

# CONSERVATION OF ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE AS THE TRANSMISSION OF TRADITION – HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AND AUTHENTICITY

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The paper critically discusses the issues of understanding the authenticity of architectural heritage and their implications for the conservation action. A special focus is placed on analysing where to look for significance and how significance depends on authenticity. There is also a discussion of what must be taken into account to be sure that the historical narrative of the architectural structure is properly understood and thus taken into account when planning a conservation action.

KEYWORDS: heritage architecture, authenticity, significance, conservation, aesthetic value, genius loci.

In the contemporary world characterized by the quickly progressing process of globalization, the conservation of cultural heritage is facing new problems. One of the most important issues seems to be a proper understanding of the authenticity and significance of historical structure and thus, consequently, a proper approach to its protection as well as to safeguarding its original narrative.

Having the above in mind, it is advisable to assume that the most important for conservation as such is an action, some kind of intervention that recognizes and in the next step changes what is detrimental in the condi-

tion or context of the object in question<sup>1</sup>. In a deeper sense then, conservation as an action is carried out for the survival of the values of the object which are essential for the continuity of human culture in time.

*It is not the thing per se we are trying to conserve, but its cultural significance (and so its value), that we conserve by conserving the thing<sup>2</sup>.*

<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Bell, "The Naming of Parts", in: *Conserving the Authentic: Essays in Honour of Jukka Jokilehto*, editors: Stanley-Price N., King J., Rome: ICCROM Conservation Studies 10, 2009, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

“AUTHENTICITY OF SIGNIFICANCE”  
AS THE TRANSMISSION  
OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

According to Bell, an act of conservation is defined by two components, namely, the holder of significance of the object (structure), and the particular significance that the object (structure) holds<sup>3</sup>. So the appropriate conservation “action” then is based on the full understanding of the two of them.

Significance and values themselves are conceptual and therefore intangible, so it is possible to distinguish three types of the conservation action<sup>4</sup>:

1) An action to conserve (intangible) significance through alteration to the conditions of its tangible holders;

2) An action to conserve (intangible) significance through alteration to the conditions of its intangible holders;

3) An action to conserve (intangible) significance through alterations to the conditions of holders whose nature has both tangible and intangible components that are inseparable.

A necessary condition for preserving the significance of the object (historical structure) is the preservation of its authenticity. Thus, when planning any alteration to the object, the adequate understanding and maintaining of its *authenticity* must be the main factor taken into consideration to guarantee a proper conservation action and, in consequence, the transmission of historical narrative of the heritage building.

However, “*authentic*” does not necessarily mean “*original*”<sup>5</sup>. Ipso facto, the evaluation of authenticity [of the recognized tangible holders of significance] “...*does not limit consideration to original form and structure but includes all subsequent modifications and additions over*

*the course of time, which themselves possess artistic or historic value*”<sup>6</sup>.

Such an understanding of the concept of authenticity is consistent with Article 11 of the *Venice Charter*. Therefore, it allows us to recognize as authentic the structure along with all the changes that have occurred through history in its construction as well as any modifications and additions resulting from its repairs. The later are usually the consequences of material degradation or might result from aesthetic or functional reasons. There is, however, one condition that must be applied. Thus, any modifications to be treated as authentic should be a “*valuable contribution*” (*Venice Charter*, Art. 11)<sup>7</sup> that has been executed during the subsequent periods. It means that in fact the primary task of conservation becomes an attempt to preserve the structure in its current condition together with the additions acquired in its history. An approach to conservation which promotes the “acceptance” and the preservation of the structure in the condition in which it reached our time together with all the modifications executed in its history can be defined as “*minimum intervention*”.

