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Monuments Conservation

A School of Building for the Nation

The following article is a lecture held by the President of the Hamburg Chamber of Architects, Engineer Walter J. M. Bunsmann, on April 7, 1984 at the Hamburg Chamber of Crafts and Trade. The text was originally published in 1984 in No. 5 of the magazine "Deutsches Architektenblatt". We thank the author and the publisher for their courteous permission to reprint it.

Since 1975 – the “Architectural Heritage Year” (unhappily and misleadingly called the “Monuments Conservation Year”) – since 1975 so much has been said and written, so many accurate and relevant things (and some things have also been said twice, as just now), since that successful year of inherited architectural baggage, so much applause, emphasis and activity has entered into this business, and this from so many of the right and not-so-right people, that weariness of the topic has quickly become widespread. And today, to top it all off, an architect is adding the claim that monuments conservation is a “school of building” (Bauschule) for the nation.

That’s pretty steep, isn’t it? It may be that making over and renovating old castles and facades boosts tourism, brings people money, impresses abroad, establishes and preserves an awareness of history by making it visible - but that monuments conservation constitutes a school of building for the nation, that might be going a bit too far...

Nevertheless, I will prove this to you, and I will justify the amount (some think: the enormous amount) of tax monies that have been invested in historic buildings for decades.

First a look around: if we set all our buildings in the cities, towns and landscapes of our Federal Republic at 100 percent, then barely 1 percent is protected as an individual structure or an ensemble from blithe intervention, fundamental change or demolition. The remaining 99 percent is more or less subject to unfettered demolition and transformation. "More or less", since the demolitionists or designers always need permission to do it, and this is no longer as easily acquired everywhere as it was 10 years ago. What has changed in the meantime?

What we are seeing is one of the first and ongoing pedagogical successes of the monuments conservation field. For decades conservationists have been imploring the public to look carefully at the new buildings and new things that have taken and are taking the place of destroyed old buildings. The key phrase “loss of value and form” hits home when Germans return from holidays in Italy and ask themselves in desperation, why Hanover or Lingen or wherever can’t look - at least a tiny bit - like Siena, Florence or Verona, just a tiny bit, for crying out loud! And today citizens rise up with one accord when a "better" use or a supposedly higher return on investment propose to destroy formal values; values which, since they have become a part of the public city and landscape, may no longer be disposed of or destroyed by a single owner as though they were private property.

This resistance to careless demolition that monuments conservation has inspired, this resistance from citizens that extends to valuable built forms of every era, has confronted proprietors, buyers and architects with an entirely new issue regarding old buildings. Buildings do not only age, they also become obsolete. If these old buildings may not be torn down, how can they be used more economically? We have known for a long time how this is possible: Dwellings in the 18th and 19th centuries attained new attractiveness through careful repair and restoration to their earlier state and hence yielded more in rent or sales proceeds. The miserable contributions of the post-war period were assiduously removed, stucco ceilings were uncovered, missing facade ornaments completed, balcony

railings copied, balustrades reconstructed, tile walls in staircases refurbished, destroyed masonry repaired, overpainted clinker bricks freshened up, lighting fixtures reproduced – all with the aim of reclaiming the old splendour, the generous spaces and materials, the old room heights, the blocked vistas.

Anyone with self-respect takes pleasure in working in such rooms, enjoys their futuristic steel furniture in the restored old setting. This pedagogical success is owed to the field of monuments conservation, to whom else?

If the obsolescence of floor plans and spatial arrangements has been overcome by the creative implementation of a different style of living or by the willing acceptance of a formerly despised working-class milieu, monuments conservation has also taught novel and imaginative uses for outdated spaces and structures: factories have been transformed into cultural centres, spinning mills into libraries, gasworks into citizens' forums, jails into youth hostels, forts into restaurants, splendid villas into town halls, churches into artists' studios, factory workshops into theatre halls. Today an amazing willingness to introduce such alienating usage in a stimulating and contrasting way is a basic skill of every architect of some rank. And this new manner of coping creatively and enthusiastically with the legacy and hereditary burden of old buildings without destroying them has its roots in the conservation of historic monuments.

It should be added in parentheses: naturally not there alone. Movements never arise from a single impulse. One of the factors is the longtime refusal of run-of-the-mill architects to really produce architecture. Another is the pathos and the persistence of a miserly, supposedly pragmatic rationalism. All of this has caused citizens to look back yearningly towards the past. This should hardly be subject to mockery, as long as each individual comprehends his own personal share in it. So far so good, or also bad.

In any case we ascertain: as far as the German public is concerned – and I maintain this is a consequence of monuments conservation – the attitude to existing building inventory has changed radically. What the construction industry regarded in 1970 as mass available for demolition -- keyword: building reserves for two generations -- has today become our beloved old homeland, largely worthy of preservation, as long as the new generation and those of similar views have not already pounced on it.

This transformation of attitude can also be calculated: if the economic life of a building is 80 years and its general technical life 100 years, then buildings that nevertheless still survive are valuable because they are free gifts, whether at Klosterstern or in Bologna.

Therefore, monuments conservation is already a school, a school of building, in which the correct estimation of values of form is taught and learned; a school in which, furthermore, the correct handling of the burden of old buildings is communicated in the selection of intelligent uses, in the development of an adequate style of living and usage, and many other ways of behaving and acting toward it. This school of building proves the economic value of architectural attractiveness, whether in Innocentia Park or at Linderhof Castle.

But let us now turn away from this planning, assessing, and designing side of conservation doctrine and take a look at building practice. A national school of building must also mean, here and today, that monuments conservation has developed and conveyed methods, means and practices that are fruitful for the entire building trade and that otherwise would not have been developed.

