



Fondazione  
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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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# Ugo Carughi

## ***Time Frames. Conservation Policies for Twentieth-Century Architectural Heritage***

### **'Contemporary' architecture in the idea of protection**

More and more frequently, in territories progressively reduced to exclusive market instruments, the excesses of new interventions, the resounding delays of administrative culture, and the media-driven accelerations of contemporary architecture have highlighted the underlying shortcomings of protection regulations; the history and conservation of the architecture from the second half of the twentieth century in particular must grapple more and more with the debate over sustainable development.

As has been pointed out, the contrast between the 'iconolatry' of many architectures of the last century and their vulnerability has helped determine the concept of the 'limit of the modern'. The reflections made on protecting architecture from the second half of the twentieth century, within an extremely complicated global landscape, refer to the concept of the contemporariness

of history rather than to a simple temporal category, to which regulations instead refer. Although not yet settled in historical and critical terms, the problems of more recent architecture not only may often refer to those of works from every age, but almost always reveal wholly new aspects.

*Time Frames. Conservation Policies for Twentieth-Century Architectural Heritage* (2017) considers certain problems of protection referring not only to the time factor but to the relational interest, to the relationship between monument and context, to the design aspect of protection instruments, and to the graduality of the constraint.

The book deals with the protection of twentieth-century architecture through a reconnaissance survey extended to a large number of countries on the various continents. It is a path that began with an in-depth reflection on the Italian situation in the book *Maledetti Vincoli* (Carughi 2012), which already collects a certain number of surveys beyond national boundaries. All the critical nodes that, in Italy, condition the protection of more recent architecture and that are an integral part of the problems relating to previous centuries as well were dealt with.

One may wonder why we should limit an institutional discussion about protection to twentieth-century architecture alone. We might respond to this observation that the protection of so-called 'modern' architecture is, in Italy, essentially the 'exposed nerve' of protection. As is known, the problems that relate to it are not only often ascribable to those of works of every era, but also entail the recognition of new aspects. One need only consider the experimental technologies employed in many works, necessarily to be updated, or the obligation to meet conformity requirements with often invasive interventions without the exceptions often permitted by the measures recognizing cultural interest. This is a further reason to pay attention to a sector that appears to be neglected. In fact, a series of verifiable criticalities emerges when discussing twentieth-century works, especially from the second half of the century, in relation to the regulatory regime to which they are or are not subjected, and to their actual conditions following changes of intended use, modification interventions, states of abandonment, etc. This arrangement approach led implicitly to a set of themes to which the protection problems are to be referred.

This resulted in critical observations on the shortcomings of Italian regulations, with a series of possible modifications to suggest, but also to the need to turn our gaze beyond national boundaries to ascertain how the consideration and protection of twentieth-century architecture are perceived and dealt with in other countries, taking account of the tendentially universal nature that may be attributed to the cultural interest referring to the twentieth century as well. These observations and comparisons naturally lie outside the levels of analysis of comparative law but, albeit through brief comparisons, make it possible to assess the attention that various countries and continents assign to twentieth-century architecture, and how that architecture is framed in the respective regulations.

Beyond the specific differences, the overall framework has shown the importance taken on by critical judgment and historiography in a protection sector that goes beyond the object it addresses, connecting to history and to national identities, to managing and developing the territory, to the economy, and to the very idea of the contemporary in the various examined situations.

Starting from the issues relating to the temporal threshold – often non-existent outside of Europe – that influences the protection of more recent architectures, we considered four other, more general issues linked to it, relating to protection, plain and simple. Among these, the so-called relational value, along with the time factor, presents a primary critical/theoretical nature. Instead, the relationship between architecture and context; the planning aspect of the protection instruments; and the graduality of the constraint show a close and reciprocal relationship and a prevalently operative character. These principles may be ascribed to certain general concepts that, in the second part of the book, serve as the sections' titles: *Memory* (Time factor); *Identities* (Relational value); *Heritages* (Relationship between architecture and context); *Economy* (Designing protection instruments); and *Conservation* (Graduality of the protection measure).

The so-called time factor, by establishing a distance between the project's development and the protection measure, determines an interval that can harm the conservation of testimony important for future generations. We must keep in mind that architecture, unlike other cultural assets, is subject to an increasingly rapid functional obsolescence, with consequent interventions of updating, modification, or, in the more radical cases, destruction.

The temporal threshold should guarantee an adequate historic perspective upon which to base a reliable judgment. But, where it is present, it varies from one country to another.

Moreover, it is absolutely mandatory in most countries where it is established.

