Contemporary paradoxes of heritage.
An international perspective on restoration

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Fig. 1
Leaning tower,
Pisa, 1950. Archivio
Fotografico Restauro,
Firenze. SMGPI6873

Abstract

Restoration today has to deal with new questions, especially those related to patrimonialisation and its conflicts. At a time when everything is heritage, it seems increasingly difficult to apply criteria of choice and selection. Too often the uncritical observation of the founding principles of the discipline, such as authorship or authenticity, lead to the production of paradoxes, as we shall see in this essay through a series of examples spanning from classical ruins to serial architectures. In the restoration project, the process of recognising values becomes fundamental when taking responsibility for defining what to save and what to sacrifice. In contemporary society, the pressing need to preserve cultural heritage obliges us to clarify theoretical aspects before these turn into site practices.

Keywords

Restoration, Theory, Cultural Heritage, Patrimonialization, Paradox.

Memory Testimony Value

The excessive specialization we are seeing today in the field of restoration essentially leads to the proliferation of theoretical and professional tools and to a 'territory of restoration' that has expanded its boundaries to include almost all material and immaterial objects[1]. This led to the loss of one of the characteristics that marked its specificity: the choice of what to conserve or restore. Responsibility, and above all for a collective memory, which remains the true patron of each restoration, could then reopen the difficult path of a theoretical reflection (Dornier, Dulong 2005).

In recent years, much has changed in the discipline of restoration, but the question is what can a restoration work transmit other than a testimony, which must be the very reason for its existence. If this is indeed the case, the epistemic and cultural crux to be tackled becomes a theoretical reflection on what a restoration 'transmits' and to whom (Caccia Gherardini 2019).

Transmission implies a connotative condition of restoration that must, at the very least, be rediscussed: recognition of values. Those who intervene judge some values as non-negotiable with respect to the status of the work while deeming others negotiable. What comes into

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[1] The following essay is the result of a lecture given in September 2024 in the Nordic Master In Architectural Heritage (NORDMAK) at the Aarhus School of Architecture.

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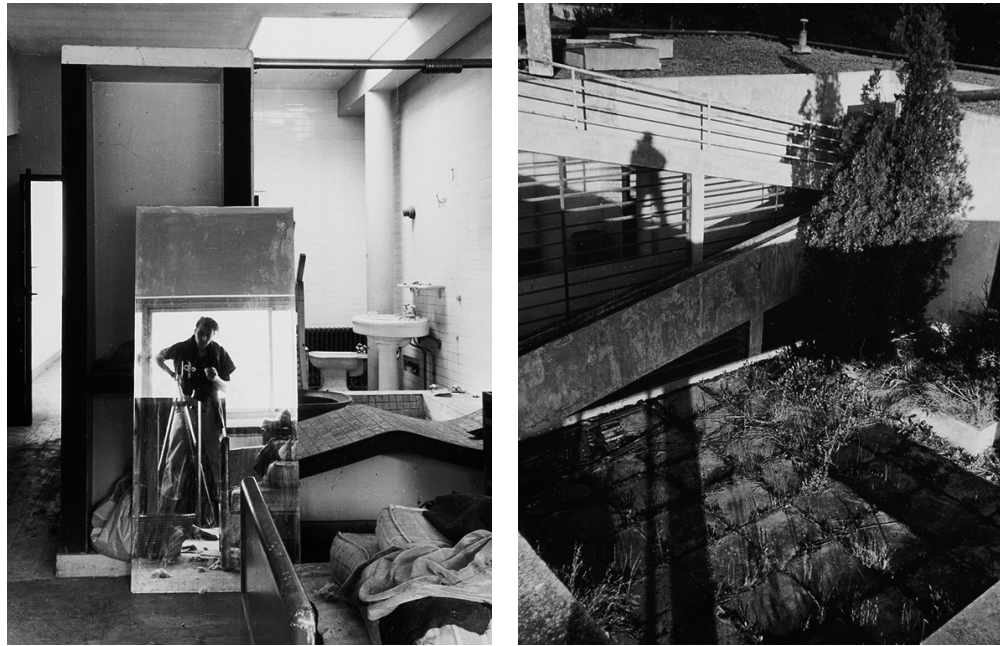
Figg. 2-3
Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, Poissy, France. Exterior (photo by Balthazar Korab, 1952) Balthazar Korab collection. LC-MISC-25-306 Online Cata.
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play, especially in restoration, is the role of the instability of the values that should be transmitted, so the use of protocols seems to be a remedy capable of ensuring both the authority of those who intervene and the ordinariness of the work carried out (Ricœur 2005).

