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Knowledge and protection of the modern and contemporary architectural heritage: comparative experiences

Proceedings of the seminar

— Rome, MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, 23 October 2019

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editing

Carlotta Brovadan, Martina De Luca, Paola d'Orsi, Elena Pelosi
(coordinamento editoriale / editorial office)

Roberta Fedele, Francesca Neri, Marta Samek, Valeria Volpe
(editing)

graphic design and layout

Francesca Pavese

translation

A.I.T. s.a.s.

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Margherita Guccione

Architecture archives for the protection and restoration of modern and contemporary architecture

Although the culture of conservation and restoration already has a long history, it is not yet a standard practice for intervention on modern and contemporary construction to require deeper critical analysis and respect for the building's inner consistency, as is current practice in the case of ancient constructions.

The intention here is therefore to examine the relationship between archive, architectural work, and restoration, starting from the experience of MAXXI Architettura, whose collection includes design documents of many architects and engineers, creators of the Italian architectural heritage, from the twentieth century to the present day. The role played by original designs and by the technical/construction solutions retraced in the archive documents is central to the restoration project, as it enables the acquisition of the basic knowledge for understanding the construction and the design logic behind it. The relationship between design and the completed work is each time characteristic and representative of a specific authorial research. To properly guide every type of intervention, from maintenance to restoration to the ongoing micro- and macro-transformations involving works of architecture, the availability of and the ability to read the documents are to be considered indispensable tools for giving the designer the interpretative and operative keys for appropriate intervention.

To reflect on the relationships that bind the design archive to the produced work, it is interesting to see, for example, the work of Carlo Scarpa, which is significant for the complexity of the conceptual process and of its subsequent translation into construction. For the interventions on Scarpa's works, knowledge through the comparison of the documents, drawings, photographs, and written and oral testimony of his work is essential. It is also true that, as always, the starting point in restoration is essentially the work itself, the actual architecture that, in itself, summarizes the physical memory of the process that led from the idea to the design's development, and therefore to the final outcome. The work is in its turn the archive of the original materials and forms, transformed by use and by time. It is therefore necessary to start from the work, and then to proceed systematically by surveying, investigating, and analyzing the materials and the structures. Doing this makes it possible to understand their pathologies of decay and to draw a comparison with the archival materials, period photographs, and existing documents, in order to promote a complete understanding of the work for the purpose of the restoration project.

When looking attentively at the work's development, the direct confrontation with the material required by restoration interventions presents an extraordinary opportunity to traverse the work's modes of construction – a phase that for many twentieth-century architects was a moment to check and verify in reality what had been anticipated in design. While it is customary to note modifications and discrepancies among the various design forecasts, in the work site documents and at times in the completed work (to return to Scarpa, in the case of the Brion Tomb, for example)¹, the discrepancy between design and development is quite strong, because it was precisely during construction that the phase of experimenting with and reinventing forms, materials, and their mutual relationships – on top of the other extraordinary qualities of the Venetian architect's design – took place. In this case, the reconstruction of the work site – the privileged place for Scarpa's technological experimentation –, alongside the design drawings, becomes indispensable for understanding the idea and for retracing its progress or ultimate solution, at times completely *ex novo* as took place in certain parts of the Brion Tomb.

The linkage between archives, architectural work, and restoration is therefore a clear one, and remains a central factor for the disciplinary setting that looks to the protection and conservation of the modern and contemporary architecture within which the restoration of the modern is placed. A few words must be devoted to introducing the various connotations underlying the «restoration»/«modern» duality. «Restoration» is a term that comprises many categories of intervention, in addition to the various ways in which it is legitimately achieved: conservative restoration, or restoration for reintegration, reconstruction,

functional requalification, and so on. «Modern» is likewise a very broad term, although its use is restricted to the post-industrial revolution – a departure from the historiographical orthodoxy that sees the discovery of America as the start of the modern Era. The adjective «modern» referring in our case to the architecture of the Modern Movement, was then considered more broadly for the twentieth-century architecture that used innovative materials and technologies, in comparison with historical construction in masonry. In this sense, the complete conservation of the documents held in architects' archives is particularly useful, since they retrace the processes (photographic documentation at the work site) or the new materials and industrial products that have at times fallen into disuse (documented by technical data sheets and terms of contract).

The great size and heterogeneity of post-industrial era construction then raises a series of questions that, although to some extent included in the conceptual framework of restoration applied to the antique, in turn raise even more and not easily solved questions. The debate and the increased awareness of the value of the modern heritage, the experiences of the final glimpse of the twentieth century, the restorations made, the technical reflections, and the analyses done, have on the one hand underscored the great opportunity offered by the presence of design documentation, while on the other hand raising some problems specific to modern buildings. In their broad features, these problems may be ascribed to the techniques and materials used in construction that had often seen little experimentation, and therefore to buildings with construction errors, which accentuated decay and have required interventions to redesign and interpret the initial text. Other problematic aspects are connected to the rigidity of architectural structures with little tolerance for changes in intended use or for adjustment to current standards that can bring radical transformations, distortions, and even the destruction of the work².

