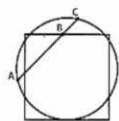


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Using Fortifications for Tourism: Can Conservation Objectives Be Reconciled with Financial Sustainability?¹

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Introduction

Built monuments have traditionally been mainly defined as individual sites, such as churches, castles, and ruins and their conservation considered merely as actions directed at the monument's structure. The concepts of "monument" and its "conservation" have changed over time. Today instead of only individual buildings, both the cultural landscape and the human activity are valued. We are now restoring large entities whose conservation goes beyond the structure and fabric of the individual building. Conserving a historical milieu requires an interactive balance between the different factors involved in the monument, that is the setting (buildings, structures, and landscapes) and the users (residents, visitors, and other users).

The paper considers two case studies at the two North-South extremes of Europe. The first is Suomenlinna Sea Fortress in Helsinki, the second is Fort St Elmo in Valletta, Malta. The conservation process for both fortresses is described and put in the context of the site's use for tourism. The paper ends by making comparisons between the two case studies and drawing conclusions applicable to similar fortifications.

Suomenlinna: Conservation and Reuse

Suomenlinna is a group of small islands off the coast of Helsinki, Finland. Suomenlinna was established as an island fortress first by the Swedish and then by the Russian occupiers. After Finnish independence in

¹ The author would like to thank Leena Grönroos of Haaga-Helia University of Applied Science, Helsinki for her comments on a previous draft of this article.

1917, it continued to be used for military purposes. The bastion fortress was mainly built in the 18th century with improvements being made in the 19th century. The fortification walls were built of masonry with rubble infill.² The fortress has an irregular ground plan with size and layout of fortification lines often being dictated by the contours of the ground terrain. The fortress saw war action in 1855 when it was bombarded during the Crimean War.

In 1919, the islands and their fortifications were designated as a national monument under the Antiquities Act. This provided the impetus for restoration works, even if the islands remained under military control. The novelty of the antiquities designation was that a fortress still in use was also considered to be a historic monument. The site was perceived as a totality that had a future as both a conservation site and a functional area, i.e. a monument in use.³

In the early 1970s, its military use was substantially reduced and the islands were passed on to the civil authorities. The Governing Body of Suomenlinna (GBS) was set up with representatives of different ministries and agencies. The formerly unpredictable funding was replaced by an annual grant from the government for the upkeep of the monument. The GBS is property owner of virtually all the islands including most of the buildings. In 1974 a master plan was drawn up, with the emphasis on creating a resident community. Tourism and recreation also featured strongly in the master plan.

In 1991, Suomenlinna was inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List as an example of the 18th century military architecture. The monument consists of two types of structures: the buildings and the lines of fortifications. Wherever the layout and form of the internal spaces allowed, the buildings were converted to residential. Where this was not possible, buildings were adapted to other uses such as offices and conference facilities. The viable use of a building is the most effective way to preserve the monument in that the use will generate funds for its continued maintenance and conservation.

2 Governing Body of Suomenlinna, *Suomenlinna: Conservation and Reuse*, Helsinki 2000, pp. 18-19.

3 Governing Body of Suomenlinna, *AT FORT Self-Analysis Report*, Helsinki 2012, pp. 4-6. <http://www.atfort.eu/files/1416139744.pdf> (access: 1 July 2017).

