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## **AUTHENTIC / INAUTHENTIC. On the Meaning of Monuments Conservation in Times of Artificiality**

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The past has probably never been as present as at the beginning of the 21st century. There have never been more museums, more historical books, more films and more television productions concerned with history. Apparently the faster the world turns, the more rapidly it changes; and the greater is many people's need for support, for what is reliable and genuine. The more pressure the future puts on us, the greater our yearning for the past becomes. Thus no one can be surprised that the built witnesses of our history also arouse great fascination, that hundreds of thousands go on viewing tours on Monuments Day. Conservation profits from this mania for history, in which a mania for progress discharges itself. And if one were to create a picture of how the public perceives our monuments, then it would probably be a dreadfully tacky oil painting in light, bright colours, vigorously bordered by a proud frame, possibly gold-plated.

By contrast the image painted by conservationists would look different: probably a slightly yellowed woodcut, torn at the edges here and there, since it would not be granted a solid frame. Little of the lustre of monuments is reflected back on their protectors; they are not the celebrated heroes of this era of history mania, but at best the tragic ones. Many people consider them to be stubborn control freaks, pen-pushers and know-it-alls, even rag-pickers as was heard last summer, and naturally also as enemies of progress, stonewallers of investment. And naturally they are also obstructionists, since that is precisely what conserving means: halting, standing still and braking. These custodians of memory ought really to be loved for doing this. But they are not loved. Why? How can this diptych be explained? Why the double image of conservation and conservationist? Three reasons are given here.

First, it is the task of the protector to protect, thus to make himself unpopular, to stand defensively in front of the threatened heritage and thwart all aggressors. Add to this the fact that more than a few people now consider it good form to disparage all employees of the state, be they teachers, professors or social workers, and to consider them overpaid and in reality dispensable.

With monuments conservation, and now I am already at point 2, this situation is aggravated by the fact that they attempt to establish an obligation which is more and more rare in society. They want to define a canon by which our history's worth and worthlessness are judged. Since lifestyles are ever more pluralistic, and particularisation is becoming more and more powerful, this effort must necessarily lead to misunderstandings and mistrust. Both the conservationist's society-spanning claim to the authority to set definitions, as well as his ultimately moralistic appeals to preserve, must have an alienating effect at a time when not much store is set by morals and not much is thought of conventions. All public institutions lose influence: sports clubs, political parties, the Church, even *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit* and *Tagesschau*. The institution of monuments conservation, however, insists on interpretational authority and on obligation. In order to justify the preservation of a building, it claims general public interest, where others have long since lost the courage to utter these words. This is also why there are distortions in the image of the conservationist – for what is the public sphere today, who is the general public?

Finally point three: I suspect that interests and needs of professionals and lay

people in conservation differ fundamentally, and that this is the reason for the distortions described here. What is common to both groups is the search for the real, for the essential and authentic; both hope to encounter it as directly as possible in the historic monument. The conservation professional considers the original in all its complexity to be indispensable for such an encounter. The layperson by contrast not at all. He is less interested in the object than in its appearance, less in its substance than in the image of that substance. To put it differently and more generally: For him the impression is enough, he relies on the atmosphere, the semblance, on his feeling for moods. And for the creation of this mood, into which he would like the monument to transport him, the original is sufficient but not mandatory. It can just as easily be the replica, the reconstruction, or of late also: the iteration.

Anyone who observes tourists going off on excursions into history with their video cameras in their hands, their eyes fixed on the viewfinder; anyone who studies the assortment of goods in many museum shops and realises that replicas of Egyptian sculptures and imitations of Inca jewellery are on offer and are gladly bought there; or anyone who notices how uninhibited and insatiable the yearning to return to the old is, in Dresden for example, where some would like to see the entire inner city raised from the dead, never mind at what price, never mind with what quality – anyone who sees all this, realizes: The difference between authentic and inauthentic, between fact and fiction can no longer be especially important. Every day people experience what the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous really means: in advertising, fashion, pop, design, they are presented with the continuous availability of all forms and styles. Even the 80s, of the 20th century mind you, have already been recycled. It has long since ceased to be possible to distinguish what is actually retro and what is futuristic, to say nothing of the present. Everything can be copied and nothing seems reprehensible about it. Even the reproducibility of human beings, or at least parts of people, is being considered – and not a few find it appropriate.

