

# HISTORICAL ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN THE «CULTURE OF CONSERVATION» AND THE «CULTURE OF DESIGN»: CONTROVERSIES, MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND AIMS

RICCARDO DALLA NEGRA\*

*Abstract:* The attitude towards historical architecture to existents varies consistently according to the different approaching criteria. The so-called 'culture of design' considers legitimate to work on them, as it was usual in the past. The so-called 'culture of conservation', instead, opposes the predominance of History, underlining the different conservative awareness that the established distance between 'present' and 'past' implies. Within the rich and sometimes harsh controversy between the two 'cultures', which are themselves not univocal, some contradictions, misunderstandings and different interpretations of the aim of the works emerge; broadly speaking, a different way to understand the 'making of architecture' arises.

*Key words:* Recovery, Restoration/Conservation. Maintenance. Refurbishment. Ancient/New.

According to a peculiar and incomprehensible belief, the so-called 'culture of design'<sup>1</sup>, in and outside the academic field, considers architectural design as its exclusive competence. Consequently, restoration, which is a main component of today's 'making of architecture', because it confronts 'architectures' of any time *in corpore vili*, is considered a secondary or a specialized discipline, on par with other ones<sup>2</sup>. The paradox becomes evident when architecture comes to dealing with tangible testimonies of its past. It would seem obvious that today's 'making of

---

\* University of Ferrara. Department of Architecture. dllrcr@unife.it

1 I will use the definitions 'culture of design' and 'culture of conservation' to simplify the discourse, although I believe they are both misleading: on the one hand it is indeed impossible to distinguish restoration from architectural design; on the other, conservation is a concept whose interpretation is not univocal.

2 This is misleading in the case of architectural design, as the Vitruvian triad (*firmitas, utilitas, venustas*) cannot be considered separately and technological aspects cannot be separated from formal ones as they influence each other; but, in the case of historical buildings, residential or special, it becomes a paradox.

architecture' within historical contexts should imply very 'conscious' knowledge and operational sensitivity<sup>3</sup>; however, this does not usually occur due to a 'self-referred' attitude of the architects, starting from the so-called 'star-system' and all the way to the ampler range of 'anonymous' professionals.

In order to unravel the situation, a quite intricate one given the drastic expansion beyond the chronological boundaries and the usual disciplinary fields of the attention for historic architecture, I deem necessary to analyse its misunderstandings and its controversies.

### 'CULTURE OF DESIGN' VS. 'CULTURE OF CONSERVATION'

We should start saying that both cultures are responsible for having long exacerbated two convictions. The first tends to consider contemporary design in perfect continuity with the past, namely with an equivalent degree of operational liberty in treating the existent as in the past, when it made perfect sense to demolish, extend or reduce or, more in general, to refurbish and, also, to up-date from a figurative viewpoint. Seemingly, this is what Alberti's elevation for the church of St. Francesco d'Assisi at Rimini suggests or the awesome coexistence of the structures of the ancient Temple of Athena within the 18th century's Cathedral of Syracuse, just to mention two of the mostly recalled examples by the 'culture of design'. Preventing this operational, thus creative, liberty would therefore mean to deny future itself and innovation.

These positions do not take into account the long theoretical elaboration rooted in the birth of the modern concept of restoration based on the acknowledgment of the distance between 'present' and 'past'<sup>4</sup>, only fairly anticipated by subtle attempts<sup>5</sup>. The fact that a conservative awareness has enforced the contemporary detachment from the historical buildings through an act of intellection was also clear to a renown scholar as Guglielmo De Angelis d'Ossat, who envisaged restoration as 'architecture on pre-existents one differently assessed over time'<sup>6</sup>.

3 DALLA NEGRA, R. "Il restauro consapevole: la traduzione dei principi conservativi e il difficile rapporto con le preesistenze", in BALZANI, M. (ed), *Restauro, Recupero, Riqualificazione. Il progetto contemporaneo nel contesto storico*, Milan, Skira, 2011, pp. 15-19.

