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Modern architecture vs. restoration of monuments: underlying divergences?

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Abstract: The pioneers of the emerging Modern Architecture Movement expressed their differences with the postulates of the theories of restoration of monuments. They rejected the emphasis placed on the conservation of pre-existing architecture, to which they attributed limited concepts and negative aspects. This provoked controversies during the third decade of the twentieth century that influenced the subsequent evolution of the concepts of cultural heritage. The objective of this work was to clarify the divergent criteria formulated at that time, and to explore the current situation. It was based on the review of bibliographical sources, the analysis of documents, opinions of authors, and examples of paradigmatic modern works intervened up to the present. Persistent problems are observed in recognizing the heritage significance of the architecture of the recent past and in undertaking its restoration. In conclusion, there are failures in the attention that these deserve, and differences in the specific restoration processes that they require.

Key words: Modern Movement; theories of restoration of monuments; restoration of modern buildings

1 Introduction

Over time, buildings deteriorate and fall into disuse due to wear and tear, aging, obsolescence, neglect, or other causes [1]. In the past, there was not always an interest in protecting them from the destructive effects to which they were exposed, and during antiquity and the Middle Ages, deteriorated, decommissioned, and disused buildings were demolished so that their materials could be reused. This practice was gradually replaced later on—most frequently beginning in the 18th century—by efforts aimed at preserving or restoring certain structures when they were considered to possess specific values [2]. Over time, the various initiatives to conserve or restore these structures gave rise to different approaches, which sparked heated debates involving diverse theoretical positions that came to be known as "theories of monument restoration."

This evolution was accompanied by heated debates and controversies that spanned a long historical period, influencing and shaping contemporary concepts regarding the conservation and restoration of built cultural heritage. Among the debates and conflicts that took place were those involving members of the nascent Modern Architecture Movement, who, in its early stages, expressed views that contrasted with the principles of conservation and restoration of examples of traditionalist architecture, considering them to embody rigidity and creative immobility, and of a nature that restricted the freedom of expressive language, among other negative aspects that were conceptually incompatible with the principles of the Modern Movement.

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The objectives of this study are to explore the controversies that arose regarding the early theories of monument conservation and restoration, to clarify the divergences from the approaches prevalent at that time and their influences, and to identify the circumstances and difficulties that remain latent in the contemporary era.

Methodologically, various bibliographic sources were examined regarding the evolution of theories on the restoration of monuments, as well as the viewpoints of the leading figures of the emerging modern architecture movement, who during that historical period voiced criticism of the approaches to conservation and restoration. Reference was made both to certain examples of modern projects and to construction interventions carried out on contemporary architectural works that sparked some controversial theoretical debates; various lingering aspects and conditions that remain present today were also identified, at a time when restoration efforts for significant buildings from the recent past are still insufficient [3].

2 Development

2.1 The conservation and restoration of monuments: background

The protection and conservation of built heritage did not always exist; however, among the diverse isolated actions that took place in the past with the intention of conserving or restoring objects with values beyond their mere material existence, buildings considered paradigmatic ─ including those ancient structures, a perspective influenced, among other factors, by the publication of J.J. Winkelman's (1717-1768) History of Ancient Art and the discoveries at the cities of Herculaneum (1719) and Pompeii (1748). From this period, there are accounts of conservation work carried out on churches, castles, and medieval structures that reflected national histories and identities[1]; in addition to several examples of archaeological restoration, notably the works carried out using anastylosis by Giuseppe Valadier (1762-1839) and Raffaele Stern (1774-1820) [4] (Figure 1).

