

ARCHITECTURE RELATED TO THE EXISTING CITY

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abstract

The distinguishing character of the historical centres of our cities does not depend on their big and famous monuments, but on the common residential building tissue. An urban landmark may be destroyed but the character of the city still remains, as it happened with the Twin Towers in New York. On the other side, the disappearance or transformation of all the framework of constructions with the isolated conservation of the monuments of one city may completely disrupt its distinguishing character.

This concept of the city leads in our architectural studio to a twofold approach: in the first place, it claims the conservation and restoration of its architecture for the sake of the preservation of that distinguishing character, and, secondly, proposes new projects that can be inserted in the existing planning of the historical centre, reinterpreting thus its character in contemporary architecture.

In the restoration of the residential or monumental architecture, we search not only for a spatial or geometric conservation of the building, but the preservation of its structural function, its constructive substance and the character that confers their finish surfaces. In the new architecture we design within the context of the historical city, we re-elaborate the context as a strategy to silently integrate our new architecture in the existing character of the historical centre.

key words:

Architectural restoration, historical centre, urban context, architectural character, monuments, vernacular.

izvleček

Razpoznavni značaj zgodovinskih središč naših mest ni odvisen od velikosti ali pomembnosti spomenikov, temveč navadnih stanovanjskih mestnih tkiv. Mestno dominantno lahko uničijo, vendar se značaj mesta vseeno ohrani, tako kot se je zgodilo z newyorškimi dvojčki. Po drugi strani lahko izginotje ali spreminjanje strukturnega okvirja mesta z izoliranimi prenovitvenimi posegi na mestnih spomenikih povsem raztrga njegov razpoznavni značaj.

V našem arhitekturnem studiu takšen koncept vodi k dvojnemu pristopu: prvič, zagovarjanju konzerviranja in prenove arhitekture zaradi ohranjanja razpoznavnega značaja mesta, in drugič, predlaganju novih projektov, ki se jih načrtuje z umeščanjem v zdajšnja zgodovinska središča, tako da jim s sodobno arhitekturo nanovo opredeli značaj.

Pri prenovah stanovanjske ali spomeniške arhitekture ne zasledujemo le cilje prostorske ali geometrijske prenove, temveč ohranitve strukturnih funkcij, nosilne substance in značaja, ki ga izražajo dokončane površine. Novo arhitekture oblikujemo iz konteksta zgodovinskega mesta, kjer kontekst opredeljujemo kot strategijo, tako da neopazno vključujemo našo novo arhitekturo v zdajšnji značaj zgodovinskega središča.

ključne besede

Prenova arhitekture, zgodovinsko središče, urbani kontekst, arhitekturni značaj, spomenik, vernakularno.

Foreword

The increasing awareness of the conservation of architectural heritage has arisen many questions about how to treat our historical centres in order to guarantee its preservation and survival. First, it would be convenient to ask where does the real value of a historical centre lay. Maybe in the streets layout, in the plots' structure, in its urban voids, in its compactness, in the typology of its buildings, in the ways they gather, in its facades' composition, in its materiality, in its colour, in its finishes or in constructive details? All these parameters help in the configuration of its value and determine what we like to call the character of a historical centre.

But a further deepening would come to the question if this character depends more on the outstanding monuments of the city or rather on the common residential building tissue. In order to answer this question, a twofold absurd hypothesis could be proposed: what would it happen if we would demolish all the common residential buildings of a city and leave only the outstanding monuments or, on the other hand, what would it happen if we would demolish all the outstanding monuments and only the common residential buildings.

In a first option, once it has been decided for the restoration of a monument or a common residential building, further questions still arise: how should it be restored? Often, the restoration works take away from the buildings their mystery, their aura, their patina, their real age and give them a papier-mâché aspect. The historical centres thus restored become a sort of fairground of our own history, a tourist show for the visitors of the city. But, are there alternatives to this fate? If so, what are they?

In a second option, once it has been decided for the construction of a new building in the historical centre in order to fill up an existing empty plot caused by various circumstances, another question arises: how should this new building be designed in this consolidated context? How should we create harmony between our new project and the existing built tissue without denying originality and contemporariness to our contribution?

