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a cura di Guido Biscontin e Guido Driussi

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BIRTH AND AFFIRMATION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF “MINIMAL INTERVENTION” IN THE PRACTICE OF RESTORATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM (19th c.)

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the history of nineteenth-century restoration in the UK by highlighting the events, theories and documents that will lead for the first time in Europe at the maturation of the restoration discipline. The world of architecture and the possibility of a physical survival of monuments found a professional and ethical dimension that can be considered sustainable in many subjects. The confusing and arbitrary stylistic restoration, with all its contradictions and unruly, is recognized as a deleterious practice to the conservation of ancient buildings.

Some architects addressing the restoration to the stylistic unity became the target of a growing collective movement that challenged the scraping and demolition, and upholds the principle of “minimal intervention” by John Ruskin. Just the ideas of the writer and philosopher and his suggestions for the restoration of monuments will generate a need for clear rules. The negative evaluations expressed by many critics, historians, politicians and scientists demonstrate that interventions were not sustainable from many points of view: procedural (absence of a methodological approach), technical (destructiveness), economic (high costs for drastic measures), and social (no respect for the authenticity and deception of style).

The *Papers on the Conservation of Ancient Monuments and Remains* (1865) will be adopted to contain the vast controversy generated by the outcome of the stylistic restoration. The document contains the guidelines approved by the *Royal Institute of British Architects*, designed with the innovative conservative approach; it must be pointed out that some of the most current meanings attributed to the term “sustainability” are perceptible in its articles.

The essay will demonstrate how the principle of “minimum intervention”, the respect for the historical stratigraphy, and the fundamental interdisciplinary contribution of chemical science had already become the characteristics of “sustainable” restoration in the UK in the nineteenth century.

Key-words: Restoration, conservation, sustainability, discipline, rules

Restoration, maintenance and reuse of historic buildings are among the most significant goals of contemporary society. The interdisciplinary interest of the scientific community for the conservation of monuments is leading to a real international movement more and more. The relationship between conservation and globalization, and the attempt to develop specific terms with the concept of “sustainability” in the field of restoration are among the themes of the current debate; aspects that, however, have a significant antecedent in the emergence and affirmation of the criterion of “minimal intervention” in nineteenth-century culture of restoration in the United Kingdom¹.

The debate about the purpose and techniques of restoration of monuments starts in the nineteenth century supported by a rapid process of collective awareness, with repercussions within the social, political, intellectual and professional sphere. The concept of socio-economic advantage and the one of technical feasibility will be increasingly important and influence the practice of restoration. The *Society of Antiquaries of London* (founded in 1717) and the *Society of Dilettanti* (1734) incited the interest in classical antiquity and their conservation². In addition, the affirmation of the gothic revival promoted the study of authentic Gothic through the drawing of cathedrals, no longer appreciated since the sixteenth century, when gothic architecture had become an anachronistic symbol of Catholicism in Britain. It soon emerged a general interest in medieval monastic ruins and the first to draw the attention of scholars and scientists were Fountains and Newstead abbeys³.

When James Wyatt restored the cathedrals of Lichfield, Salisbury, Hereford and Durham pursuing the unity of style, he demolished some parts of the buildings and removed architectural elements to make the churches more functional. The destructive method of Wyatt was at first considered valid by many other architects and builders. During the restoration of Salisbury Cathedral (1787-1793) Wyatt directed a series of drastic measures so that the venerable cathedral was substantially transformed⁴. But a greater sensitivity towards the authentic testimonies was already rising and negative comments were unprecedented. Richard Gough and John Carter criticized in a negative sense the work of Wyatt. It was evident that the nature of the intervention in the historical architecture should be conservative and Gough advocated the establishment of a Committee for the preservation of ancient buildings in 1788. The issue of cultural sustainability emerged in a major way, and Carter was even more drastic in condemning the hands of unqualified restorers and emphasizing there was not a real and sincere understanding of medieval details. A promoter of the restoration of churches was the Cambridge Camden Society, founded in 1839. Among his first actions, the society funded the restoration of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Cambridge⁵.

