

# Design challenges in creative systems

THEORIES, METHODS AND PRACTICES  
FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND INCLUSION

Edited by  
Paola Cordera and Raffaella Trocchianesi

# Design International series

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# Contents

7	<b>Preface</b> Michele Trimarchi
17	<b>Crafting tomorrow through the Design lens</b> Paola Cordera, Raffaella Trocchianesi
	PART 1 TERRITORIES AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT
25	<b>1. On the post-war Italian design network: challenges for a 21st-century widespread heritage</b> Paola Cordera
37	<b>2. Design for cultural cooperation and sustainable tourism. Inclusive experience, accessible environments and heritage representation</b> Giuseppe Amoruso, Polina Mironenko
51	<b>3. Dialogues with the past_echoes in the future: cultural heritage and the transformation of buildings and cities</b> Peter A. Di Sabatino
65	<b>4. Reframing design for hospitality towards a cultural and sustainable approach to tourism</b> Elena Elgani
	PART 2 MUSEUMS, EXHIBITIONS AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCE
79	<b>5. Sustainability challenges of exhibition systems</b> Raffaella Trocchianesi, Rossella Locatelli

93	<b>6. Elevating inclusivity. Film's role in redefining museum engagement at Brera</b> Ilaria Bollati, James M. Bradburne
103	<b>7. Decolonizing design for cultural heritage and museums within a systemic change framework: discussing the participatory paradigm</b> Eleonora Lupo
121	<b>8. Accessibility design for museums. Synaesthetic communication tools</b> Dina Riccò
137	<b>9. The museum from the perspective of cultural proximity</b> Ico Migliore
	PART 3 ART, DESIGN & CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS
153	<b>10. Can cultural institutions in the field of architecture and design play a role in fostering social innovation?</b> Qing Yu, Suzie Attiwill, Luisa Collina
171	<b>11. Art and technology as tools for creating inclusive and sharing spaces</b> Giulia Gerosa, Federica Guarnieri
185	<b>12. Design cultures and digital humanities. The case of <i>Design Philology</i></b> Agnese Rebaglio, Laura Carugati
199	<b>Annex I</b>
203	<b>Authors</b>

# 3. Dialogues with the past\_echoes in the future: cultural heritage and the transformation of buildings and cities

Peter A. Di Sabatino

## 3.1 Dialogues with the past

Seminal texts from the mid-1800s exhibit contradictory and shifting positions of key figures in dialogues with the past that specifically concern conservation, preservation, and restoration. The historical dialogues, treatises, and arguments underway in the 1850s focus on the two main competing positions or paradigms in the turbulent (and still somewhat nascent) body of thought on conservation, preservation, and restoration... and the consolidation of the discipline and profession of the historian and others. The editors of *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage* state that, «It is in these decades that archaeology, history of art, and history of architecture were defined» (Price *et al.*, 1996). These conceptual and procedural positions, some translated to English for the first time, are fundamental to how we approach cultural heritage broadly, and how we view and act upon existing specific artistic, architectural, and urban constructs in our time and over time. The main protagonists in this pivotal debate, which was most severe



in the discipline and profession of architecture, include some of the most distinguished leaders in architectural theory, writings, and, to some extent, practice. On the more *conservative* side were Viollet-Le-Duc and his followers, including the most radical expression via what would become known as *de-restoration* and *purism*. And on the more *progressive* side of the debate were Ruskin and Morris, and an extension that would become known as the *anti-restoration* movement (Price *et al.*, 1996).

Viollet-Le-Duc basically argues that existing, past work could be known and reproduced through intense observation and deep study. This process requires incredible attention to detail, and a strong understanding and ability in stylistic articulation at the large and small scales, and in the methods and materials of construction of the period (Price *et al.*, 1996). We might say that the architect and the restorers must come to a full understanding of the *DNA* of the historic building and then be able to rebuild, or reinsert pieces that may have been damaged, destroyed, or removed by them since they were not *original* and hence not *pure* to the original style. This latter aspect gave rise to the idea of *de-restoration* and *purism* by some of Le-Duc's most extremist followers. In his essay *Restoration* from 1854, he wrote:

**[...] the best thing to do is to try to put oneself in the place of the original architect and try to imagine what he would do if he returned to earth and was handed the same kind of programs as have been given to us. Now, this sort of proceeding requires that the restorer be in possession of all the same resources as the original master – and that he proceeds as the original master did (Viollet-Le-Duc in Price *et al.*, 1996).**