We try to throw some light on all these questions through the following written thoughts that constitute the basis of our professional work where our projects and works are founded. They are some restoration works and new buildings in consolidated historical contexts that, being apparently very different from each other, nevertheless belong to the same look and attitude towards the built tissue of the historical centre.

The character of the historical centre

As said, each city has a certain character achieved by the anonymous historical constructions rather than by its singular monuments. In fact, the architecture of each region or each city has a specific language that goes beyond styles, times and fashions, and is translated into an atmosphere or distinguishing character that allows us to identify the cities in the ambience of its streets - Paris, Barcelona, London or New York -, without having to visit its more singular monuments - Eiffel Tower, Sagrada Familia, Big Ben or the Empire State Building.

For the conservation of that distinguishing character of the cities



Figure 1: The Alhambra of Granada is a monumental set of extraordinary beauty and suggestion. Its fabrics have stratified throughout the centuries and at the moment keep the memory of their rich history. Our work in this ensemble have tried to deepen in the knowledge of this monument and try to safeguard its present state.

Slika 1: Alhambra v Granadi je spomeniški zbor izjemne lepote in pomenov. Plasti njenega tkiva so se nabirale skozi stoletja in ohranjajo spomin na njeno bogato zgodovino. V tem prostoru se je naše delo usmerilo v poglobitev znanja o spomeniku in ohranitev zdajšnjega stanja.

it would be more important the preservation of this anonymous framework of constructions than the survival of one of these monuments. For example, the substance of Paris lies more in the anonymous homogenous architecture of its Haussman boulevards than in its great cathedrals or urban landmarks. The spirit of Barcelona hides in the rent buildings of its gothic district or in the apparent monotony of its end of the Century urban expansion area, rather than in Gaudí's magnificent residences or churches. The soul of London can be seen more in the succession of houses and reddish brick residences that in the Houses of the Parliament or the Millenium Dome.

If the higher relevance of this framework of constructions characteristic of these cities over its monuments of reference is not admitted, at least, a mutual interdependence should be accepted. The disappearance of one of those monuments does not affect the atmosphere of the city, whereas the disappearance or transformation of all the framework of constructions with the isolated conservation of its monuments completely disrupts this distinguishing character. Let us see some examples.

The essence of New York still lies more in the uniformity of the districts of apartments in Manhattan from the second half of the 19th Century than in the survival of the architectonic landmark that –until recently– was its monumental point of reference: the Twin Towers. The disappearance of the Empire State Building or the Chrysler Building would constitute a true disaster, but they would not affect the essence of this city at all.



Figure 2: The intervention recently carried out in the bridge of Pobleta de San Miguel in Villafranca del Cid (Castellón) was aimed at the restoration of the medieval monument and the recovery and valuation of its surroundings.

Slika 2: Cilji nedavnega posega na mostu Pobleta de San Miguel in Villafranca del Cid (Castellón) so bili prenova srednjeveškega spomenika in odkrivanje ter ovrednotenje neposredne okolice.

The transformation of the character

The intervention carried out by baron Haussmann in Paris in the 19th Century entailed the destruction of the medieval city with the conservation of its more significant churches that were planned as fixed urban landmarks within the new planning. The place-name of Paris did not disappear with this action, neither its monuments, but its distinguishing character disappeared completely, leading to a new city with a new fully diverse atmosphere. In 20th Century Albania, the communist demolition of the historical centre of Tirana and consequently the rebuilding of the whole city, only conserving one ancient mosque in the centre of the capital, transformed completely the original character of this settlement.

They are two cases of legal and planned demolition of the city, with different fortune and two aspects in common: the inevitable risk of failure of this type of massive performances and the irreparable loss of character, atmosphere, culture and material history of the previous city. Nevertheless, this type of extreme interventions is not strictly necessary to threaten the atmosphere of a historical centre. The slackness in the protection and conservation of the anonymous residential framework of a historical centre may also lead indolently to similar transformations within a few years [Vegas&Mileto, 2006].

The contemporary city has a space of action in the urban periphery of these examples, in the form of new landmarks, singular monuments and buildings and, mainly, new urban residential districts that aspire legitimately to the creation of their



Figure 3: The restoration of the wood ceiling of the Parochial Church of Pobla de Benifassá in Castellón has been based on a kind study of its built history. This detailed study has allowed, in addition to the recovery of polychrome tables from the end of the 13th century, the conservation of the character of the ceiling itself through the respect of its original constructive elements, the historical traces of the wood carving and the history of its transformations.