4 Cfr. BONELLI, R., entry "Il restauro architettonico", in *Enciclopedia Universale dell'Arte*, vol. XI, Venezia-Roma, Istituto per la Collaborazione Culturale, 1963.

5 Cfr. MIARELLI MARIANI, G., "Il 'Cristianesimo primitivo' nella riforma cattolica e alcune incidenze sui monumenti del passato", in *L'Architettura a Roma e in Italia (1580-1621). Atti del XXIII Congresso di Storia dell'Architettura. Roma, 24-26 marzo 1988*, Vol I, Roma, Centro di Studi per la Storia dell'Architettura, 1989, pp. 133-166; PERGOLI CAMPANELLI, A., *Cassiodoro. Alle origini dell'idea di restauro*, Milano, Jaca Book, 2013. Also see the wider considerations in CARBONARA, G., *Avvicinamento al Restauro*, Napoli, Liguori, 1997, pp. 49 and ff.

6 Cfr. DALLA NEGRA, R., "Guglielmo De Angelis d'Ossat: un maestro degli anni della transizione", in *Monumenti e ambienti. Protagonisti del restauro del dopoguerra. Atti del Seminario Nazionale*, Napoli, Arte Tipografica Editrice, 2004, pp. 44 and ff.

The second conviction —although boasting very old roots— has been coming to age in the last thirty years, also due to an undisguised responsibility of part of the ‘conservation field’. This considers restoration as a ‘medical-nursing’ act, aseptically and scientifically achieved, to delegate to various different professionals, except architects: engineers for structures, art historians for artistic cycles (intending also the lightest presence of colour or modelled architectural elements), chemists for all that concerns cleaning and consolidation works, geologists for building materials, historians and archivists for historical documents and so on. As Giovanni Carbonara poignantly affirms «[...] restoration without architects is, actually, the dream of many, including public administrators which consider a rude oversimplification of problems as the way out from those same bureaucratic cages set up without a true reason by themselves and by the political power they express»<sup>7</sup>.

Shifting in the world of associations, such conviction takes on ‘mundane’ tones, widely used by mass-media, with peaks of true intellectual dullness, trivially repeated in pseudo-scientific conferences where invited speakers just downgrade the debate’s level. In such occasions the term ‘anastylosis’ is often used inappropriately, and unlikely re-compositions, which reveal a ‘literary’ idea of restoration are proposed<sup>8</sup> together with examples of ‘cosmetic surgery’ aiming at reproducing, faithfully and ‘scientifically’, what has gone lost. More in general, there is an obstinate aversion towards the idea of restoration as a ‘critical act’ and, consequently, towards any experiment of contemporary architectural language within historical contexts.

It is evident that such ‘reductive’ positions do not consider the complexity of the present debate<sup>9</sup>, although they both stem from rather ‘conservative’ intentions; instead, they tend to minimize it reducing the content both from a dialectical and a practical viewpoint.

It is not by chance that such ‘reductions’ are fully endorsed by the so-called ‘culture of design’ which prefers to entrust boring conservative practices to the ‘medical-nursing’ competences of conservators (who sometimes tend to take the architects’ place), in order to then feel free to intervene, as said, in a self-referred way.

7 CARBONARA, G., *Restauro architettonico: principi e metodo*, Roma, m. e. architectural book and review, 2012, page 13. As to the gradual downgrading of the architect’s role within the restoration charters, see ZUPPIROLI, M., “Contesti storicizzati e progressiva marginalizzazione del ruolo dell’architetto restauratore nell’evoluzione delle carte internazionali sul patrimonio culturale”, in MERLO, A., LAVORATTI, G. (ed.), *Pietrabuona. Strategie per la salvaguardia e la valorizzazione degli insediamenti medioevali*, Firenze, DIDA, 2014.

