



USE IT OR LOOSE IT – CHALLENGES IN THE PROTECTION OF ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

Paul Keogh

Image
Carlo Scarpa's remodelling of the Castelvecchio in Verona



In the 2010 ICOMOS Ireland Maura Shaffrey Memorial Lecture, Italian historian Andrea Pane outlined the sequence of events that led to key concepts of *Restauro Critico* - the concept articulated by Cesare Brandi in his 1963 essay 'Teoria del Restauro' - being embedded in the 1964 *International Charter for the Preservation of Sites and Monuments (The Venice Charter)*, the text which is the foundation for heritage protection philosophy to this day.

At its simplest, *Restauro Critico* is a synthesis of parallel but opposing lines of thought that originated in nineteenth century debates around the conservation and restoration of historic buildings. On the one hand, John Ruskin argued that historic buildings should be "conserved" to reflect their age; on the other, Viollet-le-Duc promoted the idea of "restoration" to a conjectural original condition - even one that might not have ever existed in reality.

While the evolution of theory in the decades prior to adoption of *The Venice Charter* has been well documented, there is little published on the remarkable coincidence between the principles it set down and those underpinning the design of one of the iconic projects of the genre - Carlo Scarpa's remodelling of the Castelvecchio in Verona. However, there is considerable circumstantial evidence to suggest the probability of a correlation between the two; not least because Scarpa's masterpiece was inaugurated within months of - and little more than 100 kilometres distant from - the conference that adopted the landmark charter in May 1964.

First, it is known that Roberto Pane and Piero Gazzola, the two key figures behind the drafting of the charter, were committed to the idea of linking heritage protection with contemporary culture. The former, in his grandson's words, was "trusting in the idea of a co-existence between modern architecture and historic centres". Second, Pane championed, albeit unsuccessfully, Frank Lloyd Wright's 1954 proposed Masieri Memorial for a site close to Venice's Grand Canal (Scarpa and Wright were known to each other since the American's first Venice visit, when he bought pieces of Venini glass, not knowing they were of Scarpa's design). Third, as architectural superintendent of the West Veneto from 1941, Gazzola was responsible for the restoration of Verona's war-damaged monuments - including the bridge over the Adige river, immediately adjacent to the Castelvecchio. It is implausible therefore to suggest that there is not some correlation between the individuals involved and the theoretic principles underpinning the drafting of the charter and the design of Castelvecchio.

Pane illustrated one of the key tenets of *Restauro Critico* with pictures of a restored equestrian statue in the Baia Archaeological Museum, near Naples. Missing parts of the statue were replaced with wood, thereby distinguishing between the new and the original, and restoring the form of the horse in outline only; or, in the words of Brandi, "re-establishing the potential oneness of the work, without creating a historic fake or an aesthetic outrage". Similarly, in Castelvecchio Scarpa sought to allow the historic fabric maintain its identity and its history, but with a tension between the two: "if there are original parts, they have to be preserved, and any other interventions have to be designed and thought of in a new way", the architect said.



- **Image**
 2 Neues Museum, Berlin by David Chipperfield Architects
Photo: Ute Zscharnt
 3 The Dental Hospital, Dublin by McCullough Mulvin incorporates five Protected Structures
Photo: Christian Richters

As we pass the fiftieth anniversary of these milestones in theory and practice, it might be timely to reflect on the legacy of each; especially as they relate to the challenges we face in adapting historic buildings and places to the needs of today and, in so doing, integrating contemporary architecture with heritage conservation - especially in historic urban environments.

While Scarpa's remodelling was but one episode in over 700 years of alterations that the Castelvecchio had undergone since the 12th century, changing the use of historic buildings has not always been favoured among conservationists. William Morris's 1877 manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings contains a plea to "resist all tampering with either the fabric or ornament of the building as it stands; if it has become inconvenient for its present use, raise another rather than alter or enlarge the old one".

While *The Venice Charter* is accepting of the idea that conservation of "monuments" is facilitated by making use of them for socially useful purposes, it goes on to say that this "must not change the layout or decoration of the building". However, this is contradicted by the stipulation that new work "must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp".



Thinking moved on in the decades that followed Venice, and the 1985 Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe (*The Granada Convention*) committed member states to policies that foster “the use of protected properties in the light of the needs of contemporary life” and “the adaptation where appropriate of old buildings for new uses”. As a signatory to the convention, Ireland incorporated its core principles into the 2000 Planning and Development Act, and the subsequent *Architectural Heritage Protection: Guidelines for Planning Authorities*.

While the guidelines cite the benefits of adaptation and reuse of historic buildings, and state that “good conservation practice allows a structure to evolve and adapt to meet changing needs”, there is growing concern today that limited interpretations of conservation principles in planning and development control might inadvertently be putting at risk the future of

the material the 2000 Act sought to protect: “structures of special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social and technical interest, and the character of architectural conservation areas”.

