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Differenziato e Compatibile: conservazione nel contesto del recupero dell'architettura e dell'urbanistica tradizionale

Differentiated and Compatible: conservation in the Context of a Recovered Traditional Architecture and Urbanism

Sin dall'adozione della Carta di Venezia nel 1964, i programmi e le politiche di conservazione hanno assunto che le nuove costruzione nei contesti storici dovessero continuare a riflettere i caratteri del tempo.
Tra i mandati della Carta, riguardo i nuovi interventi nei centri storici, è che questi "mostrassero il segno della contemporaneità".
Questa affermazione guida di fatto tutti gli interventi di conservazione e pianificazione ancora oggi.
Come si potrebbe reimpostare la questione sulle nuove costruzioni "differenziate" e "compatibili" (come sollecitato nel contesto Nordamericano dal Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation) se non possiamo più lavorare sulla distinzione stilistica per rendere visibili le differenze? Il concetto di "falsificazione" ha qualche significato nella cultura della costruzione tradizionale?

Since the adoption of the Venice Charter in 1964, many conservation programs and policies have assumed that new construction in historic setting would continue to reflect what was seen at the time as an irrevocable difference between present-day and historic conceptions of architectural style. Implicit in the Charter's call for new additions to historic sites to "bear a contemporary stamp. This assumption underlies virtually all conservation and planning practice today.

How might we re-frame the notion of making new construction in historic settings both "differentiated" and "compatible" (as the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation require) if we may no longer depend on stylistic distinction alone to make the difference discernible? Does the concept of "falsification" have any meaning in a traditional building culture?

ISSN 1828 5961

INTRODUCTION

Since the adoption of the Venice Charter in 1964, many conservation programs and policies have assumed that new construction in historic settings — and contemporary architecture generally — would continue to reflect what was seen at the time as an inevitable and irrevocable difference between present-day and historic conceptions of architectural style. Implicit in the Charter's call for new additions to historic sites to "bear a contemporary stamp," was a permanent formal contrast between "contemporary" architecture and preexisting traditional work. Such a clear stylistic difference would allow an unequivocal identification of any new addition as distinct from the historic fabric, avoiding any risk of "falsification." This assumption, restated in most of the standards enacted subsequently to guide conservation programs in different countries, underlies virtually all conservation and planning practice today.

But the exclusive identification of "contemporary" architecture with a particular stylistic position — that associated with the most widely-publicized architects of the moment, the heirs of the Modern Movement — is no longer possible. In fact, the production of the broad range of contemporary designers displays a diversity of appearance and a plurality of aims, from informed exercises in traditional formal languages to seemingly unprecedented configurations that dramatize their striking contrast with historic models. In these circumstances, a presumption in favor of any single design approach as an instrument of conservation policy seems arbitrary at best. Imposing a stylistic preference in opposition to historic typologies and formal languages can prove destructive of the character that makes historic monuments and districts valuable in the first place. In response to increasing public dissatisfaction with the dissonant character of much new construction in historic contexts, architects, preservationists, and urban designers are re-examining the logic of continuity rather than assuming uncritically an attitude of contrast between new construction and historic settings.

Several questions immediately arise: How might we re-frame the notion of making new construction in historic settings both "differentiated" and "compatible" (as the United States Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation require) if we may no longer depend on stylistic distinction alone to make the difference

ISSN 1828 5961


Fig. 1. Parthenon, Athens. Author photo.


Fig. 2. New facades on the Rue de Laeken, Brussels. Author photo.

discernible? Does the concept of “falsification” have any meaning in a traditional building culture? Can we propose a meaningful definition of “appropriateness”? We can begin to answer these questions and construct a more capacious theory of architectural conservation by re-examining historical practice, avoiding on one hand a too-familiar appropriation of historic fabric for our own purposes and, on the other hand, a too-distanced assumption of difference that decontextualizes valued monuments and urban districts.