8 I have I defined the term in a provocative way as ‘anastomosis’, in DALLA NEGRA, R., “Il restauro consapevole ...” in *op. cit.*, note 2, page 19.

9 General ‘conservative’ aims should not be confused with the ‘culture of conservation’. For an overview on current professional orientations, refer to the ample considerations in CARBONARA, G. *Avvicinamento al Restauro*, Napoli, Liguori, 1997, pp. 271 and ff. Also see VARAGNOLI, C., *infra*.

The situation of Restoration within today's Italian educational system<sup>10</sup>, gives evidence of the fact that in most cases this discipline is missing in the last grading years of training in architecture since a recent reform has absurdly introduced a 3+2 years of study<sup>11</sup>, pursuing an educational model which does not belong to our tradition. Neither can the problem be solved by adding two-year post-graduate courses, nor by introducing monothematic 'conservation' courses, eliminating core disciplines of the architect's training. In this sense, I believe that the definition 'architect-restorer' should be left behind, as the latter term, although underlining the aim of a higher training, is a qualifying adjective which may lead to further misunderstandings such as highlighting a limit to the application of Restoration to the architectural field.

Insisting on the opposition of these two 'cultures' has not helped to solve the problem: from inside the Discipline, claiming that Restoration and Conservation are antithetic—as proposed by eminent scholars—<sup>12</sup> has ended up denying that Restoration itself is an act of architectural creativity, removing any critical and creative basis; from outside the Discipline, rudely accusing the ones who support Conservation<sup>13</sup> of being backwards-looking, has proved a significant ignorance about the true matter of the issue.

Recalling Gaetano Miarelli Mariani<sup>14</sup>, we should rather start speaking of 'architectural design' in its different declinations, according to the various purposes of architecture: in this sense, changing the order of the factors, restoration is nothing more than a way to 'make architecture', though in strict consideration of the material witnesses of the past and with conservative aims.

Hence, a restoration work consists in 'translating' into practice the conservative principles which identify contemporary culture and which cannot be subject to arbitrary interpretations. Therefore, restoration will decide to use its consolidated methodology, but also to recur to contemporary architectural language, to solve issues of lacunas (or gaps); the intent will certainly not be to exploit the existent as a new design 'opportunity' but, rather, to critically detect its value.

10 See PRACCHI, V., "L'insegnamento delle tecniche costruttive storiche nelle facoltà italiane", in *Muri parlanti. Prospettive per l'analisi e la conservazione dell'edilizia storica, Atti del Convegno di studi, Pescara 26-27 settembre 2008*, Firenze, ALINEA, 2009, pp. 55-68.

11 Conceived in the Ministerial Decree no. 509 November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1999 establishing the 3+2 course of study, an act which has produced indefensible damages.

12 See the definitions by Marco Dezzi Bardeschi and Amedeo Bellini, in AA.VV., *Che cos'è il restauro? Nove studiosi a confronto*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2005.

13 See the charges expressed by Giovanni Corbellini in CORBELLINI, G., "Tutto ciò che è solido si dissolve nell'aria". Restauro e delitto, in BALZANI, M. (ed.), *Restauro, Recupero, Riqualficazione. Il progetto contemporaneo nel contesto storico*, Milano, Skira, 2011, pp. 47-52.

14 MIARELLI MARIANI, G., "Esiste il restauro?", in *Storia architettura*, 1975, n° 2, pp. 4-9.

### 'RECOVERY' VS. 'CONSERVATIVE (OR SCIENTIFIC) RESTORATION'

The current scenario is also characterised by a conceptual contraposition between 'recovery' and 'restoration', acknowledging to the first the role of legitimately transforming the artefacts (which would otherwise be lost), and to the second a more specialized role strictly applied to 'monumental' heritage.