It is worth noting that by accepting the concept of “*valuable contribution*” and by employing the “*minimum intervention*” approach, we automatically agree that the aesthetic value of the building comes from the “*patina*” of time<sup>8</sup>. So understood, *patina* has inherent value as a document and thus has historical value. The preservation of that patina then is a “necessary” condition for maintaining the “historicity” of the building and its authenticity. At the same time, however, some kind of risk exists that the acceptance of the acquired “historical” values of the building as a foreground can cause the loss of its original aesthetic quality.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> Knut Einar Larsen, *Architectural Preservation in Japan*, ICOMOS International Committee, Trondheim: Tapir Publishers, 1994, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Jukka Jokilehto, “Authenticity in Restoration Principles and Practices”, in: *APT Bulletin* 17, 1985, no. 3–4, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> ICOMOS. 1964. *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (Venice charter)*, [online], [accessed 29 June 2014]. Available at: <[http://www.icomos.org/charters/venice\\_e.pdf](http://www.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf)>.

<sup>8</sup> Knut Einar Larsen, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

“Aesthetic” value as such allows the recognition of “aesthetic significance” of the historical structure (building). Seeing the “aesthetic significance” of the heritage building is thus directed to the appreciation of its “aesthetic” value that can be directly included in its historical narrative.

Moreover, one of the most important aspects when analysing the significance of any kind of historical building “in general” seems to be exactly its aesthetic significance. The nature of aesthetic significance is without a doubt intangible, but what will be the nature of its holder? Is the holder tangible or intangible? The first impression tells us that obviously the holder must be tangible as the form, colour, shape, structure, the smell of the fabric etc. are responsible for bringing to life aesthetic value and, then, aesthetic significance. We are not even able to recognize why this is aesthetic experience only by measuring or comparing all the individual tangible aspects of a historical building, but we strongly feel that because of them and their unusual arrangement we are experiencing the aesthetic value of this particular architectural structure. But there is also the second impression hidden underneath, something beyond the first one, something that seems to go further and point at the untouchable or elusive aspect. There is something telling us that it must also be some “beyond-tangible” holder of aesthetic significance, some – as perhaps we can call it – “hidden spirit” of the site. Can we then regard the “genius loci” as some intangible aspect and at the same time also as the holder of aesthetic significance?

Having said that the holders of aesthetic significance have both tangible and intangible nature, it must be considered how the proper understanding of this dual nature affects the decision making process for the conservation action. Thus, in parallel it should be examined how to properly define the action to conserve intangible aesthetic significance which is “resting” in the tangible aspects of the building and at the same time depends on some particular intangible factors.

The issue of significance of buildings seems to have been problematic since the beginning of the idea of conservation. Some important observations were made already in the eighteenth century, when some kind of clear dividing line was placed between the “historic” monuments (the important remnants of “civilization” that must be saved in the condition in which they have survived until our time) and the architecture valued for its use and appearance<sup>9</sup>. According to Cloquet, the first group can be called the dead monuments, whereas the second group is the living monuments<sup>10</sup>. Among the second group there are buildings which have been intended for saving just because of their exceptional visual (aesthetic) value. But this aesthetic significance, unlike in the case of “historic” monuments, was seen as something that needed to be retained by treating them as any kind of art object. They had to be maintained in the best condition possible and “retouched” to show them in full glory. In other words, all the tangible aspects of objects must be restored to their primary appearance.

This paradigm of approaching heritage architectural structures left a stigma in the conservation practice for the coming decades. When the significance of a building was seen as attached mainly to its aesthetic value, then this fact was a reason for the acceptance of reproduction, replacement and even stylistic completion. Because, as it was understood, in the case of a building where aesthetic significance had priority, the structure had to be presented as a complete and entire work of art.

Regarding what it has been said above, the principal condition for saving the significance of the structure is the necessity of maintaining its authenticity. This condition, however, becomes unclear in the case of aesthetic

<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>10</sup> Louis Cloquet, *Traité d'architecture: éléments de l'architecture; types d'édifices; esthétique, composition et pratique de l'architecture*, Paris: Liège: C. Béranger, 1922, p. 71.

significance, as it remains problematic how to define the aesthetic value of a particular structure as authentic and how to keep its authenticity.