Slika 3: Prenovo lesenega stropa župnijske cerkve Pobla de Benifassá v Castellónu smo izvedli na osnovi študije zgodovine njene graditve. Ta podrobna študija je omogočila obnovo večbarvnih tabel iz konca 13. stoletja, hkrati pa prenovo značaja samega stropa, ob spoštovanju izvornih konstrukcijskih elementov, zgodovinskih sledi na rezbarijah in kronologije sprememb.

own distinguishing character. Thus, the end-of-the-19th-Century urban expansion area of Barcelona mentioned above made its contribution to the character of the city through the contemporary architecture of its time, halfway between Eclecticism and Art Nouveau [Permanyer, 1992]. The new districts of the city of Prague at the beginning of the 20th century contributed to enrich the medieval nucleus and the baroque city with the new atmosphere of the Secese architecture [Quattrocchi, 1990] that also demonstrated its acknowledgement with the character of the pre-existing city.

Therefore, we could analyze one after the other hundreds of cities worldwide, based on the conservation or transformation of their original character and its successive enrichment with the contribution of the atmosphere of the new districts of growth and expansion, for the conformation of what we could call the city's own identity. Nowadays, characterized by the progressive eradication of the tradition for the sake of an increasing globalization, a great deal of cultural tourism moves indeed searching for those urban or rural landmarks of the world where that own identity is conserved with greater purity, the character conferred by the homogenous architecture of a time.

Our approach in the historical centre

This concept of the city built leads in our case to a twofold approach: in the first place, it claims the conservation and restoration of its architecture for the sake of the preservation of that distinguishing character [Mileto&Vegas 2006], and, secondly, proposes new projects that can be inserted in the existing planning of the historical centre, reinterpreting thus its character in contemporary architecture.

Our architecture studio works fundamentally on these two lines: the restoration of anonymous residential and monumental architecture, and the accomplishment of new projects within built historical contexts. Both types of actions are part of the

same way to conceive the historical city and aim at consolidating the existing urban atmosphere or bridge its gaps through new buildings that can be integrated in harmony with the existing character without need to imitate languages from the past which disturb the historical setting in spite of its contemporary character.

The restoration of the residential architecture

In the restoration of the existing architecture, we search not only for a spatial or geometric conservation of the building, but the preservation of its structural function, its constructive substance and the character that confers their finish surfaces. We considered that, whenever possible, the building should keep its original structure that will be object of reinforcement or consolidation if the new function or applicable regulation requires, rather than being replaced. The constructive substance of the building is the testimony of the material culture of the city's past that represents an important part of its heritage as significant as the monument or singular building.

In addition, the character of a building itself that is expressed predominantly in the finish of its external and internal surfaces, treatments of facades, plasterings, pavements, etc., is completely distorted without a careful attention to preserve materially the singularity of its constructive solutions and the possible aging effects.

Victor Hugo compared the residential anonymous buildings of Paris with unique books that hoarded all the wisdom and memory of the past, and the city with a library with their bookcases filled with these books [Dezzi Bardeschi, 2002: 11]. The demolition of a building is equivalent to throwing one of these unique books to the bonfire with the consequent complete and irrevocable disappearance of all its contents. Each building constitutes a constructed book, a material document, loaded with an important historical memory: the memory of its own



Figure 4: The intervention of structural consolidation of the bell tower of Vistabella del Maestrazgo (Castellón) has been performed searching for the highest compatibility possible between the necessary structural reinforcing elements and the maximum respect of the existing stoneworks, from the point of view of the structural behavior, as well as from its expressive capacity bound to its history.

Slika 4: Poseg konstrukcijske ojačitve zvonika Vistabella del Maestrazgo (Castellón) je bil opravljen ob iskanju kar največje skladnosti med nujnimi konstrukcijskimi elementi ojačitve in spoštovanjem kamnoseškega dela, pa tudi iz vidika obnašanja konstrukcije, in z željo po ohranitvi skozi zgodovino dosežene izrazne moči.