Over time, conceptual theoretical stances were gradually shaped and structured, including some opposing viewpoints, which were referred to at that time as "Theories of Monument Restoration," though they were not exactly "theories" as we understand them today. In the 18th and 19th centuries, these approaches succeeded one another or coincided in time, associated primarily with prominent advocates, with Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879) and John Ruskin (1819-1900) likely being the best-known early figures in this process due to their mutually opposing positions regarding their personal approaches to restoration. The former—an architect, writer, and historian born in Paris—advocated restoring monuments to an appearance similar to that which they had during the most significant period of their history, a criterion he applied in several cases in which he was involved. According to Quatrimere de Quince (1755-1849), his actions boiled down to restoring ancient works and monuments—which had been degraded by the passage of time or by all manner of accidents to which they were exposed—and to restoring their original integrity by rebuilding the degraded parts and missing elements using the same material [5].

The second, Ruskin—a British writer, art critic, and sociologist who wrote on politics, economics, art, geography, geology, and botany—was an advocate for the historical authenticity of works of art and the leading proponent of the conservationist movement in Europe known as "Ruinsism." He viewed restoration negatively, considering it a form of falsification—not only material but also moral [5]—a perspective shared by prominent figures of the time, such as William Morris (1834-1896), who founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in 1877.

Various theories with diverse concepts were defined and implemented, some of which were characterized by conflicting or non-conflicting postulates [6], which can be summarized as follows:

- Those based on the idea that historic architecture is untouchable.
- Those that advocate for a supposedly neutral type of intervention, based on the belief that this respects historical values.

- Those who propose intervention without renouncing the values of the pre-existing contemporary architectural culture [1].

Among the theoretical positions that emerged from the late 19th century through the 1930s, the following stand out: Modern Restoration, Historical Restoration, and Scientific or Philological Restoration, led respectively by figures such as Camilo Boito (1836-1914), Luca Beltrami (1854-1933), and Gustavo Giovannoni (1873-1947) [2]. The latter also made a notable contribution to the organization and holding of the first International Conference on the Restoration of Monuments [5].



Figure 1. Arch of Titus, built in Rome in 81 AD; and reconstructed using anastylosis by Stern and Valadier in 1821. Source: author's archive, 2015 [4]

This conference, held in Athens in 1931, aimed to unify, consolidate, and promote the advances of the restoration movement up to that point [7]. It covered the debate on various aspects related to monuments, such as art; maintenance; restoration; anastylosis; additions; materials; methods and techniques; legislation; archives; inventories; collaboration; the role of the sciences; and interdisciplinarity, among others.

Monuments were considered testimonies—inherited documents—which, in the case of "living" monuments, should be restored; whereas "dead" monuments (ruins) should only be consolidated and preserved (Figure 2), because their paramount importance lay in safeguarding their historical and commemorative values, since otherwise they would disappear [5], although both cases could coexist.



Figure 2. Ruined remains of the original facade of the former Hotel Roma, in the Historic Center of Old Havana, supported by shoring for several years to integrate them into the new reconstruction. Source: author, 2010 [4]

The conference culminated in the drafting of a manifesto known as the "Athens Charter," which advocated for respect for historical and artistic works and their conservation [5]; this served as the catalyst for heated controversies between its organizers and representatives of the nascent Modern Movement in architecture of the time.

2.2 The modern movement in architecture: the divergences

The emerging Modern Architecture Movement, which took shape more rapidly than the evolution of conservation and restoration practices, proclaimed principles of rationality, functionality, emancipation, hygiene, discipline, planning, and control of urban growth [8]. It was considered linked to a dynamic way of thinking—characterized by ingenious creativity, innovation, and sharp intellectual insight—which entailed both a creative challenge and a commitment to industrial processes and products [9]. However, it never turned its back on the development of heritage conservation practices. As the bearer of a new approach to creation and from its inception, this movement expressed positions incompatible with the rigid academicist concepts that had prevailed until then in examples of traditionalist architecture, as manifested in areas as varied as formal and expressive aspects; criteria for spatial and functional organization; the building materials used; and the priority given to hygiene, environmental integration, and climate control, among others [4].

