

CAN ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVATION BECOME MAINSTREAM?

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Abstract

Heritage is recognised today as a sector of international strategic importance and the conservation of historic buildings becomes, internationally, an increasingly common and shared activity for architects and other professionals. There is however a lack of understanding between the general public of what conservation and restoration is, as well as a shortfall between theoretical and philosophical developments concerning the contemporary concept of built cultural heritage and the current professional practices, and even research methodologies. This paper reflects on this observation and proposes a model for the integration of traditional knowledge and contemporary technologies and for a more effective communication with the wider public.

Key words: architectural conservation, theory, practice, education

Introduction

The conservation of built heritage is becoming one of the biggest sectors within the construction industry. The combined value for the UK's built heritage construction sector is equivalent to almost £12.5 billion in respect of GDP, supporting more than 530,000 FTE jobs.¹ Additionally, one fifth of the housing stock is now more than 90 years old, mostly traditionally built and the sensitive continuous use of historic buildings is crucial to meet the UK government targets for reducing carbon emissions by 2050. All these compelling facts do not have however a current direct translation on the existing provisions for education and training at a professional and citizen levels.

Although we understand now the close relationship between immovable-movable and tangible-intangible built cultural heritage, existing research and conservation practices do not support this theoretical framework. One of the main barriers is the difficulty to record, access and analyse the large amount of buildings and data, many times dispersed in a variety of locations and ownerships.

Heritage science on the one hand has developed enormously and there is a great amount of existing specialist knowledge concerning the pathology of materials. On the other however, there is a lack of undergraduate education and skills in other important aspects of architectural conservation –such as theory, design and history- and only minor integration between the relevant disciplines within the context of international principles, local regulations and practices.

¹ (Ecorys, 2012).

Architectural conservation today

Theoretical and design concerns seem to lag behind scientific/ technical developments in architectural conservation, and there is a lack of awareness even on existing contemporary theories of conservation and only limited informed open and public debates on conservation. This is clearly exemplified by OMA's travelling exhibition 'Cronocaos', with the re-emergence of radical surrealist proposals such as the need to destroy urban buildings over 25 years old in order to avoid being "at the mercy of unsolvable problems forever". 'Cronocaos' reveals the lack of contemporary international popular debate on architectural conservation theory and practice, even its superficiality.

Despite more than two hundred years of developments in the theory and practice of architectural preservation and conservation, the exhibition claims that this theory does not exist. This shallow statement has not prevented it from being displayed in some of the most prestigious venues of the world, from the International Architecture Biennale in Venice 2010 to the Royal Academy of Arts of London (2011). The exhibition was even presented as "theory of preservation" at the Festival of Ideas for the New City (2011). The inaccuracies continue also with the misunderstanding that heritage-listed buildings are 'untouchable' and with the poor historical background to the field displayed, limiting it to the dated dilemma Ruskin *versus* Viollet le Duc. OMA created this public exhibition as a manifesto and provocation, and it is remarkable that this global event, with substantial press coverage, has not provoked much reaction within the profession, or even worst, in some instances the reactions seem to have been actively sidelined.

What appears evident is that the main historical and contemporary positions on architectural conservation are not well known,² not only at public but also at professional levels, which is a cause of concern. There is also a clear language barrier which prevents, for example, the extensive Italian reflections to penetrate the Anglo-Saxon world. From the other hand, there are misunderstandings and sometimes even serious discrepancies between international principles, local regulations and practices. Our global world which was supposed to facilitate exchanges is somehow fragmented when it comes to the understanding of architectural conservation.

Architectural conservation education

Most of the Architecture and Engineering schools do not teach architectural conservation, certainly at undergraduate level, and there is little room in the curriculum to teach much about traditional materials or even survey and diagnostics, two important areas in conservation. As in many other countries, the criteria for the prescription of architecture qualifications in UK are orientated to new buildings, and do not refer explicitly to the conservation of existing ones. It includes however criteria which is applicable to the conservation of historic buildings, for example criterion GC2 requires the "Adequate knowledge of the histories and theories of

² For an overview of the history and theory of conservation, see Carbonara (1997) and Torsello (2005)..

architecture and the related arts, technologies and human sciences”.³ As Loughlin Kealy has noted: “the difficulty in integrating conservation into mainstream architecture education derives directly from the fact that ‘legitimacy’ in design remains (and is celebrated by professional bodies everywhere) rooted in the idea of avant-garde and the aspiration to be part of it.”⁴ We need to incorporate to the architecture and engineering curricula teaching about traditional construction materials and techniques, explaining how they relate to modern construction materials and methods, so that students can understand the nature of older buildings and suitable conservation techniques.