CONTINUITY AND OPPOSITION

If we look at how architects have historically understood the relation between historic and new construction at sites of cultural importance, we find that the most common approach is that of *continuity*. Among familiar examples one can cite the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens; completed in the mid fifth century B.C. as a replacement for an earlier temple on the site, it continued the style of its predecessor. The Louvre in Paris was expanded over the course of four centuries without altering its essential style, and the United States Capitol likewise grew in parallel with the new nation, adding new wings and a dome that continued its Neoclassical beginnings right into the 1960s, in triumphant disregard of changing fashions *(Fig. 1)*.

On the other hand, the opposition between a historic structure and a contrasting addition is not a recent development: Andrea Palladio’s white stone arcades wrapping the medieval Basilica of Vicenza embodied the principles of classical architecture and repudiated the old building’s Gothic style. Significantly, Palladio was not imposing something new but trying to re-establish something old — a classical tradition dating back to antiquity. The handsome new buildings designed by Gabriele Tagliaventi and a team of contemporary traditional architects along the Rue de Laeken in Brussels similarly repudiate the structure they replaced — a 1960s glass curtain-wall office tower — in order to reinforce an older and more valued urban character *(Fig. 2)*.

But intentional contrast can also pose problems for historic environments. The contrast between a new structure and the adjacent historic environment has been an essential component of the Modern Movement’s urban program from the beginning, as Mies van der Rohe’s 1922 proposal for a glass skyscraper on the Friedrichstrasse in Berlin clearly shows. The allure

ISSN 1828 5961

Fig. 3. Museum of the Ara Pacis, Rome. Author photo.

of this image, with its shining, crystalline new object building in startling contrast to the darkly rendered and seemingly obsolete structures around it, has proved irresistible for "progressive" architects ever since. For example, Richard Meier's museum to house the ancient Ara Pacis in Rome adjacent to the Mausoleum of Augustus is celebrated by architects and academics for its blatant contrast with its historic neighbors, but is largely detested by ordinary Romans and has prompted calls by the Mayor of Rome for the structure's demolition *(Fig. 3)*.

Taking this logic to an extreme, the contemporary avant-garde has made conspicuous subversion of context a major theme, as illustrated by Will Alsop's Ontario College of Art & Design and Daniel Liebskind's Military History Museum in Dresden. These projects raise a troubling question: How is it possible to maintain the historic character of a protected site if contemporary architects insist on a formal language that refuses to enter into relationships with the pre-existing context on any basis other than contrast and disruption? Is the preservation establishment not perhaps a little too eager to support the interests of well-known architects whose conspicuously oppositional stance toward the historic environment contradicts the goals of preservation itself?

We can detect two successive motives behind this preference for contrast: First, there was the desire to obliterate the past as a matter of principle. In the aftermath of the Great War of 1914-1918 there was a strong sense among many artists and intellectuals that vestiges of the *ancient regime* must be erased and the world remade on more just and scientific principles. From this viewpoint, virtually all the preexisting environment could be seen as a *tabula rasa* upon which perhaps only a few monuments of supreme importance would be permitted to remain, as in Le Corbusier's 1925 Plan Voisin for Paris, in which Notre-Dame and the Louvre remain as isolated objects within the gridded field of new highways and high-rise buildings. Understandably, many modernist architects initially resisted the rise of the preservation movement because they saw it, correctly, as an impediment to their program of reconstructing the world. Once preservationists were successful in their resistance to this program, architects shifted their attention to the second motive: Surviving historic structures were now valued as "foils" for the new work, providing a

ISSN 1828 5961

contrast that intensified the visual impact of the new construction. The oppositional attitude remained but now the new intervention would be juxtaposed to — though not integrated with — the historic structures, free to express what was called "the architecture of our time" in conspicuous opposition to the architecture of the past. At the same time, to address the objections of critics of the new architecture, the new work would be sensitive in scale, avoiding disparities of massing or size that might otherwise dwarf the historic resource.

