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

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Massimo Visone

The history of architecture for the documentation and conservation of the modern and contemporary built heritage

In 2020 Carlo Olmo brought to an end a long period of studies and research, the results of which have been published since 2010. At the outset, the author posed a question: can the history of architecture make a contribution of its own to the discussion on twentieth-century history? (Olmo 2010, p. IX)¹.

While this is an apparently simple question, and always valid, its answer varies in relation to the historical and cultural context in which the query is made. The scholar was making explicit reference to the book by Eric J. Hobsbawm (1994), which in a certain way marked the opening of the historiographic question at the conclusion of a well-defined historic cycle. In that sense, the question placed the scholar before the need to enrich historical and architectural didactics by introducing new and different topics at the service of the contemporary architectural studies. These critical and methodological discussions were subject to ongoing historiographical debate and dialogue, not without some forms of experimentation, to overcome a long-lasting *impasse*, with close relationships relating to the role of the architectural historian in cultural policies for the documentation and conservation of the modern and contemporary heritage, with the intention of avoiding any current form of applied architectural history.

We are dealing with an activism that has changed its nature, with an architectural historian observing from a fresh perspective the century that has now passed, and with a twentieth century upon which a rich critical fortune, quite often more descriptive than interpretative, has accumulated. In particular, we are dealing with a mutation easily measured through a reading of the introductions to the main history of architecture manuals, which for the sake of brevity we summarize with the most significant cases (De Fusco, Lenza 2015).

In 1980, when David Watkin observed that «two of the most important and persistent motives which lie behind the production of architectural history are the practice and the preservation of architecture» (Watkin 1980, p. IX; see also Leach 2010), he was identifying the contemporary role of architectural historians in educating and in conserving memory.

Given the impossibility of summing up the different historiographic analyses underlying the critical debate on contemporary architecture that tends towards greater internationalization (Irace 1992; Tournikiotis 1999), it seems useful to identify some points for reflection on the relationship between history and conservation, focusing attention on protection and recognizing in it an element providing a hinge between the world of studies and that of the institutions tasked with conserving the architectural heritage, particularly as regards architecture from the second half of the twentieth century, which is to say those works chronologically placed at the limits imposed by national legislations on cultural heritage, where such limits exist. In this sense, thanks to the publishing project carried forward by Ugo Carughi and this author (*Time Frames* 2017), the intention was to verify this relationship in the points of its maximum tension: when history converges towards the present. This means probing the cultural and regulatory approaches towards the architecture placed more alongside Conrad's shadow line, which results in identifying as 'contemporary' that production that is not 'historic', in accordance with the most commonly used guidelines.

Italy is known as the world's leading country in terms of architectural heritage. But this no longer works for the twentieth-century one. This means that Italy, in its history of protecting ancient and modern architecture, can no longer be considered a leader for its experiences in the field of safeguarding the Modern or Modernism more generally, not to mention more recent languages.

This is why it has been necessary to compare Italy's rules with those of countries richer in twentieth-century architecture. Moreover, in line with historiographical principles, the cultural approach had to be as inclusive as possible, with the aim of providing the best overview on the state of the art.

The history of experiences in protecting the architectural heritage on an international scale has been the subject of numerous studies, with in-depth exemplifications on the most recent restoration efforts and on the comparative studies of administration policies². But these efforts have not dealt in a more substantiated way with the problems of the twentieth century. Only recently have several scholars raised the need to review the parameters of intervention on modern architecture (*The Reception* 2005; Prudon 2008; *Riiso* 2011; *Architectures modernes* 2012; *Law and the Conservation* 2014). The reassessment of the Modern Movement and of Modernism is clear to see in the rediscovered enthusiasm for protecting this heritage, as demonstrated by the phenomenal growth of DOCOMOMO International (founded in 1988), the recent inclusion of modern complexes on the Unesco heritage lists, and the special *Modernism at risk* initiatives of the World Monuments Fund, without considering numerous other institutions and cultural outfits active elsewhere in the world. This phenomenon can only be contextualized in the spectacular acceleration seen by the process of internationalization and globalization of the planet's built heritage, which has its roots in the Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), followed by the European Charter of the Architectural Heritage (1975) (Glendinning 2013, pp. 390-448).

At the same time, in the contesting culture of those years, which was increasingly favourable to nomadism as the future existential condition of a humankind freed of time and space, a globalizing process of architecture got underway (Tafari 1973) – a process that also found correspondence in contemporary historiographic contributions³. This opened a new vein of criticism, which over time cleansed itself of the more strongly ideological bases (Adam 2012).