Perhaps no formulation better represents the difficulty of transmission in a culture, namely that of restoration, that has lost its certainty about values and the conviction that identity is what the restorer must aspire to. Perhaps no human activity is focused on the paradoxes that come with patrimonialisation, such as restoration. A material trace undergoes a metamorphosis and becomes a monument when a policy, in Europe at least, invests it with the issue of identity (Jullien 2018).

Originality authenticity authorship

For a long time the architectural work became a document of itself, almost a specular new edition of the immaterial phenomenon it transmits and of the values it should embody. Moreover, the architectural work came to organise other sources and other archives - the work is the first archive that structures the external materials (papers, drawings, reception in its various forms). The case of Villa Savoye inform us, about how authority, not only authorship, is exercised first and foremost through the lack of criticism of the sources (Olmo 2020). The history of Villa Savoye in Poissy has been recounted in dozens of books, essays, exhibitions and articles since the 1930s. This literature also includes the research that we have been conducting for almost ten years now with Carlo Olmo (Caccia, Olmo 2016).

The restoration of Le Corbusier's works represents an opportunity to focus the critical and theoretical discussion on key issues of the reflection on the restoration of modern architecture: originality and authorship.

These themes have taken on additional problems, reviving a discussion on the possibility of translating the value of authenticity into site rules and practices. The discussion has distant origins and there has been growing interest in literature on the subject since the start of the 21st century, when all the problems linked to the restoration of a modern work began to interlace, at the end of a season of comparisons that started at least twenty years earlier. This

truly complex interweaving would eventually debate the role of sources and not only of history, and the almost obsessive relationship between history and restoration. One of the first aspects concerning the restoration of the modern is a re-discussion of sources and their hierarchy. Although it may seem absurd, it is the author who proposes as the primary source not the constructed work, but the paper archive, as is the case with Villa Savoye. The uniqueness of Le Corbusier's example in France on the one hand highlights the possibility and need to protect works of modern architecture, and on the other hand reveals the countless difficulties (Caccia 2014). These difficulties relate to both recognition of their patrimonial value and the intensity of the conflicts of interest at stake once protection has been granted. The difficulties therefore do not only concern conflicts involving 'recognition' of the work and its gradual patrimonialization, but also the methodological choices adopted at the restoration sites, which are often more concerned with the 'aesthetic aspects' than the documentary value of the architectural work (Caccia, Olmo 2015).

The restoration of villa Savoye highlights that in the case of authorial works the approach is always unique. The building in this case loses its function, becomes a work of art, extrapolated from its context and is treated and restored as such. Le Corbusier himself used the term 'archaeological restoration' for Villa Savoye, because all the categories valid for a work of art apply to the villa (respect for material authenticity, authorship, the need for a museological approach...).

Contradictions arise because authorial works are recognized as 'monuments', first historical and then iconic, almost regardless of their use, function or typology. The works of Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe have not only undergone multiple restorations, but in these cases the most deeply rooted disease in the restoration culture offers an almost paradoxical example. The search for the origin, the cult of traces left behind by customs and time, and the transition from testimony gives way to an almost ontological value of the work. And it has no bearing that almost all modern works were designed not to last (Caccia Gherardini 2023).

Extremes and paradoxes

In the case of authorial and iconic architectures, we are often faced with two extremes, depending not only on the geographical area in which one operates, but also on which school of restoration the restorer refers to. We could proceed by exaggeration and argue that the opposite extremes are are represented by the *retour à l'origine* (very much practiced in the French area, where Viollet Le Duc's theories seem not to have been completely abandoned) and the preservation of every trace that the building presents (an attitude of extreme/pure conservation, very frequent especially in Italy and in all the country where the Italian school is active). This second attitude, that of rigid conservation, follows with obsession the idea of material authenticity, which is often difficult to achieve. As is easily imaginable in the case of modern architecture, because many of the materials used were experimental materials that have now gone out of production[2], but also in the case of ancient buildings when enormous efforts (especially economic ones) are often made to restore damaged building materials.