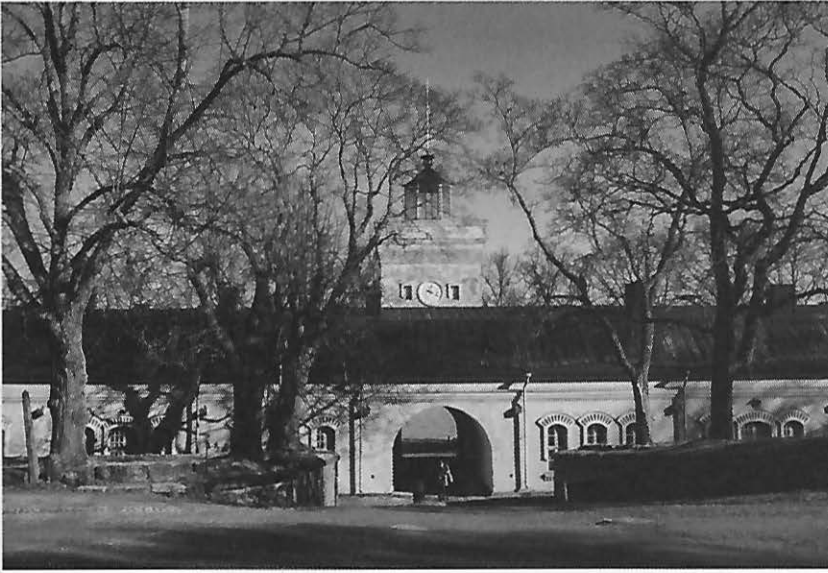


Image 1: One of the buildings on Suomenlinna, just off the main quay
© John Ebejer

With lines of fortifications it is a different matter. Although fortifications may have some internal spaces, these are normally very limited and/or inappropriate for any modern day use. This makes it more difficult to identify a use that will generate funds for maintenance and preservation.

Apart from being a World Heritage Site, Suomenlinna is also home to about 800 permanent residents. When the islands were transferred from military to civil administration in the early 1970s, it was decided that the fortress would be maintained both as a museum and as a living part of the city and therefore increasing the permanent population was considered important. Suomenlinna is generally perceived as an attractive place to live. It is often described as “a small village that happens to be only a 15-minute ferry ride from the centre of the capital.”⁴ So converting buildings to residential use was not just about finding a viable use for a historic building but also about providing accommodation for existing and new residents. Since the 1970s there was an ongoing programme of projects to convert historic buildings to residential use and subsequently

4 Governing Body of Suomenlinna, *Suomenlinna: Conservation and Reuse*, op. cit., p. 78.

to renovate them periodically. Many of the buildings were originally built as barracks or as housing for officers. For each conversion to residential use, unique solutions were needed in terms of layout and choice of material to ensure that modern day requirements were met, without compromising the historic value of the building. It was sometimes problematic to reconcile the provision of essential services (heating, ventilation, running water, and waste water drains) with the safeguarding of the authenticity of the historic structure. Sometimes compromises had to be made.⁵

Residents are provided with basic municipal services including transport connection, a school, and a day care centre. Other services available on the main island include a church, food shop, a sports hall, a library, a public beach, and a sport field. Health services are only available on the mainland, although a service tunnel allows for the passage of emergency vehicles.

The creation of a resident community necessitates the creation of jobs. Suomenlinna provides the right business environment for 30 travel and tourism service providers operating restaurants, cafés, museums, event organisers, and a hostel.⁶ The islands provide 400 full time positions and a further 100 seasonal summer jobs. A good proportion of these jobs are held by Suomenlinna residents.⁷

Some of the internal spaces are inappropriate for conversion to residential uses. For example, vault casemates are often very low and their embrasures are insufficient to provide light for apartments. The increasing spaces needed for building services is an added constraint on the reuse of old buildings. A considerable number of these spaces have been converted for use as studios for artists and craftspersons.⁸ These uses are in line with the tourism and culture development of Suomenlinna. Various other buildings and sheds across the islands were converted for light industry use and for boat storage.

Suomenlinna has a small marine industry providing services to small ships, yachts, and boats. A small dry dock built in the late 1700s was

5 Ibidem, p. 79.

6 Milla Öystilä and Leena Grönroos, "Tourism in the World Heritage Site," [in:] *Changes in the Hospitality Industry*, Kristiina Havas (ed.), Helsinki 2017, p. 11 (7-11).

7 Governing Body of Suomenlinna, *Suomenlinna: Conservation and Reuse*, op. cit., p. 10.

8 Ibidem, p. 122.



Image 2: Lines of fortifications at the south end of Suomenlinna
© John Ebejer

repaired and rehabilitated in 2004,⁹ not only because of its heritage value but also for its continued use to provide marine services.