Carughi and I knew that, given the high number of cases, comparing laws on heritage was impossible. This is already difficult for more than two countries at a time and, moreover, the monitoring system of the steering committee of the forty-two national cultural policies in Europe already exists. And there is also *Herein*, which brings together the European public administrations responsible for national policies in the matter of cultural heritage, with forty-two Member States of the Council of Europe contributing to this project's progress. Similar initiatives also exist outside of Europe. Outfits like Unesco, Icomos, and others, which offer an opportunity to reflect on shared criteria for the protection of at-risk twentieth-century architectural heritage, also have links to international cultural heritage institutions.

We have therefore sought to focus on a single article of the law: the time rule.

This is why we asked the authors whether or not their own laws on national heritage included a time limit for listing and protecting an architecture and historicizing the results of this interest for contemporary architecture. As it often occurs when the same question is posed to different people, when our research was done the response was an unbelievable variation on the theme – a surprising result.

In recent years, the cultural inheritance of twentieth-century architecture, which had privileged an anti-historical and self-referential reading of the modern and a paradigmatic position of the Western architectural tradition (of many, Frampton 1980; Curtis 1982; Colquhoun 2002), has in fact been contested by a series of new critical contributions produced outside the canonical geographical confines of historiography – a breach opened by the introduction of the category of «critical regionalism» (Tzonis, Lefaivre 1981; Frampton 1983) and that brought numerous architects, both native and migrating abroad, working in critical backwaters, out of the shadows. Given the impossibility of summarizing here the different historiographies underlying the more recent critical debate on contemporary architecture (Scalvini, Sandri 1984; *A critical History* 2014), starting from interdisciplinary theories few books explore the complex relationship between modernism, modernity, and modernization, and their relations with colonialism and postcolonialism, nationalism and development, globalization and regionalism. These historiographical efforts start from the consideration that the modern architectural history is above all a principal account that focuses on the masters, on large-scale movements, and on the emblematic buildings in Europe and North America. Sibel Bozdogan goes as far as to emphasize that the study of non-Western modern architecture was, more or less until a couple of decades ago, «dubiously marginalized» (Bozdogan 2001, p. 8; and also Bozdogan 1999), by modern architectural historians and local specialists alike. This expansion of time also saw the emergence of an expansion of geography in modern architectural history from the traditional centres, to include some parts of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America as sites of proliferation of modern architecture in the middle of the twentieth century (*Non West Modernist Past* 2011; ma anche Elleh 1996; *Third World Modernism* 2011; Al-Assad 2012; *Colonial Architecture* 2012; Botz-Bornstein 2015).

The current nature of the discussion in progress tends to reassess a past that is from some standpoints too recent, particularly in the Western world where historiographies have in fact for some time attained a greater scientific maturity (Curtis 1984; *The Challenge of Change* 2008). In fact, especially in the 'non-Western world', the Modern has often ended up prevailing over works from the second post-War

period, as identifying twentieth-century architecture *in toto*. These works cast a shadow over subsequent architectures that thus undergo a more difficult reception by common opinion, but are conversely broadly historicized in sectoral studies. This is a condition that finds correspondence in cultural and regulatory limits that are wholly inadequate for the new geographies of architecture – and for the very history of architecture.

The synoptic table (*Time Frames* 2017) shows a fundamental divergence on the question of how a building must be before it can be classified as heritage, with some countries specifying the dates of interruption, others operating on the basis of a limit date, and others still establishing no cut-off date that can define the historic distance for the proper assessment of the so-called 'constraint'.

However, in taking the current confines of contemporary architecture for granted, they show themselves to be rather discretionary in comparison with the various criteria established by heritage laws. This trend is even stronger when dealing with the notion of time and, specifically, of contemporariness. It may easily be understood that 'contemporary' is actually far from being a passive term. The framework that emerges reveals a set of substantial differences in the form and content of protection.

Political stability emerges as a recurring consideration. In countries that have experienced turbulent independence processes or with vast areas of urban poverty, the question of modern heritage is unlikely to emerge as a public priority.

The synoptic table and the reading of the individual protection regulations raise questions as to recognizing the primacy of historiographies over regulations, of time over history, of the individual work over its function, of public property over private ownership. In practice, in their multiple variety, the current time rules for the protection of architecture reveal, to all effects, a sort of cultural precariousness, and may themselves be plunged into crisis by an overall reading.