Various pioneering architects of modern architecture had previously voiced criticism of restoration and expressed disdain for the vestiges of traditionalist thought in architecture. They believed that the basic precepts proclaimed by the Modern Movement contravened the principles and practice of historic preservation. This was the case with Tony Garnier (1869-1948), who in 1912 accused earlier architecture of being based on false principles, and the Architectural Review, which in 1905 labeled it deceptive. On the other hand, Adolf Loos (1870-1933) went so far as to criticize the Greeks for paying too much attention to architectural ornamentation; while William Richard Lethaby (1857-1931) asserted in 1911 that ornamentation had ceased to be an expression of cultural validity—a view shared by Hendrik Petrus Berlage (1856-1934), who considered it superfluous in architectural works. Auguste Perret (1874-1954) and Bruno Taut (1880-1938) also expressed critical views in this regard, and Alvar Aalto (1898-1975) once declared that the ancient could not be revived. Frank Lloyd Wright (1876-1959), in turn, asserted that the old was in decline and already lacked vitality, while Walter Gropius (1883-1969) went so far as to say he was fed up with the arbitrary reproduction of historical styles. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) advised architects not to indulge in such outdated ideas, and Louis Sullivan (1856-1924) urged them not to imitate them, since he believed that restoration contradicted the phrase attributed to him: "form follows function," by directing attention first and foremost to the object and then to its function [4]. For Le Corbusier (1887-1965), there was a great discrepancy between the modern mindset and the suffocating accumulation of detritus from earlier eras [8].

The preservation of built heritage was viewed, in a sense, as a cult of the vestiges of traditionalist architectural practice, which embodied rigid, inflexible principles of expression associated with reproductive, static thought processes and limited creativity; consequently, in certain educational programs, all content related to any type of style was systematically eliminated. Courses in the history of architecture were even avoided, on the assumption that they contributed to the persistence of outdated images during the design process—images that stifled creative activity and encouraged the adoption of flawed compositional approaches [4].

2.3 The "Athens Charter" of 1931 and 1933: divergences and controversies

After the Athens Charter was published in 1931—advocating respect for the past and championing the conservation and restoration of monuments and other artistic expressions—architects belonging to the nascent Modern Movement in architecture also gathered in Athens two years later, in 1933, for the Fourth Congress of the CIAM (an acronym for the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) and addressed approaches to both urban planning and architecture. It was

acknowledged that a break had occurred with the examples of the past (which was perceived by many as a rejection of their preservation), and the meeting concluded with a document known as the "Second Athens Charter," to avoid confusion with the previous version of the Charter [8].

The Second Athens Charter could only be published anonymously by Le Corbusier in 1942 and was later made public in September 1957, after the end of World War II. It was considered an alternative counter-proposal to the conservationist principles contained in the 1931 Charter, and it responded to Gustavo Giovannoni's criteria for excluding the works of modern architects from historic districts, as he believed that the transcendent values accumulated by these works were not yet evident [2] [4,5], a view that persists in part today and still leads to the application of restrictions under certain regulatory documents (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Expansion of the Hotel Parque Central in Havana, a project by José Antonio Choy and Julia León at the beginning of the 21st century, in which regulations governing the Historic Center required modifications to the original design of the facades to blend in with the adjacent buildings. Source: author's Archive, 2011

In this regard, the modernists' document argued that historic areas should be protected only in cases where isolated monuments, complexes, streets, or neighborhoods were representative of a specific era; and they should be respected only if: a) they reflected a past culture and served the public interest; b) they did not involve living in unsanitary conditions; and c) their preservation did not hinder the organic development of the city or the option to demolish the unsanitary portion [5].

Point 66 added that: not all of the past was entitled to permanence by definition; and one had to choose wisely what should be preserved. In the case of buildings constructed in large numbers, some would be preserved for documentary purposes, while the rest would be demolished; and in other cases, only the part that constituted a memory or had real value could be preserved, with the rest modified in a useful manner. Only a network of the city's historic streets would be preserved; the dilapidated dwellings surrounding these areas—which lacked any interest whatsoever—would be demolished; and green spaces would be introduced. He advocated for the insertion of new buildings in keeping with the contemporary spirit, ones that were sufficiently healthy for people, without showing any sympathy for the historic fabric, considering the aesthetic adaptation of new buildings to old standards to be disastrous—something that could not be tolerated under any circumstances [3].