Therefore, and ultimately, the argument reduces to the call for imitation *in the style of the original* and for the removal of anything foreign to the original style and intention. The best light for the rationale of this position would include issues of integrity, authenticity, and coherency. However, not everyone is as sensitive, skillful, and talented as Viollet-Le-Duc; and in any case, the position is vulnerable to a variety of counter-arguments. Even Viollet-Le-Duc had warned about extreme interpretations and actions:

Let us, however, go on to consider yet another important point: suppose the rebuilt vaults [...] happened to be of remarkable beauty, and, at the time they were installed, they also made it possible to construct glasswork employing stained-glass that is of equally remarkable beauty; moreover, when the modified vaults were added they were fashioned in such a way that the exterior construction of the building now also has great intrinsic value. Should all of these valued features now be done away with merely in order to restore the construction of the nave to its primitive simplicity. Our answer [...] must be: Certainly not. *It is easy to see* from these kinds of examples *that the adoption of absolute principles for restoration could quickly lead to the absurd* (Viollet-Le-Duc in Price *et al.*, 1996).

The easy trap towards absurdities with the extreme positions of purism may be of secondary importance to the denial of the possibility of continuity between the past and present due to a strict freezing and quarantining of time, culture, and voice. Of at least equal importance is a denial of others to contribute to an existing piece of work... which is a denial of an ongoing sense of creativity, experimentation, transformation, innovation, and voice. Lastly, and perversely, it is fundamentally anti-historical as it separates and distances the historical from the present and the future, and it denies fundamental actions that have occurred throughout human history. It also contradicts natural processes that constantly occur due to the passage of time, such as decay, entropy, or at least an acquired weathering or patina... plus the historical and contemporary sense of the palimpsest, stratification, and layering... and the dialogues that these layers, these voices, express individually and collectively. The editors also underline the clear contradiction to history:

**The folly of Purism [...] is an entirely new type of absurdity, without precedence in the history of restoration [...] However far into the past one probes, the prevailing attitude is [...] of reuse, and of changes in functions as may be suitable to various cultural or political changes (Price *et al.*, 1996).**

Explicit opposing positions are found in John Ruskin's *The Lamp of Memory* essay published in 1849, and further underlined in the *Manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings* by William Morris in 1877, where the *anti-restoration movement* was fully initiated (Price *et al.*, 1996).

In a few sentences, Ruskin presents a clear and comprehensive position towards the value of existing, historical architecture and urbanism, and unites the continuum of the past, present, and future. He restates the importance of time and age (including the processes of time and human/cultural actions over time), and he underlines the critical importance of voice and voicefulness.

**[...] the greatest glory of a building [...] is in its age, in that deep sense of voicefulness [...] which we feel in walls that have been long washed by the passing waves of humanity [...] It is in their lasting witness [...] through the lapse of seasons and times [...] the decline and birth of dynasties [...] it is in that golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, and colour, and preciousness of architecture [...]** (Ruskin in Price *et al.*, 1996).

Ruskin's stance, including that it is simply *impossible* to restore, or recreate, any great work from the past (Price *et al.*, 1996), influenced many significant architects and theorists over time. They, in turn, developed the positions and added greater nuances and increased diversity and complexity. For example, Alois Riegl wrote about *age value* and *historical value* in his essay on *The Modern Cult of Monuments* in 1928, and states that «age value has a distinct advantage over historical value, which rests on a scientific basis and therefore can only be achieved through intellectual reflection. Age value, to the contrary, addresses the emotions directly» (Riegl in Price *et al.*, 1996).

Cesare Brandi wrote his *Theory of Restoration* in 1963. Beyond underlining the inherent problems and issues of *imitation* in interventions with existing works, Brandi also introduces the idea of an *addition* versus a *reconstruction* as a different typology and process.