An initial duality involves the dialogue between historiographies and regulation, or that of the historiographical criterion having a more or less compulsory role over the protection action; of the existence or non-existence of a work's critical fortune; of whether or not the life cycle of an architectural movement, more often than not of the same creator, has come to an end.

The limits are placed mainly between a time indicated as a wholly quantitative value in relation to the more known definition of a generation (twenty-five years), but commonly identified as the fifty-year rule (Sprinkle Jr. 2007), and a history associated with a date that constitutes a moment significant for the community, the province, or the nation.

Another cultural dichotomy has also been distinguished: protection of the heritage as an asset, for which its physical nature is safeguarded, and the protection that recognizes the heritage's memory and identity in the continuity of its function. Lastly, there are two more opposing approaches: one analytical in type, in which protection is bound exclusively to the work or even only to a single part of it; and the other, holistic in type, in which the safeguarding of the architecture is placed in relation to recognizing its historic context, in such a way that the asset's authenticity is constantly safeguarded within its own historic environment, or within a more complex system (*Sustainability & Historic Preservation* 2011). The limits, however, can be undefined, established unofficially by an unwritten law; they may be graduated in a more or less articulated way, and assessed on the basis of a system of more or less simple criteria. However, it bears mentioning that they may be ambiguously suspended and contradicted by daily practice, in accordance with principles that sometimes brush up against the precarious nature of local situations, or talent, or subjective culture. Above all, the question of historic-architectural value all too often clashes with the concrete reality of economic interests, and with the pressures of the market, of development, and of urban planning. Distinct classifications and responsibilities are emphasized, as well as gradual levels of protection, on both a territorial and architectural scale, often without failing to interact with more specialist disciplines, and with specific protection programmes for factories, urban planning, the landscape, housing, engineering, and still other types.

The impression remains of an architectural and theoretical phenomenon of great richness and variety, in which the contemporary appears characterized by a series of cultural fractures and of historic events from which temporalities burst forth that are heterogeneous – if not at times in conflict – with one another. The twentieth century would appear to take shape as the era when time exploded in every direction, with no terms of comparison with what took place in the past. In fact, increasing the unit of measure of time, for example from years to centuries, would suffice to see that this acceleration is historically unprecedented.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Hobsbawm raised new historiographical considerations, making critical reinterpretations for the various historiographies in the sector inevitable. In the case of architecture, historians have focused on the origins of the radical transformation of the language in the contemporary age, based on a criticism that has seen a break with

the end of the so-called short twentieth century. Within the conflict that characterized the twentieth century, the British historian observed how effective – or in fact how consciously desired – were the rival strategies for burying the world of our ancestors (Hobsbawm 1994, p. 9). The progressive loss of historical memory and the revolutionary mutation of collective identities have created the conditions for significant cultural change, and the world of today is thus no longer the one it was before. With the end of a monolithic duopoly and the interruption of the highly tense conflict between two opposing political, economic, and cultural systems, the architecture of the golden age, of mass society and of consumption, should appear today as distant as Socialist architecture, albeit in a more subtle way and with less immediacy, and not without a certain uneasiness (Hobsbawm 1994, p. 13). And thus, in its undeniable complexity, the more recent building production in the Western world should be recontextualized as a function of a proper institutional safeguarding, within a new historiographic perspective. For example, in the world of the former Soviet Union, the debates that animated criticism in the late 1970s are still reflected in the general public as a reaction to the architecture of totalitarianism. Several initiatives in progress are seeking to reassess the production of Socialist realism and to call back into question the heritage's most established values in the context of social development.

Among the more recent examples, in 2007 the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation called for the formulation and development of a project to gather information on the Portuguese heritage in the world, in order to make it available online. In 2009, the Swiss University Conference promoted a three-year research project on the *Critical Encyclopaedia of Restoration and Reuse of Twentieth Century Architecture*; 2012 saw the launch of the *Atrium* project, a programme composed of eighteen partners from Southeastern Europe on the architecture of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes; February 2014 saw the start of another three-year research project, in cooperation between Bauhaus-Universität Weimar and Technische Universität Dortmund, called *Which monuments, which modernity? Understanding, evaluating and communicating the architectural heritage of the second half of the 20th Century* (Meier 2016). Less has been done to reinterpret the architecture of the countries that emerged 'victorious' from the clash of the last century.

