

# Architectural Restoration: a comparison between Japan and Italy

Olimpia Niglio

*It is on proper diagnosis and prognosis that the future of our discipline (which in the present interdisciplinary development we are increasingly frequently calling “heritology”).*

Andrzej Tomaszewski, Florence 2009

Whether it be the maintenance of artistic, architectural, or environmental assets developed in the past, or more generally any form of knowledge, the conservation of cultural heritage pursues constructive objectives to the extent that it enables each society to freely manage their own cultural interests and to exercise their own capabilities, for the development of their own knowledge, in respect of the ethical values that distinguish their particular epoch and, consequently, the particular design paradigms of that epoch. For this reason the criteria adopted for conserving historically important architectural assets are bound to be affected by the nature of the social problems, and their related aspects, in the human ecosystem in which those assets are found. For that reason we need to address the problem of how to analyse, in

different contexts and in different countries, the bases on which these points of reference are founded, since they are the motivating force that generates the criteria for intervention; they establish the strategies that gradually become consolidated practice for carrying out restoration work. Although in today's world economic values are becoming more and more globalised, my considerations here are intended to show that the conservation of cultural assets is a complex issue that seems, instead, to be propagating a range of differentiated assessments and approaches. Reflection is therefore needed so that we can acquire knowledge of these complex types of human behaviour, their motivations, and the objectives they pursue, and compare them as we find them in different cultural contexts: matters whose implications go much wider than can be fully discussed at this particular time. These present observations report my findings in relation to the conservation of architectural assets as I have experienced it whilst teaching and researching in different countries.

### **Cultural Postulates**

Today, at a time when the conservation of cultural heritage tends to be approached in a narrowly specialist, circumscribed way, we no longer find that there is any single valid or univocal response either in terms of theoretical background or in the practical, operational field. What we have come to understand is that the conservation of movable, fixed or intangible assets pursues positive goals to the extent that it enables different human societies to live in relation to their own environment, and to exercise their own vital actions, as a function of the cultural values that characterise their own existence. This is because the methods that are used to critically establish how to recognise a *value* are strongly influenced by the specific social, economic, political, and above all the historical context in which any particular society acquired its configuration. The requirement that we identify these *values* by way of an analysis that simultaneously takes account of all the factors mentioned above, of the interferences between them and sometimes their tendency to come into conflict, is born out of the need to refer to the real causes that make it possible for any social community to orientate and individualise its own decisions, thereby to give a spe-

cific meaning to its own life in the present and for the future. This means that a relationship between *values* and *needs* has to come into being, along with another related fundamental factor: knowledge of the different ways in which the changes in the life conditions in different societies, as they are now, came about in the past and are still happening now: different ways of living together that can give rise to different requirements when it comes to defining the relationship between the *conservation* and the *use* of individual buildings or architecturally important groups of buildings; all the more so in the case of buildings which, taken together, form the historic cores of cities; and from there, understanding the different forms that this relationship can take insofar as it relates to what existed before and the situation as we find it now.

When we evaluated the different concepts on the basis of which different cultures have developed different interpretations of the past, the various interpretations that derive there from can be taken as the basis for constructing theories as to what kind of action would be appropriate. These interpretations will also determine the different approaches to be adopted for safeguarding and conserving heritage, specifically architectural heritage.

Analysing the methods and criteria for intervention that we encounter in the many social, cultural, economic and political realities that still today differentiate all the human societies that populate our planet, it seems to become clearer and clearer that the most important common denominator is the relationship between historic value and usable value. But this relationship is not based on fixed or unquestionable criteria; it is caught up in a continuous process of reinterpretation that closely connects to its cultural environment of reference, and thus to a *cultural postulate*.

Every *cultural postulate* must be understood as an *ethical act* which is the driving force for human activities and at the same time, the justification for them. As such it can be analysed on the basis of the historic considerations that produced it, although of itself it does not require justifying references. The requirements for architectural conservation come from addressing and satisfying these postulates. In order to do so in concrete terms, a conservation project must firstly and foremostly acquire knowledge about the asset, including historical knowl-

edge, so that this factual knowledge can then be used to determine what the requirements should be for conserving the asset and what methods should be used for implementing them. This concatenation of factors makes it possible to identify suitable criteria that can guide the procedures to be followed; thus the work can be carried out in respect of the principles laid down by the *cultural postulates*, as the motivating force that drives the activities of all human societies.

Every society is the bearer of its own *cultural postulate* which, since it is also an *ethical act*, is closely linked to the history and environment of that society, and therefore possesses an *ecological* meaning. It follows that every conservation project must come into existence as ecological action. In that sense the conservation of cultural heritage, in any society, is one of the most important and indispensable references for the further enlargement of its scope; and in all societies, the teaching and training institutions have an essential role to play in that regard.

In examining some real situations, the brief further notes that follow are intended to demonstrate the importance of this unbreakable link, as it exists in different societies. The two geographically and culturally differentiated situations I have taken as my reference make it possible to investigate the close interrelationship between knowledge of an asset and its conservation. Although my choice of these two particular examples is coincidental in that it was the outcome of reflections suggested by personal experience, neither does it seem merely casual. In fact in both settings, the cultural development that conditions the practice of architectural conservation has taken directions that were dictated by specific ethical principles and *cultural postulates*. For that reason they cannot be generalised, because they find their own motivations in the histories and environments to which they refer.