As in the example of Giovanni Michelucci's so called *Chiesa dell'Autostrada* in Campi Bisenzio near Florence, whose copper roof was damaged in 2014 by a windstorm[3]. Many diagnostic investigations were done to understand the state of preservation of the roof surviving elements (thermographic analysis, chemical-physical analysis...) and different assembly test of these elements according to Michelucci's original documents preserved in the historical archive (Merlo 2020).

But it is not only the technical difficulties or the excessive financial effort, sometimes the difficulties are due to the fact that the building's original materials were already born with defects.

[2] There are hundreds of materials patented in Italy between the 1930s and 1960s that are no longer available, see Di Resta, Favaretto, Pretelli 2021.

[3] The studies were carried out as part of a research project between the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence and Autostrade per l'Italia spa.

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As in the case of the bricks used for the construction of the Escuelas Nacionales de Arte di Cubanacán (Havana, Cuba). The brick of the Facultad de Arte Teatral is badly fired, there are many calcifications and it disintegrates. The clay is not good, there are pieces of limestone that make the brick friable (Merlo, Feliciano Valenciaga 2023).

In the end, after much analysis and testing to consolidate the bricks, it was realised that the best solution would perhaps be to replace the elements, at least those that are difficult to restore (Caccia Gherardini, Paradiso 2023).

And to close with a paradox... what to do in the case of the restoration of the stone materials of the Leaning Tower of Pisa? Recent studies on building materials have shown that a long series of replacements and renovations have affected the tower over the centuries. In fact, sculptors, stonemasons and marble workers alternated from the end of the 14th to the end of the 19th century in renewing the stone elements, as confirmed by the continuous supplies of stone and marble (Caccia Gherardini, Ferretti 2024).

A situation confirmed by the mapping and analysis of the recurrences of stone materials used in the monument carried out as part of a broader campaign of studies and investigations during the conservation work on the surfaces by the *Istituto Centrale per il Restauro* (Rome). In this case, the definition of the frequency and location of a specific type of stone, for example white Apuan marble in its different varieties, together with the identification of the manufacturing techniques, makes it possible to understand the different substitutions, but also any phases of reworking of the surfaces (Capponi, Vedovello 2000).

The loss of originality of many architectural parts – a critical point affecting all the buildings in the Piazza dei Miracoli – is thus noted, leading the scholar to question the tower's presumed origin (Renzoni 2024). An obsession that forces the restorer to reflect on two fundamental issues, namely uniqueness and identity.

Because in this case we could provocatively say that the World Heritage Tower is an almost entirely 19th century monument, at least in its material aspects[4]!

[4] This consideration of a fundamentally 19th century image of the tower had already been provided by Piero Sanpaolesi (Sanpaolesi 1956, p. 61).

Patrimonialisation at risk

The transposition from a testimony to an icon changes the status of the work, to the point of reconstructing what has been lost or recognising architecture as a monument only on the basis of the author's reputation. But that of the designer's authorship and fame opens up another fundamental problem for the discipline of restoration, that of the recognition of the value or values to which a building is a testimony (Heinich 2017). The process of recognition of values and after of patrimonialization is a risk, because this process it removes entire categories of products from the collective memory.

The process of patrimonialisation creates conflicts, because it exposes the uncertainty of the theoretical assumptions called upon to define the field and the objects. After all, it is difficult to defend the restoration of, for example, a petrol station, a banal non-symbolic piece of architecture, without having a clear idea of the long chain leading from the simple canopy to the petrol station up to today's motorway restaurants (Caccia 2009; Caccia 2012). And the case of the heritage of petrol station architecture is emblematic. In Italy, unlike many European countries, despite the richness and importance of these buildings, especially in terms of style and technological innovations, they have not been protected. In order to make people understand the importance of these small buildings, it was necessary to demolish the logic of the list and inventory of monuments, and also to demonstrate the cultural and social values that these architectures have. As a result, it was necessary to move away from the traditional logic of the uniqueness of the work of art and the monument, and to confront serial objects.