The education in architectural conservation is at the moment concentrated at postgraduate level, and there are a number of postgraduate conservation courses, with a focus ranging from heritage management to heritage science. There are also short courses on offer with a more technical and practical approach. Organisations such as the Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC), the professional body for building conservation practitioners and historic environment experts working in UK, carry out a great role in supporting conservation professionals, training and dissemination information between institutions and individuals. The Conference on Training in Architectural Conservation (COTAC) has created the online educational resource to help to develop your conservation skills, based on the International Council on Monuments and Sites' (ICOMOS) Education and Training Guidelines.⁵

Architectural conservation as architectural design project

Somehow we have stopped seeing historic buildings as architecture and this is affecting their conservation. Fixations with the romantic views about historic buildings and the issues of authenticity have distorted and limited the discourse, in many cases conducting, ironically, to reconstructions, even today. Since the eighteenth century developments, the archaeological value of historic buildings prevailed and turned them into artefacts, carriers of idealistic images from the past, sometimes just documents or city's scenography. Previous architectural practices of reusing, transforming and intervening in a contemporary way in historic architecture had somehow stopped and it would not be consciously undertaken again until the twentieth century. We need to reflect on the limiting current routine of reusing buildings in a “new versus old” fashion and look at the best tradition of architects in history who were able to create contemporary architecture masterpieces by intervening on existing buildings.⁶ It is a fact that many of the buildings would not have survived if they were not transformed: history demonstrates that architectural design is an active agent for conservation and architectural conservation should be, first of all, an architectural project.

We need to start moving from the existing tendency of classifying practices, and start looking at projects on an individual basis, in detail and debating the processes and outcomes, including their architectural qualities. This will enhance knowledge and critical skills that can

³ (ARB, 2010)

⁴ (Kealy, 2005)

⁵ COTAC, *Understanding Conservation*.

⁶ (González-Longo, 2012)

be also used in the new design, moving on from so many historic buildings becoming only museums of themselves, and stopped in time. Projects such as the St Kolumba Diocesan Museum, in Cologne or Neues Museum in Berlin have been extensively published in architectural journals but there could have been more discussion about the conservation aspects. The fact that in the Neus Museum the project was divided into two (new build and conservation) raises many questions about the integration of architectural design and conservation today. It presents also an interesting case study to analyse, clarifying what could appear as a discrepancy in the approach: at building level, the gaps in the existing structure were filled while in the individual elements the *lacune* were left untouched. The project should also be discussed in comparison with other relevant projects such as the conservation of the *Sala delle Cariatidi* at Milan's Royal Palace, not only in terms of outcomes but also of different approaches to the treatment of the ruin, the different conservation methodologies and techniques.⁷

Communicating architectural conservation to a wider audience

If we want to improve the conservation of built heritage, we need to solve a major problem: how we translate conservation research into effective policies and how we educate students and the general public about conservation. But even before that, we would need to educate about architecture in general.

ICOMOS Charters and Conventions as well as the Council of Europe recommendations have played an important role as international references, but their quantity and different priorities make it difficult for the public –and even to professionals– to effectively use them. There is still a lot of work to be done for a real integration of Conservation and Sustainability, as there are still many conflicts between policies and practices in both fields to be resolved. International guidelines should be at a higher level and more concise, giving only a general framework in which local policies and practices should be developed.

The different interpretation of Standards and even Regulations produces as a consequence discrepant practices which very much confuse the general public and even professionals. Unfortunately there is not enough public discussion on these matters, and each project 'fights' its own battles in isolation and there is never enough time after the projects finish to reflect and disseminate them. Many of the debates in conservation are related to controversies about demolition of historic buildings proposals, for example Covent Garden and St. Pancras in London and George Square in Edinburgh. In the case of Edinburgh, it went beyond, leading to the creation of the influential Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland (AHSS). In the majority of cases, the debate in conservation is limited to these events and it is not continued and developed later in the public domain. This lack of public debate and awareness about architectural conservation affects projects significantly, as many difficulties during the planning process and public consultations could be avoided if there was a baseline of skills and knowledge in conservation to start from.

⁷ (Carbonara, 2012)

The conservation professionals need to engage more with the local communities and general public, using a more accessible language and media, providing clear information about the history and theory of conservation and disseminating more effectively the outcomes from conservation projects. But citizens need also to be educated on architecture primarily and subsequently conservation, and this should start in the primary schools. The education in conservation is fundamental for the development of good citizens, and, in the same way that sustainability and environmental awareness is, conservation should be included in the curriculum. As the European Commission has recently concluded, we need to develop a more integrated approach to the preservation and valorisation of our cultural heritage, and it is possible to progress from an appreciation of the unique nature of one's heritage to a respect and interest for other people's heritage.⁸

Capacity building through research and education in conservation

If we want to improve the conservation of built heritage, we need to solve a major problem: how we translate conservation research into effective policies and how we educate students and the general public about conservation.

The Universities have a key role on this. Following ICOMOS-CIF recommendations, the University of Strathclyde has been working on capacity building in conservation within a wider approach. A starting point has been the creation of a postgraduate course, the MSc in Architectural Design for the Conservation of Built Heritage, and the Architectural Design & Conservation Research Unit (ADCRU). These initiatives constitute a research, teaching, training and dissemination hub, which tries also to make the theory and practice of conservation more open and comprehensible to the general public. Conservation is further placed in the professionally prescribed architectural curriculum by offering two new optional classes to fifth year Diploma architectural students: conservation theory and architectural and construction history.