Another recurring factor consists of the modern use of traditional materials or the experimental use of new, industrially produced materials (*Materiali del moderno* 2017), leading to a congenital fragility – a factor quite distant from the restoration problems posed by the large masonry structures of old. When considering the modern architectural language, the strong points doubtlessly include the lightness and transparency afforded by windows and doors and by façade cladding, which over time result in accelerated decay and in the consequent need to replace many parts of the building.

Exemplary cases from the standpoint of method and of the types of questions dealt with notably include the Pirelli Tower, designed by Gio Ponti and Pier Luigi Nervi in the 1960s – a restoration that was done on the basis of a rigorously philological method, attentive on the one hand to the original materials and modes of construction, and on the other to adjusting the building to current standards³.

Although this is not the place to summarize the multiple aspects of the theory and operative practice for protecting and conserving modern and contemporary architecture (cf. on a general level: Carbonara 1997)⁴, discussion should be dedicated to the role that a museum institution like MAXXI has had and can have in this area.

At its founding, MAXXI Architettura – Museo di architettura moderna e contemporanea embarked on an action of collecting and protecting Italian architectural archives from the twentieth century to the present. This action strongly marked the museum's identity aimed at conserving, exhibiting, and communicating its collection and making it available for study and research, while turning its gaze to Italian architectural developments in the twentieth century and to the more original and interesting forms of contemporary production in Italy and abroad. The museum's collection thus bears witness to the widespread quality and the important excellent output that were the mark of twentieth-century Italian architecture: entire professional archives, more fragmented holdings, and individual projects are indispensable sources for accessing this collective heritage that is the memory and identity of our present, secured in the papers and at the same time in the living body of cities.

The museum offers critical thought on architecture through research, shows, and public programmes for training and deeper analysis. The objective is to activate, in the public, awareness of the historic, artistic, and environmental value of twentieth-century architectural heritage in the context of contemporary culture, while seeking to highlight, among other things, the increasingly pressing issue of protecting at least the most important instances. In agreement with DO.CO.MO.MO. Italia and Associazione degli archivi di architettura AAA/Italia, discussion and dialogue have been initiated on modes of intervention, restoration methods, and paths for raising awareness. Since 2001, more than eighty archival collections have been acquired, together forming an important piece in the history of architecture, of use for conceiving conservation strategies from the design and regulatory perspectives. At the same time, activity was initiated and consolidated to raise awareness of the values of architecture, and of the responsibility this discipline has in determining the physical landscape of cities as an asset of identity and of collective interest. Specific reflection is still needed on how to protect and how to take action to safeguard the large yet fragile heritage that is twentieth-century

architecture – a reflection that cannot be made without archival documentation as a point of departure and knowledge. And, in these relationships between documents, architectural work, collection, and public, the identity of the architecture museum, an institution whose work focuses on the heritage of the recent past and of the near future.

Notes

1 The complex relationships between the design documents and the related constructions built under the management of Carlo Scarpa in the Brion cemetery emerged during the *9° Seminario internazionale sul restauro architettonico Tomba monumentale Brion: temi di restauro*, Vicenza 3-6 June 2004, curated by Margherita Guccione, Mario Piana, and Sergio Poretti, and organized in collaboration with the Italian Ministry of Culture – Direzione generale per l'Arte e l'Architettura contemporanea.

2 In this regard, there are some sensational cases from recent decades: destruction of the work by direct action, in the case of Giulio De Luca's Arena Flegrea (1940), destroyed and rebuilt by the same architect at the Mostra d'Oltremare exhibition in Naples on the occasion of the 1990 World Cup hosted by Italy; the implosion in 2008 of Velodromo Olimpico, built in Rome in 1960 by Cesare Ligini, Dagoberto Ortensi, and Silvano Ricci; lastly, mention is made of the tragic collapse in 2018 of Riccardo Morandi's Polcevera Bridge (1963-1967), due to a lack of maintenance.

3 The Pier Luigi Nervi archive was fundamental for retracing the building's modes of construction and technology, thanks to the rich design documentation kept at CSAC - Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione in Parma and MAXXI in Rome. For restoration interventions, cf. Crippa 2006.

4 Mention is also made of the decades of activity by Associazione DO.CO.MO.MO., documented at <https://www.docomomoitalia.it>.