

MODERN  
HERITAGE  
BETWEEN  
Venice, 4-5th May 2021  
CARE  
AND RISK

Edited by Maria Bonaiti, Sara Di Resta

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The International Conference “Modern Heritage between Care and Risk” (Venice, 4-5th May 2021) was held at Università Iuav di Venezia, in collaboration with Fondazione Le Corbusier and Docomomo Italia. The event offered an opportunity for an international exchange on crucial issues of documentation and preservation of the 20th century architectural heritage in a time of rapid social, cultural and political changes. The first day has been dedicated to “Ahmedabad. Laboratory of Modern Architecture”, a site-manifesto threatened today by the demolition of relevant dormitories of the Indian Institute of Management by Louis I. Kahn. The second day has been dedicated to “Living the Architectural Preservation. Modern Houses in the Conservation of 20th Century Heritage”, focused on recent conservation/restoration works of Modern authorial houses and neighbourhoods. The proceedings collect selected papers presented by international researchers and architects involved in the fields of History of Architecture and Architectural Preservation.

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MODERN HERITAGE BETWEEN CARE AND RISK

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**15** CONSERVATION  
VS  
MUSEALIZATION.  
NOTES FOR AN  
ANTHROPOLOGY  
OF INHABITING  
THE MODERN  
HERITAGE

ANDREA CANZIANI

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The examples and reflections collected here are dedicated to inhabiting domestic space when it is a monument, or to restore the possibilities of living in a monument.

They add to the themes we have long been confronting in the disciplinary debate – technique, theory, cure – other themes that open up new spaces of thought that need our attention: heritagization and sociology of architecture.

## **15 · 2 BEYOND THE TECHNIQUE**

Retracing the histories of the restorations presented and placing them into the broader panorama of the restoration of modern architecture completed in recent years ①, it clearly emerges that conservation is no longer just a challenge to a technical problem which we could summarize in the questions: how do I restore that experimental material? and where do I find a similar one?

This challenge is not completely over but has focused on very specific cases such as passivation or self-healing technologies for reinforced concrete or challenges related to a precise feature that defines the identity of a building. It is the case of the recent intervention on the Neue Nationalgalerie by Mies in Berlin, where to re-propose the original appearance of the windows it was necessary to reopen an entire production cycle and certify the products.

This was because the large glass panes of the upper part of the envelope were no longer available with those dimension ●. The challenge was huge, but even in this case the narrative focused more on the motivations and the method rather than on the difficulty of finding technical solutions ●.

The technical problem, which was undoubtedly preeminent in past decades because we did not have enough knowledge of the real built body of Momo architecture, seems to have been solved or at least taken into the background to the point that it seems to have almost been a false problem ④. However, we must record the construction of a whole mythology of the so-called "restoration of the Modern" ●.

This most likely happened for two reasons. On the one hand, because we have faced the fragility of the Modern for decades and there can no longer be astonishment in discovering that new materials require new conservation techniques ●. On the other hand, because media and designers focus on the final image of the restoration which is closely linked to the cultural expectations of the intervention.

The experiences presented here also confirm this analysis. There is no major technological challenge and there are no experiments on materials or application techniques that are being tested for the first time. If there is an experimentation emerging - or lacking - it is methodological and consequently cultural.

Therefore, awareness of need and method have been reached but limits persist on the cultural horizon of the intervention. We see many restorations that demonstrate a lot of research, a lot of study and many discoveries. As we know the luck of the Modern is often to have full archives and abundant documentation. Sometimes this luck becomes a curse because plentiful documentation becomes the justification for hypothetical restorations that erase the real traces of a constructed history.

Perhaps there is still some difficulty in learning how to approach the buildings through their material consistency and not just through their paper projects. Perhaps because that substance, with all the signs of time and history, is not yet evaluated as such, and those signs are interpreted as an intrusion in the perception of the monument. Among *neo-philologists* and *conservators*, according to Sara Di Resta's definitions, there is still a serious problem represented by the return to the origins which becomes more complicated when the life of inhabitants becomes another further story to be addressed.

But why are we so obsessed with origin? And above all, which origin? What to go back to? To the designed house? To the market-published house, since architecture is a mass medium ●, is that equivalent to the built one? To the built house modified by builders' tacit know-how? To the origin represented by the first inhabitants, or to the stratified one of the different generations that have followed one another? Which original can be claimed for Le Corbusier's apartment in Porte Molitor which he changed continuously from 1934 to 1965? The problem of origin is an obsessive one that calls into question the philosophical and anthropological disciplines and for us is inextricably intertwined with the concept of authenticity.

