

Restoring 20th Century Architecture: Few Words about a Possible Theory

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Abstract: The restoration of twentieth-century architecture has led the discipline to develop a solid theory which, considering the complexity of new issues to be resolved, can provide useful instruments, above all critical ones, for operational practice.

Key words: 20th century architecture, restoration, preservation, heritage.

1. Introduction

An expansion of the boundaries of what can now be recognized as heritage opens up not only linguistic conflicts about what is or is not defined by that term, but also what restoration methodologies can or should be ¹ [1-4]. If these conflicts exist within questions concerning already established operational practices for architecture considered “historical”, even within the European context alone, the disagreements are amplified if the gaze shifts to 20th century heritage [5]. In order to address and establish intervention practices, it seems more necessary than ever to develop an adequate theoretical approach to problems that 20th century architecture poses to the restorer today. Especially at a time when various technocratic drifts have pushed the discipline mainly towards micro-specialist solutions, when in fact the problems posed involve far more complex critical issues, first and foremost the intertwining of recognition, memory and political use of the past [6].

2. Authorial/Anonymous Architecture

Moving into the 20th century, the first issue that arises is how different artistic movements and geographical contexts approached the question of surfaces and color.

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We need only recall the differences between De Stijl and Constructivism, between Bauhaus and Dadaism. The other fundamental aspect is that this problem arises in different ways between authorial architecture, with the added difficulty of the transition to icon, and anonymous buildings (a term preferred to “minor”, but there is much to discuss in this sense, too) [7].



Fig. 1 Le Corbusier, Asile flottant, Paris (2016).

¹ On the evolution of the concept of heritage note at least: Babelon, J.-P., and Chastel, A. 1995; Poulot, D. 1998; Caccia Gherardini, S., and Olmo, C. 2015. For a general overview of the problem see also Swenson, A. 2013.

The works of Le Corbusier (Fig. 1), Mies van der Rohe or Terragni have not only undergone multiple restorations, but in these cases the most deeply rooted disease in the restoration culture offers an almost paradoxical example. The search for the origin, the cult of traces left behind by customs and time, and the transition from testimony (of an artistic conception, a constructive culture, a cultural and social environment), gives way to an almost ontological value of the work.

These problems are compounded by an additional one that further complexifies the definition of a theoretical framework: the reproducibility was made possible by materials and techniques throughout the 20th century [8].

Moreover, the prevalence of the photographic image as the primary source of restoration over the materiality and stratification of interventions and uses of the work has resulted in aesthetic precaution prevailing over heritage precaution [9, 10].

The problem of color, materials and more generally surfaces in 20th century architecture finds answers articulated on a case-by-case basis, as also demonstrated by the essays within this volume, which well exemplify the complexity of the matter especially in terms of research and practice (Figs. 2 and 3).

A starting point could be to transfer the complexity of the issues listed above to a testing ground using the arguments and procedures of microhistory² [11, 12].

3. A Possible Theory

The first characteristic that may pertain to what could be defined as a potential micro-restoration [13] is the possibility of proposing a scientific approach in the strong sense of experimental science, highlighting causal links from small to large scale. But perhaps the real issue concerns the sources. The illusion of the mirroring of reality does not belong to micro-history: what is interesting is the presence of the past in our

contemporary world, that is the set of sources that represent the “real” for the historian and the restorer. In this sense, micro-history goes beyond the traditional criticism of sources: the problem becomes the textual, as well as material, construction of the source, its uses over time, its conservation, and the consistency of its distribution with respect to other documents.

The reflection should be shifted to what it means to talk about micro-restoration, the plan shifts to textual construction, to the construction of the fact, starting with a review of the usual approaches to the debate on documentality [14].

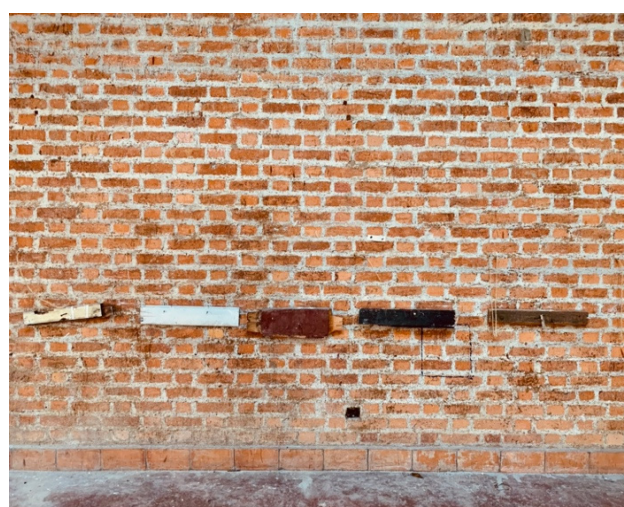


Fig. 2 V. Garatti, R. Gottardi, R. Porro, Las Escuelas de Arte, La Habana (2019).



Fig. 3 J.-F. Zevaco, Thermal Bath Station, Sidi Harazem (2023).

² There is a well-established bibliography on microhistory, among many see Revel, J. 2006; Vito, C. G. 2015.

Criticism of the sources, whether paper or “material”, does not make the investigation “scientific” but is a precondition, today more than ever, for the restorer’s cognitive and decision-making process to move from the extremely delicate relationship between awareness of what they reveal to us today and knowledge of their origin. Sources are in fact social productions that must be decoded as such.

The relationship between investigations, research, surveys and studies is far from a simple problem and is constructed in the concatenation of the different work phases and their placement in a hierarchy, while there is a very strong risk of evolutionism and/or descriptivism in these transitions. The problem of how to structure a historical-critical investigation of 20th century buildings with the aim of clearly revealing the building’s physiognomy, nature and characteristics, not without declaring any gaps that may have emerged in the cognitive process, is anything but trivial and, to date, is a largely underestimated problem [15].

4. Conclusions

In restoration, there is no theory of oblivion, of what has been forgotten, why and especially whether it should remain so. Whatever architecture is restored, what does not exist has a hermeneutic force almost as much as the traces that can be found in its material. Referring to the heritage of the 20th century, all these cues have to be measured against an architecture that is experiencing a quantitative leap never before seen in history, and coming to terms with the question of reproducibility, whose sources are on the one hand exorbitant and on the other hand repetitive, with the consequent undermining of the tools and methods of

traditional restoration.

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