.
- Smith, Laurajane. *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2006.