On this basis modernist architects and conservation authorities arrived at a compromise: Preservationists would not resist the architects' commitment to stylistic "differentiation" so long as the architects respected the preservationists' requirement of volumetric "compatibility." The latter condition would be satisfied by simple alignments of horizontal elements like window openings and rooflines. Both sides agreed that continuity of architectural character or language was neither possible nor desirable for interventions in historic settings.

This compromise, enshrined in the language of the Charter of Venice (1964) and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation (first published 1977 and last revised 1995) as well as other governing documents, has inspired numberless new structures in historic settings that, despite some sensitivity in massing, nonetheless celebrate their differences from their surroundings in ways that many observers find diminishes the historic character of the place. For the lay preservation community — the vast number of citizens upon whose activism and support the leadership of the movement depends — and a growing and increasingly vocal segment of the leadership, the addition of new structures displaying contrasting materials, forms, and scales has had the insidious and deleterious effect of *decontextualizing* those historic elements that have been preserved. This objection is not a question of aesthetic judgment alone — the quality of the new work considered in isolation — but a recognition that no work can, in fact, be considered in isolation. The relationship to its surroundings of any new building must be considered an essential aspect of its architectural merit. The experience of the last several decades increasingly suggests that such relationships cannot be considered only on the basis of abstract notions of "difference" and "compatibility," but must address the more difficult issues of architectural language and character.

APPROPRIATENESS

The recovery of traditional architecture and urbanism within contemporary practice allows us — indeed, requires us — to reconsider the relation between new construction and pre-existing historic environments. If we forget for a moment our obsession with projecting "the architecture of our time" and instead embrace what for centuries has been the common practice of architects and patrons, we can see historic places as living entities that not only grow and accommodate change without losing the character that qualified them for preservation in the first place, but can also provide models for new work in other places and times. In this view the criterion that matters most is the *appropriateness* to its setting of a proposed intervention rather than conformance with rigid stylistic categories or current fashion.

The appropriate is *the fitting and the exemplary*: A new building or an addition is *fitting* when it intends to fit rather than provoke, contributing to rather than subverting the character of the place. It is also fitting when it responds thoughtfully to local climate, materials, topography, and building traditions. It is *exemplary* when it establishes a precedent for others to imitate, recognizing that all architecture is imitative and imitation is particularly likely if the project is deemed a success. An exemplary project "sets a good example" for others to follow. Exemplary buildings make it easier to build a beautiful city — the kind of city that is itself a composition of beautiful parts rather than a collection of unique gestures or isolated objects. In this way, the appropriate looks back in time to join the series of architectural decisions previously made by others; and it looks ahead by setting the tone for others who may come after us. The cultivation of the appropriate is the key to understanding architectural style and it is also the key to understanding the traditional city and the way it maintains valued character over long periods of time. Using the criterion of appropriateness as defined here, we can choose continuity when appropriate, without copying historic buildings or sacrificing innovation. Alternatively, we can use contrast when called for to heal damaged places or reweave fraying urban fabrics, without introducing alien forms and materials that erode historic character. But how can we realize such an approach in practical terms?

A CONSERVATION ETHIC

The concept of *conservation* holds the key to answering this question and finally exorcising the ghost of Mies's Friedrichstrasse tower. As I use the term, conservation does not mean embalming something that is dead, like insects in amber; rather, it means managing and cultivating something that is alive, as one conserves an endangered species, a rain forest, or a garden. We understand this very well with regard to natural resources, which are conserved by maintaining the ecosystems that sustain them, clearing away invasive growth and taking remedial action to repair damage. In the same way, we can conserve cultural resources by ensuring their physical integrity and allowing them

ISSN 1828 5961

to assume new roles in the ongoing life of the man-made ecosystem of the city. A conservation ethic does not mean a ban on change; rather, it means the *management* of change to avoid unnecessary loss. Conservation is tied to the concept of *culture*, which, as Hannah Arendt reminded us, is of Roman origin, deriving from the Latin *colere* — "to cultivate, to dwell, to take care, to tend" — a term that ultimately "indicates an attitude of loving care." Extending that "attitude of loving care" to the built environment is the main purpose of the conservation ethic proposed here.

