

From Winckelmann to Restoration of the Colors: Modern Architecture from Kodachrome to B&W

Marco Pretelli

Department of Architecture, University of Bologna, Bologna 40126, Italy

Abstract: The restoration of modern architecture raises open issues starting from the interpretation of its original colors. The essay investigates the different approaches emerged by restoration works that have led to erroneous restitution of the building's image.

Key words: 20th century architecture, restoration, color, photography.

1. Introduction

“Restaurer un édifice, ce n’est pas l’entretenir, le réparer ou le refaire, c’est le rétablir dans un état complet qui peut n’avoir jamais existé à un moment donné”. Unchanging, unforgettable, incisive, incipit of the entry *Restauration* [1] written by Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc is still capable to explain, better than any subsequent theories in the field of architectural restoration, the ways in which the restoration of existing buildings, no matter how old, was conceived, but more importantly, was realized.

2. From Kodachrome to B&W

Architects involved in restoration works usually have the goal of restoring the buildings “dans un état complet qui peut n’avoir jamais existé à un moment donné”. However, respecting only the visual integrity of Modern heritage does not require testing, nor analysis, nor checks. That state of completeness lies in our retinas, even before the countless stock images (actually, always the same) that usually accompanied the inauguration of modern buildings that were manifestos of a new way of living, even before new places to live.

Those photographs were made in black & white: color photography, made available on the market since

1936 by Kodak company with the introduction of Kodachrome film, would not become commonplace until after World War II (although the architectural photographers would often continue to use black & white, considered more elegant, less distracting in relation to the qualities of volumes, of the shadows, of the surfaces of buildings whose main value laid in the purity of the surfaces, the absence of ornamentation, the sculptural volumes; all qualities for which the chromatisms of Kodachrome and later color films represented an unnecessary distracting factor).

The fate of modern architectures was thus, inevitably, to be restored to a state of renovated completeness, we are now certain, that buildings had never had.

But what are the reasons for the “return” to black & (especially) white (Fig. 1)? When was it decided that modern buildings should be white, somewhat like cathedrals, almost a retaliation to what Le Corbusier [2] stated in one of his famous books?

We do not have a certain data, nor a precise author or event; the answer may lie in what has been written above, in the image that books, journals and magazines have created over decades, in the absence of color in those photos, republished countless times. But there is also a possible critical thinking that moves away from the European context and, through the Cornell University



Fig. 1 Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, Doppelhaus, Weissenhofsiedlung, Stuttgart (Germany) (restoration works: 2003-2005).

and New York, returns to Europe, contributing to the creation of the myth of White Architecture. The proposed interpretation is probably affected by those who, like us, were trained in the last quarter of 20th century with the myth of the Five Architects and their white architecture.

Richard Meier¹ [3] claimed to have trained through the Alberto Sartoris's book entitled *Gli elementi dell'architettura funzionale: sintesi panoramica dell'architettura moderna*, published in Milan in 1932 by the publisher Hoepli. The volume contained many photographs, obviously in black and white. That is why the idea of the whiteness of rationalist architecture would find a new legitimacy through the reflections of Meier, Eisenmann, Gwathmey, Graves and Hejduk, reflections destined to have good fortune not only in the design of new buildings² (Fig. 2) but, in a kind of mirror game,



Fig. 2 R. Meier, Arp Museum Rolandseck, Remagen (Germany), 2004-2007.

in the restoration of modern heritage.

The reference to Sartoris also introduces the question of the classical inspiration in the choice of the white color for modern architectures, when they were really white and there is no doubt that there were some: "It is particularly the Italian Rationalism that pursued this idea of the Classic, an issue in relation to which there is a wide critical thinking" [4].

The classic and the white immediately refer back to the initiator of that misunderstanding, to him who had wrongly interpreted the white color as the only hue of classical sculpture and architecture: Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Just under three centuries after the theories of the German historian we know that his assumptions about the whiteness of the sculptures and buildings of Classicism, were completely wrong; and

¹ On Richard Meier and the use of white color in architecture, cf. Zammerini, M. 2016.

² The fortune of the white color in contemporary architecture is vast: from Sverre Fehn to Santiago Calatrava, from Steven Holl

to Kenzo Tange, there are many examples of architectures in which the pervasive choice of white is a decisive factor in building of their image.

we know that such an idea not only led to the glories of Neoclassicism, but also led to the removal of many colored fragments that resisted and were preserved on ancient statues and temples.

Our hope is that, long before what happened in Winckelmann's case, it will be accepted today that modern buildings were much less monochromatic than the images in which they are captured, as evidenced by numerous studies carried out on the different layers of plaster and paintings present on their surfaces³ [5]. If we are not yet culturally ready to choose the "simple" material conservation, let us then at least refer to the category of scientific restoration dear to Gustavo Giovannoni, trying to return to the color palettes that distinguished modern buildings at the time of their inauguration.

References

- [1] Viollet-le-Duc, E. 1854-1868. *Entry on Restoration in Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XIVe siècle*. Paris: Édition Bance-Morel. (in French)
- [2] Le Corbusier. 1937. *Quand les Cathédrales étaient blanches. Voyage au pays des timides*. Paris: Éditions Plon. (in French)
- [3] Zammerini, M. 2016. "Le radici del bianco nell'opera di Richard Meier." Accessed October 19, 2023. <https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/oi/article/view/7915/7913>.
- [4] Zammerini, M. 2016. "Le radici del bianco nell'opera di Richard Meier." Accessed October 19, 2023. <https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/oi/article/view/7915/7913>.
- [5] Reichwald, H. F. 2006. "Oberflächen und Farbfassungen." In *Le Corbusier/Pierre Jeanneret. Doppelhaus in der Weißenhofsiedlung Stuttgart. Die Geschichte einer Instandsetzung*, edited by Adlbert, G. (Hg.). Stuttgart/Zürich: Karl Krämer Verlag. (in French)

³ One of the most pioneering studies on the subject was that of Le Corbusier's Doppelhaus in Weissenhof; beyond the result, on which opinions differ, it is necessary to note that the attention to

the analysis didn't set an example for many subsequent interventions, where the will for renewal prevailed.