On the necessary change we could try a parallel with what happened to our discipline in the nineties, when in the proposals of Amedeo Bellini and Marco Dezzi Bardeschi we resume talking about conservation as opposed to restoration ●. It was a proposal looking at greater complexity, different relationship with time and awareness of the contemporary philosophical debate, that proposed an important conceptual leap. Today we are facing a leap of that type, on the possible interventions and on the applicable preservation.

### 15 · 3 THE CARE

In anthropology, the issue of care has to do with a dichotomy between adaptation of self and adaptation of the home. The care lies in the balance between these two poles and can tell us how life has transformed the architecture and how much the inhabitants are eager to preserve or adapt them.

At the moment, adaptation and adjustment are fashionable words in our field and I think of the particular fortune of the term "adaptive reuse" where there is, perhaps instrumentally, a misunderstanding of who should adapt: whether the building to the project or the project to the building. Again, the history of the restoration would have already given a precise answer: it is the building that suggests its possible function, even if it has lost its original one.

There are two types of care: that of the architect and that of the inhabitant. Living is transforming. It is no coincidence that architects' photos are normally without inhabitants, because their presence would transform the architecture. These images subtract life of those buildings to the point of presenting us with the corpse of architecture. Care can be transformative or just aimed at maintenance. It is no coincidence that the iconic places captured through the people who take care of them, by Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine in their anthropological research on the ordinary, first amazed and then set the standard ●. Living involves an exuberance of changes to be faced, not necessarily to prevent them (impossible) or cancel it. In the words of Michel Foucault:

*"the architect has no power over me. If I want to tear down or change a house he built for me, put up new partitions, add a chimney, the architect has no control. ... I would say that one must take him – his mentality, his attitude – into account as well as his projects, in*

*order to understand a certain number of the techniques of power that are invested in architecture, but he is not comparable to a doctor, a priest, a psychiatrist, or a prison warden”* ⑩.

On the other hand, if the architect who has power over the building proposes a return to the origin, he deprives us of this exuberance, of the right to aging and of a whole series of stratifications. And this is the life that is passed within those spaces and which perhaps may even have contradicted, reread or enriched the initial idea.

When we do not accept that objects age, the problem from my point of view is not architectural at all but anthropological: we do not accept that these objects age, while they, regardless of our will, age anyway.

The Modern is past and has the right to inhabit history and time, preserving the transformations of life manifested in spaces and surfaces. If, as in the well-known motto attributed to Le Corbusier, life is always right and architecture is wrong ⑪, one wonders why and with what right these reasons are removed.

Yet there is room for this in the care as well. It would be hypocritical to deny the sense of necessity we feel in correcting interventions that insensibly erase finely thought out spaces. Perhaps because the idea that "the verbalized and conscientious wishes of the inhabitants - who do not have the appropriate 'culture' - may not correspond to the 'real' needs ⑫ do not belong only to the Enlightenment idea of the Modern Movement.

The architect's care is subtly different from that of the inhabitant because the temporal perspective and the proximity to the object are different. To live is to stay with, to take care of people and objects and it is an intermediate step between building and thinking ⑬. To restore, on the other hand, is to reactivate that all-encompassing

relationship between thinking and building, and creator and work, which involves a detachment and not a frequentation <sup>14</sup>.

Only recently we have started to think of restoration as an intervention over time and not as a cyclical correction of problems. An example is the planned conservation theory and the conservation plans in which the time of care and maintenance is reintroduced in an effort to deny the restoration as a return to the origin <sup>15</sup>.

#### 15 · 4 INHABITING THE MONUMENT

Inhabiting the monument confronts us with heritagization issues and special performance of dwelling connected to living in such a special place where cultural performance and comfort converge.

Living is a theme that overlaps two patrimonial communities that are distinguished by their way of using architecture. As Walter Benjamin wrote:

*“Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception - or rather, by touch and sight. Such appropriation cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception”* <sup>16</sup>.

A community is represented by experts - connoisseurs, historians, architects - who do not necessarily inhabit the monument, but who privilege perception and expect to see an architecture that bears witness to a moment in history or resembles a well-known icon. For them the cultural

performance is a priority and they should not clash with the difficulties of living in the monument. The other community is that of the inhabitants, who favor use and thus have a tactile appropriation which is mainly achieved by habit. They expect to be able to live before and above observation. The two communities do not necessarily have opposite purposes. For example, the inhabitants are divided into unaware and much more informed than one would think. For some of them, having purchased a monument is a choice that involves a social positioning and the consequent aim of preserving and increasing its authenticity and exceptional value. These among other are the inhabitants of Villa Bloch, of the Balboni house, of the Unité of Marseille but also those of Pessac who are angered by the state of neglect of one of the buildings in the neighborhood, which they perceive as degradation of the collective value. For others there is no consequentiality: the architecture is known, so is the author and its purposes. However, no obligation arises from this, and any modification is allowed because it does not betray the function, that is living. The examples could be innumerable. Two visions that are found even in the use of the Italian language, in two idioms: the satisfying *vivere in una reggia* [living in a royal palace] versus the limiting *vivere in un mausoleo* [living in a mausoleum]. They are two ways of experiencing the cultural performance linked to heritagization.

