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UNDERSTANDING
THE HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT: **FRANCE**
A VIEW FROM

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In France, the principal agency responsible for providing reliable, soundly researched information on the historic environment is the *Inventaire général du patrimoine culturel*. Founded by André Malraux in 1963, this national inventory service, with a staff of about 300 throughout the country's 26 metropolitan and overseas regions, is responsible for identifying and studying the national heritage and diffusing information on this heritage. Closer then in its missions to the former Royal Commission than to English Heritage, this organisation has developed a methodology, comparable to that of inventory organisations throughout Europe, founded on the confrontation between the classic resources of the historian – maps, archival records, engravings, photographs, publications... – and the heritage as it survives on the ground, to be identified, photographed and studied. The results of the inventory's work are made accessible by means of a national data base called Mérimée which can be consulted by the (world-wide) general public at the web site of the Ministry of Culture and Communication. The inventory's main approach is a topographical one, advancing by defined "study areas" which may be towns, cantons, departments or groups of communes along a valley. But there are also thematic surveys underway, focussing on the industrial heritage or on the heritage of France's seaside resorts.

Historically, the inventory's research programmes have been of a disinterested, academic nature, with no direct input into planning procedures or even into the selection of sites worthy of statutory protection under the terms of French legislation on historic monuments. The information on the historic environment is generally presented in a succession of documentary files on individual buildings but also with more general files on urban development, for example, or for the collective, typological analysis of the "ordinary" architecture of housing or farm buildings. These files are readily available to decision-makers in the fields of national and regional planning and to the national historic monuments administration and its services in the regions, but these actors are under no obligation to take the inventory's work into consideration. As well as the national data base, the inventory's findings are also published in different collections: the "Cahiers du patrimoine" which are in-depth studies, generally the result of several years' research; the "Images du patrimoine", which, as their name suggests, are comprised essentially of historic and contemporary images accompanied by a well-informed text; heritage

"itineraries", designed as tools for cultural tourism and finally heritage "Indicateurs", gazetteers which are simply published versions of the computerised data base. It is largely through such publications, in the fond belief that they can encourage wider public appreciation of the historic environment and its values and inform the management of this environment that the Inventory makes its contribution to planning policies in general and to the intelligent negotiation between conservation and change.

The Inventory has no specific programme on the theme of port cities, but its classic topographical programmes have covered, or are covering, a number of French ports: Dunkirk, Boulogne-sur-Mer, La Rochelle, Cherbourg, Le Havre and Rouen. Some work has also been done on the port installations at Marseilles, the French port most readily comparable to Liverpool (the question of tides set aside), studied in detail by René Borruet at the Marseilles architectural school. I propose here to look more closely at the Inventory's work on Le Havre, a good example of the Inventory's approach and one which addresses the questions of this workshop: the links between the

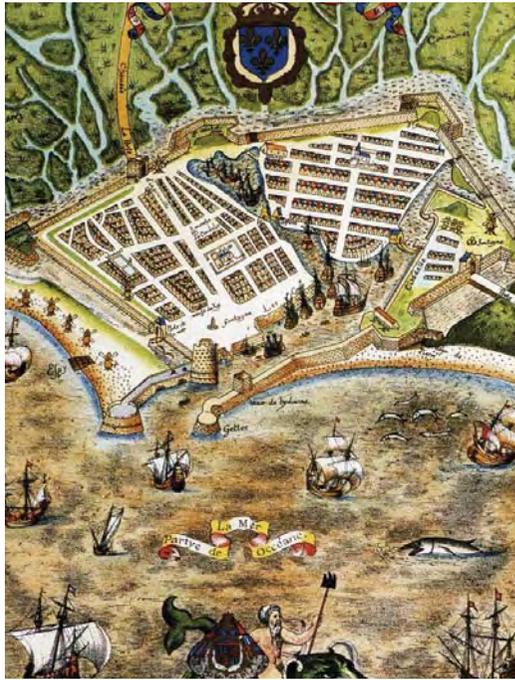


Fig.1



Fig.2

understanding of an historic environment and its preservation, the audiences targeted by research endeavours and the possible benefits of better understanding.