There ought always to be room in our cities for architectural innovation and experimentation, but there must also be places dedicated to the continuity of valued architectural character. So, like a protected wetland or rain forest, a historic district should be a zone in which we impose limits on normal activity for the sake of sustaining the architectural ecosystem, if you will. It should be a "provocation-free zone" within which new interventions strengthen and clarify, rather than transgress or obscure, the historic character of the place. This should be the minimum requirement of any preservation program, analogous to the medical profession's Hippocratic Oath: "First, do no harm."

We must abandon the idea that to design new architecture in a historical style is an act of "falsification" or "false history." This phrase is often used without awareness of its now-discredited philosophical subtexts. *There is no such thing as "false history" in architecture because the "true history" presupposed by the people who use that phrase does not exist or has been grossly misunderstood.* The history of architecture, especially in the 20th century, is more than the history of modernism and cannot be reduced to a simple program of winners and losers. Defending a highly tendentious historical narrative is not the job of preservation authorities. It is not up to us to decide whether some particular design embodies the *zeitgesit*, but whether the design itself and the style it represents is appropriate to the place in which it is built.

Preservationists, as the advocates and curators of the historic cities they serve, must understand what Howard Davis calls a *building culture*: the bodies of knowledge, styles, formal languages, building typologies, construction trades, and craftsmanship that form the productive capacity of a living built environment. It is the building culture, and the extended sense of place in which it operates and which it sustains, that must be the focus of our preservation efforts, because only a building culture produces landmark buildings and only a building culture can effectively conserve and sustain them for the long term. In many cases these building cultures are still alive and simply need to be engaged in the care for their own historic achievements. Preservation policies that make the continuance of a historic building culture more difficult are inherently counterproductive.

REVISITING THE DOCUMENTS

We can now reconsider aspects of the Venice Charter and, for the United States, the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation in light of the conservation ethic. While most of what these documents have to say is unexceptionable, some clarifications or adjustments are in order. For example, the Charter insists that restoration "must stop at the point where conjecture begins" and that additions to historic settings "must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp." Parts added to monuments are to "integrate harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence." The effect of these charter provisions has been to cut off historic buildings from the building cultures that produced them, even when these traditions remain operative in the present, resulting in a growing collection of isolated and de-contextualized monuments and contributing to the disappearance of the traditional building cultures on which maintenance and restoration of the protected sites depend. Reflecting changing views of contemporary architecture, the 2006 International Network for Traditional Building, Architecture, and Urbanism (INTBAU) conference in Venice to produced *The INTBAU Venice Declaration on the Conservation of Monuments and Sites in the Twenty-First Century* calling for recognition of the pluralism of building cultures and craft traditions and the legitimacy of the contemporary practice of traditional architecture in historic settings. (INTBAU, 2008)

Similarly, the Secretary's Standards must be critically re-examined since they have come to be regarded as the de facto standards for preservation throughout the United States, despite having been written originally for a different purpose. Standard 3 requires that nothing may be added to a historic structure that would suggest "a false sense of historical development." This was

ISSN 1828 5961

Fig. 4A: Existing façade, Building in Greenwich Village, New York. Author photo.

Fig. 4B: Proposed façade, Building in Greenwich Village, New York.

originally intended to prevent "antiquing" or "back-dating" of historic sites, making them — as one of the original authors, Brown Morton, put it — "more historic than they really were." But the Standard has too often been interpreted to mean that any addition or infill must depart from the style of the historic construction in order to avoid "false history". The consequences of the adoption of this view can be seen in the response to a proposal to build a new — not a restored — elevation for a Georgian Revival apartment house in the Greenwich Village Historic District whose ground floor was insensitively modernized in the 1960s. Fairfax & Sammons Architects were told by the staff of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission that the only acceptable approach would be to restore the curtain wall or create a "contemporary" design, but an elevation conforming to the style of the building be not be approved *(Figg. 4A-B)*.

