

## Who Determines the Public Interest in the Conservation of Historic Buildings? Mechanisms and Problems of Selection

*By Georg Mörsch\**

Public interest in the preservation of our visible historic environment is only represented by the field of monuments conservation. As a representative of the public interest, it understands its role as one of service and it speaks for a common good which I would like to term the "basic right to history".

In my conviction that this has always been the basic mission of conservation, I contradict the claim that has become a topos in the past few years that conservation has only recently freed itself from introversion and small-mindedness and has finally come to represent the public interest in a modern and open-minded fashion.

If one assumes that an interest is first to be considered public if a sufficient number of interested parties promote it, then it may be claimed that conservation has represented the basic right to history as a public interest for decades, yet without sufficient interested parties.

Depending on the viewer's standpoint the conservationist has accordingly been seen as a courageous voice in the wilderness of blind innovation, or as a tearful squaller on the outside of a society that is storming forwards. Lacking an echo, the monuments conservator nevertheless did not lack a basis even then. He did not allow this basis -- the knowledge of the necessity of history for the present and future -- to be taken from him, even by a plebiscitary superior power.

In the past few years this image has in part changed radically, and conservation is increasingly being embraced by a public that is imposing in numbers.

This too is not the result of a change in the conservationist's thinking, but is apparently due to the fatal mechanism whereby a thing is not valuable until one has to do without it -- much like peace when one is at war. In our case, it is surely not necessary to present those circumstances that have again given rise to such strongly expressed feelings for the necessity of visible history.

Just as monuments conservation did not let the public interest that it represents be called into question by an uninterested public, so too is it obliged today to justify that interest from not just one direction alone. In the appeals of recent years, the talk is mainly of the aspects of urban planning, social and aesthetic alike, that demand the maintenance of important areas of the historic environment. This clear emphasis on the part of advocates is necessary and legitimate; and it remains legitimate even next to the special motivation that accentuates certain object areas, areas which seem most likely to offer an effective antidote to our discomfort with the way we treat our environment and the results of that.

This accentuated demand on the part of a public that has become demanding is something that conservation must face, and it has faced it, for example in those cases where public pleas for the preservation of objects held to be uninteresting were heeded. As an example from my own area, I can point to the southern part of the city of Bonn.

Not by contrast, but in addition, the monuments conservator may well determine that in these appeals of recent years, the basic need for history that I have identified has only been articulated with a few amongst many possible motives, and only for specific areas of our historic environment. For this reason the conservationist might see himself not only as the representative of a spatially and temporally defined public, but also as an advocate for objects that at present have no lobby. For as circumstances change, it is indeed not always the same objects that the public lays claim to. Thus workers' housing estates have finally found their backers, but not so the much-maligned cultural landscapes of our old villages or our individual farmsteads, or at least not to the same degree. Urban streetscapes have their lobby, but to date our city skylines do not; was not Cologne's skyline a first-class monument and medium of identity?

Conservation must also be aware of the different ideational and also ideological systems of thought in which the need for visible history can be expressed, and which are not irrelevant simply because we are not discussing them at present.

Apart from a certain north-south divide in this area, the Federal Republic is a clear outsider in Europe when it comes to the identity-building national role of built heritage. The clear avoidance of the term "homeland" (Heimat) is something that anyone can see, irrespective of his own particular values; but the absence of Heimat's claims to the visible witnesses of history is by no means

self-evident. The fact that at present, the major Christian confessions broadly forego an understanding of built heritage as identity, is also something I see as a sign of the times – but what enormous consequences it has for our stock of historic buildings!

Monuments conservation therefore, as a representative of the basic right to history and as the chronicler of this public interest through history, must always remain conscious of its knowledge of the relativity of current forms of the public's interest in certain areas of monuments. Like an arbitrator, it must attempt also to maintain and keep available the things that no-one wants to have at present. Its activity becomes doubly extensive: it must respond to the public when it experiences historicity in objects which conservation does not hold to be significant, and it must deny the public when it demands the removal of unwanted things or casts its vote just as clearly through a lack of interest.

