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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conservation and modern architecture. Fortune and misfortune of the School of Mathematics at Rome University (G. Ponti, 1932-1935)

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Abstract
The framework of the Italian restoration doctrine is based on the reception and transmission of the memory of the past. However, interventions in modern architecture represent a radical drift in the sense that they mostly consist of reconstructions, refurbishments, and renovations. Such work disregards the sense of value acknowledgment that is implicit in architectural conservation and neglects the importance of material conservation. The uneven fortune of the School of Mathematics at Rome's University Campus illustrates this situation. This predicament is similar to that of many other modern buildings that have been declared "monuments" by mouth but are actually bent to listless and insensible use, mistreated, and hardly maintained. The recent work carried out at the School of Mathematics proves that interventions on modern buildings are mostly insensitive to their true significance and are often carried out in extreme urgency for mere practical reasons, if not for political opportunities.
Modern buildings can be true architectural monuments that express great esthetic potentials and retain notable historical weight in the history of architecture; therefore, they should be regarded as highly representative of our recent past and maintained as such.
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"We only have our civilization to save our civilization."
(G. Ponti, 1943)

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1. Modern architecture and Italian restoration culture

Within the Italian cultural context, restoration may be defined as an activity aimed at the reception and transmission of the memory of the past and applied to different artistic

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expressions. The development of a conservative approach within the European culture lasted for centuries. Such conservative approach acquired its “modern” shape between the 19th and 20th centuries and continues today, as indicated in the structures of Western civilization, in its culture, and in its environment. Therefore, restoration is about cultural demand and does not depend on the objects themselves. Despite the various interpretations to which conservation principles and methodology necessarily yield in practice, the main concepts do not change: neither in reference to a specific chronological context (whether an archeological ruin, an ancient monument, or a modern building) nor according to different figurative expressions (whether painting, sculpture, or architecture nor, in the latter case, in relation to the function of the building, its typology, its author, and so on). Hence, the specificity of this matter lies in the acknowledgment of the value of the object. This critical process should be driven by the sincere intention to conserve an artifact for its memory value.

Conservation may however meet very different declinations, which in turn become the “cultural mirror” of the civilizationthat expresses them, and should thus be considered strongly representative of the European culture and, in general, the Western one.

Given these premises, the practice in modern architectural heritage in the last three decades, has instead shown the rise of a retrospective approach and a consistent drift from the general restoration doctrine (Salvo, 2007a).

The problem of conserving modern architecture, which was first proposed in Northern Europe in the early eighties, initially took shape as a reaction to the ramshackle conditions of many modernist “icons.” These buildings began to be appreciated after the post-war years for their appealing image and material novelty; thus, most of them have been restored to their original condition, assuming their “pure” form as their highest value.

Different from the so-called architectural “icons” of the 20th century, the coeval “built heritage,” such as housing estates, services, and civic buildings, has been subjected to interventions regardless of its historic and cultural value. Such work includes systematic refurbishment, retrofitting, reuse, reestablishment of efficiency and functionality, uninformed maintenance, and sometimes abandonment. This situation mirrors the fact that the built heritage of the past century is rather compelled to pander various concerns (e.g., cultural, symbolic, political, ideological, functional, economical) that all refer to current demands and not to what the object actually is or represents. In this sense, the abovementioned retrospective approach may be interpreted as a consequence of the “faintness” of our civilization, which tends to hold back the “icons” of the recent past without accepting its memory value. In the case of the broader built heritage, pragmatic and economic needs are favored rather than cultural ones. This condition has strongly limited the true value acknowledgment of recent architectural heritage and thus debases the importance of its material preservation as well as endorses its reconstruction instead of its conservation.

The *maître à penser* in this specific field are practicing architects, designers, and technologists and not specialists in restoration, as would be more appropriate. The former are, in fact, still directly connected to modernity and perceive it as part of their genealogy or personal identity. Therefore, they avoid any historical intercession and their behavior is diametrically opposed to that of a conservation architect.

The retrospective attitude has been justified with the assumption that the physical substance of modern architecture rejects any kind of material conservation, thus claiming a different and *ad hoc* theoretical and methodological status for this field. The idea that conservation applies to the appearance of an artifact and not to its physical substance, which is rather stale if one considers the Italian restoration culture, has paved the way to new forms of “period reconstructions” based on very appealing philological references, such as original drawings, period photographs, direct testimonies, and sometimes, the support of the author himself. But philology is a serious matter that refers to the historical comprehension of a work of art and has nothing to do with mere reconstruction.

However, the process of value assessment is harshly hindered if the object is a recent one because of the absence of a chronological gap and consolidated historiography. When it comes to modern buildings, restoration principles and practices are truly put to test and require very fine critical skills to face unprecedented situations and explore new fields. Actually, restoration practice often meets such holdbacks, as in the case of the conservation of exceptional artworks, such as the *Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci, which represent the epitome of technical difficulties.

Therefore, the true challenge is not in outlining a new restoration theory or finding the solution to technical issues. Instead, it addresses the culture of memory itself and more specifically, the survival of the memory of Modernity.

While the international situation appears to be rather homogeneously oriented toward reconstruction[1], in Italy (at least theoretically) the situation holds onto the traditional scientific and critical theoretical framework and depends on long-lasting experience, which allows ultimate cases to be faced without derailing from conservative scopes. The restoration of the curtain wall facades of the Pirelli building in Milan (Gio Ponti's masterpiece dating back to 1960) presents a significant example of a true and successful conservation work applied to a very recent building (Salvo, 2007b). Focused on the conservation of the physical matter (the original curtain wall system), this work has been tackled as a critical process based on scientific knowledge and technical understanding of the artifact and has been carried out in full respect of material authenticity. Overcoming considerable practical difficulties caused by the very modern construction technique and materials (anodized aluminum, glass, rubber, and plastic), the process has been

[1] We refer mainly to the action of Docomomo, which was founded in the Netherlands in 1988 by a group of architects and technologists of Delft Polytechnic. On behalf of an international activity, their pragmatic approach to this matter has caught on everywhere, in the Western world and beyond. In recent years, Docomomo has also received the support of international institutions for heritage conservation, such as UNESCO, interested in spreading a global idea of cultural heritage and its conservation mainly intended as a peace making tool. Such “politically correct” strategy has distracted conservation from its original cultural roots and communicated a rather confusing idea of its true scopes and reasons.

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