A DISCIPLINE IN THE MAKING

CLASSIC TEXTS ON RESTORATION REVISITED

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Since its advent in the 19th century until the present day, the practice of restoration has been marked by controversy and challenges. Ever since the discipline began, specialists have been working on the construction of a consistent theoretical basis for restoration in order that tough decisions related to heritage issues, whether in the preservation of historical, artistic or cultural matters, can be better informed. Beatriz Mugayar Kühl has recently translated three titles into Portuguese in the series "Coleção Artes & Ofícios" and has written an introduction for two of them. These are three classic texts on restoration theory - Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (2000), Camillo Boito (2002) and Cesare Brandi (2004) - and they provide a new opportunity to revisit the theoretical framework of restoration, which we still employ today.

The theory underpinning restoration gained a clearer shape in the mid-19th century, especially due to the contributions made by John Ruskin (1819-1900) and Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879). These were followed by the synthesis developed by Camillo Boito (1836-1914) and the Values Theory developed by Alois Riegl (1858-1905) at the beginning of the 20th century. The work of Cesare Brandi (1906-1988), culminating in Teoria del Restauro (1963), shows impressive maturity in its approach to restorative action. However, practices still widely adopted in areas of historical and artistic interest prove that Brandi’s ideas have often been misunderstood.

Even though Ruskin’s and Riegl’s works were not translated, Beatriz Mugayar Kühl provides enough material for us to form a new understanding of restoration and to clarify points which are still obscure. Odete Dourado’s translation and critical comments, published in the Prétextos UFBA series in 1969, are the only sources available in Portuguese of Ruskin’s theoretical formulations. In the same series, it is also Odete Dourado to whom we are indebted for a translation into Portuguese prior to Kühl’s: that of the entry for Restauration in the Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture française du XI au XVI siècle by Viollet-le-Duc.

Viollet-le-Duc’s controversial theory and his classic concept of restoration had impressive practical repercussions which are still to large extent well-accepted by the general public. “The word and the subject are modern. To restore a building is not to maintain it, repair it or refurbish it, it means to reestablish it to a state of completeness that may have never existed, at any given moment” (Viollet-le-Duc, 2000: 29).

This scholar’s fundamental concepts are based on the central importance of the building’s completeness and its respect for “stylistic unity”. Thus, he and his followers advocate the
reconstruction of missing parts (even including those parts that were planned but never actually built) and the elimination of elements added later that alter the original concept. From the perspective of Riegl’s Values Theory, it is possible to say that, for Viollet-le-Duc, the novelty value is fundamental, to the detriment of the values of History and Antiquity.

This type of practice finds admirers among those who consider the reconstruction of a historic building exactly as it was in the past a legitimate aim of preservation. An example of this line of thought is the negative criticism made of the recent intervention to restore the former Customs House in Recife. Many critics think that the four towers that the building used to have should have been rebuilt. On the other hand, such practice has increasingly become the target of severe criticism from scholars who condemn, as attacks on authenticity, reconstructions and recompositions based on Viollet-le-Duc’s theoretical framework. This extremely critical stance has led, however, to a biased reading of Viollet-le-Duc’s work, which blinds us to pioneering contributions to be found in his writings. As a result, prejudice towards him leads to several of his contributions not being recognized.

Kühl’s translation and comments focus on the importance of Viollet-le-Duc’s contributions, and she reminds us that the practice of reconstruction already existed before his theories; therefore it was not he who invented it. Even before the first generic concepts about restoration emerged in France in the 18th century, academic reconstitution exercises had already been undertaken (Viollet-le-Duc, 2000: 18). On the other hand, Dourado also reminds us, in her critical comments, that Viollet-le-Duc is ultimately a rationalist, and that his interest in restoration is above all in the study and understanding of construction techniques in the past (Viollet-le-Duc, 1996: 4-6). This practice of restoration should be observed within the context of revaluation and exaltation of the qualities of medieval architecture. Here, Viollet-le-Duc is, once again, a pioneer. Whilst the widespread re-evaluation of Gothic architecture has become a revival movement, he maintains that the truly modern architect must understand that style’s structural logic. This was used in order to be able to call attention to architecture in the 19th century, which made use of then new materials and met new needs.

Moreover, if we go beyond Viollet-le-Duc’s controversial concept of restoration, we shall be able to identify impressively up-to-date passages in his writings, suggesting that he is not a radical that should be ignored. For instance, he says that using a historic building is the best way to preserve it (Viollet-le-Duc, 2000: 64-65). Even in relation to the core idea of his concept of restoration, the complete state, the building’s wholeness, Viollet-le-Duc allows for concessions. Concerning the decision to preserve modified parts or reestablish the unity of style by removing later alterations, he states: “Adopting one of the principles without considering the other may be dangerous here. It is necessary to act according to each peculiar circumstance, and not to accept any of the principles in an absolute way. We can see, thus, that absolute principles in such subjects may lead to the absurd” (Viollet-le-Duc, 2000: 48-50).