**With an addition there is no imitation; there is, rather, a development or an insertion. A reconstruction, on the other hand, seeks to reshape**

**the work, intervening in the creative process [...] It merges the old and the new [...] abolishing or reducing to a minimum the time interval between the two creative moments (Brandi in Price *et al.*, 1996).**

Additionally, Brandi posits the progressive concept of a *new unity* (emphasis by Brandi) and the idea of a *new fusion* in his argument about how to approach past interventions, restorations, and additions. He continues,

**[...] we should always respect the new unity that, independently of the foolishness of restorations, was established within the work of art through a new fusion; the more this fusion affects the work of art, the more it is also a real source of historical material and testimony. Thus an addition will be worse, the closer it comes to being a reconstruction [...]** (Brandi in Price *et al.*, 1996).

A contextual interlude may be interesting and valuable here. This reflective pause illuminates the theoretical dialogues being discussed in another light. This may add a critical perspective in wondering, and worrying about, the current general rules and regulations in place that very narrowly control what one may do with existing buildings and towns in Italy and beyond. It is important to note that Carlo Scarpa completed the reworking of the Olivetti Showroom in the heart of Venice in 1957-1958. His initial work at the Castelvecchio Museum in Verona started in 1957 (and continued into the early 1970s), and his initial work at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice was done in 1961-1963 when Brandi was likely writing the essay above (Dal Co and Mazzariol, 1985). These three seminal projects are not meant to be exhaustive. Other work not mentioned include Michelangelo's significant work in the formation of the new Piazza del Campidoglio in the heart of ancient Rome in 1567-1559 (after having moved and restored the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius in 1538), and at the new Laurentian Library in Florence from 1524/1525 and 1558/1559 (Hibbard, 1974). And again, we have not mentioned the vast amount of building, and rebuilding, over the span of human existence... Yet a narrow reading of these theoretical, highly influential writings seems to exclude the realities of time and built/transformed

activities over time. The use of such narrow blinders is concerning. Is this about the danger of narrow, theoretical, and academic focal points... the distancing from the actual conditions on the ground and in the communities... or the mingling of works of fine art with buildings and towns in the formation of theories and practices? How, and why, did current rules and regulations get put in place, and how was the structure and system of reviews and approvals – which hardly exist in significant and democratic terms – put into place? While becoming clearer, these concerns, as well as strategies for interventions, adaptations, and additions, will be developed in future iterations of this work.

Lastly in this brief overview of some principal European theorists, architects, and leaders in conservation from the mid-1800s, we turn to Paul Philippot and his lecture *Restoration from the Perspective of the Humanities* published in 1983. Beyond his long academic activities, he served as the deputy director and director of ICCROM for many years, and hence provides a more rounded, contemporary, and global perspective. Philippot's most significant contributions to the dialogues with the past and in relationship to this chapter's intentions, include the importance of the inclusion of contemporary and past *context* and *use* in the decision-making process, and in the design and execution of those decisions in the actual field. According to Philippot, these considerations should be lead factors governing decision-making and execution from the start of the process, and should also include any past and present *ritual value* that could affect how the public has traditionally used, and presently uses, the space, building, or object (Price *et al.*, 1996).

The factors of context, use, and the inclusion of the public were rather novel and challenging, but Philippot understood that the public is ultimately the real significant ambassador and caretaker of the works from the past surviving into the future. He also cautioned that very narrow, or too restrictive and abstract, ideas of cultural heritage may hamper the engagement and enthusiasm of the public, and that conception and processes could be more socially and community inclusive and liberal. He wrote that:

[...] this restrictive conception of heritage is incompatible with the desire to save the totality of the living cultural environment of a population, an environment threatened not only by modern development, and especially land development, but also by an abstract and far too narrow conception of the work of art [...] this definition will have to be broader and more comprehensive than the traditional one.

[...] To place emphasis on the social dimension of a building is to [...] free the protection of cultural heritage from a museum-oriented definition of the monument and from the tendency to transform it into an exhibition piece (Philippot in Price *et al.*, 1996).

Philippot's progressive positions are unfortunately contrasted by other conservative and possibly *protectionist* positions favoring historians, while also quite *negative* and damaging to architects. Is this a basic *power-struggle*, and possibly political and economic in nature, and hence about the preservation and enhancement of control, position, and power? Is there room for more interdisciplinarity? In the same essay he writes:

**A certain shift could be observed in the relationship between the disciplines concerned with architectural conservation: the architect seemed increasingly to take precedent over the historian or the archaeologist. This phenomenon could be explained by the growing necessity to find new, creative solutions. It carried an obvious danger, which was the exploitation of the historical monument to the extent that the architect considered it above all from the perspective of a developing whole – that is to say, of an environmental totality that could not survive without creative intervention (Philippot in Price *et al.*, 1996).**

## 3.2 Additional voices & strategies for the present & future

*New ideas need old buildings.*

*(The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs, 1961)*

A very different voice emerged in the United States of America in the 1960s. Perhaps it reflected the pragmatism, simplicity, and directness of American life and public debate at the time... or perhaps the voice reflected its carrier, who rose from the rather ordinary ranks of active citizens in New York City.

