

Theory and practice in conservation. Some thoughts for the case of architectural conservation

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Abstract

Different monuments may require different intervention approaches even though they may have the same deterioration problems. Furthermore, since their value may also be dissimilar, this will affect the choice of intervention to be carried out. The secondary role that maintenance plays in the conservation of monuments has resulted in the need for more thorough conservation or restoration interventions, regardless of the fact that many conservation actions would benefit from slower but repetitive measures. An example of this approach, currently being implemented for the stone statuary decorating the National Palace of Queluz, Portugal, is presented.

Introduction

Cesare Brandi is an undisputed name in the field of conservation. Most of his work was centered on fine art objects since this was his main responsibility at the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro (ICR). However, he did consider the problem posed by architectural conservation. One of the important concepts he enunciated was the following:

‘S’intende generalmente per restauro qualsiasi intervento volto a rimettere in efficienza un prodotto dell’attività umana... Si avra dunque un restauro relative a manufatti industriale e un restauro relative all’opera d’arte’ (Brandi 1977).

[Restoration is understood to be any intervention meant to bring back into working order a product of human activity... Thus, there will be a restoration of industrial artifacts and a restoration of works of art] (author’s free translation).

What is important about this concept is that the type of conservation intervention to be carried out will depend on the building or monument to be restored. Already Giovannoni had highlighted this same point:

‘Le classificazione che possono farsi dei monumenti nei riguardo dei restauri sono di diverso ordine e s’intrecciano tra loro come le fila che in piu sensi vengono a formare le maglie di una rete’ (Giovannoni 1929)

[The classifications that can be made of monuments with regards to their restoration are of different orders and they intermesh as the threads that form the cells of a net] (author’s free translation)

This point was not as clearly stated in the ICOMOS Venice Charter (1964) where historic and artistic monuments to be preserved are considered of equal value. Although no two monuments will have the same value—each one is unique—it is important to consider and define the factors that make up the particular value of each monument. This is a critical point since value(s) will change over time (Burman 1997) and will affect the choice of intervention selected. A more practical and rational approach needs to be found to define an overall strategy for the preservation of those buildings and structures valued as monuments (Hassler and Kohler 2001).

Conservation vs. Restoration [heading]

There is a certain ambiguity about what is meant by a conservation intervention and what is meant by restoration. Part of this is the result of variations in use and meaning of these words between languages. To try to clarify these terms, the following definitions were proposed (Henriques et al. 2004):

Conservation is a cultural activity that uses technical methods to preserve the building by reducing its deterioration rate. The intervention must respect the historical, documental and aesthetic value of the building.

Restoration is a conjectural intervention in which parts that are heavily damaged or missing are rebuilt (in some instances, these may never have existed). Thus it can be considered a falsification since the historic authenticity of the building is violated, since missing parts are also historic evidence.

These definitions do not include the concept elaborated for the NORMAL standards developed in Italy, *i.e.*, that of extraordinary maintenance (NORMAL 20/85) where the word ‘extraordinary’ defines it as being ‘out of the ordinary’. This important concept highlights that a conservation intervention is really part of the regular maintenance required for any building or monument. It also emphasizes that the monument periodically will need these out of the ordinary maintenance interventions. Such an approach is currently being developed for the conservation of the stone statuary in the gardens of the National Palace of Queluz in Portugal.

Stone statuary in the gardens of the National Palace of Queluz

The conservation of the stone statuary in the gardens of the National Palace of Queluz is part of an overall project developed initially between World Monuments Fund-Portugal and the Instituto Português do Património Arquitectónico e Arqueológico (IPPAR). Subsequently, IPPAR’s role was taken over by the Instituto dos Museus e da Conservação. The project deals with the restoration of the gardens and the conservation of the decorative elements found in it, such as statuary—both in stone and lead-cast, fountains and a canal lined with azulejo tiles. It is evident that each element needs to be addressed in a particular way depending on the nature of the materials involved.

For the specific case of the stone statuary, which mainly suffers from bio-colonization, a new approach was devised taking into account the fact that these decorative elements have to be considered as part of the garden itself and not as individual works of art. While it is accepted that gardens require regular maintenance for their upkeep, no such attempt has been considered for decorative elements in them. In general, stone statuary is subjected to thorough cleaning only when it reaches a high degree of soiling, in this specific context this refers to bio-colonization. The rather drastic methods then used to clean them can contribute significantly to the erosion of their surface. It is important to consider that, depending on the location of the object, cleaning may be required as often as every ten years and that these decorative elements date from the 18th century. Repeated cleaning interventions over the years may result in more damage being induced by cleaning than that derived from natural weathering.