It is therefore not surprising that in architecture too, the difference between the true and the falsified hardly counts anymore. The penchant for neo-historicism is becoming increasingly noticeable; ever more architects, whether on Oranienburger Straße in Berlin or in Hamburg-Blankenese, have no problem anymore with drawing adoringly on the 19th century. Why should the things that were permitted to our fore-fathers not be possible today? Why should we not also build with bay windows, tympana, dormers and aedicules today – such are the questions of these neo-historicists, who by the way have already formed into a broad movement in England and the USA.

Many conservationists will presumably view this tremendous wave of artificiality serenely. Let it come and roll over us, they will probably say. First of all, contemporary architecture should have to cope with neo-historicists. And second, the monuments conservation is in possession of the original, the authentic, and therefore the real, and that will survive all retro impulses. Then again, is this not a dangerous equanimity? It is permissible to make things so easy on oneself? Is conservation not substantially affected by this new arbitrariness of general historical consciousness? After all, it does not operate outside of society. The new old buildings do indeed compete with the authentic old ones, since only a few people can differentiate between the authentic and the inauthentic. And sooner or later the question will arise of why we must preserve the old at the cost of so much effort and money if it can be built from scratch so much more practically and inexpensively. A good example of this is the Hotel Adlon on Pariser Platz in Berlin: Most passers-by and tourists consider it to be an old building; the artificial patina of its roofs is believed to be natural aging. And at least since Roman Herzog gave his famous "jolt" speech here, this hotel has been considered an authentic, intrinsically significant place. One should almost get it listed...

It cannot be denied: rebuilding, reconstruction, neo-historicism of every kind must be

the enemy of all meaningful monument conservation, because they suggest the full availability of everything that was. But it is precisely the unavailable, the unique and non-repeatable that constitutes the greatest capital of monument conservationists. They must resist and oppose the mania for doability that grips our society, a society that is not only building a better future, but also a better past, a society that wants history, but if you please without the pain of memory; they must insist on veracity, must adhere to the authentic.

However, in these struggles for the authentic, for the original, conservation does not have it easy. For it has to admit: this original does not actually exist. Conservation collaborates on an artificial product: this is how it was formulated with commendable candour in an exposé for this conference. It is not an objective science, not one which sits in the archive and turns folios with white gloves but never actually touches reality. Monument conservationists touch reality, indeed they change it; they cannot remove their wards, the monuments, from the stream time, but are obliged to participate in shaping the changes to them, or at least to take responsibility for them. They make themselves guilty, if not of being falsifiers, then at least of falsifying the authentic. For they must always follow their own guiding principles in their work, their own preferences, their own projections, their own wishes regarding the past. They themselves are bound to time, they are condemned to make mistakes – they are not granted objectivity.

Wherein then lies the difference between the conservation professional and the lay conservationist, between the advocates of originals and the supporters of reconstruction? If the original does not exist, but only an artificial product, and when both parties only want to see their own central concepts materialized in monuments, how can a clear distinction be drawn between a reconstruction, a new neo-historicist design and for example a preserved building furnished with a new use? Are the differences still qualitative or only quantitative? Can a conceptual difference still be defined? Or do the lay person and the conservation professional only differ in that the one formulates his own desired view of history very drastically and openly, and the other at least makes an effort at critical appropriation?

Monuments conservation thus finds itself in quite a dilemma, one that only gets bigger the more the field is open to self-reflection and the more deeply it examines its historical practice. With what can it oppose copyists, the proponents of inauthentic authenticity, if it cannot claim objective historic truth itself? How can it defend its image of history against the many seductive images of desire put forward by others? How can it defend itself against charges of relic-worship and the idolization of damage and decay, only because it does not want to reconcile itself with duplication and freely-conceived repairs? If it cannot itself distinguish clearly between authentic and inauthentic, because history is much too complicated and contradictory – how can it answer those who accuse it of fetishizing the original?

