

The Critical Nature of the Reconstruction of Modern Icons

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Abstract

The ways in which two masterpieces of modern architecture, the Villa Savoye at Poissy and the German Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Barcelona, both designed in the very late 1920's, were restored, in a broad sense and respectively through rehabilitation and reconstruction, after the turn of 1966 are problematic.

From the 1930s onwards, the plans and images of these two works played an essential role in disseminating the canon of modern architecture. Later, Burri's photographs or Tschumi's advertisements served as documents that demonstrate the high degree of ruin that the villa finished by Le Corbusier in 1931 had reached, given the refusal of its owners to renovate the building after the damage suffered during the Second World War. Even in its significant material degradation, the villa continued to reflect its essential formal components, but in its deterioration illustrated metaphorically the crisis that the orthodoxy of the modern movement was undergoing. In contrast, the pavilion designed by Mies Van der Rohe, which was conceived as a temporary construction, endured as a vanished reference that was never altered in its pure image and whose material reproduction had been demanded since the 1950s by Barcelona's leading architects.

When these two reparation operations were completed in the 1980s, the strategies that were employed, in both cases generally in line with the *restauro scientifico*, were widely accepted by critics. However, some others underlined several contradictions in this respect. For example, one of them, concerning the German Pavilion, is of an ontological nature, questioning the pertinence of reconstructing a transitory building by raising its material qualities, using later construction techniques and completing, after interpretative work, its external definition.

This paper analyses the approaches to *restauro critico* applied in these two interventions, highlighting the *nonstraight-forward* architecture nature of the results achieved through them.

Keywords

Masterpieces of modern architecture, Scientific restoration, Critical heritage restoration, Nonstraightforward Architecture.

Introduction, objectives and method

The conceptual problem associated with the *restauro del moderno* is related to the means and goals of contemporary architectural project. Aspects of both types are involved in the present processes of intervention in the modern heritage. Despite the buildings that are included in such category have not an important *age value*, they undoubtedly hold some *artistic* and *historic values* that justify the social needs of preserving them or establishing determinate limits for its restoration operations. Those substantive formal and material qualities that turn these into monuments, in sum, compel the architects to act according to a specific way; especially if a reconstruction of a canonical work constitutes the problem.

This paper is aimed to underlining the critical nature of the reconstruction of two main modern icons attending to some aspects contained in Brandi's *Theory of Restoration* (1963). As it is known, the principles contained in that book inspired the *Italian Restoration Charter of 1972 (Rome)*. And that document provided the criteria that should have been followed shortly after in the rehabilitation of the Villa Savoye at Poissy and the German Pavilion for 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition.

In terms of purpose, Brandi¹ pointed as crucial in his preconceptual scheme the return of the work to its own efficiency. That logically implies that the work of art that needs a restoration has not completely disappeared. In fact, what it really means is, only, that it is not fully displaying its most valuable virtues. That is the reason why Brandi stipulated a first axiom: «only the work of art matter is restored»².

Nevertheless, the double historicity of every artwork, which consists of the combination of the unique moment of its creation with each posterior aesthetic reception by other subjects over time, became central in order to establish the second principle: «Restoration should aim to re-establish the potential oneness of the work of art, as long as this is possible without committing artistic or historical forgery, and without erasing every trace of the passage through time of the work of art»³.

The exceptional character conferred by the *Italian Restoration Charter of 1964 (Venice)* to the restoration operations⁴, which is directly linked with the objective of minimizing the risks associated with pursuing a false interpretative hypothesis, became in certain way blurred with the anastylosis easing that implied the implementation of Brandi's theory⁵ succinctly summarized in the *Italian Restoration Charter of 1972 (Rome)*.

In any case, the problem of repristination, formally stated by the *Italian Restoration Charter of 1932 (Rome)*, was not completely solved in the 1970s and 1980s. After the disciplinary turn of 1966, different advances were produced and the crisis of the modern movement should be read as an evolution more than as a rupture. Venturi's claim for a *nonstraightforward* architecture was an advocacy of «the difficult unity of inclusion rather than the easy unity of exclusion»⁶.

A special kind of heterodoxy can be associated with the two selected case studies. The reproduction of these original paradigms of modern orthodoxy conveys, despite its important charge of *restauro scientifico*, several conceptual problems that link those initiatives to *restauro critico* premises.