In any case, Jane Jacobs serves as a kind of *break* and *bridge* in this chapter, and her writings demonstrate aspects of being both a dialogue with the past and, not only an echo in the future, a growing body of work that is creating ideas and strategies for the present and future. She bridges the shifting theoretical foundations above with a simple and accessible tone, and offers strategies of inclusion, transformation, and development for existing buildings and cities.

Jane Jacobs recognized, understood, and articulated the importance of *old buildings* assisting new innovative activities in a community. She understood the economic and ecological benefits of reuse and adaptation of the existing fabric of the city, and, at least as equally important, she recognized the social and communal benefits for both the new *occupants* and for the existing community.

**These old, and often dilapidated, buildings with new ideas and lives typically not only brought new investments to the city and community, but also new vitality and energy [...] and new perspectives and activities. They brought diversity, freshness, and hope for both the new entrepreneurs or artists and for the existing community (Jacobs, 1961).**

These small, simple sentences were a large contribution in her advocacy for relevant, vibrant, and inclusive cities that truly respect the actual environment – what might be called *quotidian* buildings and urbanism – of, by, and for actual people... and their voice, value, and potential. As a New Yorker, she was surrounded by diversity, and hence

experienced first-hand its vitality and importance. The diversity was not simply in people, but also in buildings and the urban fabric. All of which she advocated for, through direct, pragmatic, and often primary research and writings, throughout her life. The initial quotation that starts this section of the chapter is a slight simplification and a popular verbalized version of her original text included below.

**As for really new ideas of any kind – no matter how ultimately profitable or otherwise successful some of them might prove to be – there is no leeway for such chancy trial, error and experimentation in the high-overhead economy of new construction. Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings. Cities need old buildings so badly it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them. By old buildings I mean [...] a good lot of plain, ordinary, low-value old buildings, including some rundown old buildings (Jacobs, 1961).**

More recently, Richard Florida elaborated and modified Jacobs' research and writings, and perhaps made them more conducive to governments, industry leaders, and developers. His principal claim is that the creative class is a very large social, economic, and cultural engine that can drive urban development more than «companies, firms, and industries drive regional innovation and growth» (Florida, 2003). He writes that the *super-creative core* includes

**scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers, and architects, as well as the "thought leadership" of modern society: nonfiction writers, editors, cultural figures, think-tank researchers, analysts, and other opinion-makers (Florida, 2003).**

For Florida, the key drivers and needed conditions for this systemic strategy to create economic and urban change include what he terms as «the 3Ts of economic development: technology, talent, and tolerance».



He continues:

To attract creative people, generate innovation, and stimulate economic development, a place must have all three. I define tolerance as openness, inclusiveness, and diversity to all ethnicities, races, and walks of life. Talent is defined as those with a bachelor's degree and above. And technology is a function of both innovation and high-technology concentrations in a region (Florida, 2003).

### 3.3 Dénouement

*The treasured past is said to overwhelm French culture and politics. «Everything is indiscriminately conserved and archived», notes a historian of the patrimony. «We no longer make history», charges the philosopher Jean Baudrillard. «We protect it like an endangered masterpiece». The Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas calls preservation a «dangerous epidemic» spread by «clueless preservationists who, in their zeal to protect the world's architectural legacies end up debasing them», gentrifying and sanitizing historic urban centers. Noting that UNESCO and similar bodies sequester one-sixth of the earth's surface, with more to come, he terms heritage as a «metastasizing cancer» (*The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal, 2015).*

There is certainly no real *conclusion* at this point. The dialogues with the past have certainly not ended... nor will they, or should they, ever do so. In fact, needed now are additional critical dialogues about, and with, the past, and about the relationship of the past to the present and future. We need a sense of continuity and engagement, an awareness and understanding of the needs and desires of the past, present, *and* future. We need to be aware of the past, and feel its contributions and forces, but we cannot *live* there, nor can we overly bias towards it. We must also tend to the fertile gardens of the present and future... or we will truly live a barren, dull, and uninspired life distanced and removed from direct engagement with the past. We must argue not only for contemporary voice, but for the future voices of those

emerging and yet to come. We must bring voice, care, and support to the past, but also to the present and future.