The critical concern is for the future of city and town centres, the majority of which have unacceptable numbers of historic buildings, and not only protected structures, in inappropriate uses, vacant and even derelict, while housing, schools, shopping, commerce and even civic functions relocate to out-of-town and edge-of-centre locations. The reasons are complex, but one stands out: planning and development control policies, and building regulations, that restrict the adaptive reuse of these properties can only discourage investment in their repair and maintenance, thereby accelerating the decline of historic urban areas as vibrant places to live, work, shop and visit – and as tourism destinations. As Maurice Craig pointed out in his 1975 introduction to *Architectural Conservation - An Irish Viewpoint*: “If we want to freeze the appearance of any street or precinct in the centres of our towns, it is essential that we know exactly what we are doing”.

While there are undoubtedly many buildings whose heritage values dictate that they should be preserved unchanged, the reality is that few are of such importance that they and their settings are not capable of being remodelled to accommodate new uses – especially where they have outlived the functions for which they were constructed, and where adaptation and reuse is the most viable option for extending their lifespans and preserving the vitality of their urban locations.



One of the key issues is that, unlike in the United Kingdom, all buildings of heritage value in Ireland are listed as “Protected Structures” as required under the 2000 Act. By comparison, in the UK there are three grades of protection: from “buildings of exceptional interest”, which make up only 2.5 per cent of the total, to “buildings of special interest” which, at 92 per cent, comprise the vast bulk of those listed. The degree of protection provided, and the extent of alteration and / or extension permitted, is determined by the significance of the building in question.

Apart from the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, there is no grading of protected structures in this jurisdiction, nor is there any requirement for an evidence-based justification for their listing. The same level of protection is applied to all - to the structure, its interior, its fittings and its curtilage, and to any structures within the curtilage - irrespective of whether the building is of international, national, regional, local or record-only status in the NIAH

While the *Guidelines for Planning Authorities* state that “the creative challenge is to find appropriate ways to satisfy the requirements of a structure to be safe, durable and useful on the one hand, and to retain its character and special interest on the other”, they go on to say that dramatic interventions in a protected structure are rarely appropriate and that changes should be kept to a minimum: “Do as much as necessary and as little as possible”.

While the 2000 Act stipulates that planning permission is required for works that materially affect the character or special

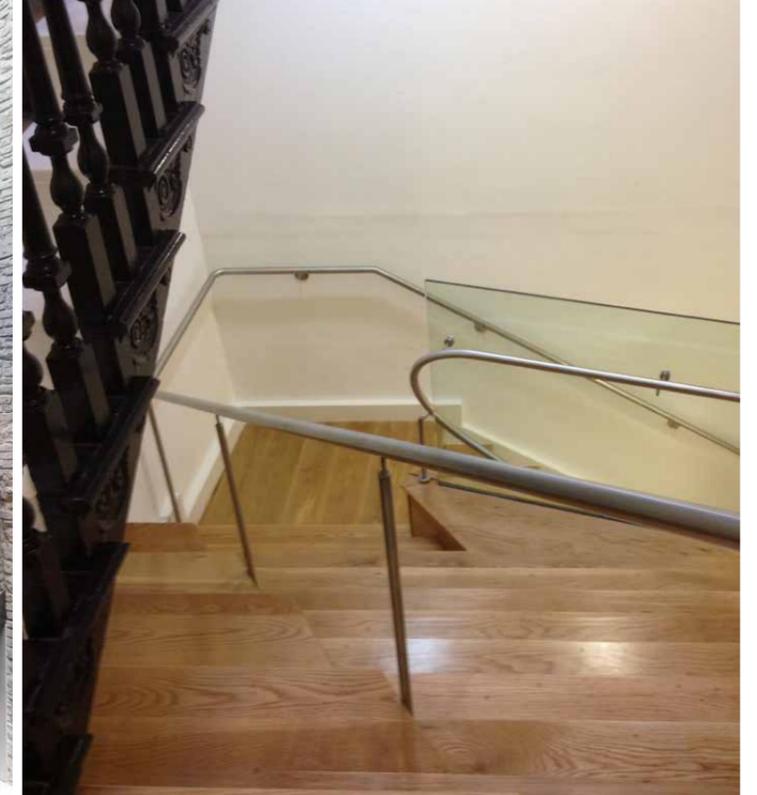
interest of a protected structure, it does not state that there should be a blanket prohibition of such works. Yet, the guidelines “minimum intervention” philosophy is more often than not the reason for planning authorities refusing “creative demolitions” and contemporary interventions of the type employed by Scarpa at Castelvecchio. As alluded to by Maurice Craig, is it not preferable that the adaptation and reuse of historic buildings is promoted – including sympathetic modern interventions that do not compromise their essential heritage values – especially where the original use might no longer be viable?

