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HISTORY AND PROJECT

HISTORIA I PROJEKT

Abstract

History, in various forms, constitutes a constant reference in our work as architects. Today we experience a distance between the present and an idealised vision of the past. This pathological situation has led to a widespread idea of the historic city as an intangible asset to be subjected to arbitrary immutability. This viewpoint ignores the fact that our cities and monuments are the result of centuries-old stratifications. Only a critical attitude (distant both from an ahistorical idea of the city and from modernity at all costs) can help shape contemporaneity and ensure that the past can transmit its values.

Keywords: history, past, architecture

Streszczenie

Historia, w swoich różnych formach, stanowi nieustanny punkt odniesienia w pracy architekta. Współcześnie doświadczamy dystansu między teraźniejszością a wyidealizowaną wizją przeszłości. Ta patologiczna sytuacja doprowadziła do powszechnego postrzegania zabytkowego miasta jako niematerialnego dobra, które należy zachować w stanie arbitralnej niezmienności. Takie podejście pomija fakt, że nasze miasta i zabytki są rezultatem wielowiekowych nawarstwień. Tylko postawa krytyczna – wolna zarówno od ahistorycznego pojmowania miasta, jak i od dążenia do nowoczesności za wszelką cenę – może pomóc w kształtowaniu współczesności i sprawić, by przeszłość nadal przekazywała swoje wartości.

Słowa kluczowe: historia, przeszłość, architektura

History, in various forms, constitutes a constant reference in our work as architects.

In Italy, we experience a distance between the present and an idealised vision of the past. This pathological situation has led to a widespread idea of the historic city as an intangible asset to be subjected to arbitrary immutability. This viewpoint ignores the fact that our cities and monuments are the result of centuries-old stratifications.

Every transformation is inevitably an expression of the city's time, the result of a slow process of tampering with buildings and urban spaces, which characterises every ancient urban structure. Only a critical attitude (distant both from an ahistorical idea of the city and from modernity at all costs) can help shape contemporaneity and ensure that the past can transmit its values. Throughout history, architecture has often represented extraordinary palimpsests of complex processes of transformation, determined by changing historical and social conditions. Over time, some factories have maintained and incorporated pre-existing structures, adapting their layout to new functions through a technique of spatial re-signification, based on a process of typological mutation.

This is the case of the cathedral of Syracuse, in which the original peripteral plan of the Greek temple was transformed into a Christian basilica through the inversion determined by the closing of the intercolumniations of the peristasis and the opening of the walls of the cella of the *Athenaion*.

Michelangelo used a similar procedure to transform the Baths of Diocletian into a Christian church, maintaining the spatial and material influences of the ancient ruin: the tepidarium became the main nave and connected the entrance rotunda and the central altar with an innovative arrangement that reversed the traditional longitudinal character of the hall, anticipating the solutions of Baroque churches by a century.

In other cases, the ancient building serves as a substructure for new structures, as in the case of Hadrian's Mausoleum and the Theatre of Marcello in Rome. Often, spoiled materials are recovered (even in the extreme case of buildings becoming "quarries" for other constructions), giving rise to new buildings.

The idea of a cyclical time thus translates ruins into architecture, restoring – as Simmel says – the "unique balance between mechanical, inert matter, which passively resists pressure, and the formative spirituality which tends upwards"¹.

These examples demonstrate how architectural artefacts inherited from the past are perceived not as intangible testimonies but as living materials, as *exempla* that manifest their vitality over time precisely through their availability to alteration. This point of view, which sees architectural design and restoration practice as coinciding, is shared by some contemporary architects.

Rafael Moneo, in describing the processes of modification of the mosque of Córdoba, maintains that it is precisely the respect for identity that makes the transformation of a monument possible, guaranteeing its survival². In the intervention on an ancient castle in Pamplona – home of the Archive of Navarra (2002) – the Spanish architect creates new volumes and intervenes with extensive, and necessary, reintegrations, using the same stone as the original facing with a more abstract texture and surface treatment that gives a unitary character to the entire intervention.

The theoretical position of the Italian architect Giorgio Grassi is more radical and assertive. In his text *Il castello di Abbiategrasso e la questione del restauro*³, he cites a 1929 passage by Ambrogio Annoni, who theorises the *case-by-case* approach for interventions on ancient buildings. According to Annoni, any completion required for reuse must be characterised by "frank simplicity." Grassi's intervention on the Roman theatre of Sagunto (1985–1993), a very harsh solution, interprets this position with coherence and rigour. The ruin denies the monument's original identity, and the role of the project is to restore it by reconstructing the proscenium, the collapse of which had created an improper relationship of continuity between the *cavea* and the landscape.

