

Revolving funds and building preservation trusts: a new and efficient way of preserving European Heritage?

Descrizione

In France, Culture is a very centralized matter: only the State can be trusted when it comes to that field. However, a lot of the government competences are now being transferred to regions or private structures because the State can't handle them anymore. That phenomenon isn't always seen as a good thing and this privatization is often depicted as a danger for the national heritage integrity. However, if we look across the Channel or the Atlantic, private structures and initiatives seem to be pretty efficient tools to protect the heritage. Revolving funds and building preservation trusts are part of them and deserve to be considered as a potential solution to be introduced into the French system in order to safeguard historical buildings.

“Revolving funds” are structures frequently acting in cultural heritage preservation. They can be described as pools of capitals from which the revenues are reinvested into a specific activity and can be compared to the French “fonds de dotation” created in 2008(1). The Fonds de dotation is a non-profit moral person of private law. It receives and capitalizes goods and rights of every types that are brought to him in a free and irrevocable way. It uses the revenues of the capitalization in order to achieve a mission of public interest or redistribute them to assist a non-profit moral person in its general interest activities. This new tool, inspired by American “endowment funds”, is coming across a quite important success in every philanthropic sector thanks to its creation simplicity and its utilization flexibility. A “fonds de dotation” can be used as a structure managing and financing a cultural property by a private person. For instance, “Bateaux du Patrimoine” manages historic ships and finances their restoration. But most of them are usually created by foundations or associations in order to finance more efficiently their activities.

Two different kinds of revolving funds should be imported in France. The first one comes from the USA and acts like a bank that enables very interesting loans for who wants to preserve cultural heritage. Moreover, this system is efficient because the

loan will only be granted if the renovation has to respect high standards. If labels systems, or foundations such as the “Fondation du Patrimoine(2)” already exist to help vernacular buildings’ preservation, such a fund hasn’t been created yet even though it could be a very powerful financing tool.

“Building preservation trusts” are another form of revolving funds that are mostly present in Great Britain, Ireland but also Switzerland. The Landmark Trust (Great Britain) is a charity created in 1965 that manages pools of capital. Thanks to its revenues, it rescued more than 200 historic and architecturally interesting buildings and their surroundings from neglect. Once they have been restored, the buildings are turned into places to stay for holidays, which gives a new functionality to the unused building. Created in 2011, “Pierres d’histoire” adapts this great system in France for the first time. Why is it worth creating such a firm in France? First of all, the Landmark Trust was a proof that the concept was successful and sustainable for a long period of time. Moreover, it guarantees the quality of the restoration of non-used buildings or threatened buildings with a special architectural or historical interest. Giving them a new economic potential enables their preservation but also makes them financially independent. It is a sustainable long-term process to fight against the heritage destruction. Then, this structure has several other advantages: it promotes social integration and contributes to local development, and it insists on the educational aspect. “Pierres d’histoire” is a very young initiative, so the project is still shaping up but it seems to be a right track to follow and develop.

As a matter of fact, the private sector can sometimes be more efficient at protecting cultural heritage than the State does: new ways of funding this preservation are put into action and high quality restoration standards are usually respected. Of course, it still falls to public instances to create a strict and intelligent framework around these new initiatives so they can be developed in the right way.

Endnotes

(1) Articles 140 et 141 de la loi du 4 août 2008 de modernisation de l’économie (articles of the modernization of economy law).

(2) French Foundation aiming at safeguarding and enhancing the non-protected rural

Heritage.

Bibliography and websites

Christel de Noblet, Protection du patrimoine architectural aux Etats-Unis et au Royaume Uni – Initiative privée à but non-lucratif, L’Harmattan, France, 2009

Frédéric Martel, De la Culture en Amérique, Gallimard, France, 2006

Fondation du Patrimoine <http://www.fondation-patrimoine.org/>

Pierres d’Histoire <http://www.pierresdhistoire.fr/>

Fonds de dotation des Bateaux du Patrimoine <http://www.bateauxdupatrimoine.org/>

The Landmark Trust <http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk/>

Campi meta