## **Japan**

From what can be observed when we investigate projects that have been carried out in accordance with one of the approaches currently followed in the complex culture of the conservation of architectural assets as it is practised in Japan, a first series of considerations

emerges. It becomes evident that in Japan, the approach differs in significant ways from the regulatory principles that are taken as the basis for practice in a European setting. One of the first things that emerges from this comparison is that in Japanese culture, space is not only perceived as a physical entity, but more importantly in terms of its relationship to the passage of time. The most well-known exemplification of this, and one that has much to tell us in terms of helping us to understand Japanese philosophical principles and the criteria establishing the conservation approach to which these principles lead, is the cyclical activity of constant demolition and reconstruction carried out every twenty years at the beautiful Ise-Jingu Shinto shrine, in the city of Ise.



The suggestive schintoist sanctuary of Ise-Jingu in Ise

As elsewhere in Japanese culture, the definition of space at the Ise-Jingu shrine is based on the concept of *MA* or sense of place: that is, a way of perceiving space that varies from person to person and from

time to time, on every occasion in which they find themselves occupying a particular place. From this we can infer that in Japan, the existence of things does not correspond to any permanent physical reality; what prevails instead is experience of place, the poetic evocation of space in its beauty, which is linked to the nature contained in that the space, at the single moment in which it is perceived. So more than a desire to conserve physical material, the prevalent intention we find at the Ise-Jingu shrine is to transmit knowledge of construction techniques and of the skills needed to carry them out.

This is of considerable interest for us in the West in that it accords pre-eminence to the transmission of knowledge about operational methods and criteria, in ways that has to a considerable extent now been lost here, ever since the West elected for the most part to base architectural conservation on approaches that analyse an existing asset as it is configured now.

Another important aspect of conservation culture in Japan, of which we find confirmation at the Ise-Jingu shrine, is the awareness that the characterising feature of existence is change; a concept of *impermanence* that permeates all the philosophies and religions of the East; there is nothing in any of the fields to which we can refer (animate or inanimate, organic or inorganic) that could be defined as permanent. Inevitably, like all the rest of life, our material surroundings are destined to change, and are in continuous metamorphosis. So in the field of architectural conservation as is in everyday life, the *impermanence* of reality is a *cultural postulate* rooted in the principles on which the culture of Zen Buddhism is based.



Kyoto, Shosei en Garden (photo A. Parducci)

## Italy

In Italy, the attitude to the conservation of architectural assets is profoundly different from Japanese approaches. In Italy, conservation culture is seen more in terms of ethical-cultural relationships that are strongly conditioned by dogmatically consolidated references. In academic practice above all, there exist traditional established criteria that insist on classifying different methodological approaches that are evaluated as appropriate according to the greater or lesser extent to which they can be applied to the building to be restored. These methodological means of orientation are often differently rooted in different historic and geographical settings in which the practice of restoration - rightly - is based on how things are done in that particular place. But there is also often a tendency to fall into the bad habit of validating one particular method rather than another by making recourse to explanations of theoretical type rather than to explanations that relate to the real issues inherent in the artefact to be restored.

In Italy the entire experience of restoration has been focussed on amassing knowledge about the historically existing material; valid support for this approach has been contributed by the sciences. In Italy, it is beyond doubt that the most important basis for every operative action in architectural conservation is history, and that the practical work must be carried out in accordance with "codes of practice" that take careful account of the historical and cultural situations that generated and transformed the object being restored. This approach is thus linked to what has been physically inherited from the past, even though this tends to be more in terms of formal interpretation than in terms of its actual substance. Such positions do not favour artisan-based approaches where the aim is to conserve traditional working techniques; nor can those positions do anything to foster a positive relationship between old fabric and new construction, as we find in some other places. What is more, the problem of Italy's historic urban centres is analysed on the assumption that it is not possible to insert contemporary architecture into them. Recent experience in Italy, including in the scientific disciplines, has been underlining more and more that the restoration and conservation of historic artefacts must be closely linked to the values of art and science taken together, and that operational methods must align themselves with those values. But

since architectural restoration is in fact a process of architectural design, as such it must be based on principles of creativity and knowledge. It must surely therefore be of interest that we investigate a new attitude according to which art and technique are more and more inseparable; it is becoming clear that a search is under way to identify interesting new approaches, particularly in projects where the operational codes are less constraining.



S. Stefano in Sessanio: *palace in the historical center*; Parma: *Auditorium*; Roma: *Ara Pacis* (detail); Roma: *Crypta Balbi* (detail); Lucca: *St. Peter's Church*. (photo: O. Niglio)



### Some conclusions

The two examples thus briefly mentioned can be taken as a demonstration of how the foundation for any true process of conservation is the *cultural postulate*. Each example presents a different methodological approach, but they share a common denominator: the essential role of the *cultural postulate* that motivates them. This is fundamentally important for a revolution in design that ought to favour integration of the conservation requirements in different societies with their own environment, their own technical development, and their own material needs. But no accredited version of their *cultural postulates* could be taken as an infallible guide for the conservation of their historic-environmental values. Instead, what is required is an appropriate intellectual sensibility which, respecting the requirements of the different societies and the specific characteristics of the environment to which they belong, favours the definition of a correct policy for defending architectural heritage, each time in each place.

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*Translated from the Italian by Tom Muirhead*



Shinto priests walking beside the Ise Grand Shrine, Japan. Extract from *In God's Name* by Gédéon and Jules Naudet.