Regardless of the correctness of the principles, the outcome of any intervention on the existing heritage depends on the sensitivity with which the designer is able to resolve some of the most significant problems: the dimensional relationship between completion and ruin,

¹ G. Simmel, *Le rovine* [1911] [in:] idem, *Saggi sul paesaggio*, Armando, Roma 2006, p. 70.

² See R. Moneo, *La vita degli edifici e la moschea di Cordova* [in:] idem, *La solitudine degli edifici e altri scritti*, Umberto Allemandi & C., Torino 2004, pp. 131–159.

³ See G. Grassi, *Il castello di Abbiategrasso e la questione del restauro* (1971) [in:] idem, *Scritti scelti 1965–1999*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2000, pp. 83–88.

the treatment of stratifications in relation to the unique balance that each intervention on the ancient aims to achieve, and the integration of degraded materials.

While some contributions have assumed the character of a manifesto in practice, in disciplinary debate, it is more difficult to define precise frameworks relating to the complex relationship between conservation, restoration, and design. Rigorous methodological guidelines can be found in a 1991 interview with Manfredo Tafuri, in which the Italian historian argues that conservation and restoration have different characteristics and different purposes. In some circumstances, the transformation of monumental buildings can betray their value as *mementum*; in these cases, the only possible intervention is conservation.

Restoration, when essential, must be configured as a dialectical decision-making process involving various professionals with different training and roles. Tafuri writes:

Scarpa managed, even by massacring a monument, to give us a work of great value. This happened by the grace of God, and not everyone has that grace [...] It is difficult to evaluate the significance of the ancient if the cities are not modern, there is a lack of courage to plan the new where it is possible and necessary: from this derives the ‘libido operandi’ on the ancient monument [...] Without experience of contemporaneity, history becomes asphyxiated and resolves itself into a personal whim⁴.

This illuminating passage by Tafuri finds new references in a more recent essay (2003) by the philosopher Emanuele Severino, who supports the need to distance oneself from the past through an apparent paradox: “abandoning while conserving”, a solution against the naivety of an abandonment that does not conserve and a conservation that does not abandon. “The authentic sense of the fundamental dynamism of our time [writes Severino] can truly distance itself from the past only if it continues to look at its face and feel its breath”⁵.

Comparing three very famous projects for Venice, it is possible to grasp different ways of relating to an exceptional historical context such as that of the lagoon city.

Ignazio Gardella’s intervention at the Zattere (1958–1962) tends to reinterpret, in a modern key, the score of the Venetian façades. In the project for the New Hospital of Venice (1964), Le Corbusier works on the settlement idea of founding the city on piles and on the urban form of the *campielli*. In the project for the Congress Palace, Louis Kahn envisions a hall in the form of a bridge with three large domes (1968).

In reductive synthesis, we can say that Gardella favours metric-formal relationships with the context, Le Corbusier designs a building in the form of a city, Kahn uses, in a symbolic and abstract way, two elements of the structure and the urban landscape (the bridge and the dome), avoiding any direct formal reference and adaptation of scale to the context.

Beyond the problems of method and practice of contemporary design on existing structures, however, the question of the relationship with History prompts a further, and no less relevant, reflection on the role that the architecture of the past has always had and still has today for the work of every architect in the conditions of their time.

Many architects today, as in the past, pursue research paths oriented towards a critical vision of History, understood as a vital material in the condition of their contemporaneity.

⁴ M. Tafuri, *Storia, conservazione, restauro*, “Casabella” 1991, no. 580. p. 26.

⁵ E. Severino, *La città e le idee. La questione dei “centri storici”* [in:] idem, *Tecnica e architettura*, Cortina, Milano 2003, p. 110.

One need only think of the role of Roman architecture in the work of architects such as Brunelleschi and Leon Battista Alberti, to name two great Renaissance architects.

A similar interest in the past led the architect Robert Adam to travel to Italy and then to Split in the 18th century, to study and survey the ancient buildings. In Split, Adam's interest focused on the settlement and spatial relationships of Diocletian's Palace. Describing the sequence from the *Cryptoporticus* to the *Vestibulum* to the *Atrium* – an extraordinary example of that gradation from smallest to largest – Adam comments: “Modern architects [...] by paying so little attention to the examples of the Ancients on this point, tire us with a tedious succession of similar spaces.”⁶.

The clear settlement relationship of the imperial palace's seafront, shaped like a city, became a fertile lesson for Adam in the construction of the city of his time. The memory of the system of warehouses and storage facilities in Split's *Cryptoporticus* became an operational tool for resolving the relationship between services, transport, and housing in the Adelphi neighbourhood that the Scottish architect built around 1770 on the banks of the Thames.