Years later, at the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, a controversial project by Spanish architect José Luis Sert for the Historic Center of Havana was based on principles similar to those outlined above (Figure 4), in which it was proposed that only the most significant historic monuments be preserved and the rest of the buildings be replaced with modern-style structures.

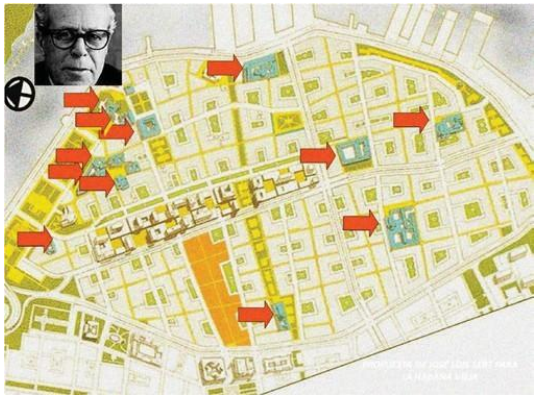


Figure 4. Proposal for a controversial urban intervention in the Historic Center of Havana by Spanish architect José Luis Sert in the 1950s. Source: author's archive [4]

2.4 Modern heritage to the present day

Alongside the development, strengthening, and expansion of the Modern Movement throughout the last century, theoretical concepts of conservation and restoration also evolved; adjustments to these concepts were considered to have been significantly influenced by the clash between early restorers and the pioneers of modern architecture [10]. There was a gradual broadening of the concept of cultural heritage, which has led to the diversification and greater flexibility of regulations and the inclusion of other categories, including contemporary architecture [11].

Today, the key players have changed, as have the controversial debates of earlier eras. But while Gustavo Giovannoni, in the 1930s, did not attribute sufficient cultural value to modern architecture, it continues even today to demand the attention its works deserve—just as is granted to the restoration of historic buildings—since it already possesses the required values and historical significance [6], and, being alive and valid, it aspires to be taken into account—and with it, to have its modes of use, contemporary needs, and respect for the original design assimilated [1].

In reality, the arguments of the Modern Movement introduced criteria that ran counter to the approaches typically associated with monuments. These centered on the valuation of historic buildings and ruins as documents evoking bygone eras, serving as reminders of historical memory, and expressing various artistic and architectural values of the past. They believed that such approaches created a disconnect from the significance attributed to paradigmatic works from more recent periods and the restoration processes those works required. In the case of the latter, the goal was to highlight their innovative significance and to bring to light evidence of the transformative role they played in architectural practice, their significance due to the creative essence and new compositional freedom they they introduced, the use of industrially produced building materials, the emphasis on sanitary conditions, the connection with nature, and the promotion of a different way of using them and appreciating their expressive image, among other aspects. Their structural interventions have sparked a profound debate, in which the possibility of a specific approach to restoring them has even been raised [11].

The restoration of historic buildings focused on preserving historical memory, recognized values, and the formal image of cultural heritage, and generally employed traditional techniques and materials, among other aspects. Meanwhile, contemporary buildings offered greater flexibility in using advanced technologies to improve the functionality of structures; however, over time, these buildings present greater limitations in acquiring the required replacement components, due to the depletion of commercial supply or their unavailability on the market [12].

However, the cultural and social devaluation, the material and physical decay of modern buildings [1], the vulnerability and diversity of their building materials [9], the use of partially obsolete construction technologies, the inappropriate alteration of their original uses, the marked depreciation of their use value due to their advancing state of

disrepair, the need to resort to interdisciplinary work, and the limited historical value they had accumulated due to their recent date of construction—unlike that of past cultures—have generally not contributed to their conservation and have accelerated the process of deterioration in numerous cases, putting valuable, paradigmatic examples at risk of disappearance.