Let us begin with the example of the negative long-term effects of Tulla's straightening and regularization of the Rhine: barely 100 years after his ingenious feat, with which he initiated the desertification of the Rhine Valley the heads of the piles supporting the foundations of the cathedrals at Speyer, Worms and Mainz were rotten.

One can read about the insights gained in the 1930s during the laying of new foundations for these monumental buildings, knowledge of earthworks and hydraulic construction, technologies of driven and drilled piles, and statics.

Truly, our national school of building has enormous testing grounds.

As we stroll by, let us briefly touch on moisture barriers. We have monuments conservation to thank for everything we know and are capable of, especially regarding the addition of such barrier layers to strained and cracked masonry. And much more besides: rotten abutments no longer lead to entire roof structures being dismantled, as monuments conservation invented vamping using synthetic resins; crumbling stones are reinforced, not knocked out. For the best insights into mortar composition, wood-eating pests, tin blight, exterior paint, and water-repellent treatments, we have monuments conservation to thank. Without the pressuring stimulus of monuments conservation, in other words without the buildings that are worth every effort and all efforts, barely a third of all the modern means of protecting buildings would exist. For the science regarding ageing in building -- and this directly concerns all involved in the trade -- is a central discipline in this national building school of monuments conservation. It, monuments conservation, is the only academic locale and the only large-scale practical laboratory in which the phenomenon of ageing construction has been elevated to the main object of thought and research. It is therefore hardly surprising that the earliest warnings regarding losses running into the millions and structural damage due to air pollution came from conservationists -- in 1907 in Cologne, in 1899 in Strasburg. Where else could one find a school or university of building which provides us with such services for the building industry?

The basic conservationist attitude of monuments conservation, which justifies the interest in processes of ageing and has brought forth such significant technical, chemical, petrographic and metallurgic innovations in response to ageing -- this basic conservationist attitude has also, however, promoted old, even ancient insights and the techniques linked to them. Monuments conservation keeps crafts alive that we would urgently need "in any case" -- and conservation guides these crafts to buildings that set standards. Just think of the appalling lack of culture displayed by tombstones and grave markers. I remember very precisely the peculiar changes in the hitherto dismal offerings of a stone-cutting company in Emden after its workshop had worked in monuments conservation for barely a year. Skills that had not been required up to then were suddenly present and developed so strongly that in a few weeks, granite bollards crafted by this workshop, which are a true joy in their creative originality and in the assurance of their form will be installed in Katharine Street in Hamburg,. And this is occurring in many ways: The carpenter who had forgotten how to handle solid wood; the metalworkers who are now casting door fittings even though a piece of crooked pipe used to do just as well; the smiths whose welding machines had banished all comprehension of materials (and also of practical welding); the ceramicists who must now recall old glazes; the bricklayer who is no longer asked to produce the dead perfection of the first sorting, but is now required to apply all his skills in creating lively, picturesque, fascinating stonework surfaces... Through monuments conservation, all of them are finding themselves in a demanding and high-level school, which is extraordinarily fruitful for the whole building trade.

Therefore, let us not deceive ourselves! The young citizen of tomorrow, who is already well-travelled thanks to peace, whose viewing has matured in modern art education, will no longer be satisfied with what is currently accepted as architecture.

Let no-one believe that, once the understandable attacks of nostalgia have passed, everything will again turn out as badly as Manhattan and Hamburg -- like this and like that. We will then be happy that in the environs and surroundings of monuments conservation, certain things have survived which some prematurely believe to be dead and gone.

And finally, the national school of building has a fourth operating principle, which is hardly noticed among the public and therefore is not paid any particular attention: I mean the remarkable exchanges of influence that arise between leading conservationists and supervising architects and craftsmen alike. If we ignore a few half-educated know-it-alls, whom we also encounter in monuments conservation (where do we not encounter them?) -- then generally speaking, participation in a conservation project involving cooperation and exchange with high-ranking building historians and knowledgeable practitioners often

amounts to a kind of spa experience for architects and builders, a kind of therapy for weeks or months, in which the dislocations and deformations that the normal everyday practice of new construction entails, can be healed. The mutual respect, without which every building effort can easily turn out wrong, becomes the basic tenor on such building sites; the craftsman is included in discussions, he notes the value of his contribution with satisfaction. There is also time to reflect and try things out; the surprises that emerge from the existing structure and the on-site findings do not provoke pointless accusations and useless attempts to assign blame. Rather, the common effort serves a building project that is recognised in common as beautiful. In short: the fact that monuments conservation repeatedly delivers this experience is not without positive consequences for the working relationships among those involved in other building projects. This building school of monuments conservation sets examples, and such examples set precedents.

Let us summarise what we have heard:

Monuments conservation is thus a school of building for the nation

- because conservation is oriented to preserving and not wearing out the built environment,
- because conservation evaluates buildings according to their value of form and their history, and thus sharpens citizens' awareness of such values. It encourages them to expect higher standards in new building.

Monuments conservation is a school of building

- because conservation teaches and finds novel uses for outdated structures,
- because conservation studies the ageing of building substance and develops new techniques and new methods to deal with this ageing.

Monuments conservation is a national school of building

- because conservation keeps ways of handling old materials and old techniques alive – with invigorating consequences for the entire building industry,
- because conservation creates a pressure- and stress-free space for thinking and acting, with regenerative consequences for the everyday processes of new building.

And finally, monuments conservation is a school of building for the nation because it secures the publicly visible measure and standard by which the contemporary architecture of any period can judge itself against the background of building history.

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