Many people thought Wyatt’s intervention to be exemplary and there were attempts to emulate, as in the case of stylistic restoration of Canterbury Cathedral (George Austin), Ripon Cathedral (Edward Blore) and Windsor Castle (Jeffry Wyattville). The purpose of re-establishing unity of style through demolitions is also

pursued in the restoration of York Cathedral, directed by Robert Smirke continuing the tradition of Wyatt⁶. But the effects of these restorations on the ancient architectures made even stronger the denunciation of their destructiveness, because instead of preserving the stones, they replaced the authentic material resource to get an historic falsehood. Wyattville restored the Windsor Castle with great disapproval of the public opinion. The project won the competition held by the British Parliament and the long-lasting and expensive works were financed with public money supplied by the government. The economic resources were consumed in twelve years without any respect for the historical authenticity of the castle, which was substantially redesigned in style⁷.

The theme of “sustainability” emerged in a major way: a growing number of architects, in fact, began to encourage an approach to restoration based on in-depth knowledge of architecture and conservative. William Atkinson was among those who protested against the restoration of Durham Cathedral, directed by James Wyatt, suggesting less invasive remedies and especially with the recommendation that the existing parts of the building were left unchanged (cultural and technical sustainability). Atkinson thought the interventions in the Gothic cathedrals should be based on a detailed study, and he emphasized the importance of rigorous training of the workers involved in the yard and more scientific methods of restoration. The members of the *Society of Antiquaries* disapproved the restoration of Durham Cathedral and a social movement began. They also dubbed the perpetrator of the crime against the ancient church with the nickname “the Destroyer”⁸.

In his works *Contrasts* (1836), *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841), and *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture* (1843), Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin assumed a critical position regarding the treatment of historic buildings and, especially, about the restoration of the churches, that had vast echo (and not only in the English kingdom). He knew that the restoration was necessary but did not accept that the intervention could exceed the limits imposed by the value of sacred architecture; its main objections were addressed to the reorganization of the churches and the redefinition of the interior, often radical; ignorance and improvisation in imitation of Gothic details were unsustainable in his vision⁹.

The English restoration culture has distinctive elements that clearly characterize it: in Britain, a sincere interest in the knowledge and conservation of medieval architecture led to the creation of professional standards based on principles of restoration¹⁰. Edward Augustus Freeman tried to define them and in his work *The Preservation and Restoration of Ancient Monuments* (1852) he described three different methods of approach to the restoration: the destructive approach neglected the styles of the past and admitted repairs or additions in the style of the present time; the conservative approach was based on the most meticulous reproduction of every detail of an old building; the eclectic approach required a very accurate analysis of

the history and valuable characteristics – on a case by case basis – to arrive at the most correct restoration procedure. The third type of approach could allow the removal of additions, if worthless or negative for the understanding of the original forms. Some assumptions of this philosophy are similar to those of Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and probably there was a correspondence with members of the *Cambridge Camden Society*¹¹.

The architect George Gilbert Scott applied the “conservative” approach in the restoration of Saint Mary’s Church in Stafford, one of his earliest worksite (1840-1844). Among his principal restorations are those of the Cathedrals of Ely, Hereford, Lichfield, Peterborough, Durham, Chester and Salisbury; he also worked at Westminster Abbey in London. Although he tried to act conservatively, his restorations were disruptive and he attempted to replicate and replace the decayed stones. Because of its concept of intervention in historical contexts, he became one of the main targets of the movement that supported the principle of “minimal intervention” by John Ruskin. The consequences of many restorations that pursued the illusory return to the purity of the gothic forms and disputes that arose demonstrated that new ideas germinated and were taking root in the Kingdom of Great Britain in the mid-nineteenth century¹². Scott tried to react and in *A Plea for the Faithful Restoration of Our Ancient Churches* (1850), he divided historically significant buildings in two categories: those to be considered evidence of lost civilizations but deprived of their original function; old churches in use but to be restored to give them the best possible presentation¹³. In 1865, Scott published the *General Advice to Promoters of the Restoration of Ancient Buildings* and revealed an attitude that will be typical of the philological restoration at the end of the century¹⁴.

The writer, critic, and philosopher John Ruskin became the main representative of this reaction against the destructive treatment of the architecture of the past and stimulated a social awakening to react and counter the uncontrolled radical destruction or alteration of environmental heritage of Britain. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1853), Ruskin demonstrates to admire monuments even if they are incomplete and perceives the signs of time as precious qualities of historic buildings. The aspects that anticipate the modern concept of sustainability – with particular reference to its economic, technical and cultural meaning – are recognizable in his notion of restoration. Ruskin, in fact, condemned the alteration of ancient architectures proposed by those who tried to make monuments look like new buildings for an economic interests. He spoke against the recreation of monuments, in favour of the respect of irreproducible authentic signs of the past. When *The seven lamps of architecture* is published, in 1849, the controversy on the restoration is already launched in France and many influential personalities, such as Adolphe Napoleon Didron, Charles Forbes René de Montalembert and César Daly, had expressed against the errors made in the restoration of many cathedrals¹⁵.

