Teresa Ferreira

Appropriation of medieval architectural heritage: examples from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

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This discussion position, with Portuguese case studies, addresses the pervasive and uncritical consumption of medieval architectural heritage, which is often distorted from its original material and cultural values. Over the last two centuries we have observed not only a rising awareness of the importance of architectural heritage as an historical and material document, but also a popularization of medieval structures, as the elected «portraits» of national, aesthetic, religious and political signifiers. In the twenty-first century, the era of globalization and information, heritage is being re-evaluated as a material document for our collective memory. «Artificial memories», developed via electronic and digital means, contribute to a growing «cult of monuments» and superficial appropriation, which may misinterpret a site’s original significance. Complex, dynamic and multiple cultural heritage meanings are often reduced to a self-referential cult of generic, even narcissistic identity, playing the role of a big mirror where we can contemplate our ideal and desired image. In addition, the economic sustainability of restoration, tourism and marketing, which inevitably submit structures to an exhibition process that removes them from their original contexts. As a result, heritage is developing into one more ‘site’ for general public consumption and entertainment, just like the Internet, shopping mall, stadium or theme park.

Medieval architectural heritage, with its rhetoric and symbolic appeal to a nostalgic and golden past, is undoubtedly a key representative of cult and consumption, revivalism and fetishistic pastiche. In such a scenario, is medieval architectural heritage itself becoming a theme park, a nostalgic escape into the security of the past when facing an uncertain future? Are we respecting the original significance of cultural heritage sites or are we just using them as narcissistic mirrors of our own identity?