

The Editors' Notebook

Alms for the Acropolis

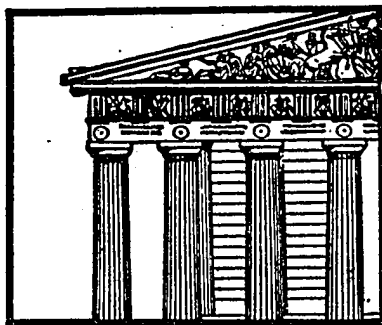
Venice is sinking; the Acropolis is crumbling. Western culture is biodegradable. The architectural monument of post-industrial society is the shopping center, not the Parthenon. Art may be eternal but only plastic lasts.

In a ceremony from the rock of the Acropolis, the 2,500-year-old citadel in Athens, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has just announced that \$15 million is needed to save the Greek masterpiece that is the touchstone of European civilization. That is for the first stage of a long, difficult and expensive restoration.

"This magnificent monument," said UNESCO's director general, "on which Ictinus and Phidias left the imprint of their genius, is threatened with destruction as a result of the damage which industrial civilization has increasingly inflicted on it."

The imprint today is from atmospheric pollution. Temples and sculptures are rotting away. The sense of permanence and immutability, of esthetic immortality on that Athenian hilltop is illusory. The visitor is no longer allowed to walk through the measured, classical spaces defined by tapered creamy columns against sharp blue skies and crimson poppies that grow in almost indecent glory around their chiseled bases. The Turks blew up the Parthenon but failed to destroy it totally. Industrial society is easily finishing the job.

In Italy, Roman generals and Renaissance heroes lose noses, faces and limbs to chemicals in the air. The statuary on French and English cathedrals is melting steadily; there are modern diseases of marble and stone. St. Paul's and Salisbury Cathedral have mounted international campaigns for corporeal salvation. And when con-



If all else fails—why not plastic?

cerned conservators try to reverse the damage the results of modern technology can be as disastrous as the ravages of unaided industrialism: Some of Chartres's finest stained glass has lost its color and luminosity after being plastic-coated for protection against pollution.

The Venetian water table is supposed to be rising again, after sinking for a century, revealing decayed and drowning treasures, but only because the uses of the industrial mainland are tapering off. The great Palladian villas of the Veneto, which cry for serene and elegant vistas, are surrounded by the detritus of the technological environment. Egyptian temples are carted away for modern dams that submerge the ancient valleys of kings and corrupt the natural processes of land and water. Aswan energy must now be used to manufacture fertilizer to replace that lost by the end of the natural flooding of the Nile.

When art and history are irretrievably gone, there is always that favorite, delusory 20th-century cultural game of making "authentic reproductions" to replace the irreplaceable. On

the Acropolis, the process is under way. The Erechtheum is being shorn of its Caryatids, the graceful maidens who have supported the temple's porch for 2,500 years. They will be put in a museum and replaced by molded fiberglass replicas—replica is a high-class word for fake—to be provided by the British Museum. Pilgrimages have not been made for 25 centuries to see the marbles of molded fiberglass. The sculpture will never be experienced properly, as it was conceived, again. Next—a plastic Parthenon?

Museums corrupt as well as save. The process is accelerated insidiously by the keepers of the treasures of the world. Museums mass-produce and mass-merchandise "hand finished" copies of all kinds of works of art with immense commercial success for a subtly poisonous erosion of taste in the name of education and deficits.

In spite of institutional guarantees of quality, the art gets lost on the way to the consumer product. The line between today's commercial culture and the only alternative culture is blurred and dimmed. The difference between the values of art and the values of business has almost disappeared. The sound you hear in the galleries is the blip and buzz of the electronic cash registers.

Pollution today is physical, visual, and conceptual. Post-industrial society is the confused possessor of an abused and mutilated heritage. Post-industrial sensibility, consumer oriented, finds that it has consumed its past. Pleas for assistance, campaigns for help, cannot go unheeded. Still, it is the peculiar arrogance of money and technology to believe that a civilization can be put back together again.

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE