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Conservation of Modern Architecture

We are delighted by your selection of such a pertinent subject as "Conservation of Modern Architecture", for deliberation at your annual get-together in Denkmal '96. We are proud to speak to one of the most advanced countries that have helped to focus attention on a subject that is not only "Cultural", but covering an area of "Heritage", that is fast dwindling due to the lack of a sufficient "public outcry". We hail the efforts of such stalwarts of conservation in their desperate struggle to build up "public spirit", and above all "public taste" for "Modern Architecture", as it is love, we repeat love, and not laws that will save this immovable heritage of the immediate past.

Ladies and Gentlemen, if we are desperate as conservators to save the heritage of the recent past, let us harken to a voice of a great savant and campaigner of a hundred years ago. It was John Ruskin of Oxford, who refused to be honoured with the gold medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects. He refused the coveted medal, on the grounds that he did not wish to be decorated by a band of "demolishing experts". If this was true a century before, how truer is the situation today? Let us as architects, tap our own conscience and say even in a venial way, *mea culpa, mea culpa, if not, mea maxima culpa.*

Ladies and Gentlemen, let us look at the other side of the coin and avoid feeling extra romantic, and keep attempting to save all that man has created. In such an instance, we have even a more distant voice from the Orient, from over 2,500 years previously, when the Buddha pronounces on this very subject. The occasion was when his chief disciple Ananda, asked the Master, "What shall we do with the remains of the Thatagaha or the Buddha?" The Buddha remained silent. And when asked for the third time, he responded and said "... as you would with the remains of a Prince. "The over charged retort of the chief disciple to such an unexpected reply was, "... how are the remains of a Prince to be interned?" To which the Buddha once more responded by saying, "Place the remains in a built up cairn or Stupa." The statement of the Buddha that followed was the philosophical note that is most relevant to our subject today, namely, "If cairns or stupas were built for everyone, where is the living going to live?" Well Ladies and Gentlemen, that wisdom of a 2,500 years previously should hold the key to our intellectual acumen, to be selective and in being not over sentimental in our perceptions of want, and be prepared to avoid the extremes of romantic greed.

We trust, that the speakers and exhibitors at this Denkmal '96, will deal in depth on the immediate problems of the "Conservation of Modern Architecture" as of today, in this geographical region of Germany and Europe. Therefore, if we are given the liberty to digress gently to an alarming situation that is facing the whole world at present, namely,

the accidental destruction of modern architecture by "professional demolition experts" of today. You will thus see, how Ruskin himself would have come alive, to roll in his own grave.

The examples are too numerous and too universal to illustrate. While we speak here and now, there could well be many a monument being demolished somewhere in the world by such modern "demolition experts", which profession is more specialized than we, the demoralized conservators. All we, the pious conservators can do, is to perform our ritual dance round this burning monument of a funeral pier. We could even write an obituary in glorious phrases of what we have sadly lost. We could even leave an epitaph to a dismembered shrine, and say, "Here is the site of the shrine, about which a Persian Poet once said, if there is a Paradise on earth, it is here, it is here".

Ladies and Gentlemen, how can we counter these Barbarous unbred acts with no sense of accountability to God or man, the lack of a heart, the absence of love for the "Created Heritage of Mankind". The law is not the only answer, it is love and vigilance that will respond. Love is what we create and culture in our dear children. We must have this committed want of society always inbred and ingrained in our youth. But society and sanity are not synonymous terms. It is lack of cultures sanity that we are underlining in our paper today. We believe, that the answer to the lack of cultured sanity has to be appropriately countered by an equal and opposite force of willed vigilance. It is this campaign effort that we wish that Germany takes a lead roll to nurture and create, and by which, to establish an appropriate vigilant body such as Heritage Watch.

We have parallel institutions as counter organizations to such human frailty in other activities of mankind such as Amnesty International for justice, or Greenpeace for the protection of the environment. But man-made heritage is still most vulnerable and does not have an appropriate fairy god-mother to safeguard these monuments of the recent past due to the lack of cultured sanity. We might say that edifices of a one hundred years or more, remain partially protected by the laws of many countries, but it is the "new born" and those under one hundred years that are the most vulnerable, and these must be given a "fair trial" for establishing their historicity and artistry. We must provide for the muted of the Chopins and the Mozarts and the Beethovens of the 21st century, as much as we are about to recognize the Mies van der Rohes and the Gropiuses of the Bauhaus in this century of the Common Era. Ladies and Gentlemen, we as the World Body of Conservators in the International Council on Monuments and Sites, ICOMOS, wish the dream organizers of Denkmal '96, every success.