The two principal objectives of this brief essay consist of, on one hand, remarking the fact that, even in their deterioration or dismantling, the images (photographs and drawings) of these canonical buildings were the main reference documents that served as bases for their restoration processes, not their corporeities; and, on the other hand, that their early distortions activated those recovery actions in a specific way, inaugurating then il *restauro del moderno*. The method that has been followed combines historical and reflexive approaches. The research is limited to outlining the critical components of the reconstructions of these modern icons.

The outbreak of a new canon

The original Villa Savoye at Poissy and the German Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Barcelona were two masterpieces of modern architecture designed in the very late 1920's and completed, respectively, in 1931 and 1929. These buildings were singularly expressive of the aesthetic values of the Modern Movement in architecture during the European interwar period. Both were immediately recognised by critics and historians in Europe and, also, very soon in USA. Indeed, the drawings and models of the two buildings were shown in *Modern Architecture: international exhibition* (MoMA, 1932).

In the pamphlet that Philip Johnson prepared as a proposal for the exhibition⁷, this architect noted the informational nature of the show due to the international character of the modern style. Effectively, the classic works on history of the incipient Modern Movement in architecture were published after (for instance, the first editions of



Fig. 1 View of the exhibition room where the Villa Savoye at Poissy drawings, model and photographs were displayed. MoMA (1932) Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. IN15.1.



Fig. 2 General view of the German Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Barcelona (1929). Photograph of the pavilion of 1929 in *Arquitectura, Revista del Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid*, 261 (1986), p. 10.

Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design* and Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* are dated respectively in 1936 and 1941). Johnson established the International Style as a manner of «solving anew the old problems», after all as a revolutionary result associated with the «full realization of the possibilities inherent in the new materials -steel and reinforced concrete». In turn, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., expressed in the foreword of the correspondent catalogue that this show was «an assertion that the confusion of the past forty years, or rather of the past century, may shortly come to an end»⁸. Even though the obvious variety of the new aesthetic proposals, all of them are distant from the eclectic reformulation and are based on the technical development. Regarding to the importance of materiality for the new International Style, Johnson pointed in the historical note included in this document that Le Corbusier developed Perret's achievements in reinforced concrete, «a new technic and a new aesthetic»⁹ while Mies Van der Rohe «was developing at the same time a parallel aesthetic less dependent on a particular system of construction». Despite having coined the new style with the term functionalism, the other two aspects of the Vitruvian triad were then those outlined.

However, the diffusion of the modern architecture works was mostly carried out by the dissemination of drawings and photographs. The clearly intended new language purity entailed avoiding interferences during the development process. In fact, for Johnson the plan was the thing, and for that reason declared: «The architect builds to keep the plan inviolate»¹⁰.

Undeniably, the drawings, photographs and models of the original Villa Savoye at Poissy and the German Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Barcelona were the elements which actually contributed to make up the new canon of modern architecture. In fact, both buildings properly lacked that kind of efficacy. On one hand, the German Pavilion for 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition had been dismantled when this event finished, what became its corporeity in a mythical memory for decades, remaining imagined as a kind of 'photographic architecture'¹¹. On the other, the Villa Savoye at Poissy was a private property, what implied that it could not be generally visited and could be freely transformed, or not conveniently maintained, by its owners. Either because

the pavilion's disappearance or because the threats on the villa, these two main references of modern architecture remained primarily fossilised in its images and representations.