Another example I would like to show you comes from the Selinute archaeological park in Sicily. Here the risks of patrimonialisation are even more evident. In this case, the classical ruins, the Greek temples, have always been the focus of patrimonialisation processes and thus the object of protection policy. And this often at the detriment of their context. As in the case of the Villa Savoye, here the land around the classical ruins was not completely safeguarded (until today)[5]. Thanks to a research project this historical landscaping has been carefully studied and has led to a more organic and unified restoration project for the site (...it would have been enough to pay attention to what Gustavo Giovannoni, author of the first *Italian Charter of Restoration* in 1931, already sustained with his theories on the indivisibility of the architectural work from its context!).

The example of petrol stations leads us to a reflection on patrimonialisation. For those involved in restoration theory, there is now another very rich and complex plan of investigation and study: heritage and processes of patrimonialisation (Babelon, Chastel 1995). This is not a mere expansion of the field of investigation, but the introduction of topics and issues that require profoundly different theoretical tools. It is necessary to specifically reflect in particular on patrimonialisation processes and how they produce values and theories of values, which are different and often not complementary to the traditional ones of restoration (Desvallées 2003). Patrimonialisation is currently an extremely pervasive social process. Heritage does not exist, but it must be acknowledged, its values mainly – as Paul Ricœur has written (Ricœur 2005). A number of actors rescue from oblivion some man-made products, but not others. It will be above all the entry onto the patrimonial scene of the objects of everyday history, first rural, then of industrial society that will mark, also culturally, this transition. The question today of heritage, but above all patrimonialisation is more than ever central. *Fabrique du patrimoine* is perhaps the most convincing metaphor when tackling a complex topic such as patrimonialisation (Heinich 2009). The reason for this change is explained in both the aforementioned book by Nathalie Heinich, and in the geographies and traditions that have created an epistemological unease in the use of the terms heritage and

Figg. 7-8
Leaning tower, Pisa, 1950. Archivio Fotografico Restauro, Firenze. SMGPI4553, SMGPI4870

[5] The researches were carried out as part of am agreement between the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence and Parco Archeologico di Selinunte.
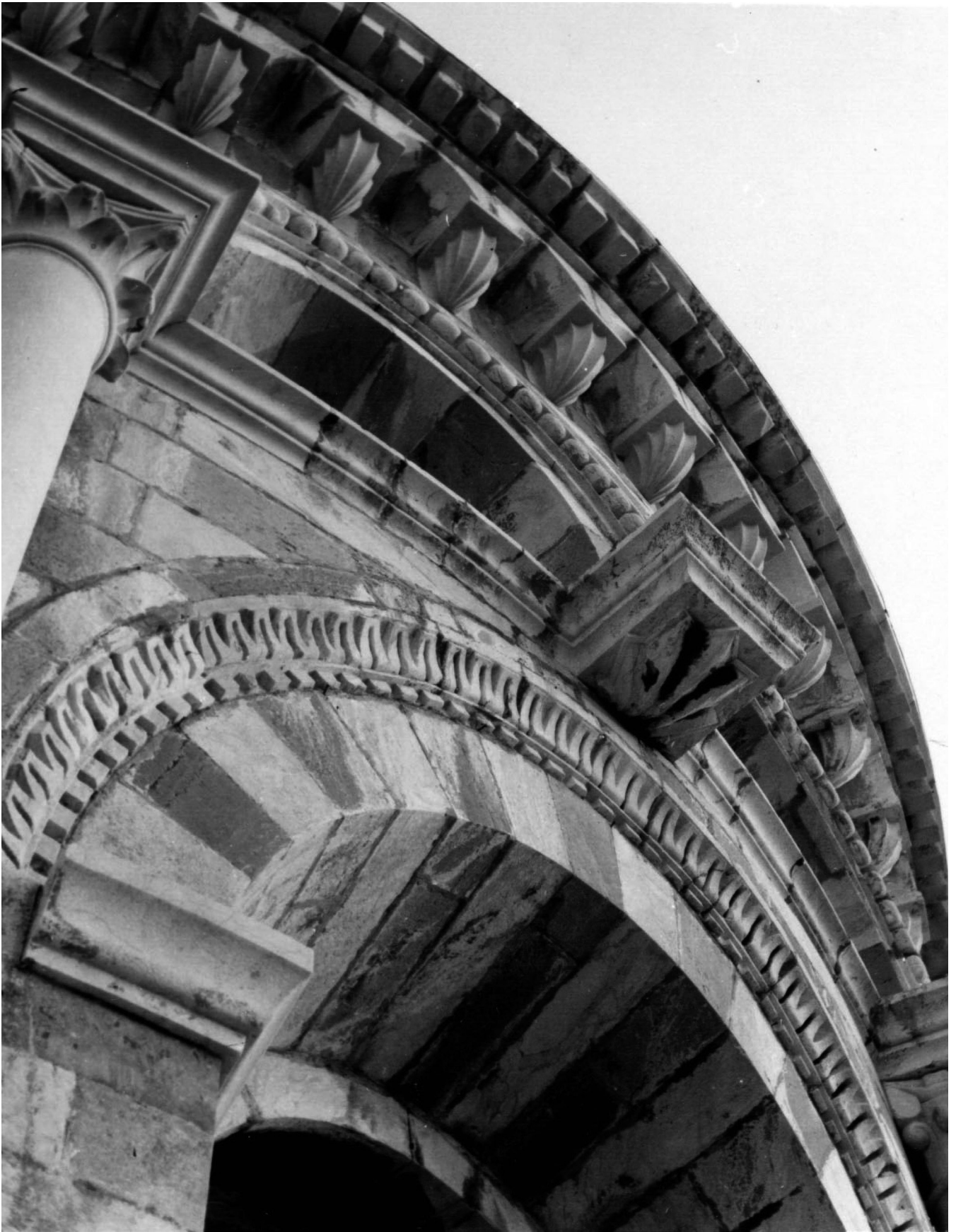
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patrimonialisation. While words must have weight, language can fall ill and initially generate distortion and then migration of meaning, until words become semantic tools we no longer need to listen to. While heritage and patrimonilisation have fallen to this fate, especially in the last few years, the value reattribution processes indicated by these terms have become crucially important.