One of the greatest dangers of current monument conservation lies in the area discussed here: namely, the danger of limiting its general mission to that which is currently in demand. Conservation is in demand today more than ever before, but its mission has not become easier if it sees itself as more than merely opportunistic, as more than taking advantage of favourable circumstances. This temptation lies not only in leaving aside unmodern groups of monuments. It also lies in unreflected collaboration in seizing on the areas that are in present demand, using the methods that are common today.

Is it not grotesque that monuments conservation, which has allegedly only just discarded the disrepute of the alleged aesthete, is expected to assist in the radical optical "improvement" of well-preserved ensembles or even to applaud such measures? I refer to Hamburg Pöseldorf as an example.

Or take for example such an old and obvious law of conservation work as the necessity of finding a reasonable use for every listed building. This law, which intends the creation of compatibility between old substance and new use, is usually applied such that almost everything, except a few exterior surfaces of the building or the entire group of buildings, is sacrificed to the use: the inner furnishings, the inner structure, the environment, indeed even the location. It is as though the fact that the exterior shell is seen by more people were the criterion for determining that its conservation represents the highest or even the only public interest; it is as though the altar of the van Eyck Brothers in Ghent were less worthy of preservation than Manneken Pis in Brussels!

Thus we ourselves must have the courage to be unwelcome representatives of the public interest, especially with regard to the most popular areas and methods, such as restoration. What must be said about currently unwanted monuments is that conservation will not cease to demand their maintenance from a public that will lay claim to them tomorrow. Every type of support can only improve the chances of these objects.

Our appeal to maintain the buildings of the Bauhaus period for example, and those of its stylistic antitheses from the same period, has as yet remained almost without an echo, and I do not consider it a necessary act of coming to terms with the past when problems regarding the maintenance of buildings from the Third Reich are hushed up. There is more to be learned from built witnesses than from gaps between buildings.

As mentioned, the use of monuments – from their intellectual appropriation to their practical usage – is determined by diverse forms of public interest, which are based on the fact that they will always somehow be required as historical orientation.

It would mean seeing the mission of conservation falsely if one were to expect from it, over and above the provision of historical material, also decisive suggestions for the concrete use of those materials. Thus it is not first and foremost the basic concerns of conservation that are touched on when reference is made to the socio-political values of cheap old apartments with their intact social structure, but rather the indubitable public interest in living conditions or an environment that are fit for human beings.

I also believe it is wrong to deploy listed buildings as aesthetic stopgaps and conservation as watchdogs of tastefulness in the face of the formal inadequacy of contemporary architecture. Although it is gratifying when recognition of the aesthetic qualities of monuments contributes to their conservation, one cannot make their preservation conditional upon the potential beauty of a replacement building: conservation is not a beauty contest with modern architecture.

I am not differentiating here in order to separate, but rather to convey the impression, gathered

from many practical cases, that a polyphonic concert of public interests, social, cultural, medical, aesthetic, and certainly many more, wrongly attempts to make itself heard in the urban planning sector using conservation as a mouthpiece. On topics ranging from the psychological value of housing to the downright therapeutic effects of a functioning social structure for example, there should be more competent voices than those of conservationists. In turn we are very much aware that the almost hectic demands of these years, coming from other disciplines that are certainly sympathetic to us, is dispossessing us of tasks that are urgent, and that the public expects of us if it wants to understand and use properly the supply of historic material that we are protecting and holding ready for it. Hence I expect for example a critical discussion from the public about the form, content and frequency of publication of our current inventories of monuments, similar to the discussion which has fortunately gotten underway in connection with another basis for the art of building a city, namely the social plan.

Only such a discussion could also effectively come to grips with the problems of selection.

The majority opinion of career monuments conservators on the determination of what is worthy of preservation is characterised by the conviction that the field of possible monuments, which in theory includes every human artefact, is infinitely large.