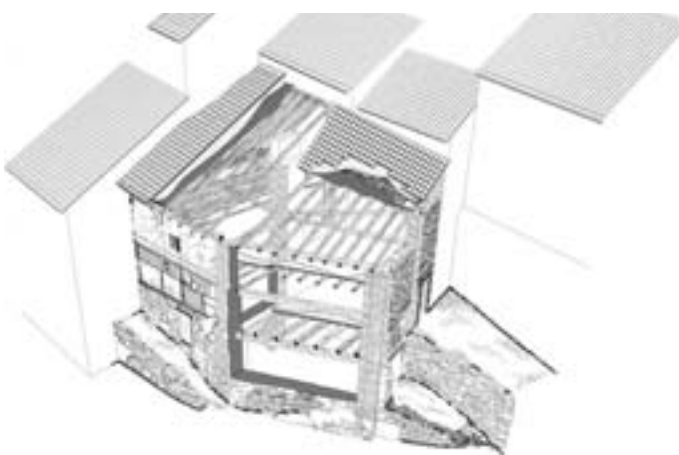


Figure 5: For the last 11 years, architects Camilla Mileto and Fernando Vegas, have developed a study of the vernacular architecture of Rincón de Ademuz (Valencia), including topics from the traditional construction to the cultural landscape, and the study of the pre-industrial buildings (mills, furnaces, presses, etc), the study of the traditional housing and the impact of the recent performances in these traditional buildings. Within this process of study it has been carried out a pilot project of restoration of a traditional house in the village of Sesga, initiative that has been awarded with 1st European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage (Europa Nostra 2004)

Slika 5: V zadnjih enajstih letih sta v Rincón de Ademuzu (Valencia) arhitekta Camilla Mileto in Fernando Vegas razvila študij vernakularne arhitekture, ki vsebuje teme od tradicionalne graditve, kulturne krajine, predindustrijskih zgradb (mlini, plavži, stiskalnice idr.) in tradicionalne stanovanjske gradnje, do učinkov novejših sprememb na te tradicionalne stavbe. V okviru tega dela so izvedli pilotni projekt prenove tradicionalne hiše v vasi Sesga. Tej pobudi je bila dodeljena prva nagrada Evropske Unije za kulturno dediščino (Europa Nostra 2004)

vicissitudes throughout time, from its construction to the later transformations, but also the memory of the cultures that have built and modified it. This constructed historical document can be known through a series of methods that allow to penetrate in its mysteries, among others the stratigraphic analysis of architecture [Doglioni, 1997].

The thorough and careful study of the material situation of the building, through the stratigraphic analysis of architecture, is a fundamental stage towards its deep knowledge. The observation of the materials, constructive techniques, processes of construction and elaboration, etc. entail a progressive understanding of the stonework that does not constitute only the basis for the knowledge of its constructive phases but an awareness-raising process that observers undergo themselves [Mileto&Vegas, 2004]. The attention paid to all the parts and elements of the building, even the smallest and apparently most insignificant ones, triggers in observers and designers an increasing aspiration to conserve the material elements that allows the knowledge of the building: materials, textures, colors, construction techniques, etc.

The conservation of this materiality of the building allows the conservation of the constructed document on one hand, but at the same time the conservation of its character and the possibility that still maintains its expressive force as old and full of memory building. It is not necessary to know how to read in detail the stratification of the building in order to breathe and perceive the load of its history: its vital experience transmits through the complexity of its spaces the fragmentation of its surfaces and elements and the aging of its materials [Mileto, 2006: 30]. These characteristics allow that the building is perceived as old and authentic.

Nevertheless, the commitment to the conservation of the building as document of material history and as witness of the memory does not mean to freeze the building but to keep it with its characteristics compatible with the needs of a modern and functional use. Thus, our restoration actions aim at the updating of the function of the building according to contemporary standards of habitability and comfort without resigning to its character nor to its condition of individual and collective memory of the past.

The new architecture within the context of the historical city

In the case of planning new constructions in a consolidated urban context, it is mainly interesting the interpretation the architectonic tradition of this context. But, what do we mean by interpretation in this case?

The new project in a space of the historical centre can assume in essence three differentiated approaches: autonomy, mimesis or integration. In our opinion, the complete and deliberate autonomy of a building with respect to its historical surroundings not only impoverishes voluntarily the starting points of the project but it makes its absorption within the set difficult. Mimesis as planning



option, so common in Spain in the linguistic imitation of moldings and cornices or in the conservation of the historical facade as curtain of the new building, betrays our Zeitgeist and aborts any possibility of progression of architecture towards the future.