Suomenlinna is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Helsinki. It has been receiving visitors since the opening of its first museum, Ehrensvarð Museum, set up in 1930. It grew progressively over the years and received a boost with the opening of new services to coincide with the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, namely a new restaurant and a new ferry connection. In 1963, a tourist landing fee was abolished, greatly expanding the recreational use of Suomenlinna. In 1998, Suomenlinna Visitor Centre was opened, providing a range of tourism facilities including the Suomenlinna Museum, a tourist info desk, multimedia presentations, shop, and a café. Suomenlinna Museum opens throughout the year whereas another five museums across the islands open during the summer months.¹⁰ The islands also include facilities for conferences and functions. This allows for the viable use of internal spaces which would not be otherwise amenable to residential conversion. It also augments the number of visitors to the islands.

9 Ibidem, p. 141.

10 Ibidem, p. 32.

In 2016, over one million people visited Suomenlinna, mostly for short visits of 2 to 5 hours. This represents a 50% increase in 10 years.¹¹ The share of international visitors to Suomenlinna increased from 17% in 1997 to 57% in 2014.¹² There are two major visitor groups: residents of Helsinki who spend leisure time walking there and tourists who come to see the fortress.

Inevitably, high numbers of visitors in a relatively small area have raised concerns about sustainability. The GBS drew up a sustainable tourism strategy for Suomenlinna in 2006, and then again in 2015. This was prepared in consultation with local residents, travel and tourism businesses, Helsinki city government, and transportation representatives. The underlying objective is to minimise the negative impact while taking initiatives to maximise benefits. One initiative was to create a visitor route connecting the more important attractions and services, and thus implicitly discouraging people from parts of the island that are more sensitive. Most visits are in the summer months from May to September. Efforts to reduce seasonality include the organisation of events on Suomenlinna during the winter. The GBS regularly communicates and consults with local residents and with the travel and tourism businesses as this is considered central to the sustainable tourism strategy.¹³

The present administrative model for the Suomenlinna Governing Body (GBS) was established in the 1970s. The GBS is led by a Board appointed by the national government with representatives of all ministries and Helsinki agencies with interests in Suomenlinna. The Board also includes two representatives elected by the residents. The GBS is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture and Education. The GBS employs 70 full-time employees as well as additional staff during the summer. It runs on an annual budget of EUR12 million financed from property rentals and a state grant.¹⁴

11 Milla Öystilä and Leena Grönroos, "Tourism in the World Heritage Site," *op. cit.*, p. 22.

12 Governing Body of Suomenlinna, *A Sustainable Tourism Strategy for Suomenlinna*, Helsinki 2015, p. 19, http://frantic.s3.amazonaws.com/suomenlinna/2015/06/Sustainable_Tourism_Strategy_062015_final_o.pdf (access: 12 September 2017).

13 *Ibidem*, p. 38.

14 Leena Grönroos, "Sustainable Tourism Management in Suomenlinna Sea Fortress," unpublished. Presentation at International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations: Tackling Overtourism: Local Responses, 29–30 September 2017, Reykjavik, Iceland.

Suomenlinna is unique in several ways. It is a monument of national and international importance, but it is also a residential district of the city of Helsinki. It is also unique in that it is an archipelago and this provides clear limits on the responsibility and authority of the GBS.

Fort St Elmo Rehabilitation Project

Built in 1552 to guard the entrances to Malta's two natural harbours, Fort St Elmo is situated at the tip of the Valletta peninsula. It played a pivotal role in the Great Siege of 1565 when the Knights of St John and Maltese militia repelled an attack by an armada of the Ottoman Empire. After the Great Siege, a fortified city, Valletta, was constructed on the peninsula behind the fort.

What is commonly referred to as Fort St Elmo is actually a complex system of fortifications spread over a large area. Over the years, the Fort St Elmo fortification system was strengthened and expanded, and this included the construction of barracks within the fort. During the time of the British, it was further adapted for military use. The fort played an important role during World War II. After the end of the British military base in Malta in 1979, parts of Fort St Elmo were used as a police academy.

Site works of the Fort St Elmo Rehabilitation Project started in 2012, although the preparations began long before that. The site presented many challenges because of the extent of the area, the historic nature of buildings, structure, and spaces and also because of the poor condition of most of the historic structures. Located at the tip of a peninsula, the Fort St Elmo fortifications system was directly exposed to the elements. With three decades of neglect, the deterioration of the buildings and structures was inevitable. The only part which remained mostly unharmed was that occupied by a police academy where some basic maintenance was carried out. The project site totals 3.9 hectares, most of which are open spaces, with bastions, fort walls, and buildings acting as boundaries to the open spaces.