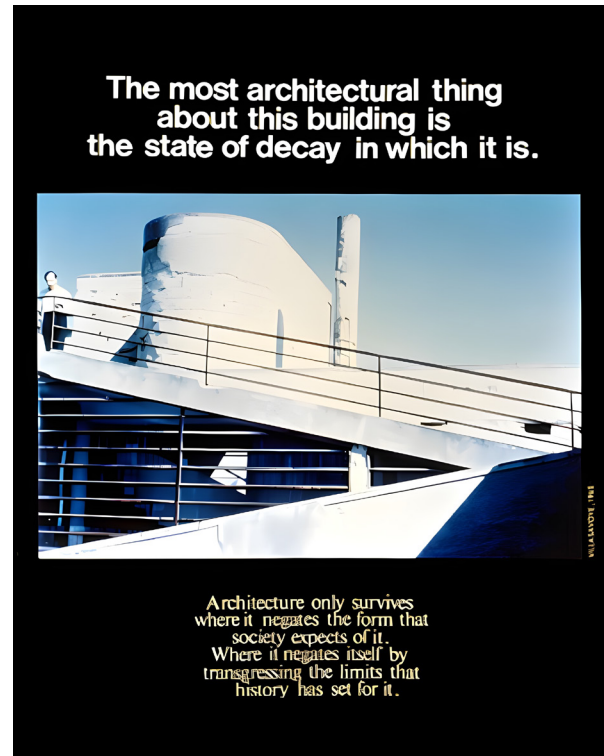
The distortion of two paradigms

The ephemeral nature of the original German Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Barcelona (1929) became contradictory with its immediate critical recognition. Despite its disappearance, it endured as a mythical memory that was never altered in its pure image, showing the spatial and even material qualities of such a relevant vanished reference. Furthermore, the social democratic government that commissioned the building had done it according to the aim of being «absolutely truthful, giving voice to the spirit of a new era»¹².

Diverse architectural critics and historians¹³ have reflected on this pavilion's paradoxical conditions tied up with the circumstance of having become a canonical reference drawing from its absence. Robin Evans, for instance, asserted that «buildings are not always better than pictures show them to be, nor are they necessarily more significant than the theories that spring up around them»¹⁴. This stance expressed, first, a relativistic approach; but, above all, an appreciation of the phantasmagoric power, understanding it as the phantasy reminiscence that an object is able to create.

The material reproduction of the pavilion had been demanded since the 1950s by Barcelona's leading architects, as the correspondence between Oriol Bohigas and Mies Van der Rohe demonstrates. When the reconstruction finished in 1986, the three architects involved in the project, Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Fernando Ramos and Cristian Cirici, expounded the premises that were taken into account by them. They recognized¹⁵ that such a reconstruction was a 'hazardous endeavour' that could result in a 'trivial operation'. There were two reasons that justified that concern: on one hand, the disappeared building had become an essential reference point for avant-garde European architecture; and, on the other, in Mies Van der Rohe's works can be greatly admired the rational will of the Modernity ideals as well as 'an intimate rigour'. They admitted that only 'a persistent cultural romanticism' could avoid «the unveiling of the mystery frozen in the old photographs of the pavilion». In that sense, they remarked that the recreation of figures from the past has been a constant course of action in architecture. Thus they executed the replica, ignoring all 'reverential fear of the past'. Updating the construction techniques and improving the material qualities were the fundamental aspects that guided the reconstruction. That was a close approximation to the original, allowing 'a fairly good sense of the spatial flow, lighting, and material conditions'¹⁶.

In contrast, the Villa Savoye at Poissy has remained to the present day, but suffering an important deterioration that started in the Second World War. In 1959, Burri took several pictures of the building that indicate the severe material declining of this masterpiece. In part, it was an act of denounce; but it also was a way of appreciating an important modern ruin. *Destruction through Neglect* was the title of an exhibition for the MoMA, curated by Arthur Drexler in 1966, in which the deterioration of this Le Corbuier's work was denounced. That initiative contributed to the dissemination of the unacceptable circumstance that affected the building, which had been acquired by the French State in 1962, while Malraux served as Minister of Culture¹⁷. Both buildings, precisely because of the mode of production proper to modern architecture, had paradoxically become deteriorated very soon. Then, inevitably their main components had to be restored not only in its materiality, but in their senses



Figs. 3 and 4 Burri's photographs of the Villa Savoye at Poissy René Burri, Magnum Photos (1959).

Fig. 5 One of the two advertisements that Bernard Tschumi dedicated to the Villa Savoye at Poissy. Bernard Tschumi in *Oppositions*, 7 (1976), p. 56.

and meanings too¹⁸. In the mid-1970s, Bernard Tschumi dedicated two of his *Architectural Advertisements*¹⁹ to this circumstance. He categorically declared: «the most architectural thing about this building is the state of decay in which it is». Even in its significant material degradation, the villa continued to reflect its essential formal components, but in its deterioration illustrated metaphorically the crisis that the orthodoxy of the modern movement was undergoing²⁰. Tschumi considered that architectural survival required its self-negation. Precisely, this paradox is explained by him²¹ using the analogy of life-and-death and the Villa Savoye as reference. In 1965, two years after the beginning of the restoration process, the villa had been listed as a Historical Monument. He also asserted that, facing the derelict building in 1965, the purity of the Villa Savoye was object of a more intense vindication. For a modern architect, he continued, «decaying constructions –the dissolving traces that time leaves on buildings- are incompatible with both the ideology of modernity and with what might be called conceptual aesthetics».

