PRESS RELEASE

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Public thematic report

LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND THE CHALLENGES FACING THEIR MONUMENTAL HERITAGE

Following on from its 2022 report on the State's policy in favour of monumental heritage, the *Cour des comptes* has conducted an investigation into the same subject from the perspective of local authorities. The study was carried out by eight regional audit chambers on a representative sample of some sixty local authorities, particularly medium-sized ones, with half of the municipalities examined having fewer than 20,000 inhabitants.

The monumental heritage covered by this survey includes all the monuments listed or registered as "historic monuments" and the zones in which the French Heritage Code applies.

A major issue for local authorities, which is not always recognised at its true level

While the State defines the rules for protection and ensures that they are applied, the local authorities, which own 45% of the 46,000 historic monuments, are responsible for their implementation. They are also responsible for development policies within the protected zone of these monuments and in significant heritage sites, which account for a third of all housing in France. Protection, conservation and enhancement are therefore very important issues at the local level, especially for municipalities with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, which account for 50% of the historic monuments owned by local authorities.

A conservation obligation that is increasingly difficult to sustain financially, demonstrating the major role of the State

Across the sample and the operations carried out, the average out-of-pocket expenses amounted to 43% of expenditure by local authorities. The *Cour des comptes* investigation highlighted the factors that can make the burden of conservation difficult to sustain: the low proportion of expenditure devoted to maintenance, the regulated nature of the property, the limited technical engineering resources, and the weight of regulated property in the local authority's building stock. Public co-financing and technical support remain essential to meet the conservation obligation.

In 2022, the *Cour des comptes* emphasised the difficulty of obtaining an overall view of the State funds allocated to historic monuments, across all ministries, and this observation remains valid today. Between 2018 and 2024, in the case of the Ministry of Culture, the State's efforts continued, particularly in favour of local authorities, which in 2024 benefited from 52% of the €267m in payment appropriations executed under the decentralised appropriations of the State budget for historic monuments and monumental heritage. The increase in State aid, combined with the efforts of local authorities, has helped to improve the state of repair of historic monuments.

For 2025, the appropriations adopted in the Finance Act show contrasting trends: previous commitments should therefore be honoured, but a new distribution of appropriations could occur between the State, for its own monuments, and other public and private owners.

Better use of levers to improve conservation and enhancement

In addition to the ability of local authorities to meet the costs of their protected heritage, there is the burden of unprotected heritage, the conservation of which is also the responsibility of local authorities. These include the religious buildings they own, the majority of which are neither listed nor classified as historic monuments. The use and enhancement of heritage appear to be essential to the acceptance of expenditure by elected representatives and residents.

In view of the efforts made by the State in recent years and the state of public finances, the *Cour des comptes* considers that it is a priority to mobilise all the levers available to improve the steering, management, pooling and enhancement of the monumental heritage as part of a strategy for development and attractiveness, as well as use and planning.

The survey highlighted a number of good practices, such as pooling technical resources across a region, anticipating the opinions of the *Architectes des Bâtiments de France* (ABF) and promoting a shared, multi-year vision of needs and expenditure relating to historic monuments. Over and above the constraints associated with it, heritage is a lever of attractiveness and development for regions, even if its economic valorisation needs to be based on rigorous analysis.

Simplifying procedures to reconcile heritage protection and development

As in 2022, the *Cour des comptes* notes that the reduction in protection constraints provided for by the 2016 law on freedom of creation, *architecture and heritage* (LCAP) is proceeding at too slow a pace, leading to a complex tangle of heritage, town planning and environmental regulations. While 31.7% of the housing stock is covered by protection regulations, the constraints associated with the energy transition may mean that the housing is unsuitable. This is a major issue in areas protected as significant heritage sites, where the vacancy rate is twice the national average.
In the light of these observations, it would seem necessary for all those involved in the heritage chain to take greater account of protection. Improving the dialogue between elected representatives and ABFs is therefore essential if the latter's role as guarantors of heritage conservation is to be strengthened and must not be called into question. In order to facilitate the emergence of asset strategies whose definition and deployment extend beyond the term of office, it would seem equally important to include training in asset issues in the training programme for elected representatives.

[Read the report]

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