In this opposition one may observe that the idea of 'recovery' cannot define a specific design work but, rather, only a general aim which is applied to the built heritage in general through current practices of architectural technology<sup>15</sup>, namely: a) 'maintenance' works, (preservation of the 'current' conditions through direct and indirect preventive actions); b) 'rehabilitation' works (linked to the concept of the building's 'performance' according to certain standards set by the stakeholders); c) 're-use or re-cycle' (linked to the 'change' of function). Distinguishing among such three different fields would avoid most of the terminological trouble, behind which there are often peculiar and individual ideas about Restoration<sup>16</sup>. What is the substantial difference between working on the built heritage and on the monumental heritage (that Cesare Brandi had defined 'industrial products' and 'special products' apart)? There is only one possible answer: the difference lays in the value assessment, which many would like to eliminate *a priori*.

Curiously enough, such exclusion is shared both by the 'culture of design', which consequently feels authorized to avoid specific constraints when dealing with historically and artistically rich contexts, and by the 'culture of conservation' which, as said, often denies any critical foundation to Restoration.

The value assessment we express in the historic present leads us, indeed, to clearly distinguish between conservative works —carried out through 'conservative maintenance' and restoration works with the unique aim to preserve the material substance— and *non* conservative works, carried out through plain maintenance works and partial replacements or refurbishments, which fully legitimise transformations<sup>17</sup>.

Indeed, such 'evaluation' of historical architecture existents was practiced in the past, either consciously or unconsciously, producing «conciliating or contest-

15 See for example CECCHI, R., GASPAROLI, P., *La manutenzione programmata dei beni culturali edificati. Procedimenti scientifici per lo sviluppo di Piani e Programmi di Manutenzione*, Firenze, ALINEA, 2011 e GIULIO, R., *Manuale di manutenzione edilizia. Valutazione del degrado, programmazione e interventi di manutenzione*, Maggioli Editore, Santarcangelo di Romagna (RN), 1999.

16 This lexical confusion is poignantly analysed by CARBONARA, G., "Per una definizione attuale del restauro", in *op. cit.*, pp. 23 and ff.

17 I recall the topics which had already been clearly debated by Gaetano Miarelli Mariani in MIARELLI MARIANI, G., *Centri storici. Note sul tema*, Roma, Bonsignori Editore, 1993, specifically within the third chapter: *Sul recupero dei centri storici: uno schematico sguardo d'insieme*, pp. 55 and ff.

ing»<sup>18</sup> architectural results. In this sense, one should be free to express a critical judgement upon very recent artefacts, in order to prevent the loss of what could be considered, by next generations, as significant ‘testimonies of our historic present’; in other words, we should be free to distinguish between ‘history’ and ‘chronicle’. At the same time, as said, our conservative awareness urges us to protect the entire heritage to the advantage of future generations.

As stated, the ‘culture of design’ opposes the concept of ‘conservative restoration’ —otherwise defined as ‘scientific restoration’— to that of ‘transforming recovery’. This is a legacy of the infamous law n. 457 of 1978 (Regulation about residential estates), a ‘basic law’ that still largely regulates interventions on the existing built heritage, and also on that with historical and architectural value<sup>19</sup>. We do not intend to analyse here the *ratio* of such law at the town planning scale; we rather intend to underline its cultural backwardness in relation to the culture of restoration of the same years and, therefore, to the International Charter of Restoration, the so-called Venice Charter (1964), and to the Italian Charter (1972). What strikes after more than thirty years is that a similar gross ignorance on the theoretical reflections about restoration still persists. For instance, the definition ‘conservative restoration’ reveals a tautology for the above-mentioned reasons, and speaking of ‘scientific restoration’ is nonsense because restoration is first of all a critical act, even though it maintains a technical and scientific aspect just as any other architectural work.