Speaking from the theoretical or philosophical point of view, we are unable to find the unequivocal definition of aesthetic value (or artistic value) for the historical architectural structure in question. Is this value something that is felt subjectively or does it have an objective dimension? Or maybe it has both of those aspects at the same time? Those are old philosophical problems that are still left without any ultimate answer<sup>11</sup>. We are even not convinced if it is possible to consider aesthetic value (artistic value) as a category that may exist permanently in time. Not only is this unclear, but also we are certain that the quality of aesthetic value is perceived differently in different historical periods. And so the aesthetic (artistic) value of the structure, “whatever it is – can be appreciated by contemporary eyes only in their own contemporary way, and never in the way of its original creators”<sup>12</sup>, thus it has a “present-day” dimension.

All this is complicated by the fact that if we eliminate the issue of aesthetic value from our discussion of significance, the only thing left will be architectural technical knowledge about the building and materials. Planning and designing any conservation action only on the basis of this knowledge is lacking the meanings constituting the essence or core of the historical narrative of structure, and thus it will bring a distortion to the understanding of significance and therefore may be the reason for constant inappropriate alterations to the object in question.

It is worth to recall the highly influential Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter. In this document probably for the first time the important stress was so distinctly placed on the full sensory impact of the heritage sites,

<sup>11</sup> This problem was under consideration by Alois Riegl, who in 1928 contended that because the concept of “art value” was unworkable, it should be abandoned – or rather replaced by its more evidential aspects (Dorothy Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> Dorothy Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

intentionally or unintentionally created, and aesthetic value was defined as including “aspects of sensory perception for which criteria can and should be stated. Such criteria may include consideration of the form, scale, colour, texture and material of the fabric; the smell and sounds associated with the place and its use”<sup>13</sup>.

So once aesthetic value has been acknowledged as strictly connected to the significance of the historical structure, we must face the problem how it could be recognized and protected in practice. And, according to Cesare Brandi, the essence of conservation is “the methodological moment in which the work of art is recognized, in its physical being, and in its dual aesthetic and historical nature, in view of its transmission to the future”<sup>14</sup>.

Therefore, the most important question remains how far the historical architectural structure would accept any change (and what sort of change) without losing aesthetic significance and, thus, cultural significance of any kind. The change as such does not concern only the architectural structure itself, as it may occur in the widely understood context of it. Actually all the surroundings of the structure are in the constant process of variation and must be adequately identified and maintained. So, for the proper conservation action this aspect should also be properly examined, and the understanding of significance must include the understanding of the entire context of the place. Any change in this context may be the reason for the alteration of significance. In other words, the conservation action must regard “the whole” and not only “its parts”<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> *Guidelines to the Burra Charter: Cultural Significance: 2.2*; Australia ICOMOS. 1999. *Burra Charter, Australia Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Interest*. Burra: Australia ICOMOS Incorporated. 1.4.

<sup>14</sup> Cesare Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, Firenze: Nardini, 2005, pp. 47–48.

<sup>15</sup> The compositional entity or “oneness” of the site (building) is not simply a mere sum or result of arrangement of all individual elements. Referring to Cesare Brandi, “oneness” can be understood as the unique quality of a particular aesthetic

One of the most essential dimensions that validate calling a historical site part of cultural heritage is the authenticity of “the spirit of place” (genius loci)<sup>16</sup>. But what is the nature of “the spirit of place”? How to define its significance that we are trying to preserve as “authentic” and what are the holders of this significance?

According to Petzet, it is highly improper to think in the so-called “dialectics between spirit and place, the intangible and tangible”<sup>17</sup> because it simply equates “spirit” with “intangible/immaterial” and “place” with “tangible/material”. Whereas the “place” as such also has intangible dimensions, and thus can also be “an ideal or unreal,

experience, its qualitative rather than quantitative value, and, above all, the absolute requirement in designing any action to see the work (the site) as an entity, a whole, rather than a sum of parts. (Cesare Brandi, *op. cit.*, p. 50).