On the other hand, Ruskin’s contribution inaugurates, together with Viollet-le-Duc’s, restoration as an academic subject. Ruskin argues that the historic building’s authenticity should be defended through the preservation of its original matter. His motivation for preserving such authenticity is eminently modern: the right of access by future generations to this original monument (Ruskin, 1996: 16-17). Ruskin’s re-evaluation of the past is so grandiose that it makes it impossible for him to consider any form of intervention. Therefore, as with Viollet-le-Duc, if we fail to move beyond the surface of his concept, we could tend to classify Ruskin as a radical and even, as some say, an opponent.
of preservation. However, if we understand him exactly within the context under which reconstructions and reconstructions are gaining progressively more supporters, we realize that Ruskin’s so-called radicalism puts him centre-stage in the creation of a theory of restoration. Subsequent contributors will learn from Ruskin to value authenticity and will face the challenge of searching for interventionist actions that enable historic buildings to come back into use in today’s world, while recognizing the central role of authenticity (Ruskin, 1996: 5).

The Italian, Camillo Boito, undertook the most influential work, which synthesizes the ideas of these two early theorists. Initially seduced by “violletleductian” practice, Boito subsequently searches for an intervention method that makes sure authenticity comes to no harm. Boito’s theoretical approach is known as “philological restoration”, and establishes seven fundamental principles towards guaranteeing the preservation of the documental value of a historic building (Boito, 2002: 21).

Unlike Ruskin, Boito accepts the practice of restoration, however by calling it a “necessary evil”. Restoration must only be carried out after all conservation attempts have proved impossible.

Through his established principles, Boito tries to systematize restoration and make its practice more accessible. His principles lead to their being disseminated and used as a “manual” with tasks to be accomplished, which practically convert them into mere formulae. It is already very clear that predetermined attitudes are not appropriate as far as restoration is concerned. Boito’s contribution is of great relevance, as it sets several valid general principles, but these are less well remembered than the ready-made formulae.

In the rigid application of Boito’s principles, we can observe the central role played by historical value, since all findings made during the restoration process must remain visible and identifiable. In this sense, the artistic value of the entire site is subordinate to that of the parts found. However, a closer reading of his text reveals ideas closer to Cesare Brandi’s modern contribution. “It can be added, furthermore, that older things are always, in general, more venerable and more important than less old things; but also that when the latter prove themselves more beautiful than the former, beauty can overcome age (Boito, 2002: 26).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Alois Riegli’s “El culto moderno a los monumentos” made an inestimable contribution to the study of restoration. Facing the task of creating legislation for preservation, Riegli feels the need for a theoretical reflection to facilitate greater awareness in how to approach the subject. In his search, Riegli formulates a real theory of values, in order to define and classify what values we have to deal with preservation. This theory is still indispensable for present-day analysis on heritage issues.

Another step towards the creation of the discipline of restoration is Cesare Brandi’s Theory of Restoration. Although it does not explicitly refer to any preceding scholar of restoration, their contributions are clearly to be found in Brandi’s recommendations, especially Riegli’s. At the very beginning, Brandi points out that to restore a work of art is much more than to reestablish its functionality, for this is not the main feature of a work of art. In fact, we must seek to reestablish the “potential unity”. In a refined theoretical construction, Brandi develops the idea that such a unity does not mean a mere summing of the several parts, but rather how the whole comes to aesthetic fruition. Here we see the central role played by artistic value in Brandi’s work, which, however. Always respects
the historical condition: “...historical and aesthetical aspects should determine the limit of what can be reestablished ... without committing a historical forgery or perpetuating an aesthetical offense”.

In his reflections, Brandi demonstrates an impressive theoretical maturity, placing historical and artistic values at the core of the restoration issue and analyzing them critically. His concept of restoration sums up practically every main point developed in his theory: “Restoration is the methodological moment of a work of art’s recognition, in its physical consistency and in its double aesthetical and historical polarity, aiming at its transference to the future” (Brandi, 2004:30).

After presenting his concept of restoration, the author focuses on demonstrating, through a series of examples, how to deal with this “double aesthetical and historical polarity”, for in certain cases it will be necessary to decide whether history or aesthetics should be given priority, that is, it will be necessary to make a value judgement. His contribution is not only theoretical, for his practical experimentation can be observed during the period he was Head of the Central Institute of Restoration (ICR) in Rome. Brandi’s contribution is still extremely up-to-date and important, but remains misunderstood and unknown to many. The fact that his work was not included in Françoise Choay’s 1992 book “L’allégorie du patrimoine” is a clear example of this.

To sum up, we have learned since Viollet-le-Duc that the utilization of a historic building is essential for it to be preserved. It must be clear, however, that this aspect is secondary in relation to the artistic value, which differentiates a work of art from an ordinary building, as Brandi teaches us. Historical and documental values, as well as authenticity, are essential aspects of preservation, as Ruskin pioneeringly alerts and Boito, Riegl and Brandi reinforce. Viollet-le-Duc’s “stylistic unity”, concerned with the artistic reading of the whole, is modernized in Brandi’s “potential unity”, which considers artistic value as a priority, but not at the expense of authenticity. We realize, then, that this continued theoretical construction has a clear sequence and must not be observed from isolated, out-of-context phrases or absolute principles. What is important for us to grasp is the essence of each contribution and the possibility of continuing this path of theoretical refinement, in order to tackle the practice of present-day preservation with greater awareness of the issues involved.

Bibliography


