



A TRUE
END OF HISTORY

GLE BOUMAN

SELL

REMOVE

KEEP



Archis 4
Layout Trace

Text Ole Bouman

A true end of history

11
Research

Flyer
Abandoned City

2003. A random year in an era in which the origins of humanity are becoming less and less relevant. A year in which Jews, Moslems, Christians, Hindus and atheists, all with their own historical calendar, are fighting one another in a singular Now that appears to be the same for everyone but which in fact revolves around the question of whose history shall be called universal and whose history shall be regarded as mere folklore. A year in which we were also witness to an unprecedented historical loss: the treasures of Mesopotamia; the remnants of the cradle of civilization. Through the recording eyes of CNN cameramen, we watched the looters at work in the National Museum of Baghdad, the archeological riches grasped in their greedy hands or piled up on handcarts. The world gasped at the sight of so much vandalism. While a guard was mounted at the Ministry of Oil, the world's heritage had been left to the mercy of bandits.

Later on the situation turned out to be somewhat less appalling than it had appeared. By no means everything had been stolen. Many museum pieces had already been taken to safety and so escaped the ravages wrought by greed, desire or simple poverty. The world breathed a sigh of relief and left the experts to get on with it. But the tableau as such – the impassively watching troops, the burning library, the superpower's tactless Minister of Defense, and the incredible shambles in the temples of culture – was engraved in our memories. The magnitude of the disaster may have been less than had been feared, its significance was not. We were all standing on the threshold of a dramatic amnesia. A loss of memory of our own choosing or at any rate for which we bore partial responsibility. In such a situation a stroke of luck makes little difference.

There are less sensational examples, of course, but their effect is probably much the same. In Guildford, Connecticut, stands America's oldest house. It dates from 1639 and currently houses the estate of its very first occupant, the Puritan Henry Whitfield. Like many other places of outstanding historical significance, this museum is now closed to visitors owing to drastic funding cutbacks in heritage protection and preservation. Tax cuts are obviously not beneficial to future generations' acquaintance with their own past. Small wonder that report after report testifies to a dwindling historical understanding – and that they are being greeted with less and less hilarity. Although some sniggering may be just about appropriate in the case of the response of an interviewee asked around the turn of which century Napoleon had lived: 'First tell me what centuries there are'.

In this climate of forgetting, old theoretical issues of historiography suddenly seem highly topical: To whom does history belong? What is the relevance of historical memory? Can that memory be externalized with aids like books and computers? How to write contemporary history when one is part of it? Is it possible to recognize the spirit of one's own age? All questions that have been posed at one time or another in order to stress the relativity of history. But now these same questions can equally well be asked out of doubt as to whether there is any history at all! At least amnesia is a conscious inability to reconstruct a complete historical record. What we are now seeing is a memory gap that no longer recognizes itself as such. Sometimes people don't want to hear a story. Sometimes they don't want to understand it. But now it is also impossible to recognize the

historical story. The End of History indeed. Was Francis Fukuyama aware of this self-fulfilling prophecy when he used this idea for the title of now-famous essay in 1989?

Perhaps it really is so. Perhaps history is no longer a battle between ideological opposites in which the study of history is itself part of history. And no one cares anymore whether history is a matter of repeatedly reliving, repeatedly rewriting or conversely of capturing its residue in cut-and-dried, easily understood clichés. These are all old bones of contention (although still hot issues for many people in the heritage industry). Gone are the days when historians split into two camps over the 'worst event in human history', the Final Solution, into those who talked about Shoah in the spirit of filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, and those who in the spirit of Steven Spielberg succeeded in reducing the Holocaust to a romantic television series. For whether you believed in a history without images and without text but with lots of empathy, or in a historical picture book for everyone, there was at least one subject about which everyone was agreed: history mattered.

The same is true of the battle being fought in architecture and heritage preservation. Whether you believe in a self-evolving city where nothing remains the same but everything moves along in a historical continuum (so that only repair and renovation is possible), or in the inclusion of the high points in a collection of ideal types (requiring restoration and reconstruction), what both parties have in common is a belief that history matters and should be preserved. Whether you are minded to give history a nudge in a certain direction because you know better, or want to reproduce it because proven quality should be the guideline, there is respect for history.

But how do you go about building and preserving when faced by a universal loss of memory that no longer recognizes itself as such? What else can you do than simply accommodate whatever task presents itself? What are you supposed to remember, represent and monumentalize when nothing but fathomless indifference remains? What to preserve when heritage is seen as no more than junk, at best fit for the black market? The fundamental question is no longer which history matters, nor how it matters, but whether it matters at all.

Archis turned to makers and thinkers who continue to answer yes to that question.