The approach being developed aims to minimize the number and intensity of interventions required, reduce the rate of re-colonization and decrease the required maintenance. This is particularly important considering the inadequate number of on site maintenance personnel and the number of stone objects in the garden: 91 statues, 143 pedestals, 35 busts, 40 bases,

102 vases and 43 balustrade sections. The objective is to have the statuary present a homogeneous appearance, not necessarily perfectly clean but rather with a slightly weathered look in accordance with their age but without giving the impression of neglect.

The methodology developed is based on the application of a biocide at a low concentration and allowing this chemical to act over time (see Charola et al. 2007 for detailed description). The approach also takes into account the fact that these decorative elements are in a garden with living plants and that therefore, the application of high concentrations of biocides to accelerate their action is not desirable from an environmental point of view. The following Figure 1 illustrates the results obtained.



Figure 1. One of the sculpture groups in the gardens of the National Palace of Queluz. The group on the left—photographed in April 2006—was treated with the biocide in September 2006 and is shown on the right in October 2007.

It is hoped that the maintenance approach being developed for the stone statues in the gardens at the National Palace of Queluz may serve as a model to be followed in similar cases. And although the methodology is not directly applicable to every intervention it might help to spark the imagination in developing comparable processes which focus on the key concept ‘**maintenance**’.

Discussion and Conclusions

The most important point in any conservation or restoration intervention is defining the objective of the intervention. Answering the following questions will help in this: What is the aim of the intervention? Why is the intervention necessary? Have the deterioration factors that created the problem been correctly identified? Have they been addressed to prevent continuation of the deterioration? Was the problem to be addressed the result of lack of

maintenance? If so, how is future maintenance to be assured? What has changed to makes this last assurance valid?

Once these questions are answered, the actual methodology of the intervention can be defined. This has to be adapted to the specific monument in its specific environment. The same problem in two different buildings will not necessarily require the same methodological approach to address it. Conservation does not have a single answer, each question can have several answers and it is up to the conservators to decide which is the most appropriate one based on the answers provided to the questions asked above.

An issue that is rarely discussed in conservation circles is the requirement that the intervention considered be carried out in a minimum of time (Caetano et al 2006). In general, this is the result of logistics requirements and, in some instances, the reduced funding made available for this purpose. For example, the removal of the last sulfate residues after the elimination of black crusts is best carried out if the surface is wetted and left to dry for a week at a time, the cycle being repeated until the amount of sulfates extracted is minimized to an acceptable level (Alessandrini et al. 1993). However, this approach is practically impossible to implement because of the high costs of scaffolding. Thus, in practice, the removal of gypsum crusts indefectibly leaves soluble sulfates present in the masonry cleaned.

Furthermore, no thought is given to the fact that the need for intervention is the result of a problem that in most cases has been ongoing for years and that correcting it may also require a long time. For example, the salts present in many historic structures are the result of their accumulation over several centuries, yet it is considered feasible to extract them practically overnight. Solutions such as the application of sacrificial renders where the salts can accumulate over time are not considered viable because of the required maintenance, since the renders will fail periodically until the salt content has been reduced sufficiently. Although the process itself is relatively simple the fact that regular maintenance is required over the initial years, does not make it acceptable even though it is not a costly solution. This approach would be the most effective method of dealing with the problem and the least damaging to the structure. But interventions are expected to solve all problems for the present and the short term future. Modern society does not have the patience to let nature do its work. Yet at the same time it lets nature weather buildings and monuments without providing the necessary maintenance, which carried out in timely fashion, would certainly reduce significantly the need for costly conservation interventions.

An “extraordinary maintenance” approach, which implies that future maintenance is assured, is the exception to the rule. Maintenance does not have the glamour required to capture people’s imagination. In general, it is considered the responsibility of the owner of the monument. Yet simultaneously, there are popular movements to designate new monuments and historic sites so as to preserve them. How these are to be preserved is never considered. Even totally ruined buildings, such as former railway stations or mills, which no longer have a practical function are restored as sites of interest and local authorities are expected to assume their maintenance. Not until society accepts the responsibility of regular maintenance, including extraordinary maintenance, for its material heritage, will the future preservation of its monuments be ensured.

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ICOMOS ‘Venice Charter 1964’ *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites* www.icomos.org/venice_charter/html

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