History and restoration are not legitimization and persuasion tools, instead they are the issues at stake in this process (Olmo 2023). For example, the juxtaposition between restoration that revives a work's original status and the role that architecture is nevertheless called to play is interpreted as a struggle between guaranteed patrimonial value and construction of the value. The former is the result of a topdown procedure, the latter is instead generated by complex collective resources mobilized to produce the sharing of uses nearly always associated with local communities and social functions (Fabiani 2022). However, when the problem involves history and restoration – patrimonialisation that turns cognitive patterns into worksite practices – not only is the 'fact' modified, but there is a possible juxtaposition between a hermeneutic consciousness (sometimes abused by patrimonialisation) and a methodical consciousness (safeguarded by inventories, dictionaries, and regulations).
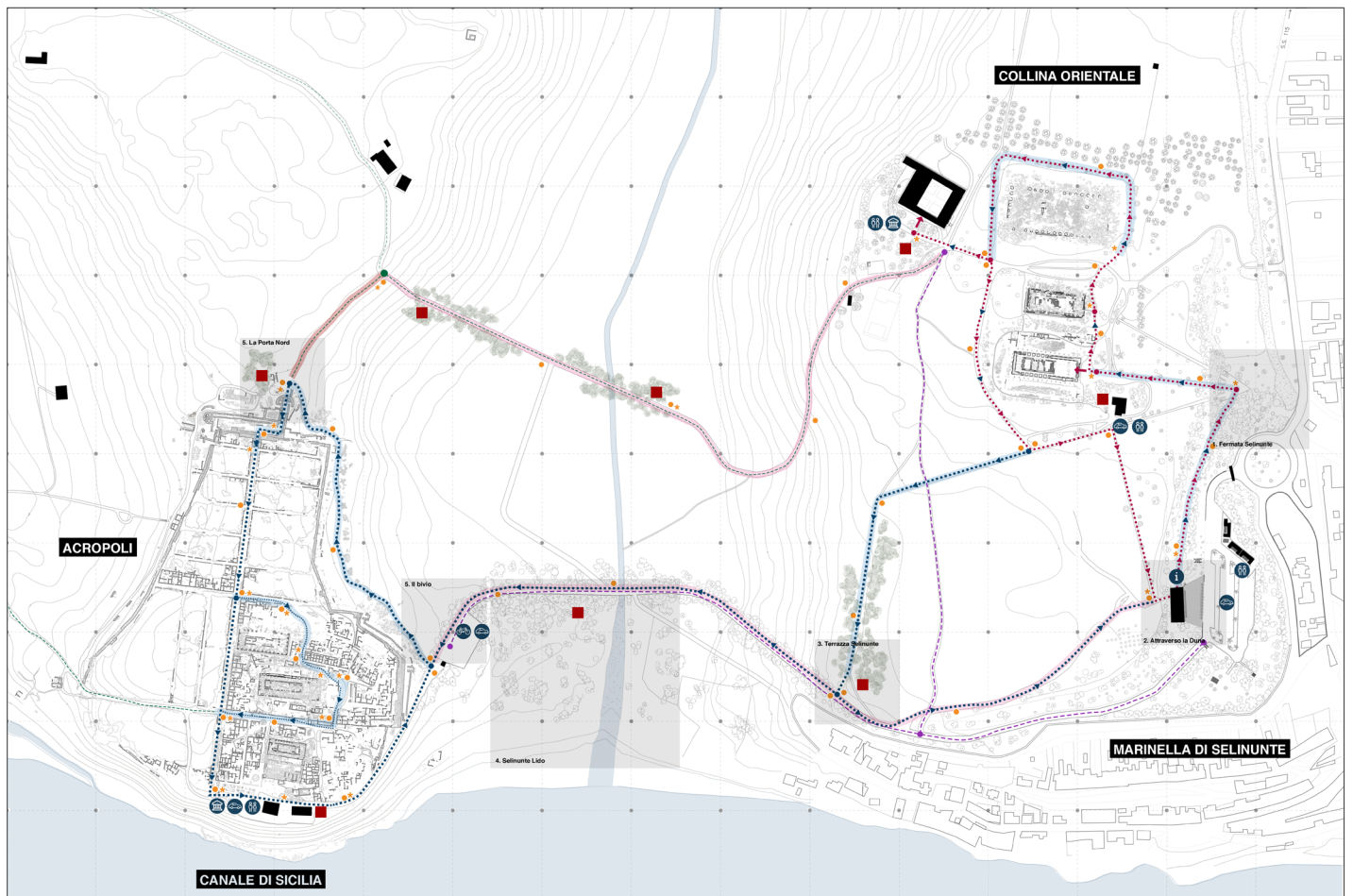
These histories make the ensemble of the intricate fields of knowledge surrounding heritage look like a surrealist collection of codes and artifacts rather than restoration – a restoration whose theoretical premises have been questioned and is now offered up to new critical and creative combinations, even when this mobile and conflictual world produces jurisprudence and regulations that appear to ratify a divorce between experimentation and classification. Maybe the omnivorous extension of the concept of heritage is not an easy escape route to avoid tackling the application of categories of value or judgment...