The writings and lectures of Ruskin aroused heated debates on how to properly restore and maintain historic buildings, whose resonance was so extensive as to affect the culture of restoration in other countries. Ruskin anticipates many aspects of sustainability, in fact he argued that the restoration under the eyes of all were falsifying; historic buildings should not be altered for any reason and it was better to see them collapsed in a pile of rubble rather than restored to their former splendour. In reference to the technical viability, Ruskin condemned every action of skinning, demolition and reconstruction by analogy and suggested to make use of external structures for the stabilization and consolidation of architecture, such as wooden struts and metal ties¹⁶. Ruskin writes some hints for the restoration and preventive maintenance in his introduction to the book by Pietro Alvise Zorzi, entitled *Osservazioni intorno ai restauri interni ed esterni della basilica di San Marco a Venezia* (1877), and anticipates some of the themes that are very current today¹⁷.

The innovative and unconventional conservative vision began to emphasize, for the first time, the importance of dialogue and debate between experts from various fields. The opportunity to take advantage of modern science was seen as beneficial to consolidate friable stones through the application of new chemical substances. Some chemicals developed in the early nineteenth century had aroused great enthusiasm among admirers of authentic monuments. Early reflections on the issue of compatibility spread in those days. Chemistry became an ally of conservation and many scholars were convinced of being able to solve every problem of preservation of the historical and artistic heritage. The substance known as “liquid glass” derived from the experiments conducted by Johann Nepomuk von Fuchs at the University of Landshut, culminating in the discovery of silicic acid in 1822. The new consolidating treatment spreads rapidly in France, Germany and Italy, but the results of its first applications appeared rather disappointing. The assistance of the British chemist and physicist William Crookes was considered useful in the restoration of the Westminster Palace, headquarters of the British Parliament in London. In 1856, Frédéric Ransome patented a new consolidating method based on the application of two solutions containing soluble silicate and calcium chloride (or barite or aluminium sulphate). The architect George Aitchison suggested Giacomo Boni how to apply the silicates on the stone surfaces of the Porta della Carta in the Doge’s Palace in Venice during the restoration directed by Annibale Forcellini. The Italian archaeologist and architect Boni had been informed about the research carried out in England by the chemist Frederick Settle Barff because he was a pupil and friend of John Ruskin¹⁸.

The restoration methods proposed by George Gilbert Scott were especially destructive and Ruskin did not consider them valid. A very common practice in the restoration of the stone was the cutting or removal of the external surface through the use of a chisel; new carved stones were then inserted together with the latest surface treatments. Accepted the disapproval of Ruskin, Scott tried to share and adopt

his conservative philosophy and presented a paper at the *Royal Institute of British Architects* in 1862; the document was revised in 1865 in a set of technical rules titled *The Institute's Papers on the Conservation of Ancient Monuments and Remains*. Although Scott did not completely share the strict conservative perspective of Ruskin, the document was the first of its kind to adopt many of his principles and to be printed and distributed by a professional organization of high level. The Papers were published in "The Ecclesiologist" under the supervision of the *Ecclesiological Society* of London, in March 1865. They are a specific regulation for the UK, which contains rules designed with the innovative conservative approach and, even today, surprisingly current and significant¹⁹. It must be pointed out that some of the most recent meanings attributed to the term "sustainability" emerge in the articles of the *Papers on the Conservation*.

Right from the first article, the paper suggests consulting a competent architect before choosing interventions. The restoration of cultural heritage requires a high level professional approach, with particular care and capability; restoration is not considered an affordable activity for everyone. The architect must chart the building with accurate measurements; photographs and drawings must be archived taking note of the date of delivery. Before starting the restoration work-site it is obligatory to perform careful investigation in every part of the church²⁰.

Article Nine, for example, confirms the influence of John Ruskin on British architects was determining positive repercussions on the practice of restoration. It recommends the old stones not to be scraped or modified under any circumstances. As a general rule, the masonry must not be completely rebuilt or renovated, but only damaged or defective parts can be removed and carefully integrated with good quality new stone. In any case, the colour of the stone must be maintained. Social and cultural sustainability are particularly evident in this article: in fact, the English document exalts the characteristic of the "distinguishability" in the restoration field for the first time: the introduction of new structural elements is allowed but it must be very clear that they are new parts. The observer will never be misled and recognize the authentic parts this way. The Institute's Paper on the Conservation suggests restoration techniques to be preferred: a consolidation technique is described in the ninth article. The prevalent tendency to replace the old stones with new ones, without any respect for the authentic decorations, would have been avoided with the help of the chemistry science, which allowed the stones to be preserved in place. The replicas of gothic ornaments were clumsy due to an inadequate ability of the workers called to reproduce the stones. It was clear that architects and workmen had a poor education, and their ignorance had caused the destruction of the monuments of Nation. New professional rules diffused after the collective denunciation of the technical and cultural "unsustainability".