Both these types of inhabitants - some who enjoy the possibility of experiencing a monument, the others who suffer its limitations - feel two needs to belong to a whole and that this belonging is recognized as such. Beyond the forms and methods used, each of them consistently behaves according to their respective conditions. Anthropology, in the relationship between architecture and inhabitants, reminds us that a dialogue must consider at least two aspects. The first is what it means to live in places that entail advantages but also inevitable restrictions and



obligations<sup>17</sup> while the second is that "home is the relationship between public and private in three dimensions, a symbol of the self and of the relationship with others"<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, its symbolic importance requires an identification and customization that appears inevitable: each inhabitant will always tend to personalize his own home.

A main related issue is that of recognition, here in its social and legal dimension as defined by the philosopher Axel Honneth<sup>19</sup>. Socially, recognition is equivalent to esteem where the other is considered by virtue of the value of his or her contribution to social life, to common goods, and it is linked to sharing a relational context of reference, such as one's contribution as a caretaker of a cultural heritage site. Legally, the recognition provides that in recognizing the rights of others, the subject also recognizes as legitimate his own claim that others respect his rights. Therefore, conservators and inhabitants must respect each other. As far as our disciplines are concerned, the connection with the heritage communities as defined by the Faro Convention of 2005 is evident<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, recognizing what the inhabitants do to inhabit a monument cannot be separated from guiding the transformation, so that this does not conflict with the conservation objectives that are important for other heritage communities who recognize themselves in that architecture. The character of heritage conservation is increasingly political and social<sup>21</sup>.

To build this dialogue, the topic of heritage alone cannot suffice. Living is not museumizing, as Giovanni Vergani says for his villa Bloch, it is about "listening to the house, being educated, without museumizing". Even if museumization is fairly common and sometimes unconscious, the parlor used only for representation is an example but it is also an example that is disappearing from our way of life.

At the same time, the proposals of modern architecture are still often an avant-garde that has not been reflected in the lifestyle of the majority of the population. "An

example to illustrate this position may be Le Corbusier, who, in delivering his 'machines for living' to the Socialist Mayor of Marseille, warned him of the need, at that point, to 'instruct' the inhabitants to use them<sup>22</sup>. Without this instruction manual it seems that architecture no longer works and face a strange inverse obsolescence. It is perceived as inadequate because it is too projected into the future. Obviously there are also cases in which life conforms to the architectural proposal, but the introduction of new functional/technical requirements and new standards, combined with today's expectations of what we could define *homo comfort* – according to an appropriate definition by the sociologist Stefano Boni<sup>23</sup> – has made many modern buildings obsolete although they still guarantee their fair original performance<sup>24</sup>.

The Modern therefore seems to need mediators because it is not always understandable in the ways of use and in the patterns of living it proposes, or it is not acceptable because the cultural performance offered by the historical monument – in which I would also like to include exclusivity – is not discussed together with other environmental performances and cannot help in balancing other perceived deficiencies. Again a Corbusian experience, such as the conservation of windows in Immeuble Molitor, tells us of an awareness extended to all the inhabitants who have understood the meaning of the conservation of aluminum frames from the sixties which were validated by Le Corbusier himself.

In this context, the preservation architect – perhaps supported by the anthropologist and not only by the historian – acts as a mediator and an educator who has a great responsibility: to make people understand the meaning of the modern project and to propose interventions consistent with that meaning. It is no coincidence that one of the forms of protection that the Fondation Le Corbusier carries

out with educational and obviously recognition purpose is the network of inhabitants.