Seemingly *simple* things like cultural heritage and its theories and positions that lead to rules and regulations that ultimately control, limit, or ban creative work in existing built environments are extraordinarily serious, and not only for the creative communities, but also for the public that is being stifled and divorced from an enhanced and transformed continuity of time and place. Additionally worrisome, overly narrow and conservative positions and policies may prefigure, or further articulate, larger problematic political, economic, social, and cultural paradigms. Rather, let us create climates that foster openness, creativity, and innovative work.

Let us conclude with three final positions, voices, provocations, and reminders:

1. Memory and forgetting have been increasingly intertwined in a complementary systemic way, in contrast to previously oppositional theories about their relationship. For example, an article in *Time* magazine in 2022 by Corinne Purtill notes that:

**«We were all taught forever... that forgetting is a passive breakdown of the memory mechanisms», says Scott A. Small, a professor of neurology and psychiatry at Columbia University and author of the 2021 book *Forgetting: The Benefits of Not Remembering*. «The fundamental insight [...] of the new science of forgetting – is that our neurons are endowed with a completely separate set of mechanisms [...] that are dedicated to active forgetting». The brain forms memory with the help of a complex tool kit of neurotransmitters, proteins, and carbohydrates, as well as other cells, Small writes; forgetting, too, has its own set of dedicated molecular tools working to clear away what's no longer relevant.**

So, it now seems that science is confirming long held thoughts by many that forgetting is a fundamental part of memory, and that without the ability to forget, we would all likely be driven insane by non-diminishing and non-hierarchical memories. This sets an interesting segue to Lowenthal's

(and others') call for *culling*:

The end result of indiscriminate preservation would be a stultifying "museumized" world, in which nothing ever made or done was allowed to perish. Failure to winnow is madness.

Yet heritage is such a sacred cow that few dare call for its culling. Italy is so stuffed with treasure that only a fraction of it is adequately cared for, let alone accessible [...] Only two World Heritage sites have ever been delisted [...] (Lowenthal, 2015).

2. If *new ideas need old buildings* is true, then, old buildings need new ideas... *new* ideas, that are actually ancient ideas and practices. We must foster a climate of adaptation, transformation, and reuse... these in turn often foster innovation, creativity, and community. They create economic, social, and cultural ecologies that thrive by and for the individual and the collective. And if there isn't an appropriate idea available, then a possible strategy is to remove (cull) the building(s) and make room for a natural ecology that benefits the community and planet.
3. The very last words go to Calvino from his essay on *Lightness*, where he writes of a sense of constant change, movement, and flux that counter the permanence, rigidity, and heaviness of the world and existence, and that offer the opportunity of unending, flowing possibilities. «For Ovid too everything can be transformed into new forms; for Ovid too knowledge of the world entails dissolving the solidity of the world; for Ovid too there is among everything that exists an essential equality that runs counter to all hierarchies of power and value». And that in Ovid's lexicon, everything and everyone «can change itself into radically different forms» (Calvino, 2016).

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This volume focuses on the dynamic systems of creativity and culture within diverse design fields, merging theoretical reflections, case studies, methodologies, technologies, tools, and original practices. Twelve essays underscore design's role in sustainability, emphasizing local growth, community revitalization, and the co-creation of cultural, economic, and social values. In today's global society, crises in productive cycles, amplified by COVID-19, have accelerated change and influenced behaviors. Digital technologies have transformed the media landscape, bridging the gap between designers and stakeholders and expanding possibilities in both real and virtual domains. As a new era emerges, this book revisits concepts like *sustainable culture*, *inclusive sociality*, and *participation* in cultural heritage as a common good. It proposes a holistic approach to the Anthropocene Age's challenges, highlighting creative industries' importance in local development and community engagement. By adopting multidisciplinary approaches, the volume seeks to inspire new models for cultural engagement and community development, contributing to a more inclusive and sustainable future. It redefines issues like accessibility, multiculturalism, and inclusion, reshaping the social and political positioning of the cultural system.