A new approach for critically reinterpreting the revolution of languages is thus taking shape. In this sense, it bears emphasizing that the historiographical image of contemporary architecture is the result of a cultural baggage and of a selection of events, but above all of contributions that are almost all placed in the short twentieth century, and it is with this that they relate.

Starting from these suppositions, the most recent histories of contemporary architecture are confronted with new arrangements and experimental historic 'pocketing'. The basic criteria are less and less selective, without the ideologies of the past, but are presented with intents that are increasingly inclusive, encyclopaedic, and virtually forced into historiographic reductionism.

These collective biographies constitute an indispensable premise for the rewriting of the histories of modern architecture (Olmo 2000, p. 12), unconsciously offering themselves for an exponential 'distortion' by their own readers, who make their own selection and elaborate their own interpretation when piecing the mosaic back together.

The phenomenon of monographs on architects offers complete catalogues that immortalize the rich production in the world as it comes into being, celebrate the architect as landmark, stand antithetically to the contextualization of the work, and celebrate the internationalization of the leading figure of the moment.

In recent years, various scholars have personally grappled with the concept of historiographic synthesis. One of the most recent contributions is the one by Jean-Louis Cohen. In 2012, in the introduction to his history of architecture, he declares that

the importance of the 'masters' of modern architecture needs to be assessed as much through a careful reconsideration of their ascendancy and period of nomination as through a celebration of their work. From this point of view [...] this book attempts to be as inclusive as possible, within the limits of its format and at the risk of occasionally oversimplifying complex trajectories (Cohen 2012, p. 16).

At the end of this work, it is truly difficult to provide an answer to certain questions: must contemporary architecture be subject to protection? Is there a time limit for listing?

To be sure, if Constantine's Basilica in Rome had been subject to constraint in its time, Bramante or Michelangelo could not have built the new St. Peter's, and Bernini could not have added other structures in its square. It is also true that we have lost, and are losing, many masterpieces of twentieth-century architecture.

As regards the time rules, the question is hard to reduce to a few words. Above all, so many different time limits for protection in fact mean that there is no finding 'the' proper historic distance for recognizing a building as architectural heritage.

As Lewis Mumford wrote in 1931: «every generation revolts against its fathers and makes friends with its grandfathers» (Mumford 1931, p. 3).

Within a historically recognized break, there is a clear conflict between a rich and fertile historiographical debate that has expanded outside the traditional geographical settings, and the safeguarding of a heritage that awaits cultural valorization, but has yet to be easily recognized by the general public. The exception for the time being are the 'starchitects' who more readily make an impact in the media. Memory is objectively weakened by a condition of eternal present proposed as the single collective dimension of daily life. It undermines one of the expressions emerging from the culture of conservation: cultural heritage. Its variable geographical interpretation conflicts with its universalization.

Time rules should take account of the progressive acceleration that is the mark of the contemporary world, and mediate with the process of cultural transformation taking place. To the contrary, a distance in which protection could dialogue critically with history, avoiding the oblivion of memory and a search for lost time for contemporary architecture, would be more binding (*Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* 2001). Lastly, the absence of a chronological limitation substantiates Alois Riegl's theory and leaves the doors of conservation open. This discrepancy requires a future that converges towards shared policies vis-à-vis a century marked by the trending internationalization process. But this is not what actually takes place.

To paraphrase the principles of the dilation of gravitational time, time goes by at different speeds in different geographical regions of differing potential, and the work of a given architect comes up against different conservation policies in the world at the same time. The decision of whether or not a work has a historical and architectural value is implicitly comparative, and not merely a decision of classification. Today, the terms of comparison for twentieth-century architecture should, historiographically and geographically, be far broader.

Notes

1 The subsequent volumes are Olmo 2013; Olmo 2018; Olmo 2020.

2 Given the vast bibliography on the subject, the following are the main scientific contributions: *Historic preservation* 1982-1990; Jokilehto 1999; *Policy and Law* 2001; Pickard 2002; Sanz Salla 2009; Stubbs 2009; Stubbs and Makaš 2011; *Preservation Education* 2014; Stubbs and Thomson 2017. An exception is Glendinning 2013, who includes in his publication the challenges of the twentieth century.

3 Among the first, mention is made of Ragon 1971-1978. For a critical analysis of the globalizing approach, Choay 2009, ed. 2012.

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