Another fundamental concept is the relational interest that may be attributed to an asset in reference to something apart from its materiality. For the Athens Charter (1931, point VII: «respecting, in building construction, the character and physiognomy of the city [...]; particularly picturesque perspectives [...]; plantations and plant ornamentations, suited to certain monuments or groups of monuments»), the idea of historical-artistic protection recorded a progressive broadening of its horizons, bringing the intrinsic value of the 'monument' to the larger perspective of the 'site', including all the possible aesthetic, historical, scientific, and social implications.

The second half of the twentieth century saw the enlargement of the global protection scenario, in particular after the Burra Charter drawn up by the Australian Icomos in 1979, which gave rise to an inclusive model for the protection of both cultural and natural assets. New Zealand's Aotearoa Charter of 1992, albeit with less authoritativeness since it was restricted to more contextualized interests, confirmed the attention to the territorial sites and to the so-called 'volatile' values (rites, religious events, etc.). The differences of cultures and traditions, recognized by the Charter of Krakow (2000), multiplied the meanings of historical testimony and of authenticity that can be expressed, also for natural sites, through the relational value.

Lastly, the final three categories: relationship between architecture and context, designing protection instruments, and graduality of protection measures, indicate that the latter cannot remain excluded from any organic territorial programming, within the framework of an economy of choices that should also include twentieth-century architecture. This means there should be no protection without urban planning, and the other way around – to the contrary of what takes place in Italy.

We may say that, rather than on the hands of a clock, the cultural interest and the destiny of a work depend on the continuously differing spirit, taste, and culture with which it is considered over time. This is also the case for twentieth-century architecture. But for the protection instruments to be able to be an integral part of the overall programming, these instruments, instead of being exclusively coercive, must also be proactive and provide guidance, in addition to being marked by a certain flexibility that we might interpret as graduality.

The latter may be seen in well over one half of European nations, and is not rare on other continents, with reference to geographic dimensions or chronology.

Going beyond the conclusions of *Time Frames*, we add that, to become proactive and provide guidance without abandoning the characteristics of rigour for the traits that determined the asset's cultural interest, the protection measure should be accompanied by an instrument that, in adopting its analyses and conclusions, dictates the guidelines and the appropriate orientations for intervention and management. This is the Conservation Plan that, in Italy, would constitute an intermediate step between the declaration of cultural interest and the recovery and restoration project. The former, in fact, goes no further than to indicate the critical and historic motivations for which the asset is to be protected; it generally provides no

operative indications.

The latter is put off until when intervention is made on the work, and relates to the project that, in the absence of preliminary orientations, is impacted by the conditioning derived from the individual situations, and by the discretion of the institutional bodies. Therefore, it would be more desirable than ever that the conservation plan found a place for itself in the national protection regulations, as a reference indispensable to a consistent policy for intervention and for the management of cultural assets.

A recent example of a conservation plan is the one formulated for Stadio Flaminio in Rome (Pier Luigi and Antonio Nervi), by the Department of Structural Engineering and Geotechnics, Sapienza University of Rome, by P.L. Nervi Project Association, and by DO.CO.MO.MO. Italia. For the occasion, the stadium was also placed under constraint.

The contents of the constraint report contain detailed references to other works by Nervi for the 1960 Olympics (Palazzetto dello Sport, Corso di Francia Viaduct, and Palazzo dello Sport in EUR), as well as other stadiums by the Valtellina-born engineer. These juxtapositions of different works – albeit by the same architect – are inspired by the concept of ‘assets in a series’, contemplated for a number of decades in an international setting (Unesco), but not mandatory in national regulations. It is a concept that might be considerably innovative with respect to ordinary protection practice. The possibility of identifying common factors among several works which differ in their realization circumstances and expressive outcomes may then be referred to the concept of the ‘series’, a mathematical figure consisting of a finite set of elements that cannot be further reproduced (in our case, because the architect is deceased, or because the particular cultural climate or the specific productive conditions in which certain architectures came into being have passed, and so on). The term is used in the connotation given it by George Kubler, who distinguishes it from ‘sequence’, a set of elements always open to accepting new ones (Kubler 1976). Some works, which we call paradigmatic, usher in wholly new modes of expression and/or construction, in various ways assumed and interpreted from later ones that thus take on a prevalently emblematic nature. By giving each work a place in the series, it is easier to define its historic placement and assess its artistic relevance than in an in-depth, work-by-work study. Depending on whether the observer is inside or outside the temporal succession, this succession appears as a closed series or as a still-open sequence – and therefore not yet entirely subject to historicization.

The more certain we are that the succession of works in which we can include the one of interest has been closed, the more the critical judgment of an architecture appears guaranteed to us. The possibility of historicizing a series of works by identifying its innovative or simply testimonial quality should contribute towards freeing the assessment of a work from the time factor, which today, for seventy years after the execution date, inhibits protection measures for ‘intrinsic’ value.

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