In view of the multiple ways in which the public can register its interest in history in general and in architectural monuments in particular, two State Conservationists – Hartwig Beseler from Schleswig Holstein and Dietrich Ellger from Westfalen-Lippe – recently drew the consequence from this for the problem of selection when they described total monument protection as the most extreme possibility. Without being able to dispute the logic of Beseler's assertion that "When everything is protected, everything is simultaneously unprotected", I believe that Ellger's model is the correct utopian consequence of our public mission (I quote from *Deutsche Kunst u. Denkmalpflege* 1974, H. 2, p. 124): "Someday soon, the entirety of what remains of older architecture might become valuable to us, and the conservationist might be summoned to act as Advocate General for all buildings and built fabrics, indeed ultimately for all things that are still to be found at their historical site; he might be called on to expand his previous judgement to one that decides the value of all things, and to develop his office into a mammoth, cross-disciplinary authority for preservation".

Exactly this possibility, even if it be a utopia, is my basic reservation when it comes to every form of selection, which theoretically labels and practically eradicates things as rejects, as superfluous, as uninteresting, or worse yet, as annoying.

The epistemological consideration according to which every complete description of what is considered worthy of preservation today, no matter how broad and comprehensive it may attempt to be, represents a selection from among all that is potentially significant – this consideration identifies the most important and generally unavoidable mechanism of selection. Always seen in retrospect, so many things unintentionally fall victim to this mechanism that all other methods of selecting from among all the things that are consciously perceived as significant must be called into question. Everyone who has a knowledge advantage is obliged to be a pioneer of general consciousness – not only the monuments conservator, and not only every historical discipline, although this would already mean much in terms of practice.

I can only name a few of the modes of selection to which I deny the right to exist. One of the most questionable is the categorisation into value levels, an abdication which forecloses consideration of the actual degree of endangerment and has devastating consequences; as a method it is also discredited by the fact that it is so beloved by the more jovial among the enemies of old substance.

Another old misunderstanding to which conservation is constantly exposed is the demand it should maintain only significant representatives of each type. Thus for example a prominent art historian suggested to me that only some Catholic buildings of the Neo-Gothic on the Lower Rhine or even only one well-preserved Rundling in Lower Saxony need be preserved. If the accusation of "museality" were ever justifiable, then it is here against this mentality of butterfly collectors.

A further misunderstanding through selection is the generally accepted reversal of the correct statement "A function for every preservation-worthy monument" into "Every monument without a function is unworthy of preservation".

First of all, it is generally accepted practice to endanger an object precisely by refusing every use of it, such that those who endanger and those who deny use are often identical; second,

well-meaning seekers of a compatible use are often not even accorded a decent interval in which to find it; and third, the moment has come to remember that the function of certain objects can lie in their mere existence, as is the case with monuments in the sense of public statues, and this value fully justifies their preservation.

Selection as rejected here is not identical with the often unavoidable decimation of historic fabric in the daily weighing of competing concerns. Admittedly, for decades there could be no question of a just weighing of competing concerns, since weighing became voting against conservation-worthy objects. This has started to change. Nevertheless, it is obvious that it can come to losses of protected substance when concerns compete. However, the notion that this weighing procedure in conservation is a kind of luxurious concern of the educated middle-class, is now likely to remain a thing of the past.

And whereas in the past, in connection with Paragraph 1 of the Federal Planning Law, cultural interests could be set against social needs and the health and security of citizens in a polarization that was hopeless for conservation, now this has changed fundamentally, fortunately for our environment and for us. As in many areas, for example in the school system, cultural and social concerns are becoming interwoven in conservation to the point of being inextricable, and the public's aspiration encompasses unforeseen qualities of unimagined objects.

In this case every monuments list must bear the date of its assembly and indeed the preamble: "The rest too can become important".

## NOTES

\* Lecture at the 5th Art Congress 1975 in Göttingen, entitled "The Art of Building a City III – The Historicity of the Individual and the City".

I have agreed to reprint these considerations, which I originally presented orally, in the hope of participating in the current discussion regarding categorisation and the quantitative limitation of monuments, and in approving acknowledgement of August Gebeßler's essay in this volume (cf. p. 113).

*G.M., Zurich, September 1980*