Image as a Heritage Value: Understanding its Role in Twentieth-Century Architectural Conservation

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Abstract

This research investigates the role of image in the conservation of twentieth-century architecture, questioning whether practice preserves material substance or mediated representation. The image of modern heritage—often canonized through photography—has shaped recognition, guided conservation priorities, and sometimes substituted for authenticity. Recent reflections on conservation criteria, combined with values-based frameworks promoted by the Getty Conservation Institute and UNESCO, suggest that image and reception can be understood as heritage values in their own right. Drawing on case studies and student-led research in the ARURCOHE Master's programme, including re-readings of the *Madrid–New Delhi Document* (2017), the article reflects on how visual identity competes with material authenticity, and proposes methodological pathways to integrate image within plural conservation frameworks.

Keywords
Twentieth-Century Architecture, Heritage Conservation, Image and Reception, Values-Based Frameworks, Authenticity.

Twentieth-Century Architectural Conservation and its Relationship with the Photographic Image

«Architects live and die by the images of their work, as these images alone are what most people see. For every person who visits a private house, there are maybe 10,000 who only view it as a photo»[1] This statement by Julius Shulman, the renowned twentieth-century architectural photographer especially known for his collaboration with Richard Neutra, raises the fundamental question guiding this contribution: Can architects survive through the images made of their buildings? In other words, as a extreme question, do we truly restore these buildings—or merely the image of these buildings? This question is crucial in contemporary architecture, increasingly mediated by a world immersed in what Joan Fontcuberta[2] has defined as *The Fury of Images*, and it resonates with Jacques Herzog's reflection: «From a photographer, we expect images, but perhaps it was not foreseen that architecture would begin to think in terms of image»[3]. The relationship between photography and architecture, evident since the earliest days of the photographic medium, gained particular significance with the rise of modern architecture. Prominent architects of the period often worked closely with skilled photographers and maintained a near-obsessive control over how their buildings were depicted, ensuring that every published image reinforced their design philosophy. During this era, the photograph became a key instrument for shaping both the dissemination and the public perception of twentieth-century architectural ideas[4].

This interplay inevitably influences the way modern architecture is restored. Simona Salvo, reflecting on restoration of modern architecture[5], argues that recent practice has not produced a genuine theoretical shift,

despite apparent antinomies. Interventions on twentieth-century buildings, instead of pursuing conservation, often privilege restoration as a return to an alleged «original splendeur»[6]. This consumable attitude resonates with contemporary sensibilities but revives a notion discarded for a century: safeguarding the image rather than the material substance.

According to Salvo, appealing to a so-called «conservation imperative»[7], many projects on modern heritage have pursued reinstatement of an initial integrity and newness. Factors make this acceptable: the youth of modern works suggest traces of time can be erased; faith in technology feeds the illusion that buildings can be recreated as good as—or better than—the originals; and principles of seriality, transience, and fragility legitimize copies and reconstructions.

Debate on modern heritage began from the idea that traditional methods were inapplicable. Materials often resist conservation, and figurative character cannot be conveyed once perfection is lost. Thus, reflection moved beyond heritage protection, shaped by historians, designers, and technologists who saw Modernity as their lineage. They projected values linked to their milieu, focusing on a 'still productive' built environment they hesitated to protect, fearing loss of symbolic or economic potential. Interventions often reconnect with the recent past by presenting an idealized image—preferably the original—or by re-establishing formal integrity. Yet 'redoing' or 'restoring'[8] rarely follows rigorous philology; instead it adopts intuitive, image-oriented approaches. This produces a neo-stylistic restoration, guided by analogy with the original as shown in drawings or photographs, sometimes transcending history to affirm contemporary values.

The image is expected to restore balance between work and present. Yet architecture cannot escape material alteration: to remake is to modify irreversibly. By contrast, critical restoration recognizes in the 'hic et nunc' the values of memory while respecting substance.

Susanna Caccia Gherardini's study of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye[9] restorations shows reception inseparable from photography, which frames it since its origin. Images often become the main filter: public and scholars access buildings through a repertoire of canonical shots.

The Villa Savoye exemplifies this. Early images, later reiterated in the 1987 Centenary exhibitions, codified a script: an immaculate white volume over a green field, excluding surroundings, use, or aging. This framed the villa as a manifesto-object of the *Five Points*, privileging abstract geometry over lived space. Such editorial strategies actively construct meaning. In the Centenary, reiteration reaffirmed the villa's emblematic purity, while obscuring fragility, restorations, or context. Photography thus shapes how architecture is canonized and remembered.

Marco Dezzi Bardeschi[10] criticizes privileging image over material reality. For him, the image is a seductive abstraction that risks distorting heritage. It cannot be self-sufficient: it is the visible tip of a broader cultural and historical network. To reduce architecture to its image—original, idealized, or reconstructed—is to strip it of material testimony.