Temporalities and continuity

If the epistemological limits must be identified each time even before the operational limits of a restoration project – in relation to the variables connected with the individual characteristics of the architectural organism – the notion of 'continuity' inherent in the planning of a restoration must be underlined. This continuity concerns the whole study and operational procedure, from the initial process of fact-finding to the monitoring which follows on from the actual intervention.

From this process history, stratifications of symbologies, previous restorations, analysis of the changes of function, techniques, and materials emerge as fact-finding passages with the contribution of several disciplines for the many different fields of knowledge which come into play.

In this sense the 'proof', the foundation of all scientific research, assumes a specific meaning in the language of the researcher – restorer. Restoration therefore presents itself as an act of continuous knowledge realised by recording the execution of the work with philological precision, by the critical gathering of the data necessary to produce documentation that is complete and that can be used to monitor and control the work once it has been carried out (Musso, Pretelli 2020).

COLLINA ORIENTALE

ACROPOLI

5. La Porta Nord

5. Il bivio

3. Terrazza Selinunte

4. Selinunte Lido

2. Attraverso la Dun...

Fermata Selinunte

MARINELLA DI SELINUNTE

CANALE DI SICILIA

Percorso di visita - primo livello
durata 3 h
Il percorso è pensato per vivere il parco
in un breve lasso di tempo godendosi
comunque a pieno le bellezze di Selinunte
seguendo il percorso progettato da
Franco Minissi e Piero Porcinai

Percorso di visita - secondo livello
durata 8 h
Il percorso è pensato per vivere a pieno il parco,
passando l'intera giornata tra le bellezze di Selinunte.
Riposandosi nelle aree di sosta lungo il percorso o
godendosi il mare.

