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# EDITORIAL

## On the Preservation and Technologies of Modern and Contemporary Architecture

In this editorial, we offer some thoughts on the 'preservation' of architecture, particularly that of the 20th century, and on the project, or rather projects, that characterise it and the technologies that underpin it, based on our experience as researchers and teachers in architecture schools at Swiss universities and elsewhere. These considerations should not be seen as conclusive or definitive; they are part of an ongoing reflection that we will gladly continue and share in the future.

### PRESERVATION

An initial consideration concerns the role of preservation in the construction of an emerging cultural project prompted by socio-ecological transition, in which the landscape, historical architectural heritage and existing built environment converge to depict the richness and complexity of our future habitat. To achieve this, we need to rethink, make an effort to innovate, and rebuild the architectural design process without jeopardising its chances of evolving towards a new form of practice. The latter must not blend into the mainstream that has developed in recent years around the reuse of architecture – terms such as reuse, adaptive reuse and revitalisation have become ubiquitous and emptied of their original meaning. 'Preservation' has long been a structured and vibrant practice. We must be precise and demanding, and this is the position we have taken in our research and practice. We clearly refer to the term 'preservation', which identifies a reflection encompassing the

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theory and cultivated and responsible practice of working with existing structures, as it took shape at the turn of this century, and as clearly identified by the activities of organisations such as Docomomo, which is involved in the documentation and conservation of modern and contemporary architecture, and a few pioneering projects. Preservation is therefore naturally and rightly part of the emerging culture of socio-ecological transition, which bases its project on heritage – qualitative architecture in the broadest sense – as a cultural and economic resource. We must also revisit the writings of the founding historians and theorists of conservation and 'preservation', such as Alois Riegl[1] and Cesare Brandi, as well as the architecture of figures such as Alison and Peter Smithson, who champion the 'as found', the 'already there', as material for their projects. It is important to use the right terms and to explain to them clearly, so as not to fall back into a pseudo-Esperanto that simplifies complex concepts and levels everything down to a lower level of understanding.

## APPROACH(ES)

A second consideration concerns the careful, close attention that preservation requires of us. 'We all work within the existing framework,' some colleagues regularly remind us, even though we systematically demolish everything that exists before considering the project. So, has there been nothing particularly new under the sun in architectural practice over the last twenty years? Is there no destructive reversal or *tabula rasa*, no embalming or futile treatment of what exists, nothing really new? Except for the very close attention we pay to materiality and what it constructs and represents. This perspective is the awareness of the dual project of conservation and renewal, relentless and paradigmatic, which must be built on its necessarily oxymoronic nature, but a subtle and intelligent oxymoron, like those composed by Gunnar Asplund and Hans Döllgast in their architecture, and also those of

1 Aloïs Riegl, Der *moderne Denkmalkultus: Sein Wesen und seine Entstehung*, Vienna, W. Braumüller, 1903.

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Angelo Mangiarotti and Jean Prouvé in some of their works. Today, they are continued in certain unique contemporary practices, such as Weiterbauen and the Plus+ strategy.

This dual oxymoronic project must be accessible to the viewer, respecting both its theoretical and practical construction. Architecture, while drawing on its own form, makes use of music, where one is both composer and performer,[2] and literature, where one is both writer and translator,[3] and also detector and provocateur of archi-texts.[4]

## METHOD

A third consideration concerns our ability to see, observe, analyse and regard detailed reading as the primary and fundamental act of architectural design, which involves surveying, drawing, close immersion, description, discovery, rediscovery, recognition, a new description of architecture and its materiality, another history of architecture, created with the cognitive tools of architects. This consideration must focus both on the recognition of the built environment as a primary text and unique document, and on the misuse of the wonderful tools at our disposal, digitisation as a tool for replacing the existing, a kind of smoke and mirrors, often a manipulation to avoid materiality when it can so effectively deepen and resonate with it, sometimes a pretext for its demolition by arguing for digital conservation, which is nevertheless so precarious.

2 Luigi Payreson, *Esthétique. Théorie de la formativité*, Paris, Æsthetica, 1988.
3 Umberto Eco, *Dire quasi la stessa cosa. Experienze di traduzione*, Milan, Bompiani, 2003.
4 Gérard Genette, *Introduction à l'architexte*, Paris, Seuil, 1979.