But this narrow interpretation makes no sense: What is the point of a historic district if the character-defining elements that make it worthy of preservation must be violated by any new elements added to it? The rejuvenated practice of traditional architecture and urbanism allows us to recontextualize historic resources in the contemporary built environment, and adapt them as paradigms for new work. Restoration and reconstruction allow us to sustain the construction crafts that will ensure the future of these same historic structures. In other words, preservation of the building culture is more important than preservation of individual artifacts as they appeared on their date of designation. Ultimately, we must ask, If the continuing operation of a traditional building culture over a long period is not a "true sense of historical development," then what is? *(Fig. 5)*.

Standard 9 requires that new interventions be both "differentiated" from the historic structure and yet "compatible" with it. In practice this has led to the predictable confusion that the contradictory logic of this approach entails. The appalling 1981 addition to the 1893 Newberry Library in Chicago still appears in the Guidelines issued by the National Park Service as an addition that satisfies Standard 9, though the only thing the new structure has in common with the Romanesque Revival stone landmark it joins is its height. Given the number of additions spawned by this example one must conclude that compatibility considered in the abstract, separated from formal language, is meaningless *(Fig. 6)*.

ISSN 1828 5961


Fig. 5: Urban infill housing, Bologna. Author photo.


Fig. 6: Newberry Library, Chicago. Author photo.

I am inclined to believe that no genuine compatibility can be created between buildings representing antithetical conceptions of architecture simply by an alignment of window heads and rooflines. On the other hand, there can be no rational objection to new traditional construction simply because it employs the same or a similar formal language as the historic structure — that is, has similar conceptions of space, structure, elements, composition, proportion, ornament, and character. Such conceptions, together with the technical and craft means to realize them in architectural terms, define a building culture and a building culture tends to spawn the characteristic relations between form and content that we recognize as a *style*. This notion of style has nothing to do with period, since it is defined genealogically rather than chronologically. While similarity of style does not confer a guarantee of quality on any new building, it does increase the odds that an addition or infill structure will have a closer rapport with its neighbors.

Close study of the great urban ensembles of Europe and the United States suggests that all historical styles are for the most part compatible with one another. Only modernist buildings refuse visual consonance as a matter of principle. It is not necessary to intervene in an alien style to maintain a distinction between the historic resource and the added elements. A new architectural composition in the same or a closely related style can still articulate a subtle difference between the new and the historic structures, without copying and without jarring contrast, as a new townhouse on New York's Upper East Side does so ably. This, it seems to me, could be the basis for a genuine sense of compatibility founded on formal language rather than physical dimensions and horizontal alignments alone.

A CALL TO ACTION

It would be a great public service if the bodies charged with administering conformance with the Venice Charter and its successor documents — UNESCO and the International Commission on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) — together with the National Park Service in the United States, were to clarify that international norms for the conservation of historic buildings, districts, and landscapes are not to be construed to require contrasting new construction, nor to preclude new work in the same or related styles, so long as the character-defining elements of the historic structure are not diminished or obscured and so long as the historical

Fig. 7: Proposed new piazza, Modena. Courtesy Pier Carlo Bontempi Studio and Leon Krier.

facts of the construction can be conveyed to the public through interpretive materials.

Perhaps we can go still further. We can insist that an addition to a prized landmark not only be compatible stylistically, but be of significant architectural merit in its own right — not a "background building" but a "distinguished neighbor." It is time for the preservation community to recognize that contemporary architects practicing in historic styles are their natural allies in the greater project of creating a city in which wholeness and continuity are valued at least as much as contrast and disruption.

We can imagine a city shaped by the consistent application of the conservation ethic, but to realize it will require difficult judgments and the current theoretical framework for conservation offers little guidance. We are faced instead with defining new policies and theories based on our best sense of what beauty, sustainability, and justice demand of us *(Fig. 7)*.