What is monument preservation? An example ought to explain it.

Anyone visiting the little town of N. thirty years ago would have taken no little pleasure in the charming appearance of the beautiful old place. The centre point was the age-old gothic parish church with its baroque tower and beautiful baroque interior furnishings, festive and inviting and evoking a thousand memories.

And anyone with the time and inclination could have taken a closer look at many beautiful things: old panel paintings, artfully carved altars, magnificent paraments, and ornate works in gold and silver that were kept in the sacristy.

From the church one passed through a maze of little old houses which made the tall church seem all the more imposing on the friendly town square, where one could also have admired the dignified seventeenth-century town hall with its pleasant onion dome. Impressively robust patrician houses closed off the whole: without false or superfluous decoration, and yet ornate; all endowed with arcaded walkways and of a limited height, deferring modestly to the overall appearance of the square which, in its closed unity and despite the differing dates of origin of the houses, would have evoked the sensation of artistic harmony in every artistically minded onlooker and, in every sensitive person, feelings similar to those evoked by the familiar spaces of an old family home. The little town was surrounded by half-dilapidated fortifications overgrown with twines, and a pleasant and varied promenade followed their path, interrupted only by four stately town gates, offering a most picturesque aspect.

Having seen it thirty years ago, the visitor to this little town would barely recognize it today. The old parish church has been ‘restored.’ The baroque onion dome has been taken down and replaced with a false neo-gothic one, which fits in with the townscape like a scarecrow in a rose garden. The magnificent altar was thrown out on the pretext that it did not accord with the style of the church, and was replaced by crude, tasteless factory products which were allegedly gothic, but were in fact devoid of style. Walls that were once simply whitewashed have been covered in loud colours and senseless ornaments and in this way the church interior has been robbed of any vestiges of its high-appointed and dignified form. And when I asked the sacristan about the old vestments and goldsmiths’ works, I could tell from his bashful mien that they had been flogged to some antiques dealer long ago.

Far worse still, however, was the devastation in the vicinity of the church. The little old houses had been razed and replaced by a so-called park in which a few sorry-looking bushes were withering away. In these surroundings even the once so imposing church had a dull and sorry look about it.

And so it went on.
The exquisite old town hall had been demolished; it had made way to a new building which looked like a cross between a barracks and an exhibition hall. The good old patrician houses had to give way to abominable rental blocks and department stores, executed fraudulently, in cheap materials, and according to pattern books without a trace of any artistic sensibility. The town gates were demolished on the pretext that they hindered the—non-existent—traffic; the walls were torn down in order that the town might one day—perhaps in a hundred years—expand. In this way very little was left of the town’s former beauty, without any sort of artistic substitute having been created.

It is the task of monument preservation to prevent such losses and devastation.

Historic artworks are still destroyed just because they are old and because they are not deemed worthy of the ‘new age.’ In the past century—and this continues even today—many were of the opinion that contempt for historic monuments was a part of progress and proof of a liberal and philanthropic attitude. In many circles it was and is virtually taken for a civic duty and a virtue to clear up and do away with all ‘that old junk’—everything which recalls the past and its former political, social, or religious conditions, but also that which merely recalls a lifestyle permeated by art, whose traces then come to be felt as an unpleasant reproach. And thus old heraldry, statues of the saints, and memorial stones are regularly broken up or got rid of for political or other partisan reasons, and old town walls, towers and gardens are destroyed just because this is thought to show that one is ‘moving with the times’. But in reality such acts of vandalism only attest to one’s uneducation and cultural backwardness.

More often still, individual monuments and indeed whole towns were and are sacrificed to the alleged demands of the age. The transformation of life that took place around a hundred years ago on the basis of the new technology led to an idolatry of technical innovations which not only lets other considerations be forgotten, but often also exceeds the bounds of that which is purely expedient and technically opportune.

The tremendous revolution in living conditions and their technical preconditions have led to an unprecedented expansion of the great cities, which have thus taken on an entirely new significance. The old capital cities and residence cities were what their names suggest, namely the cultural and administrative centres of a country; their external form was defined by gradual historical development and purposeful artistic expansion. But the vast cities of the present increasingly take the form of commercial centres where the majority of that which had been spared of the past is sacrificed to the current requirements of trade, such as means of transport and traffic routes, office buildings, department stores, and cheap mass accommodation. This transformation came so quickly that often neither the time nor the trouble was taken to ascertain what was really necessary, and the old towns were blindly and senselessly destroyed only to be replaced by new ones. These for the most part were barely capable of being anything more than temporary interim solutions, like outposts in the Wild West, not only in artistic terms but also in terms of their practical importance. It would certainly have been unreasonable and short-sighted had one wanted to rule out any concession to the new requirements of the city, but much of the time far more was at stake: monotonous redevelopments where old parts of the city were destroyed by completely unnecessary new streets designed with nothing more than a ruler; or where much that might have been saved (with a little goodwill) was in fact wantonly destroyed forever. […]
Having heard of the dangers that threaten artistic heritage it is still necessary to point out how very necessary it is, as much for ideal as for economic reasons, to combat these dangers everywhere and with all available means.

It is not, therefore, as is sometimes assumed, a matter that concerns only the educated classes and the art lovers. It is certainly of the utmost importance for art history that its sources, the monuments of historic art, are protected from ruin. And the destruction of outstanding historic artworks no doubt means an immeasurable loss to all those who have dedicated their lives to art. But at the same time this is a matter of something incomparably more important and has a significance for everyone, be they educated and artistically minded or not.

Our lives are permeated more than ever before by material endeavours and institutions: industry, world trade, and technical achievements dominate it far more than spiritual powers, so that backwardness certainly need not be feared in this department. And yet it is remarkable. The further the industrialization of life marches on, the more the conviction grows that these things alone do not constitute all of the necessities of life, and the longing for those pleasures and feelings that elevate man above the material struggle of existence becomes ever more powerful. No one would deny that electric streetcars, broad roads for automobiles, lifts and telephones, banks and factory complexes are very useful things and deserve to be introduced everywhere. But today one nevertheless also becomes ever more conscious of the fact that since man is not a machine his wellbeing does not rest upon these things alone. And alongside these material achievements it will not escape the careful observer that everything which cannot be measured on the scale of technical production or material profit gains in significance from day to day – from the generally intelligible beauties of nature to the depths of a new, earnest, and ideal conception of life. But along with these new ideal goods, historic artistic heritage also counts as one of the most important; as the source of impressions similar to those evoked by the beauties of nature, which elevate the viewer above the material cares and endeavours of everyday life.

These impressions can be of the most diverse types: they might depend upon the general artistic value of the monuments, upon their effect in the landscape, upon their relationship to the local scenery, upon the memories tied up with them, or upon the traces of age that ennoble them and, at the same time, awaken notions of becoming and passing away in the viewer. The greatest value of the enjoyment of historic artworks today lies in the fact that it is not limited to specific groups of monuments or classes of people. A simple village chapel, an ivy-clad ruin, or an old country village can afford us as much pleasure as a proud cathedral, a princely palace, or a richly endowed museum. And this pleasure is accessible to anyone who is at all capable of spiritual pleasures. It is not just individual works of historic art that have increased in value; every artistic creation of the past has become precious to us, and not just as the sum total of historical facts or artistic models, but as one of the vital contents of spiritual life as a whole.