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## RESEARCH

Research is the subject of our next consideration. Research in architecture, which is necessarily applied and for this very reason misunderstood and suspected of amateurism by both scholars and literary figures, is an in-between discipline that uses the city as its laboratory and satisfies the criteria of neither one group nor the other, too often taking refuge in 'project-based research' centred on the so-called creativity of the architect. And yet, research does exist.[5] The symposium convened by Jean-Louis Cohen at the Collège de France some ten years ago suggested that we develop research in the field of restoration and preservation. Research is based on the history of the architect and not that of the architectural historian; it is the material history of the building, which deepens accumulated knowledge by integrating the history of the object over the long term and determining the methods of intervention on it. The research draws on scientists as experts, requires detailed technical analyses rather than formal speculation, and tests its results and constantly evolving knowledge on the restoration site itself. It explores fundamental questions such as material authenticity and image, while simultaneously proposing operational methods as possible responses to issues such as the energy crisis. In architecture, and in conservation in particular, without research there can be no meaningful teaching or original practice.

## PEDAGOGY

The pedagogical potential of preservation in teaching and research has been exploited for more than twenty years now. It draws on multiple

5 Franz Graf, Marino Giulia, 'Concerning the research "Material history of the built environment and the conservation project" (2008–2020), methodology and results', in João Mascarenhas-Mateus and Ana Paula Pires, *History of Construction Cultures*, Lisbon, 2 vol., CRC Press/Balkema, 2021, vol. 2, p. 780–786.

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social and scientific disciplines, the history of architecture, architects, the construction of architecture and its materiality, the theory of architecture and design, and both abstract and very concrete questions about our surroundings in the broadest sense, from the teaspoon to the territory – in short, everything that cultivated and responsible architecture has always been concerned with.

It is worth noting the complexity of profiling these new architects, who juggle with history, design, construction, drawing, building physics and ecology. This is a complexity we have already encountered, where the architect historian, intellectual and practitioner we proposed to train some twenty years ago is, in fact, and by their very constitution, a figure outside the field, a figure on the margins, non-existent in established academic and professional categories. While it is unlikely that the transition will spring from overly rigid disciplines, it is equally difficult for it to be imposed by overly marginal positions.

## VALUES

This sixth consideration also concerns the importance of qualitative assessment of all architecture, both iconic structures such as Le Corbusier's Unités d'habitation and Chapelle de Ronchamp, Pier Luigi and Antonio Nervi's Palazzo del Lavoro, Marcel Breuer's Flaine ski resort, and the architecture of Heidi and Peter Wenger, Jean-Paul Darbellay, François Maurice, Otto Senn, Otto Glaus, Georges Brera, Paul Waltenspüh, Edouardo Vittoria, Rudolf and Peter Steiger, Jacob Zweifel, Heinrich Strickler, and others. We need to re-examine diffuse architecture in order to give it the value it deserves and prevent its destruction, support adaptations, and build on the richness of what already exists rather than on normative performance targets.

If we are to grasp the distance between monumental heritage and ordinary buildings, or even diffuse architecture, we must not radicalise this difference, but rather put it into perspective, while identifying the qualities of the buildings.

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## PALIMPSEST

We must definitively reconsider the structuring nature of palimpsests in buildings. Stratigraphy is inseparable from buildings and their lives. We once even outlined a way of approaching the history of architecture based on its stratification, additions and modifications, on its palimpsest nature, a concept so well defined by André Corboz,[6] to whom everyone refers – and rightly so – and from whom we still seek intellectual inspiration, such as the so-called 'revitalisation', however vague and ineffective this principle may be today.

Perhaps for the moment, especially in academic circles, and since the late 1960s, the mental and practical inertia of demolition-reconstruction has become firmly established in the world of construction – surely in a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the term 'sustainable'. Instead, we need to reactivate targeted and appropriate intervention, returning to the issue of perpetual, systematic maintenance, which is celebrated by everyone from the humblest professionals to the most respected scholars, and whose benefits are being rediscovered.

## FRAGILITY

The absurdity of any indiscriminate destruction prior to the project can be seen as an eighth consideration. How can the strategy of preserving what already exists be seen as original, when it is simply fair, correct and thoughtful? Pierre Caye entitled his beautiful book, published recently, *Durer* (Lasting), proposing 'elements for the transformation of the productive system'.[7]

6 André Corboz, *Le territoire comme palimpseste et autres essais*, Paris, Éditions de l'Imprimeur, 2001.

7 Pierre Caye, *Durer. Éléments pour la transformation du système productif*, Paris, Belles Lettres, 2020.

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Before taking action, it is essential to make a critical value judgement on the architectural quality after the intervention. Will the architecture be 'better'? But let us define this 'better', or rather redefine it systematically: urban and architectural quality, environmental and ecological quality, social and economic quality? Otherwise, it is better to refrain, not to degrade what already exists, but rather to redesign with awareness and determination. It is also essential to be clear-headed about the alterations caused by so-called improvements, for example, in terms of energy efficiency. Let us question the benefits of accumulating layers of expanded polystyrene that collapse during the second or third renovation of buildings, such as those by Georges Candilis that we have studied closely, when the rather rudimentary supporting structure can no longer bear the weight. How else can we say that the Europe-wide energy renovation of architecture in which we live, although essential and clamoured for by an overwhelming majority, is a systematic and naive destruction of existing buildings, if there is no qualitative project to accompany what is currently nothing more than a disastrous technical gesture? Sergio Los said it back in the 1960s: it is absurd to oppose – and separate – the materiality of architecture, the techno-scientific question, and the immateriality of the project, the cultural question.