The radical change in the methodological approach to restoration of monuments is clear: the respect of all historical periods, the contribution of chemistry and preservation methods give birth to the modern discipline of restoration. The preservation

of historic buildings became yesterday an ethical question, as it still is today, with renewed attention to the issue of sustainability of the restoration. The article seventeen focuses on the technical sustainability. It recommends the choice of an architect to be done very carefully because he will have to repair an old building. The architect must recognize the value of monuments and have fear of violating their authenticity. He should know without hesitation that the goal of the restoration is conservation. The *Papers on the Conservation* are the guidelines to be followed during inspections and restorations; moreover, the continuous supervision of monuments is required to avoid their damage. The document also includes the *General Advice to Promoters of the Restoration of Ancient Buildings*²¹.

The English document in 1865 had already clarified the meaning of the terms “restoration”, “conservation” and “maintenance” to architects and engaged workmen. It establishes a clear relationship of purpose between the terms “restoration” and “conservation” according to which the conservation becomes the goal to be pursued through the restoration, that is an activity for architects and workers carefully selected and specialized. As part of maintenance are all repairs or protection from the elements, periodically necessary to maintain monuments in good condition²².

All the mentioned events happened before the foundation of the SPAB *Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings* in London (1877). When the campaign against the restoration of St. Mark’s Basilica in Venice started, the new cultural and methodological address of restoration is already characterized by a focus on technical and cultural sustainability. These principles had a great influence on the practice of preservation in Italy and in other countries where new laws for the restoration of monuments were promulgated (*Ministerial Decree 21 July 1882* and *Circular no. 683 bis* in Italy)²³.

Finally, I recall the “principle of equivalence” by John James Stevenson, a member of the SPAB who in a lecture at the *Royal Institute of British Architect* (1877) defined the ethical dimension of the restoration discipline emphasizing the importance of considering each monument as an historical document and recognizing the same dignity in every period of the past. The equivalence monument-document is still a vital root of the restoration in the contemporary sense: falsifier instincts and demolitive shortcuts are not permitted preferring sustainable interventions as part of a transparent methodological operation.

¹ Page M., Mason R., *Giving preservation a history*, New York, 2004; Tyler N., Ligibel T. J., Tyler I. R., *Historic preservation*, London, New York, 2009, pp. 21-24.

² Schnapp A., *The discovery of the Past*, New York, 1997, pp. 260-261.

³ Stubbs J. H., *Time honored*, United States of America, Canada, 2009, pp. 218-226, 237.

⁴ Denslagen W. F., *Architectural Restoration in Western Europe. Controversy and Continuity*, Amsterdam, 1994, pp. 34-37.

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- ¹³ Scott G. G., *A Plea for the Faithful Restoration on our Ancient Churches*, published in "The Gentleman's Magazine", edited by Sylvanus Urban, v. 34, Londra, 1850, pp. 144-150.
- ¹⁴ Carbonara G., *Avvicinamento al Restauro*, Napoli, 1997, pp. 161-178, 201-230.
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¹⁹ Stubbs J. H., *Time honored*, cit., p. 224.

²⁰ Ventimiglia G. M., *Il ruolo della cultura inglese nella definizione del restauro...*, cit., pp. 304-312, 355.

²¹ The document is archived at the library of Victoria & Albert Museum of London.

²² *The Institute's Papers on the Conservation of Ancient Monuments and Remains*, in "The Ecclesiologist", new series, published under the superintendence of *The Ecclesiological Society*, Vol. XXVI, London, March 1865, pp. 220-226.

²³ Tomaselli F., *Restauro anno zero*, cit.; the topic of "minimal intervention" has been also debated in Fiorani D., *Posterità e minimo intervento*, and Della Torre S., Pracchi V., *Il restauro tra evento e processo*, essays published in Pasetti A., Montagni C., *Il Minimo Intervento nel Restauro*, Arkos, Florence, 2004, pp. 17-28.



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