Percorso caddie
Selinunte è aperta a tutti, raggiungi le bellezze del
parco con il servizio caddie.

Percorsi futuri
Il Parco continua a svelarsi, percorsi per la
Selinunte ancora da scoprire.

Legenda:

percorso esistente da integrare

percorso storico da ripristinare

percorso ex novo

luoghi di sosta

cartellonistica - informazioni

cartellonistica - indicazioni

servizi

parcheggio automobili   servizi igienici   parcheggio biciclette   musei - spazi espositivi   info point

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Fig. 12
Vasari Corridor, Firenze
(photo by P. Becherini,
A. Lumini, 2022)

opposite page

Fig. 13
Vasari Corridor, Firenze,
Photogrammetric
Survey, (elaboration by
F. Massi, C. Monci, 2023)

In this sense the recent restoration of the Vasari Corridor in Florence highlights the centrality of the cognitive investigation for the definition of the restoration project (Funis 2018). The initial Knowledge investigation was combined with the subsequent development of a monitoring system of the restoration work in progress to verify its efficacy over time (continuous Knowledge)[6].

Today, the knowledge gained from paper documents is measured against design choices and site practice, revealing how diagnostic investigation, historical research and recognition of values represent the fundamental points for restoration (Caccia Gherardini 2020). And in the case of the Vasarian corridor, the complexity of the research leads to the acquisition of information that could trigger an ongoing comparison with history and its temporalities, which can often be interpreted in a conflicting manner. Even in this case, the process of knowledge does not seem to be shaped as a neutral act and, it must be remembered, cannot be separated from the recognition of the values, beliefs and prejudices from which the researcher himself moves.

Moreover, for some time now, the knowledge phase has lost its role as a 'preliminary moment', as has become evident during the various disciplinary confrontations, to extend throughout the duration of the worksite and well beyond with the verification and monitoring actions.

But today it seems more fundamental than ever to combine this reflection on knowledge with that of comparison with sources and documents. And this comparison places a critical point at the centre of the discussion: the relationship between the materiality of the artifact and the paper nature of the sources. The Vasarian corridor and its sources have very different temporalities, creating a true *histoire croisée*, starting from the recognition of the document and its being interpreted differently over time (Werner, Zimmermann 2004 and 2006). And this brings us to another, even more delicate point for restoration, that of the nature of sources. Criticism of the sources does not make the investigation 'scientific', but it is

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[6] The Department of Architecture of the University of Florence signed a research agreement with the company in charge of the work, coordinated by the writer, aimed at drawing up 'preliminary studies for the documentation of the restoration and site activities for scientific purposes'.
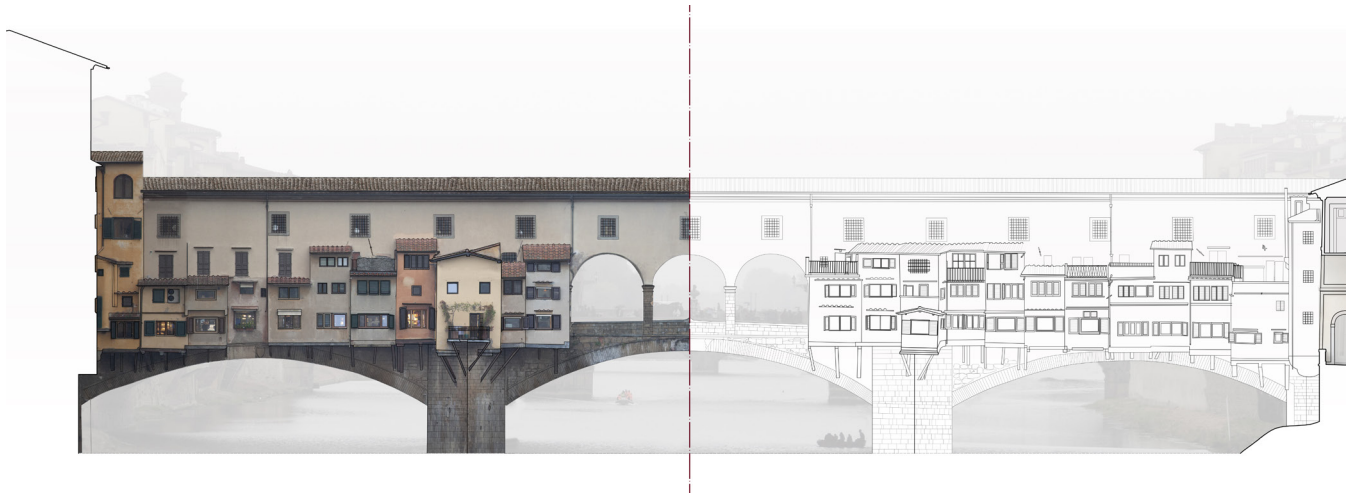
a pre-condition, today more than ever, for the restorer's cognitive and decision-making process to move from the very delicate relationship, often conflicting, between awareness of what they allow us to know and knowledge of their origin and use over time.