If this is so, one of key challenges is to review heritage protection guidelines in the context of the overarching policy objective to consolidate and regenerate the nation’s cities, towns and villages. Buildings and places change over time – they must do if they are to survive as viable entities - and heritage protection policy must include criteria for the management of that change, balancing historic values (conservation and restoration) with use values (social, economic and environmental sustainability). The alternative is to let them fall into disuse and disrepair, along with the ensuing deterioration of their urban environments.

A second consequence of the “minimum intervention” philosophy is to retard the development of an architectural culture specific to our time. While Scarpa might not have been the first to insert modern interventions into a historic building, Castelvecchio has become something of a landmark for the precedent it set in adapting a historic castle into a contemporary museum - and for striking a balance between protection of the historic



4/5 Abbyleix Library in the refurbished Market House by de Blacam and Meagher
Photo: Peter Cooke



fabric and the expression of new additions in a contemporary language. Presented with an accumulation of Roman, medieval, Renaissance and later constructions, Scarpa sought “historical clarity” - he removed some, restored others and made new interventions in a manner that assigned each its place within the overall remodeling. Specifically referring to the influence of Castelvécchio, David Chipperfield, architect of the universally acclaimed reconstruction of the Neues Museum in Berlin has said: “You freeze history with the ruin and add new elements with great care and attention to detail”.

Notwithstanding Castelvécchio’s iconic status in the pantheon of twentieth century architecture, Scarpa’s modus operandi remains a subject of controversy among those conservationists opposed to modernism, and sometimes even modernity itself. This was nowhere better illustrated than in the resignation of Prince Charles as patron of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings; in response to the rejection of his introduction for the *Old House Handbook* – the world’s oldest heritage protection body’s guide to repairing and extending historic houses. According to the prince, historic buildings should always be restored in their original style and “the desire to ‘create a contrast with’ or ‘avoid archaeological confusion’ between new and old can result in crude and dissonant collisions, and a disastrous outcome for the old building”. On the other hand, reflecting the views of its founder, William Morris, SPAB promotes “good new design, rather than reliance on past styles” - on the basis that well-designed elements from different periods are a positive addition to the heritage values of the original.

The persistence of such controversies is remarkable, given the weight of policy guidelines advocating the integration of contemporary architecture and heritage conservation in the management of change in historic buildings and places: the ICOMOS *Washington Charter* states that “the introduction of contemporary elements in harmony with the surroundings... can contribute to the enrichment of an area”. The *Granada Convention* commits EU member states to promoting architectural creation as our age’s contribution to the European heritage”. And the UNESCO *Vienna Memorandum* on world heritage and contemporary architecture rejects “all forms of pseudo-historical design, as they constitute a denial of the historical and contemporary alike”.

As first recommended in a 1975 joint Union of International Architects / International Council for Monuments and Sites seminar on the integration of modern architecture in old surroundings, *Shaping the Future - Case Studies in Adaptation and Reuse in Historic Urban Environments* was published in 2012 under Action 23 of the Government Policy on Architecture. Illustrated with over 30 projects that demonstrate a range of approaches to adaptation and reuse, the publication is aimed at providing planning authorities, developers and designers with evidence-based exemplars of best practice in combining contemporary architecture and heritage protection – with interventions that are sympathetic to their historic contexts. As stated in the ministerial introduction, protection of the architectural heritage should not be seen as an end in itself; it should be integrated into the broader planning context and the sustainable development of cities, towns and villages.



- **Image**
- 6 The contemporary Gravity Bar at the historic Guinness Store House, Dublin by RKD Architects
 - 7 Coppinger Court in Cork - new housing within an existing urban context by Magee Creedon Kearns Architects
Photo: John Roche
 - 8 Adaptation of a 19th century building into 21st century offices in Dublin, Henry J. Lyons
Photo: Enda Cavanagh
 - 9 Repair and reuse of 17 South William Street, Dublin by Robin Mandal Architects

The following key actions are suggested as steps on the road to achieving this objective. First, review the 2000 Act in the light of the ICOMOS 1987 Washington Charter’s recommendation that conservation plans should determine which buildings must be preserved, which should be preserved under certain circumstances and which, under exceptional circumstances, might be expendable. Second, update the *Guidelines for Planning Authorities* to reflect UNESCO’s 2005 Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape that historic values (heritage protection) need to be balanced with use values (social, economic and environmental sustainability) - including contemporary architecture. Third, as recommended in recent government guidelines, insert design policies into statutory development plans, and resource planning authorities with the expertise to implement these through the development management process – in particular as they relate the management of change in historic buildings and places. As stated in the Government Policy on Architecture, “The architecture we build today is the heritage of tomorrow”.

--
Paul Keogh is a past president of the RIAI, a founding member of Group 91 and editor of *Shaping the Future - Case Studies in Adaptation and Reuse in Historic Urban Environments* (2012).