Identifying suitable uses was difficult for many reasons. The historic nature of the buildings and of the site meant that modern alterations and additions could compromise the cultural value. Getting planning endorsement for substantial alterations would have been difficult and this would have caused significant delays. Moreover, the internal spaces within the buildings were small. So although the total internal space was quite substantial, it was fragmented in a large number of buildings, which created serious difficulties on the potential uses.



Image 3: Fort St Elmo, Valletta
© John Ebejer

The site also offered a number of opportunities. It offers exceptional views of both the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett Harbour. All buildings and structures within it are historic so it provides numerous attractive open spaces with a heritage backdrop. Fort St Elmo is arguably Malta's most important historic site because it features in the two most significant events in Malta's history: the Great Siege of 1565 and the Siege of Malta from 1940–1943 during World War II. The site is located within walking distance to the centre of Valletta, Malta's capital. Most international tourists to Malta visit Valletta and spend at least half a day walking in the city and visiting the sites. An estimated 1.3 million tourists visit Valletta each year.

The primary objective for the rehabilitation project was to restore and bring back to life historic buildings and structures and to do so in a manner that is financially sustainable. In effect, the project would convert what was previously a war machine into a machine for tourism, leisure, education, and the appreciation of heritage. In doing so, the project would create an outstanding visitor attraction, enhance Malta's attractiveness as a tourism destination, and also help reduce seasonality in Malta's tourism. Another objective was for the newly refurbished Fort St Elmo

to act as a catalyst for the regeneration of the lower end of Valletta.¹⁵ The intention was for the new facilities to generate a steady flow of people to this part of the capital. Increased activity could potentially generate increased investment by the private sector in restoration and reuse of historic buildings.

The defined objectives were the basis for the strategic decisions taken by the project team. It was decided to have two primary uses for the site, namely a museum and a ramparts walk. The museum would be housed in several buildings within the fort. The ramparts walk would make use of the external spaces. This would stretch along the entire length of the bastions that surround the fort. Walkers would be able to enjoy the outward views of the harbours, whilst appreciating the historic heritage. The project team's intention was for the museum to be against payment, whereas access to the ramparts walk would be free of charge.

Because of the extent of the site, it was immediately apparent that significant funds would be required and hence the availability of EU funds was an opportunity for the project to be implemented. Another strategic decision taken referred to the eventual management of the facilities upon completion. Malta has a poor record on management of public spaces, more often than not because responsibilities for public spaces are not adequately defined. To ensure that the public spaces within Fort St Elmo fortification system are well managed, it was decided that, when completed, all the site will be managed by Heritage Malta. Heritage Malta was chosen because it is the agency that operates government-owned museums. It was also decided to involve Heritage Malta in the design process and the agency was requested to appoint a representative on the project team. Being the eventual operator, Heritage Malta was better placed to determine the requirements of the museum and provide for the best possible museology design.

The new museum is housed in various buildings within the fort, with each building having a particular theme. The museum presents the military history of Malta from Neolithic times up to the present day. The new museum replaced and extended the previous National War Museum, which was located in a small hall within the Fort St Elmo complex.

15 John Ebejer, *Developing Project Concepts for Historic Sites: Lessons Learnt from Fort St. Elmo Project*, Symposium of European Walled Towns, Netherlands, 30 September 2016, p. 6, <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/15012> (access: 1 July 2017).

The museum display area increased from 600 to 3,000 square metres. Ancillary facilities like office space, library, artefacts repository, and archives were also provided.¹⁶

The second main facility provided in the project was a ramparts walk along the entire length of the bastions surrounding the fort. This provides interesting views of the historic buildings as well as outward views of the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett Harbour. The project intention was for the walk to be a freely accessible comfortable urban space, free of the intrusion of vehicles.

Over and above the two main facilities, other facilities were provided. The external spaces within the fort are an excellent venue for the staging of small scale open air cultural and artistic events, including drama and music. The rehabilitated historic buildings act as a unique heritage backdrop. Making the best possible use of the context, namely the fort and its history, enhances the experience and the appreciation, not only of the fort itself but also of Malta's history and urban heritage. The main chapel of the fort is used for temporary exhibitions and small musical performances, whereas a secondary smaller chapel is used for religious services. The project also provided for two catering facilities to service visitors to the museum and also visitors to the ramparts walk.