On occasion, some of the significant works of modernism that were decommissioned and demolished due to the ephemeral nature of their specific architectural programs have subsequently been restored, as was the case with the German Pavilion at the Barcelona International Exposition (1930) by Mies van der Rohe [3]. However, its replica—reconstructed at the end of the 20th century with considerable fidelity to the original (Figure 5)—sparked heated controversies and theoretical debates related, among other aspects, both to the authenticity of various functional alterations that were introduced and to the claimed authorship of the replica of the original.



Figure 5. The German Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe at the 1930 Barcelona World's Fair, reconstructed in the 1990s. Source: Photo courtesy of María Mestre Martí. 2010

Over time, the masterpieces of modern architecture built in the 1920s and 1930s have aged [13,14], and due to their state of disrepair, several of them underwent restoration, such as Villa Savoye (Poissy, 1929) and Villa La Roche (Henket, 1991), both by Le Corbusier; Fallingwater (Bear Run, Pennsylvania, 1935) by Frank Lloyd Wright; Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat House (Brno, 1930); Walter Gropius's Bauhaus School (Dessau, 1925); Gerrit Rietveld's Rietveld-Schröder House (Utrecht, 1924) [11]; and the Paimio Sanatorium (Helsinki, 1933) by Alvar Aalto [14].

Other paradigmatic works from more recent periods have also been restored, such as the Farnsworth House (Piano, Illinois, 1947) by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York, 1956) by Frank Lloyd Wright; the National School of Fine Arts (Havana, 1965) by Ricardo Porro; among many others, though still insufficient in number. There is a clear need for effective criteria to recognize the significance of architecture from the recent past [15], to give it the attention it deserves, and to find specific solutions to promote the appropriate, tailored restoration these buildings deserve—a task that remains pending (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Music School (1965) by Vittorio Garatti, one of Havana's National Schools of Art (ENA), currently unused and in an advanced state of disrepair, awaiting restoration. Source: author. 2019

3 Conclusion

The pioneers of the nascent Modern Movement in the 1930s questioned the theories and practices of monument restoration. They accused these theories and practices of placing excessive value on the memory of architectural remnants from the past and of tending to sanctify and perpetuate the image of the traditionalist architecture that had dominated until then—which they considered, among other things, to be unhygienic, the bearer of retrograde approaches with disastrous results, rigid in thought, and stifling of creative activity and innovation. According to them, historical models should be limited to the bare minimum necessary to preserve the memory of the past, and the rest should be demolished and replaced with contemporary buildings of higher quality, within the historical fabric. Over time, the controversies and debates that took place helped shape the evolution and subsequent transformation of positions regarding the architectural heritage. As significant modern structures aged and deteriorated, efforts to recognize and restore them faced limitations due to their limited historical value, as well as the vulnerability of the contemporary construction materials and techniques used, among other factors. It was also found that the objectives, approaches, techniques, and restoration processes applied to historic architecture differed from those required for relevant modern and contemporary examples; furthermore, it became evident that even today, these latter examples receive scant recognition and insufficient attention. This led to the proposal to develop new theoretical approaches to enhance recognition of the significance and values of paradigmatic examples of architecture from the recent past, and to promote their restoration using specific techniques and processes distinct from those applied to architecture from the distant past.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Note

[1] Construction projects associated with George Gilbert Scott (1811-1878); Karl Friedrich (1781-1841), and John Carter (1747-1817), among others [4].

[2] "The style of our century in matters of ordinary construction, [...] cannot yet claim a rightful place among monuments as an artistic expression of the past until it has been demonstrated in a stable manner—and not merely as a fleeting trend—that it truly represents our century, and has not acquired such flexibility of expression as to produce harmony and unity" [4,5].