<sup>16</sup> According to the proposals set out at *The Bergen Conference on Authenticity (Bergen, Norway, 31 January – 2 February 1994)*, the main five areas (dimensions) were designated in which authenticity can be considered as an essential to determine the validity of calling something a part of cultural heritage. And so they are as follows:

- 1) The shape or design/project (a shape is something that exists, a project is something intended);
- 2) The material/fabric or substance;
- 3) The function or use of;
- 4) The context or place, “the spirit of place” (“genius loci”);
- 5) Techniques, traditions or technologies that include pre-industrial as well as industrial techniques and technologies.

(Knut Einar Larsen, Nils Marstein, *Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention. Preparatory Workshop. Bergen, Norway, 31 January – 2 February 1994. Workshop Proceedings*, Trondheim: Tapir Publishers, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Petzet, “Genius Loci – The Spirit of Monuments and Sites”, in: *Conserving the Authentic: Essays in Honour of Jukka Jokilehto*, editors: Stanley-Price N., King J., Rome: ICCROM Conservation Studies 10, 2009, p. 66.

at any rate an intangible place”<sup>18</sup>. Thus, the tangible and intangible values are not separate, they are rather “two sides of one coin”<sup>19</sup> and thanks to the appropriate “genius loci” exist as a natural unity.

So the holder of significance of the particular “genius loci” of the historical building in question could be seen as corresponding to the individual “atmosphere”. This “atmosphere”, or call it “aura”, is coming from some tangible as well as intangible aspects, and its existence is dependent on this particular combination of both of them found in situ. Therefore, for obvious reasons it is not possible to transfer the “genius loci” to another place.

The particular spirit of the chosen place invokes the narrative of the site that extends to the history of the architectural structure. So, as was pointed by Cicero, monuments “should evoke remembrance of something”<sup>20</sup>. It simply means that some spiritual message, some intangible idea is the reason for the existence of an individual historical building. Similarly, a historical monument is something more than an architectural structure built of a certain material, it is actually an idea that took a particular shape. The fabric from which the monument as an object of remembrance is erected can thus be “just as variable as the degree of ‘materialization’ of the spiritual message that the monument represents”<sup>21</sup>. It applies particularly to the historical buildings which are erected from non-permanent materials. These are in special need of constant renewal and even “the mere replica of a monument that no longer exists materially could still evoke remembrance of something”<sup>22</sup>.

So an idea as a spiritual message that took a particular shape in a historical building is more like “the permanent form” which evokes a unique narrative. However, the “permanent form” does not apply only to the “shape” of the architectural structure, but is also noticeable in

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65 (the quoted definition by Mounir Bouchenaki).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64 (the quoted definition is a late classical commentary on Cicero).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

the entire widely understood context of the place. Then, this “permanent form” would be a spiritual message shaping the cultural landscape surrounding this particular place, as well as the existence of local spirituality concluded in the knowledge of the local building tradition. It can be seen very clearly in the influence of landscape on architecture and, at the same time, architecture on landscape. This “permanent form” is then responsible for the “aura” linked to a particular place and embedded in history, and this “aura” stays there as long as this “permanent form” is not forgotten, even when the historical monument is hardly comprehensible as “historical fabric”.

So, under these circumstances, the significance of this particular “genius loci” is an important criterion as far as the questions of conservation, restoration or renovation are concerned. As a consequence, the planned conservation action should do justice to the individual “genius loci” of the historical building in question and at the same time should focus on preserving the “spiritual message of a monument which, compared with a long history, has been entrusted to us only for a short time”<sup>23</sup>.