Carried out by a team directed by Claire Etienne-Steiner, heritage curator in the Haute-Normandie region, the inventory's research programme on Le Havre was commenced in the early 1990s at a time when the modern architecture of the city centre, entirely rebuilt between 1947 and 1965 under the direction of Auguste Perret, was still little appreciated. Unlike many of the Inventory's earlier research programmes, accumulating brief monographic studies on a selection of buildings, this programme was concerned from the outset with understanding the overall historical development of the city, founded, as a port, by King François I in 1517 (Fig.1). Built on a marshy alluvial plain, Le Havre, then, was a port before it was a city, the settlement itself, laid out according to plans drawn up by the Italian engineer Jérôme Bellarmato, being a precocious French example of concerted town planning. Strategically sited at the mouth of the Seine, the city was chosen by Colbert for the creation

of a naval dockyard, but during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the opening up of Atlantic trade and Le Havre's easy river access to Rouen and to Paris, it developed primarily as a commercial port. Stimulated by the arrival of the railway in 1847 (the line from Paris to Le Havre, built largely with English capital by English engineers and navies, was France's first major inter-city line), the nineteenth-century city, one of the fastest growing urban centres in the country, spread beyond its fortifications (demolished in 1854) and became an industrial centre (shipbuilding) as well as a busy port, with new docks and extensive warehousing facilities built from the 1840s and new jetties extending the port's domain towards the sea by the creation of an outer harbour (Fig.2). Between the two wars Le Havre also became a major centre for the importation of petrol whilst the construction of a new passenger terminal also made it an important port for ocean liners and for emigration.

Fig.1: Le Havre, map of 1583 showing the harbour and quays protected inside the town defences (© Paul Smith/ Inventaire général du patrimoine culturel)

Fig.2: Le Havre, map of 1853 showing the growing dock system and the grid-plan layout of the streets (© Paul Smith/ Inventaire général du patrimoine culturel)

During the Second World War the German army destroyed the harbour works and, in September 1944, air raids by the RAF literally levelled the city centre and much of the suburbs (Fig.3). The reconstruction of the port and of the city was carried out in parallel operations, the port rebuilt along its pre-war lines but using modern techniques of prefabrication and pre-stressed concrete. The city centre, on the other hand, offered a *tabula rasa* on which Perret's design team rebuilt the city centre according to a plan which largely ignored former property lines and which was marked by two major new landmarks, the town hall and the church of Saint-Joseph (Figs.4 & 5).



Fig.3



Fig.5



Fig.6



Fig.4

Since the completion of the reconstruction of the city centre in the 1960s, the port has pursued its expansion, huge new container terminals making it France's leading port for container traffic, ranking fifth in Europe (Fig.6). Upstream, between the river and the Tancarville canal, cut in the 1880s, an industrial zone specialised largely in oil refinery, the petro-chemical industries and motorcar manufacture (Renault at Sandouville) has developed.

Fig.3: Aerial view of the waterfront in 1944 showing wartime destruction concentrated in the waterfront area (© Paul Smith/ Inventaire général du patrimoine culturel)

Fig.4: Le Havre's Town Hall, completed 1957 to designs by Auguste Perret (© Paul Smith/ Inventaire général du patrimoine culturel)

Fig.5: the Church of St Joseph, built 1951-58 to designs by the architect Auguste Perret (© Paul Smith/ Inventaire général du patrimoine culturel)

Fig.6: Le Havre's container port from the air (© Paul Smith/ Inventaire général du patrimoine culturel)

The research on Le Havre's urban development was largely based on historic plans and on cadastral maps drawn up in 1825, 1845 and the 1950s. It resulted in a total of 878 files, covering the port and the different quarters of the city and its suburbs. "General" notices dealt with the city's infrastructures (the main road from Rouen to Le Havre, the railway, the navigable Seine, the Tancarville canal, the city's water supply and tramway networks) whilst individual notices covered the territory's public and religious buildings, its public spaces, its individual docks and warehouses and a selection of houses, housing estates and apartment buildings. Some 200 notices dealt with buildings destroyed in 1944. This was exceptional for an Inventory project but corresponded with the city's highly specific identity and the still pregnant memory of its pre-war forms and monuments. The research was then shared by means of a series of publications designed for different publics: an "indicateur" reproducing all the notices in the database and briefly surveying all the buildings deemed worthy of interest, including of course the city's 26 historic monuments, several of them destroyed in 1944 and several

others protected in 1946 as lucky survivors; four "itineraries", guiding visitors, respectively, around the port, the city centre rebuilt by Perret after the war, the old port of Harfleur and Le Havre's seaside resort at Sainte-Adresse, which developed from the 1840s. An "Image du patrimoine" dealt in more detail with the reconstruction of Le Havre after the war and, last but not least, a "Cahier du patrimoine", published in 2005, brought together the research on the city's overall urban development from its origins up to the present day.