An answer is difficult, and everyone must presumably formulate it for themselves. Perhaps it is even true and the original actually is a fetish. For we do not preserve the built souvenirs of our history because we have to. Because we could not live without them. Because our spiritual, even our material existence is threatened without monuments. Rather, we preserve them because – in spite of all social upheaval and individualisation - we have agreed that history means something to us.

A copy can serve as well as a supposed original as a bearer of historical information, certainly as the vehicle of an impression, of a supposedly historic atmosphere. Both may even be considered authentic, since authenticity arises in the eyes of the viewer, just as does a work of art, and the eyes are easy to fool. However, the idea of the original remains irreplaceable. For only it has managed to defy impermanence, has survived the times; only it can I trust to tell me about more than only the present. This trust is not rationally justifiable in the end, it issues rather from belief – belief in the encounter with an elusive

piece of history.

What remains to monuments conservation is to appeal repeatedly for thinking in the subjunctive. And to warn against understanding history only as the eager compensation of a cataclysmic present, only as the cosy decoration of our meagre times, only as a feel-good backdrop. Conservation must continue to remind us that if nothing is ever irrevocably lost, then everything has already existed, the future has already ended.

By contrast, thinking in the subjunctive means understanding the monument as an opportunity to comprehend that the world was once very different, that it could have become quite different, and that in future it can also become quite different. To see the past as something that is not at our disposal, that does not confirm us in our being, but rather enriches us, allows us to go and to see beyond ourselves. However, it cannot remain beyond our disposal if it is primarily only a part of a self-created present.

How to react to the conservationist's notion of the woodcut? What to do with conservation's own public image? How to deal with doubts? I believe that the only way is bring these doubts into the open. To discuss openly that a monument – original or not – is only valuable if one allows it to retain the traces left behind on it, if one follows the traces it leaves behind and is not ashamed of one's own traces. To discuss openly the fact that while origins can promise meaning, which so many seek in them, this meaning is never based on something reliable. Rather, it can only develop in the diversity of the possible, in a discussion of the many meanings that are conceivable. Precisely because conservation can never be an entirely objective science and the monument can never be a self-contained object in a museum – precisely for this reason is conservation so valuable. Because it does not promise ready-to-go answers, does not have definitive answers available, but invites constant questioning. It invites questions – and of this I am quite genuinely and authentically convinced – that a reconstruction can never trigger with the same urgency.

The conservationist's task is thus to preserve this openness of the monument above all. That a monument never evokes just one image, but always many images, this is what the conservationist must ensure and advocate. And if his own image turns out to be small and modest, so be it.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of the 21st century the past is omnipresent, and although the yearning for it is great, the public paints very different pictures of the monument and the conservationist. The article asks uncomfortable questions: Why are monuments loved, whereas conservationists are abused as rag-pickers, know-it-alls, enemies of progress, etc.? How does conservation stake its claim to the authority to interpret and oblige, its claim to the notion of public interest? Are there differences of interest between conservation professionals and conservation lay-people, and how can they be explained? Is there a moral or philosophical authority that could forbid what was permitted to our forefathers, namely recourse to historical architectural styles? The original: does it exist? That conservation is facing a dilemma is generally acknowledged, at the latest since Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm's report for the parliamentary group Alliance 90/The Greens in March of last year. Only one way seems to lead out of it: self-reflection within the discipline, disclosure of our own doubts, and above all a stronger emphasis on what monuments conservation is capable of achieving. As a science that is not entirely objective, it can open up a plurality of possibilities and many conceivable meanings, it can pose questions and not deliver definitive answers, it can invite people to ponder and contemplate.

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Born in Celle in 1967, the author is editor of the culture section of DIE ZEIT and writes above all on topics pertaining to architecture, urban planning and contemporary art. He has a doctorate in art history, is a graduate of the Henri Nannen School of Journalism and worked for the SPIEGEL publishing house before his engagement at DIE ZEIT. Honours: German Federal Chamber of Architects' Critics Prize, 2001. German Prize for Conservation and Preservation, 2001.