From this perspective, he rejects «formal restoration»[11] that revives or reproduces an image as it once appeared. Such practices, based on subjective judgments, erase authentic traces. Privileging the original appearance over material continuity betrays conservation itself. He criticizes charters like the UNESCO declaration on Art Nouveau (Turin, 1994) for prioritizing appearance over authenticity. For him, these reveal a fetishistic attachment to images, substituting simulacra for authentic history.
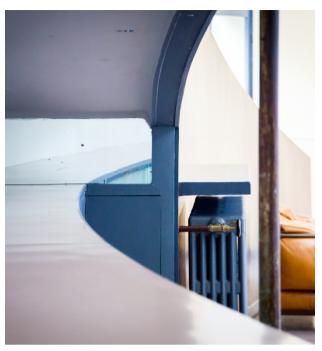
Irene Ruiz Bazán

Fig. 1 Paris, interior of the Maison La Roche where the original colours have been restored. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 2 Berlin. Restoration works at the Neue Nationalgalerie, involving massive substitutions of original materials, November 2019. Photograph by the author.

Also Ascensión Hernández[12] stresses that the image of contemporary architecture has become central yet problematic. Many interventions, particularly on icons like Villa Savoye or Villa La Roche, pursue a return to pristine appearance, dismantling later layers and recreating lost elements. While aiming to recover emblematic images, Hernández warns they risk privileging formal values over historical authenticity, reducing complex works to simplified symbols. She highlights the tension between preserving traces of time and offering a visually unblemished monument, noting that dominance of image-oriented restorations obscures richer constructive, social, and spatial meanings of modern architecture.

How might the new generation of architects and conservators interpret this situation, and what perspectives can be envisaged?

While many scholars warn of the risks of 'restoring only the image', contemporary practice often still adopts this criterion. The restoration of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin under the premise «As much Mies as possible»[13] — though centred on maintaining use — nonetheless privileged image over original material.

Within the ARURCOHE Master's programme[14] (2024–2025), we explored these tensions through collective debate, situating them within international guidelines. In particular, we revisited the Madrid–New Delhi Document on the Conservation of Twentieth-Century Heritage (2017)[15], re-reading it through values-based conservation. By crossing its criteria with methodologies of significance analysis, we tested whether 'image' could be formally recognized as a heritage value. Seminar discussions showed that reception of twentieth-century

architecture is inseparable from its mediated presence, and that conservation must increasingly address the tension between authenticity and visual legibility as co-constitutive values.

Contemporary restoration theories converge on a warning: the dominance of image in twentieth-century conservation risks producing neo-stylistic restorations that privilege appearance, erase historical layers, and reduce architecture to a timeless votive icon. In this view, to 'restore the image' is to betray material continuity, turning conservation into an ideological exercise of illusion and simulacrum.

The Values Paradigm in Heritage Conservation

Over the past four decades, heritage conservation has undergone a paradigmatic shift. No longer limited to monuments and exceptional buildings, it now encompasses vernacular sites, cultural landscapes, places of memory, intangible practices, and even media-mediated heritage. This expansion has brought a conceptual change: from preserving fabric as an end, to asking why heritage matters—and to whom.

Central to this turn is values-based conservation. Rooted in the Burra Charter (1979)[16] and later codified in international standards, it frames significance as the ensemble of values—historical, aesthetic, social, spiritual, scientific, and increasingly symbolic or communicative. Conservation is thus less about techni-cal intervention than about prioritizing which values to safeguard, enhance, or let evolve.

International texts reinforced this. The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994)[17] calls for assessing authenticity through diverse cultural lenses, while UNESCO's Manual for Managing Cultural World Heritage (2013)[18] stresses participatory value assessment in management planning. Together, they mark a move from rigid expert-led models to iterative, negotiated ones.

A key actor has been the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI). Through the Agora initiative and later programmes (1997–2005), it developed theoretical and methodological tools for values-based practice. Reports such as *Economics and Heritage Conservation* (1999)[19], *Values and Heritage Conservation* (2000)[20], *Assessing the Values of Cultural Heritage* (2002)[21], and *Heritage Values in Site Management* (2005)[22] introduced major innovations: the notion of *bundles* of values; structured methodologies to elicit, document, and compare them; integration of economic with socio-cultural valuation; and participatory approaches framing significance as socially negotiated.

Methodologically, the GCI advanced the field by: (1) structured elicitation protocols (value-mapping, interviews, consensus workshops) to capture plural values; (2) comparative matrices and weighting tools to clarify trade-offs; (3) case-based frameworks monitoring conservation decisions against evolving assessments; and (4) mixed-methods integration, combining qualitative (narratives, semiotic analysis, dialogue) and quantitative (economic valuation, contingent valuation, cost–benefit analysis) approaches.

From these debates emerges a crucial insight: if image and reception are among the attributes that communities and publics recognize as central to the meaning of a site—whether through iconic silhouettes, photographic legibility, mediated presence, or audience response—they can be formally articulated as heritage values within this plural framework. The methodological precedents established by the GCI suggest that such values could be systematically documented, compared, and integrated into conservation planning, rather than treated as ephemeral or secondary. The challenge then becomes not whether to include them, but how to design tools that balance visual and reception values alongside more traditional domains of significance.