This definition is a legacy of Giovannoni’s times when ‘scientific’ meant the incontrovertible application of principles; but, in addition, it again conceals the will to relegate Restoration to a field of hyper-specialized skills which aim at the mere material conservation and are essentially placed on the edge of architecture. The contradiction appears evident, especially in Italy, where regulations allow to entrust only architects with restoration works. The current practice assumes that the practitioners’ world should be organized according to these theoretical assumptions, which absurdly split the field in two: architects who focus on ‘design’ and architects who focus on ‘conservation’.

### ‘ANCIENT’ vs. ‘NEW’

The *vexata quaestio* about the insertion of new architectural forms in historic contexts is strictly linked to the above-illustrated issues. Contraposition between the two cultures is very strong, both in the case of interventions within a historic centre and in special contexts of high historic or artistic value.

18 I refer directly to the seminal essay by DE ANGELIS D’OSSAT, G., “Restauro: architettura sulle preesistenze diversamente valutate nel tempo”, in *Palladio*, III serie, XXVII (1978), n.º. 2, pp. 51-68.

19 Upon the effects of Law 457 of 1978, see MIARELLI MARIANI, G., “Legge 457: licenza di distruggere”, in *Restauro*, VIII (1979), n.º. 41, pp. 92-94.

Again it is necessary to anticipate two preliminary considerations in order to avoid any possible misunderstandings. First of all we should advocate the use of a contemporary architectural language in both contexts, although well aware that many objections are opposed both from inside and from outside the Discipline, as well as by most of the Academy and, more in general, by the public which is more or less influenced by mass media. Secondly, we should be against any ‘replacement’ both in the case of historic buildings related to the surrounding urban tissue, since historical complexes must be considered organisms made up of interdependent elements; and in that of single parts or elements belonging to historical buildings, since material ‘authenticity’ is a principle of great importance.

The apparent contradiction of these two preliminary considerations is solved if one reverses the problem and turns to the needs of the existent, rather than to those of the architect, as it often occurs. Consequently, a question arises: in which case the use of contemporary architectural language is legitimate when working within historic contexts? I believe that there is only one case: when, due to intrinsic or extrinsic reason, one must fulfil a lacuna produced within an urban tissue or an architectural context. This is a crucial topic in restoration since ever, together with the symmetric one which addresses the elimination of added elements.

This generates another widely spread misunderstanding in the ‘culture of design’, namely the confusion between ‘restoration works’ and those accomplished to introduce variable functions, for instance museum settings, starting from Carlo Scarpa’s project for Castelvechio, considered a sort of icon of the ‘exemplar restoration’, not the refined design work for a museum set-up it actually is. This is a misleading and long-lasting wrong interpretation, given the fact that a recent editorial for *Casabella* introducing Scarpa’s work, carried the peremptory title “The study of monumental restoration is useless”, recalling some considerations of the Maestro which belong to a widely out-dated discussion<sup>20</sup>.

Generally the so-called ‘culture of design’ maintains a rather independent structural and figurative attitude towards existents that mainly induce suggestions related either to materials, to volumes or to its general environment<sup>21</sup>.

The result changes completely in relation to the architect’s sensitivity, as he often tends to ‘update’ the image of the existent and to impose his own egotistic poetics.

The relationship with History is not entrusted to the rigorous historical-scientific knowledge of the artefact, but only to the architect’s cultural background, who

20 Cfr. “Editoriale”, in *Casabella*, n° 839-840, 2014, pp. 44-45.

21 I partially recall the topics that I have dealt with in DALLA NEGRA, R., “Il restauro consapevole ...”, *op.cit.*

often does not match up. The existent is then considered a noble frame for new achievements, that would be considerably belittled if decontextualized. All in all, paraphrasing De Fusco, we may speak of architecture with «rich apparatus for poor ideas»<sup>22</sup>.

---

<sup>22</sup> I refer provocatively to the well known editorial by Renato De Fusco appeared in DE FUSCO, R., "Restauro architettonico: ricchi apparati per povere idee", in *Selezione della critica d'arte contemporanea*, n.º 49, September 1980, pp. 5-6.