A residential complex built on a foundation that contains services for the entire neighbourhood, organised and distributed by a system of roads, both vehicular and pedestrian, which solve the functions of loading and unloading from the river. Adam intuitively understands that the question of urban density and the mobility of goods has become central themes in the modern city and, mindful of the lesson of the Split palace, constructs a project based on clear morphological-typological and infrastructural reasoning.

A similar attitude also characterises the most recent project for the new district of Quinta da Malagueira (1977) in Évora, Portugal, in which the architect Álvaro Siza takes as a reference the ancient Roman aqueduct that crosses and serves the fabric of the historic centre, an ancient infrastructure around which the city has grown over time.

Quinta da Malagueira is a residential neighbourhood with 1,200 apartments (townhouses and patios) with two street systems, one pedestrian and one vehicular. It is organised around an infrastructural spine that contains the municipal water and electricity networks, connecting the neighbourhood's various blocks, similar to the historic city. The idea of the aqueduct, a service infrastructure that distributes water, a primary resource for the ancients, is analogously echoed in the layout of the new urban structure's utilities, defining the form of the contemporary city.

Another paradigmatic example is the residential project by Rem Koolhaas for an urban block in Fukuoka in Japan (1991). In this case, the theme of urban densification is addressed by merging the idea of the insula of Pompeii and the experiments on the courtyard house of Mies van der Rohe, in which the architecture appears as a stereometric volume closed on the outside.

These examples are a clear testimony to how History can be an inexhaustible source of ideas and references.

There is no temporal or stylistic distinction between architectures: the past and the present are living materials in a synchronic dimension completely different from the diachronic and classificatory one that characterises the work of historians.

“The buildings of the Ancients are to Architecture – Robert Adam stated – what the elements of nature are to the other Arts”⁷. It seems to me that this passage sums up very precisely the value that History can represent for us architects.

⁶ R. Adam, *Ruins of the palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro in Dalmatia* [1754], Biblioteca del Cenide Cannitello 2002, p. 11.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

The past is vital for those who are able to grasp its foundational and disciplinary connections and have the stubborn lucidity to resist the constant linguistic and technological innovations that too often cause many of the cultural misunderstandings that characterise our time.



Ill. 1. Roman aqueduct, Evora, photo by the author



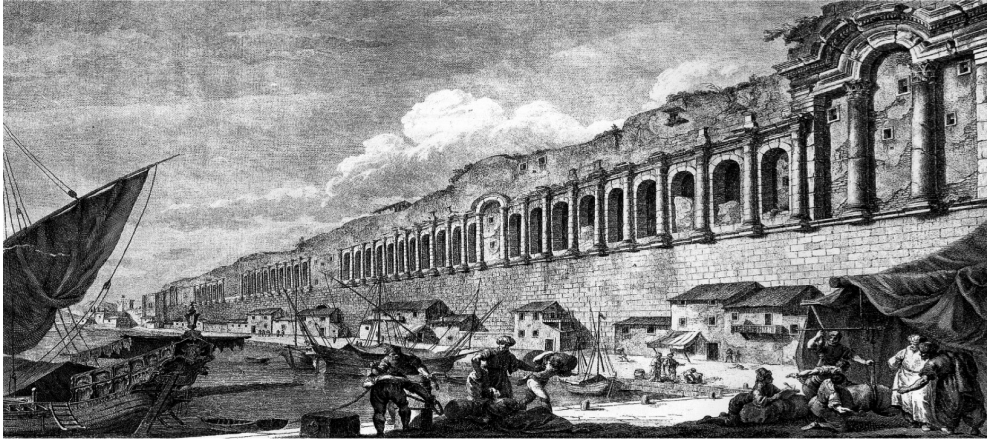
Ill. 2. A. Siza, Social housing in Quinta da Malageira, Evora, photo by the author



Ill. 3. Pompeii, orthophoto from Google Earth



Ill. 4. R. Koolhaas, Nexus World Housing, Fukoka, from R. Koolhaas, B.Mau, *S, M, L, XL: small, medium, large, extra-large*, Monacelli Press, New York 1995, pp. 118–119.



Ill. 5. R. Adam, View of the Crypto Porticus or front towards Harbour, drawing from R. Adam, *Ruins of the palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalato in Dalmatia*, Biblioteca del Cenide, Cannitello 2001, Plate VII.



Ill. 6. R. Adam, Adelphi Terrace, London, drawing from R. Adam, *Ruins of the palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalato in Dalmatia*, Biblioteca del Cenide, Cannitello 2001, p. 200

Reference

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Author's Note

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