Extending Getty's Methodologies to Image and Reception Values

The methodological repertoire developed by the GCI provides a strong basis for integrating image and reception values into conservation. While initially aimed at conventional categories—historical, aesthetic, social, economic—their logic of elicitation, comparative assessment, and participatory negotiation can be adapted to visual and mediated heritage.

First, value-mapping protocols can be expanded to include visual attributes: iconic silhouettes, preferred vantage points, characteristic framings in promotional material, iconographic repertoires, recurrence in publications, artistic representations, documentary photography, and circulating motifs. Stakeholders—residents, visitors, professionals, online communities—can annotate maps, photos, or digital models to mark the image aspects they find meaningful.

Second, weighting and decision matrices can compare image and reception values with other forms of significance. When restoration may alter recognizability in iconic photographs, a structured matrix helps weigh authenticity against visual integrity, making negotiations explicit and transparent.

Third, participatory workshops—central to the GCI—can elicit perceptions of mediated heritage. Focus groups with experts, tourists, residents, and digital audiences reveal how images circulate, which resonate, and what meanings they generate. Such workshops provide both data and legitimacy, aligning strategies with lived and mediated experiences.

Fourth, Getty's mixed-methods approach supports integrating visual semiotics and digital ethnography. Qualitative studies (interviews, surveys, narratives) can be combined with quantitative metrics (social media engagement, circulation, geotagging) to build a composite picture of image and reception values.

Finally, the reflexive, iterative testing in Getty's case studies suits visual and mediated heritage, where values shift quickly. Periodic reassessment—through surveys, monitoring digital circulation, or repeat workshops—keeps conservation responsive.

Together, these adaptations show that Getty's toolkit not only accommodates but also fosters the integration of image and reception values. Extending mapping, weighting, participation, and reviewing visual domains makes explicit what is already tacit: heritage meanings today are inseparable from how they are seen, represented, and receive.

Conclusion

This diagnosis raises a methodological question: is it inevitable that image plays only a distorting role in conservation? Or could the field develop tools to recognize image—and its historical and present reception by publics—not as a surrogate for materiality, but as part of the plural ensemble of values that confer cultural significance on heritage? Here, the values-based paradigm, consolidated by the Getty Conservation Institute and international frameworks, opens a possible reorientation. Instead of reducing architecture to image, or denying the role of image altogether, conservation might seek to operationalize image and reception as explicit values, subject to the same negotiation, prioritization, and justification processes as historic, social, or spiritual values.

Such a move does not dismiss the dangers we have discussed. On the contrary, by embedding image within a rigorous values framework, conservation can avoid the fetishistic 'short path'[23] of aesthetic reinstatement while

still acknowledging the cultural force of visual legibility, iconic silhouette, and mediated presence in contemporary heritage reception. The Villa Savoye, for instance, can be understood both as a material artifact with fragile plaster and as an enduring photographic icon, without collapsing one dimension into the other.

This approach can be explored with pedagogical experiments like the one carried out in the ARURCOHE Master's programme, where students re-read the Madrid–New Delhi Document (2017) through the lens of image as a heritage value. By bringing academic reflection, international guidance, and methodological innovation into dialogue, conservation can move toward a reflexive practice—capable of addressing the dual imperative of material authenticity and visual recognition.

In an era saturated by images, conservation must learn not only to resist their tyranny but also to integrate their significance within a plural, values-based methodology. By doing so can twentieth-century architecture be preserved both in its material testimony and in its mediated, living presence for future generations.

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[5] SIMONA SALVO, *Restaurare il Novecento. Storie, esperienze e prospettive in architettura*, Macerata, Quodlibet 2016.

[6] *Ivi*, p. 11.

[7] *Ibidem*.

[8] *Ibidem*.

[9] SUSANNA CACCIA GHERARDINI, *Le Corbusier e la villa Savoye: un caso di restauro autoriale / Le Corbusier and the villa Savoye: a case of authorial restoration*, Firenze, Florence University Press, 2023.

[10] MARCO DEZZI BARDESCHI, *Adoratori d'immagini*, «Ananke», n. 12, 1995, pp. 2-3.

[11] *Ivi*, p. 2.

[12] ASCENSIÓN HERNÁNDEZ MARTÍNEZ, *La conservación y restauración de la arquitectura contemporánea: paradojas y contradicciones*, «Loggia», n. 28, 2015, pp. 18-35.

[13] SANDRA HOFMEISTER, *As much Mies as possible*», «DETAIL», online edition 26.09.2018.

[14] The Erasmus Mundus Joint Master in Architectural and Urban Contemporary Heritage (ARURCOHE) is a 90 ECTS, 18-month postgraduate programme co-funded by the European Union for the 2022–2028 period (Project code: 101081182-ARURCOHE). It focuses on the safeguarding, conservation, and reuse of 20th-century urban and built heritage. The programme is jointly implemented by three European universities: University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), Spain; Politecnico di Torino (POLITO), Italy; Kaunas University of Technology (KTU), Lithuania.

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[23] As referred in MARCO DEZZI BARDESCHI, *Adoratori d'immagini*, op. cit., p. 3.