In conclusion, any project will always have to deal with the progressive graduation of the presence of the inhabitants; from constant to occasional and only for some compatible functions or periods, to completely absent when the inhabitant is replaced by the spectator. All are valid, but the story of houses that are no longer houses is perhaps another story.



fig. 1. INA-Casa Neighborhood  
Harar-Dessiè, Milan, 1951-  
1955. Building via Dessiè  
15, M. Tevarotto, G. Reggio:  
staircase / Insulae Via Varenna,  
L. Figini, G. Pollini: external  
wall. Photo sequence from  
the photoworkshop Everyday  
Architectural Heritage, ©  
Architectural Preservation Studio  
– A. Canziani (2017), AUIC School,  
Politecnico di Milano



fig. 2. INA-Casa Neighborhood  
Harar-Dessiè, Milan, 1951-1955.  
Building Via Harar 3, G. Ponti,  
L. Ghò: staircase/distribution  
balcony. Photo sequence from  
the photoworkshop Everyday  
Architectural Heritage, ©  
Architectural Preservation Studio  
– A. Canziani (2017), AUIC School,  
Politecnico di Milano



fig. 3. INA-Casa Neighborhood  
Harar-Dessiè, Milan, 1951-1955.  
Building Via Harar 3, G. Ponti, L.  
Ghò: entrance from the balcony  
/ Insulae Via Val Pantena 7, L.  
Figini, G. Pollini. (Photo sequence  
from the photoworkshop  
Everyday Architectural Heritage,  
© Architectural Preservation  
Studio – A. Canziani 2017, AUIC  
School, Politecnico di Milano)



fig. 4. INA-Casa Neighborhood  
Harar-Dessiè, Milan, 1951-  
1955. Building Via Harar 3,  
G. Ponti, L. Ghò: balcony/  
interior. (Photo sequence from  
the photoworkshop Everyday  
Architectural Heritage, ©  
Architectural Preservation Studio  
– A. Canziani, 2017, AUIC School,  
Politecnico di Milano)



fig. 5. INA-Casa Neighborhood  
Harar-Dessiè, Milan, 1951-  
1955. Building Via Dessiè  
15, M. Tevarotto, G. Reggio:  
elevation south toward the park  
/ interior. (Photo sequence from  
the photoworkshop Everyday  
Architectural Heritage, ©  
Architectural Preservation Studio  
– A. Canziani, 2017, AUIC School,  
Politecnico di Milano)





fig. 6. INA-Casa Neighborhood  
Harar-Dessiè, Milan, 1951-  
1955. Building Via Dessiè 15, M.  
Tevarotto, G. Reggio: interior /  
interior. (Photo sequence from  
the photoworkshop Everyday  
Architectural Heritage, ©  
Architectural Preservation Studio  
– A. Canziani, 2017, AUIC School,  
Politecnico di Milano)

## ENDNOTES

- ①: Cf. the proceedings of latest DOCOMOMO International Conferences (Conferences – Docomomo International, s.d.).
- : Canziani and Di Resta (2020, pp. 226-232).
- : Jaspers (2018, pp. 79-85). “It is not the image, but the substance of the construction that is to be put first” (p.84).
- ④: Already in Casciato, Mornati and Poretta (1999) and then in Boriani (2003) the topic was secondary to the methodological problem.
- : The expression [restauro del moderno] typically belongs to the Italian disciplinary context.
- : Among others Cupelloni (2017); Di Resta, Favaretto and Pretelli (2021).
- : Cf. De Fusco (1967) and Colomina (1994).
- : Bellini (1986) and Dezzi Bardeschi (1991).
- : Video-artists, filmmakers, producers and publishers, Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine have been focusing their interest mainly on how the built environment shapes and influences our daily life. They define this approach, in reference to French writer Georges Perec, as an “anthropology of the ordinary”.
- ⑩: Foucault (1982).
- ⑪: Cf. Boudon (1969).
- ⑫: Amendola (1984, p. 28).
- ⑬: Cf. Heidegger (1954).
- ⑭: Cf. Moneo (1999, p. 159).
- ⑮: Cf. Della Torre (1999), Della Torre (2010), on the modern heritage in particular Canziani (2009). The reference to the recent conservation plans is to the Keeping it Modern project by the Getty Foundation.
- ⑯: Benjamin (1969, p. 18).

⑰: Cf. the research project: Habiter Frugès. Anthropologie d'un site patrimonial, directed by Alessia de Biase, Laboratoire Architecture Anthropologie, ENSA Paris la Villette, 2019-2020 (De Biase et al, s.d.) and Sotgia and Wacogne (2019), De Pieri and Zanfi (2019).

⑱: Amendola (1984, p. 18).

⑲: See Honneth (1995), Camozzi (2012), and cf. Ricoeur (2004).

⑳: The Faro Convention (Council of Europe, 2005) recognizes that objects and places are not, in themselves, what is important about cultural heritage. They are important because of the meanings and uses that people attach to them and the values they represent. A heritage community consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations.

㉑: Cf. Boni and Piaggio (2011, cap. 3) and Koolhaas (2014).

㉒: Amendola (1984, p. 28).

㉓: Boni (2014).

㉔: De Jonge (2017) and Canziani (2019).

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