As noted by Petzet, the postulation found in Article 10 of Yamato Declaration that “the values associated with monuments and sites are not considered intangible cultural heritage (...) when they belong to the past and not to the living heritage of present-day communities”<sup>24</sup> is not correct. This kind of statement is unfortunately leading to a situation where the “living” intangible heritage is placed opposite the “dead” tangible heritage. As has already been shown, the tangible aspects of heritage structures are the materialization of the spiritual message and they will keep their authentic significance as long as their intangible phenomena will continue to speak to us.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65 (quote from: *Yamato Declaration on Integrated Approaches for Safeguarding Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Adopted at the International Conference on the Safeguarding of Tangible and Intangible Heritage organized by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs and UNESCO on 20–23 October 2004. Nara, Japan).

## FINAL REMARKS

The particular significance concealed in any historical structure is revealed as its unique historical narrative. This significance as such manifests itself as a result of a specific combination of tangible and intangible aspects of a heritage site, thus the proper understanding of its narrative requires recognizing and reading all of its components. At the same time, the condition of maintaining the authenticity of all the aspects of a historical structure must be met in order to guarantee the adequate preservation of the significance of the site.

Therefore, the conservation of architectural heritage should be aimed at keeping the historical narrative of the structure alive by maintaining its significance through the controlled alteration that ensures the retaining of authenticity. This issue is especially important in the case of aesthetic significance of a historical building as well as “the spirit of place” which are particularly important manifestations of cultural significance as a whole. Consequently, the planned conservation action must endeavour to reconstruct the aesthetic value of the individual heritage building in view of its historical, social and environmental understanding. Finally, any action that is meant to alter any holder of significance, tangible or intangible, must be conducted with regard to intangible values of the historical architectural structure.

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## ARCHITEKTŪROS PAVELDO KONSERVAVIMAS KAIP TRADICIJOS PERDAVIMAS – ISTORINIS NARATYVAS IR AUTENTIŠKUMAS

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REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: architektūros paveldas, autentiškumas, reikšmė, konservavimas, estetinė vertė, *genius loci*.

### SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje kritiškai aptariami architektūros paveldo autentiškumo suvokimo klausimai ir jų reikšmė konservavimo praktikai. Ypač daug dėmesio skiriama tyrimui – kas yra reikšminga architektūroje ir kaip reikšmė priklauso nuo autentiškumo. Taip pat yra aptariama, į ką reikia atsižvelgti norint užtikrinti, kad architektūrinės struktūros istorinis naratyvas būtų deramai suprantamas ir gerbiamas, planuojant konservavimo veiksmus.

Ypatingą reikšmę, slypinčią kiekvienoje istorinėje struktūroje, parodo jos unikalūs istorinis naratyvas. Tokia reikšmė atsiskleidžia kaip konkrečios paveldo vietos materialių ir nematerialių aspektų derinys, taigi norint deramai suprasti jos naratyvą, reikia atpažinti ir perskaityti visus jo komponentus. Tuo pat metu reikia laikytis visų istorinės struktūros aspektų autentiškumo išsaugojimo sąlygų, siekiant užtikrinti, kad tos vietos reikšmė būtų tinkamai išsaugota.

Todėl architektūros paveldą konservuojant reikia siekti išsaugoti istorinio naratyvo gyvybingumą ir autentiškumą, palaikant jo reikšmę per kontroliuojamą sąlygų keitimą. Šis klausimas tampa dar labiau aktualus dėl istorinio pastato estetiškos reikšmės ir „vietos dvasios“ – itin svarbių bendros kultūrinės reikšmės apraiškų. Vadinasi, planuojant konservavimo veiksmus reikia siekti, kad konkretaus pastato estetinė vertė būtų rekonstruojama atsižvelgiant į jo istorinę, socialinę ir aplinkos sampratą. Galiausiai visi veiksmai, kuriais siekiama pakeisti bet kurią reikšmę, tiek materialią, tiek nematerialią, turi būti atliekami atsižvelgiant į istorinės architektūrinės struktūros nematerialią vertę.