On the other hand, integration as a planning option offers a wide range of possible options for the contemporary architecture that may choose a conceptual re-elaboration, a typological re-elaboration or formal re-elaboration of the historical pre-existence. The adoption of some or all of these planning strategies can even help the creation of a contemporary architecture project in historical settings that are at the same time easy to assimilate by the built context.

The conceptual re-elaboration [Guccione&Vittorini, 2005] starts from a reflection on the forms of life of the past and present in the historical centre and the possible compatibility of these with the design of contemporary housing. The typological re-elaboration [Muratori, 1960] can manipulate the configuration of the urban residential groupings for the creation of renewed projects of current architecture. The formal re-elaboration, [Marconi, 1999] allows to abstract the linguistic and expressive structure of volumes and facades of the historical centre to transform it into proposals for a new architecture in consolidated settings.



Figure 6: The Maldonado building in Valencia represents an attempt towards the integration of contemporary architecture in the historical city. In this case, without resigning to the contemporary language of architecture, in the outside of the building it has been respected the austere character of the historical palaces of the city granting a greater joy and vivacity to its inside patio.

Figure 7: The Recaredo building in Valencia hide behind its apparent outer austerity an inner vivacity that allows to integrate terrace-patios in the houses that overturn its rooms, respecting the present flat terraces in the interiors of many patios of the historical city. At the same time it uses bioclimatic mechanisms of crossed ventilation and natural lightening thanks to the set of inner terrace-patios that communicate between them in diagonal.

Figure 8: The Bellvis building in Valencia is an interesting link between a traditional district of the port of the city and the aggressive and speculative periphery that threatens the complete disappearance of the district itself. The building attempts to conserve the scale of the traditional houses of the area (ground floor plus one or two floors) through the complex superposition of duplex modules in the space.

Slika 6: Stavba Maldonado v Valenciji je poskus integracije sodobne arhitekture v zgodovinsko mesto. V tem primeru zunanost stavbe sledi strogosti zgodovinskih mestnih palač, notranjemu dvorišču pa sta vseeno dana večja radost in živahnost, ne da bi ob tem podlegli sodobnemu arhitekturnemu jeziku.

Slika 7: Stavba Bellvis v Valenciji je zanimiva vez med tradicionalnim predelom pristaniškega mesta in agresivnim, špekulativnim obrobjem, ki bi lahko sprožil popolno izginotje samega predela. Stavba poskuša ohraniti tradicionalno merilo predela (priliježe z enim ali dvema nadstropjema) z kompleksnim nadvišanjem z dvonadstropnimi moduli.

Slika 8: Za navidezno strogo zunanostjo stavbe Recaredo v Valenciji se skriva notranja živahnost, ki omogoča sestavnim terasam-dvoriščem prosto prehajanje v pripadajoča stanovanja. Tako izkazuje spoštovanje do mnogih teras in dvorišč v zgodovinskem mestu. Prek sistema diagonalno povezanih notranjih teras-dvorišč hkrati izrablja bioklimatske mehanizme prečnega zračenja in naravne osvetlitve.



The ultimate aim of these re-elaboration strategies lies in the reproduction of the character of the historical centre in contemporary architecture. In fact, all historical centres have a given character as a result of their constructed matter and the sensations of their architecture. The character depends on parameters such as volume, scale, space-section proportion, spaces, coatings, color, texture... The careful manipulation of these parameters during the planning of contemporary architecture for the sake of respect of the pre-existing character can generate the same traditional sensations of the historical centre using non-traditional languages, elements and materials.

These reflections are illustrated through our contemporary architecture projects in the historical centre carried out in different districts, where the mechanisms used in the composition and planning of these new buildings in consolidated settings are presented in a specific way. At the moment, variables of ecology, sustainability, state-of-the-art facilities and fluidity in the common spaces, have been introduced in these buildings on their way to construction which demonstrates the compatibility of these concepts in the new architecture in historical centres.



Figure 9: Camilla Mileto in Fernando Vegas.
Slika 9: Camilla Mileto and Fernando Vegas.

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