This whole new postgraduate programme, fully recognised by IHBC has a new ethos as it is design-orientated and research-based, with a methodological, critical and interdisciplinary approach to architectural conservation, integrating the theoretical, technical and creative aspects of the architectural conservation project. The intention is to provide a robust theoretical and practical education in architectural conservation and the complexities of the built heritage, in a local and international context.

One of the strengths of the new course is the quality and extent of the teaching team: knowledgeable and experienced staff and professionals from government, local authorities, conservation bodies and industry. This ensures that the information disseminated is relevant to current and future practice, up to date and with a diversity of specialisms and points of view. The teaching team has a contagious passion for the conservation of our built heritage and a genuine interest in sharing their knowledge and experience with others. Students will be in this way exposed to a range of conservation professionals on all levels, so that they can

⁸ (EU Commission, 2014)

understand the different professional backgrounds and cultures, developing also their communication skills.

The doctoral research at ADCRU has started by identifying and mapping a not very well known but important heritage, such as the seventeenth and eighteenth century Scottish architecture. Some of the buildings have been demolished or lay now in ruins, but many are still occupied by the descendants of the families who built them (fig.1), which constitutes a wide range to reflect on architectural conservation in a larger time frame. The database has at the moment 1239 singular buildings (fig. 2). By researching about elements of these buildings such as the timber roof structures or masonry within the overall architectural context, we are raising awareness about their importance and disseminating best conservation practice. This research has allowed also to realise that, unfortunately, the fact that elements of buildings are not visible dictates their fortune, as it seem the same efforts are not put in their conservation. This is a lack of understanding of what architecture and architecture conservation are and we find the research will impact not just in the conservation of roofs themselves but also in the whole field of architectural conservation.

The intention is that the outcomes from the research are disseminated to a broad range of audience: clients, users, architects, craftsmen, engineers, conservators, historians, archaeologists, researchers, builders, students, technicians, planners, educators, policy makers and communities. This will require different methods and media. The scope is also to help to integrate better the input and collaboration of many stakeholders, benefiting also from the interaction between the different disciplines. We would like to encourage a creative approach to the planning and implementation of projects, rather than just follow standard systems. For smaller organisations, as is often the case in conservation, standard systems could impose an unsustainable level of bureaucracy which will distract them from the main scope: to safeguard and conserve the built heritage.

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image 1 – North elevation of Drumlanrig Castle, Scotland

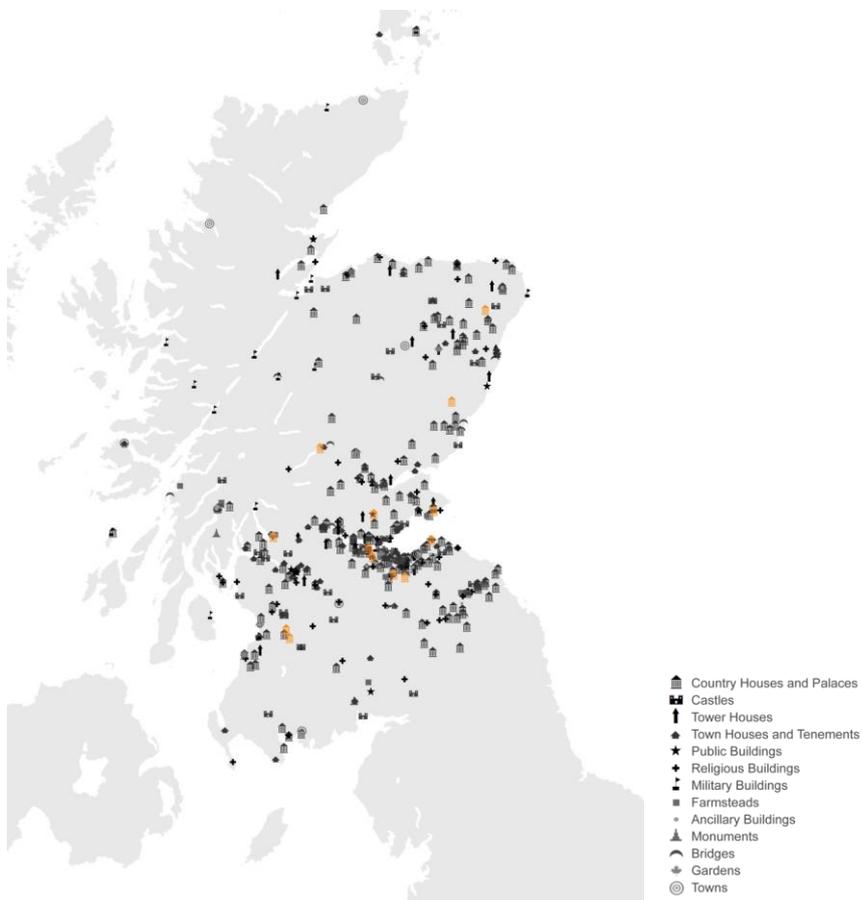


image 2 – distribution of key seventeenth and eighteenth century architecture in Scotland (ADCRU database)