The end of the Greek myth

I would like to close this short paper with a final paradox, which makes us realise the importance today of starting again from theoretical problems, questioning one of the founding myths of restoration: the Athens Charter of 1931.

The 1931 Athens Conference on the conservation of monuments opened the long mythography of restoration charters. What were in reality the *Conclusions* of the Athens event, placed at the end of the volume *La conservation des monuments d'art et d'histoire* published two years later in a limited edition, were transformed into the first international charter for restoration (Caccia Gherardini 2024).

The transformation of this event into a founding mythology of restoration was helped by the International charter for the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites of 1964, whose introduction (and taking up its legacy) definitively established this metamorphosis. It was in fact after Venice that the so-called Athens Charter gained both its critical fortune and its true international dimension, losing its origin over time.

First of all, it is necessary to start with a certainty, a clear historical fact we might say: there never was a Charter of Athens, but at most Conclusions, translated into different languages and placed at the end of the 1933 volume (Office International des Musées 1933). This was a posthumous book promoted by the Office International des Musées, one of the many organisations of the League of Nations. However, this publication does not represent the Conference proceedings (and on this point, too, clarity is needed), but rather a collection of essays arising from a completely different basis.

Only a careful reading of the genesis, the writing and the (limited) success of the proceedings helps us to go beyond forced genealogical interpretations of the document and to question the purpose of an operation that transformed a debate (the one that took place in Athens) into a text that ordered, and distinguished the levels of conservation and restoration in the context of the years following the First World War. The reason for this lies in the very nature of the initiatives of the *Office International des Musée*, not to mention of an elite that conceived all the initiatives promoted by the League of Nations as a tool for the recognition of

intellectual work and the transnationalist 'dream' (illusion), as the only alternative to dominant nationalisms and above all the use of heritage in a still nationalist way (Ducci 2012).

The 1933 book, by its very dimension, is neither an instrument of dissemination nor a foretaste of future debate. It returns us to the state of the art at European level of a terrain that is maturing its heritage, like a word originally linked to family or testamentary law gradually beginning to take on new meanings (Passini 2018).

Much has been written about the conference, almost always turning it into something that it was not. Athens was not the first real international meeting to deal with heritage conservation and restoration, but at most a restricted exchange of views between specialists, so it can be considered more of a beginning, but one strongly influenced by a pressing nationalism. In Greece, as was the case with the other meetings organised by the Office international des Musées, a few select actors were brought together, often committed above all to a national identity, and the results of these debates often flowed into publications with limited circulation (Renoliet 1999).

The Conference highlights the full fragility of a still unconsolidated epistemology, a different 'historicisation' not only of practices but also of different theories.

Although the reception in legislation or in restoration practice in different countries of the principles established in Athens has not yet been studied, merely reproducing the text of the Conclusions makes them function as the first international charter in the long genealogy of restoration charters.

The opening essay by Piero Gazzola and Roberto Pane on the occasion of the publication of the proceedings of the II International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments in Venice set the text of the Athens Conference on its long road to fame (Pane 2009). The leap was made in the section on *Decisions and Resolutions*, which definitively renamed the document and formalised the passage from one word to another. And this is just one example of how even restoration theory can be told based on historical 'inventions', on the a priori creation of a myth.

In the field of restoration, theoretical aspects are almost always considered minor in the face of a pervasive need to deal with technical issues. Today the 'boring' questions of theory are instead fundamental not only to define a critical approach to restoration, but above all to bring the discipline back to its authentic assumptions.

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