The reconstruction of modern icons predicament

The two repristination operations were completed in the mid-1980s. The intervention in the Villa Savoye started, however in the 1960s. In less than half a century, this building had reached an important level of deterioration²². Possibly, the original German Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Barcelona would have reached also its obsolescence in few decades. Modern architecture does not demonstrate the quality of long-lasting, unlike most of that of the nineteenth century and the former. In that sense, the needs of a rehabilitation can emerge often earlier than

supposed. The construction techniques and the building materials are similar to those of the present or, at least, can be now reproduced. Thus, restoration or replication operations of a modern architecture masterpiece are usually viable. Doing it according to the original project, aside from hypothesis, fulfills the requirements of *restauro científico*.

Nevertheless, these actions, specially the reproductions *ex novo*, are not exempt from the risk of incurring in some impostures. When recreating an already non existing building, course of history is fictitiously annulled and real authorship is supplanted. A copy, even if it is perfect, has lost the original aura. The Barcelona Pavilion (1986), that is the reproduction of the German Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Barcelona (1929), is more than a very good copy of the original. Several improvements were incorporated over the base of the transitory building that was initially built. The pertinence of this kind of historical falsehood is not yet solved and the resources that have already been enabled by *restauro critico* are insufficient to completely mediate in this matter.

Even the rehabilitation processes are problematic. The passing of the time degrades the works, but it also allows its transformations. The majority of the valuable historic buildings have been transformed during their lifetimes. The legibility of all the influences is a must, despite the one most significative has to prevail. If the repristinations cancel every sign of the past except the principal one, the evolution richness will be thus erased. That is in sum a type of puritanism that is not compatible with contemporary culture. The heterogeneity that Venturi vindicated arises as a source of knowledge that should not be wasted. As Brandi proclaimed²³, there is a double polarity: aesthetic and historic. And, denying the second is, in sum, inappropriate.

¹ CESARE BRANDI, *Teoría de la restauración*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial 2012, p. 14.

² *Ivi*, p. 16.

³ *Ivi*, p. 17.

⁴ Article 9.

⁵ Article 7.

⁶ ROBERT VENTURI, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, New York, MoMA 1966, p. 16.

⁷ PHILIP JOHNSON, *Built to live in*, New York, MoMA 1931.

⁸ *Modern Architecture: international exhibition*, catalogue, New York, MoMA 1932, p. 13.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 20.

¹⁰ PHILIP JOHNSON, *Built to live in*, op. cit.

¹¹ CLAIRE A ZIMMERMAN, *Photographic Architecture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2014.

¹² As set out in an essay by Terence Riley in MATILDA MCQUAID (ed. by), *Envisioning Architecture: Drawings from The Museum of Modern Art*, New York, MoMA 2002, p. 70.

¹³ Juan Pablo Bonta, Josep Quetglas, Robin Evans and, more recently, Andrés Jaque, among others.

¹⁴ *Mies van der Rohe's Paradoxical Symmetries*, «AA Files», n. 19, 1990, p. 56.

¹⁵ 1929/1986. *German Pavilion of Barcelona reconstruction*, «Arquitectura. Revista del Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid», n. 261, 1986, pp. 5-15.

¹⁶ DIETRICH NEUMANN, *An Accidental Masterpiece. Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion*, Basel, Birkhäuser 2020, p. 167.

¹⁷ Susanna Caccia Gherardini perfectly explains in her: SUSANNA CACCIA GHERARDINI, *Le Corbusier e la villa Savoye: un caso di restauro autoriale*, Firenze, Florence University Press 2023. The upheavals suffered during the course of preservation and restoration of this masterpiece.

¹⁸ HORACIO TORRENT, *What to do with modern tradition?*, in Ana Tostões (ed. by), *Modern Heritage. Reuse, Renovation, Restoration*, Basel, Birkhäuser 2022, p. 20.

¹⁹ *Advertisements for Architecture*, a series of postcard-sized juxtapositions of words and images by Bernard Tschumi (1976-77).

²⁰ The picture that was shown in the advertisement dates back to 1965.

²¹ *Architecture and Transgression*, «Oppositions», n. 7, 1976, pp. 55-63.

²² The most complete work about this process is contained in the book: SUSANNA CACCIA GHERARDINI, CARLO OLMO, *La villa Savoye. Icona, rovina, restauro (1948-1968)*, Roma, Donzelli 2016.

²³ CESARE BRANDI, *Teoría de la restauración*, op. cit., p. 15.