The project transformed the site from one that was poorly kept and closed to visitors to one with a pleasant ambience, where the historic relevance of the site can be appreciated. The project resulted in better utilisation and conservation of a fortification system that is a key component of Valletta's and Malta's cultural heritage. On the other hand, the project had envisaged free entrance to the public for the ramparts walk along the bastions but a few months after opening the free public access was stopped. Only paid museum tickets holders are allowed access to the ramparts. This is unfortunate because the full tourism potential of Fort St Elmo is not being used.

A Comparison of the Two Case Studies

The two case studies provide useful insights in how forts and fortifications can be made use of in a sustainable way. There are several similarities between the two case studies. Both are sizeable areas that include extensive lines of fortifications and numerous buildings. For each

16 Ibidem, p. 8.

the historicity created difficulties and limitations on possible reuse. In both cases, there are strong maritime links going back centuries.

One important difference is that Suomenlinna had hundreds of residents, even before the 1970s when the fortress was used almost exclusively for military purposes. Because of this residential element, Suomenlinna is conceived to be part of the city and almost a natural extension to it, despite the 15-minute ferry ride needed to get to it. It is considered to be a residential area as well as a place of work, while concurrently being a monument that merits conservation. Having a resident community creates vitality and makes the monument more interesting.

In contrast, Fort St Elmo never had residents other than soldiers in barracks. The area of Fort St Elmo was considered to be distinct from the city because it was always closed off to the public. Even after the departure of the British forces from Malta, Fort St Elmo was not accessible to the public because of its use as a police academy. Although just a few metres away, residents living in lower Valletta would have never stepped into the area and therefore in the minds of people, Fort St Elmo was not considered to be part of the city they cherish.

Another difference is the context. Suomenlinna is a group of small islands and therefore its context is the surrounding sea. As one walks around, there is always the feeling of being close to and surrounded by the sea. Fort St Elmo is located at the tip of the Valletta peninsula. It overlooks the sea on three sides, but is also close to the dense urban fabric of lower Valletta.

Both have significant cultural value, Suomenlinna being a World Heritage Site, and Fort St Elmo forming part of a larger WHS, namely Valletta. Both have good tourism potential, except that this is being used very differently. The GBS actively tries to use Suomenlinna's tourism and recreation potential to the full. The tourism potential is seen as a means for generating income to sustain the maintenance and upkeep of the monument. People are actively encouraged to visit the island. For this reason the main open spaces are full of people during the day and this in turn creates an interesting and lively ambience for visitors.

Up until the rehabilitation project of 2012, Fort St Elmo tourism potential was grossly underutilised. Having a museum in the buildings is one way the fort's tourism potential can be used. The project team, however, felt this was not enough. The project attempted to maximise on the site's tourism potential by creating a ramparts walk along the bastions that is freely accessible to the public. Rather than seeing it as a no-go area,

the intention was to bring people in for them to enjoy the historic context and the outward harbour views. Unfortunately, Heritage Malta (the agency now responsible for the area) took a different view. Access into the area is against payment and restricted to tourists who wish to see the museum.¹⁷ The projected catering establishments within the fort have not happened. Although visitor levels to the museum are good, they are not sufficient to generate any vitality within the various spaces of the fort. In spite of the museum, the area's potential for tourism still remains underutilised. More importantly, the Fort St Elmo area is still considered in the minds of people as being a distinct part of the Valletta. The objective of integrating Fort St Elmo area with the rest of the city has not been attained.

Implementing Conservation Projects: Lessons Learnt

The experience of Suomenlinna provides interesting lessons on how to reconcile conservation objectives with the social and economic needs of the community. Over a period of four decades, various conservation projects were carried out on different buildings and structures across the island. These projects were carried out within a well-defined planning framework set out by a master plan and other policy documents. The master plan, prepared and approved in the early 1970s, provides a sense of direction and ensures that each project is compatible with and supports the objectives as set out in the master plan. Inevitably, a master plan would need to be updated and new policy documents are required, like, for example, Sustainable Tourism Strategy for Suomenlinna of 2015. Even if there are changes to the planning framework, the sense of direction for Suomenlinna's management and conservation remains more or less consistent. An essential element of this approach is that the master plan and all the projects on Suomenlinna are the responsibility of a single agency, the Governing Body, so that coordination and the reconciliation of competing demands is achieved within one agency, rather than between different agencies. The GBS is staffed with different expertise (historians, conservation architects, tourism practitioners, and others) to ensure that it can adequately handle competing demands.