## REPRODUCTION?

In this ninth consideration, it is believed that the values of age and novelty of buildings, which exist as such, should be put into perspective and in no way compared, and that their historicity is rather difficult to address. At a time when safeguarding, conserving or restoring mineral plaster, a medieval stone wall, stained glass windows or Catalan vaults is common practice in conservation doctrine and presents no difficulty in terms of execution, we simultaneously allow ourselves to simply replace materials such as 20th-century glazing and window frames. They are said to be fragile and difficult to reproduce, and, as they are not labelled 'antique', they must meet standards that have become stricter in recent years. The old is easier to restore, the new is easier to

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replace. We experience absurdities on a daily basis: superb 1950s neon lighting is sacrificed in favour of a banal LED reproduction for the sake of energy savings, without any real energy calculations and, above all, without any real culture to judge its quality and the loss that its disappearance would mean. Why should something that was celebrated by international architectural critics 70 years ago as a masterpiece become intolerable today?

Why would aluminium-framed windows, which have allowed thousands of pupils to enjoy the park and wooded areas in which their classrooms are immersed, be inconceivable for today's school comfort? At a time when we will most likely and reasonably have to get used to living indoors with significantly greater temperature contrasts, can we really stigmatise them as unacceptable? Can artistic value be replaced by practical value without cultural loss? And who would be the arbiter?

## WEARINESS

The tenth consideration will address the disinterest and weariness that have set in among architects when it comes to practising 'preservation', which is a discipline that is quite demanding both intellectually and in its execution. 'Recycling' in the broad sense allows for more freedom, while we are delighted to discover a little-known tradition: the Chapel of Ronchamp was built with stones from the pre-existing church, Giampiero Mina's cinema theatre in Blenio reproduces Aalto's architecture using reclaimed wood from the construction of the Olivone dam, Gustav Peichl reused the windows from his own house when he extended it. But the common practice of the project in the built environment dilutes the meaning of terms such as preservation, rehabilitation, renovation, restoration, conservation, restitution, transformation, etc. It must be said that the trivialisation of the exercise fits in very well with the decline in heritage quality requirements across the board, probably caused by the lack of interest on the part of public authorities at the European level, and this recently almost led to the permanent disfigurement of the absolute masterpiece that is the *Maison du Peuple* in Clichy, Paris,

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which was avoided by last-minute ministerial intervention, or the application of the 110% bonus rule in Italy, which is dangerous for sensitive heritage sites such as Piero Bottoni's Palazzo Ina at 33 Corso Sempione in Milan if it is not given accelerated listing.

## SILENCE

Our eleventh consideration will be on the benefits of silence and invisibility in the conservation project, which means that after four years of studies and ten years of work, the 125,000-m² façade of the *Cité du Lignon* in Geneva has retained its original architectural qualities while reducing its 'energy drain' by half without anyone noticing, except for those working on the site.[8] This applied research, which we conducted at the Laboratory of Techniques and Preservation of Modern Architecture, is considered paradigmatic for the energy preservation of post-war buildings on a European scale and beyond. It is a vast project that had to remain silent and invisible, thus allowing architects and other stakeholders to claim credit for it! It is built on a simple and effective methodology, based on a balance between energy, economy and heritage, but which is nevertheless opposed by the managers of large complexes that could benefit from it, eager to keep a free hand over what they consider to be their entire property, without any external oversight. The economic issue will be fundamental in the global energy transition, as large scale imposes contained costs, even in rich countries where well-off cities and companies buy zero-carbon certificates at a high price.

8 Franz Graf and Giulia Marino, « Il Lignon. Un restauro silenzioso/Le Lignon. A silent restoration », *Casabella. Rivista internazionale di architettura*, n° 918, 2021, p. 3-15.

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## *BAUKULTUR?*

One final consideration: we must also be aware of the risk that even legitimate concerns driven by the energy transition, sustainable development and the materials that enable it, once again lead to a certain erosion of the fundamentals of architecture, from its spatial composition to its materiality, as was seen in the 1960s, when sociology and political concerns pilloried Le Corbusier, guilty of all kinds of architectural excesses, while Carlo Scarpa was simply ostracised from production. This was followed by pastiche postmodernists, digital deconstructionists, and now those convinced by the exclusive use of bio-based materials, always outside the scope of the discipline, when these concerns should be permanently changing the form and materiality of architecture, and with it, the entire *Baukultur*, a *Baukultur* that we have worked to consolidate through our work over the last 20 years.

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