Fig.7: Le Havre's designation as a World Heritage Site has brought many visitors to the city (© Paul Smith/ Inventaire général du patrimoine culturel)

Fig.8: The great mid-19th century warehouses in Les Docks Vauban await conversion to new uses; in 2009 they were opened as a retail and leisure centre (© Paul Smith/ Inventaire général du patrimoine culturel)

It is difficult of course to measure the impact of these publications on the appreciation of Le Havre's heritage, but the fifteen years of research investment (along with a political change in the municipal authority) undoubtedly coincided with a new appraisal of Perret's reconstruction of the city centre, given statutory protection as a "Zone de protection du patrimoine architectural, urbain et paysager" (roughly the equivalent of a designated conservation area) in 1995, and then being awarded, first of all, the Ministry of Culture's label as a "Ville d'Art et d'Histoire" and then, in July 2005, the coveted UNESCO label of world heritage: "an outstanding post-war example of urban planning and architecture based on the unity of methodology and the use of prefabrication, the systematic utilisation of a modular grid and the innovative exploitation of the potential of concrete" (Fig.7). Neither the inscribed zone nor the buffer zone includes the surviving nineteenth-century docks and warehouses which had escaped the destruction of the war years. To the east of the rebuilt city centre and south of the railway station, this is where the city of Le Havre is



Fig.7

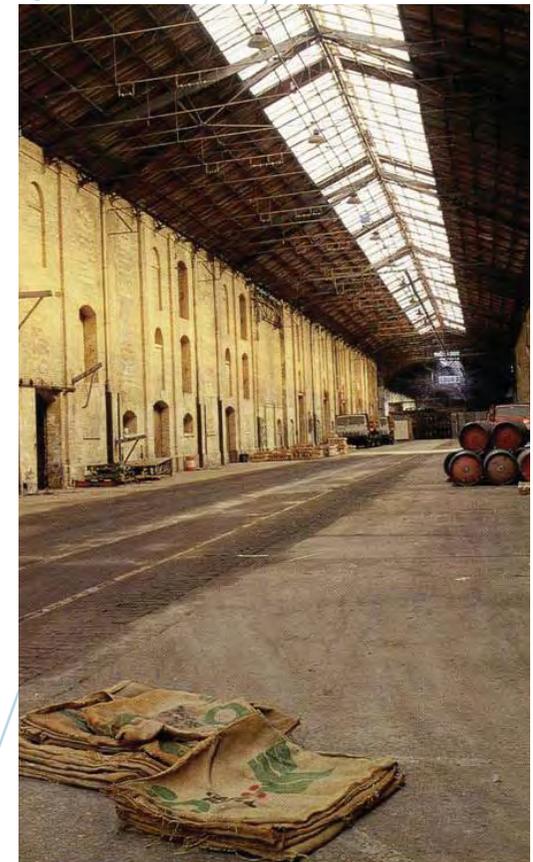


Fig.8

regenerating itself today: alongside new build by prestigious architects (Jean Nouvel), a range of nineteenth-century warehouses are in the process of conversion into a major retail and leisure centre under the direction of two architects well known in this field of the adaptive re-use of industrial buildings, Philippe Robert and Bernard Reichen (Fig.8).

Le Havre is not the only French port witnessing such regeneration – Nantes, Marseilles and Bordeaux (UNESCO World heritage since 2006) can also provide interesting comparisons – but is undoubtedly the best French example of a concerted accumulation of knowledge about the historic environment feeding first of all into a new appreciation of this environment by the local population and its elected representatives and subsequently, albeit indirectly, into the processes of urban regeneration. If the example of Liverpool and its HELP project can serve as an example for other port cities in Europe, perhaps there might also be a few lessons to be learned from Le Havre.

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