17 John Ebejer, "Walk St Elmo Ramparts Freely," [in:] *The Times* (Malta), 2 May 2017, <https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20170502/opinion/Walk-St-Elmo-ramparts-freely.646811> (access: 12 September 2017).

The effectiveness of the Suomenlinna's planning framework is that it does not look at the historic buildings and structures in isolation. They are part of the landscape of the island that also includes various human activities as well as stretches of natural landscape and coastline.

For forts and fortifications, sustainability is achieved by securing a long-term viable use. The use should generate funds that can then be allocated for the monument's conservation. The Suomenlinna case study suggests that sustainability is more likely to be achieved if a range of uses are introduced. The fortress is perceived to be part of the city and includes residences and workplaces, over and above tourist and cultural uses. In some instances, a compromise of some historic elements may be required to secure a building's long-term reuse. At Suomenlinna sustainability was also achieved through better visitor management. A tourist route was created to direct visitors to areas less likely to be impacted by visitor flows. In this way more sensitive areas were protected. Conservation projects impacts on the lives of people so the involvement of the public is recommended. In the case of Suomenlinna, this is achieved by having two representatives elected by the residents sitting on the Governing Body.

The conservation of Suomenlinna Sea Fortress is a process spanning several decades. In contrast, the Fort St Elmo project was a one-off project implemented at a specific time (2012-2015). As often happens with fortifications, Fort St Elmo was virtually abandoned after its military use came to an end in the late 1970s.

The author of this paper was directly involved in the rehabilitation project and so he can evaluate the project process and the eventual outcome. The following are a few lessons learnt. Like for any other project, in conservation there needs to be a clear vision of what is to be achieved, possibly one that is communicated and shared by all the stakeholders. The project should not be seen in isolation but should be considered as part of a wider urban area. In this respect, it is essential to refer to relevant urban planning policy documents (local plans, action area plans, development briefs, etc.).

For conservation projects, there should be a single agency responsible even if it is a sizeable historical area with various buildings. This will ensure a coherent vision and single-minded approach. On the other hand, it is essential to have a project team with the involvement of different stakeholders, together with the project architects, and other consultants. This ensures that decisions taken by the implementing agency are

well-informed. At Fort St Elmo, the agency that would eventually manage the site was involved in the design process from the very beginning as part of the project team.

In developing the project concept, the financial feasibility has to be a foremost consideration. The conservation value is best maintained if the reuse of historic buildings generates sufficient income for their upkeep. For Fort St Elmo this was not an easy task because of the extensive area involved and because the internal spaces were fragmented in a number of relatively small buildings.

Conclusion

This paper considers two fortifications systems, Suomenlinna in Helsinki and Fort St Elmo in Malta. It makes useful observations on how to reuse forts and fortifications in a sustainable way. The paper considers the similarities and the differences between the two sites. There are two differences that are worthy of emphasis. First, the conservation process of Suomenlinna was carried out over a number of decades and is still ongoing. Fort St Elmo, on the other hand, was a one-off project. The former approach is more effective and suggests that conservation should be seen as a process in time, guided by an appropriate planning framework and supported by an adequate institutional structure. A second notable difference is the approach to tourism. The Governing Body of Suomenlinna is proactive on tourism. It tries to attract new tourism facilities and generally encourages more people to visit. Even if there is no entrance fee to Suomenlinna, visitors will spend money in museums, catering outlets, and shops. This is seen as an important source of revenue, with the money being used for further conservation initiatives. At Fort St Elmo, on the other hand, no one is allowed into the area without having paid the museum fee. Yet tourism is not just about paid visitor attractions. It is also about making spaces freely accessible to tourists and residents, more so if the spaces are of interest. By restricting access, the full tourism potential of Fort St Elmo is not being used and the Maltese public are being deprived of the enjoyment of this important monument.