100 YEARS BAUHAUS

What interest do we take in Modern Movement today?

Selected Papers from
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1st March 2019 I Berlin

Uta Pottgiesser, Franz Jaschke, Michel Melenhorst (EDs.)

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Content

Cover Figure (Fig. 1): Piero Portaluppi, Valdo hydroelectric power station, Valdo (VB), Italy, 1920-23, view, south-east. © Photo: Piero Portaluppi Foundation, 1923.

Cathedrals of Modernity. The Legacy of Piero Portaluppi's electric Architecture - Valdo Power Station (1919-1923) Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Starting from 1912, the architect Piero Portaluppi (1888-1967) was entrusted to design six hydroelectric plants in Val d'Ossola, a valley in North-West Italy. The power stations, a clear representation of modern monumentality, became one of the most important systems of water reservoir exploitation in Europe. Built in the Twenties and abandoned in 1941, the hydroelectric plant of Valdo played an important social role for the valley, becoming the vehicle for the development of the area. Portaluppi's hydroelectric architectures were illustrated as modern cathedrals or castles; the modernity of the plant (even though mainly built with traditional materials) resides in the idea of society, development and progress that building still documents. The spaces, the relationship established between the power station and its natural environment are part of the legacy of the Modern Movement. From a cultural point of view, dealing with the preservation of these buildings testifies an extension of the traditional concept of 'heritage'. From an educational point of view, the challenge of their protection doesn't represent only a technical issue, but a path that requires to involve these buildings in today's social and economic demand. The paper describes the cultural and creative approaches of an academic path aimed at returning the modern building both to the locals and the community. The proposal is the outcome of multi-layer research that converts the former hydroelectric plant of Valdo, actually used as a warehouse, into a multi-functional building that meets the needs of the inhabitants, becoming a new district hub.

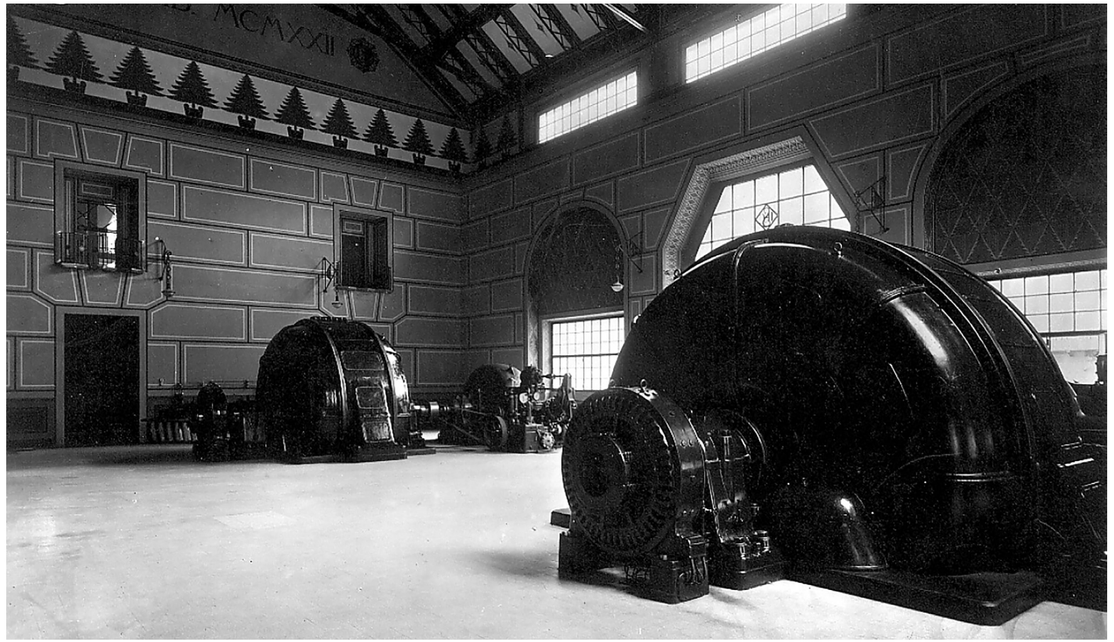

Fig. 2: Piero Portaluppi, Valdo hydroelectric power station, Valdo (VB), Italy, 1920-23, machine room. © Photo: Piero Portaluppi Foundation, 1923.

1. NEW FORMS OF ENERGY FOR THE ARCHITECT'S EDUCATIONAL PATH

Such developments as the construction of the hydroelectric power stations in Val d'Ossola and the Bauhaus school intertwine at various points. These were the years in which Piero Portaluppi[1] constructed the Valdo power station[2] and in which the Bauhaus cultural project emerged through the Weimar school.[3]

As a didactic resource, the power station, by its very nature, is exemplary as an instance of a system of edifices forming a network, with technical, constructive and figurative interconnections. This hydraulic engineering work is intrinsically linked to other buildings directly following on from it and which were necessary for its functioning. However, for a full account of the relationship with the valley, alongside the interplay with the landscape and the pertaining equilibria, one must also consider the social role played by constructions appearing at that time in these locations.

Despite the strict limitations posed by its very use, the power station bears witness, as a record, to the time of introduction of complex machinery into a natural setting (**Fig. 1**). Indeed, the project contributed to a transformation of this setting while also focussing on the culture of applied arts. As in the cases of the Crego and Verampio power stations, the role of decor or adornments in the architectural works of Piero Portaluppi emerges repeatedly as expression of the ability of the artisan or artist to give form – even while accommodating the modes of the figurative tradition – to a new idea of society and of development inhering in the very function of the building: a 'machine' with a Deco soul, in which the designer's love of ornamentation interfaces with ironic references to imposing architectural works of the past (cathedrals, fortresses, palaces).

If the Bauhaus sought to subsume all forms of artistic creation within a unity, then the unitary work of art could only be, as this school saw it, a large-scale architectural work. Nowadays, preservation of Portaluppi's industrial buildings can only mean handing on to future generations works of art that are indeed unitary. Starting from its spatial features, the power plant almost represents a concrete reference to the xylography "Cathedral"[4] by Lyonel Feiringer published in the Bauhaus manifesto of 1919: a building that embodies the merging of art, technology and craftsmanship applied to the architecture. The cultural matrix that investigates the reunification of all artistic expressions in a single creative will, also led to explore the relation between machine and art: while the Bauhaus tested out solutions aimed at producing architectural objects for the industrial society, the power plant itself produced energy to feed the needs of the new society.

The decision to propose a retrospective vision of this didactic itinerary – that led to the production of a master degree thesis dedicated to the future of this 20th-century 'machine' – came out of the belief that the University is duty-bound to educate for, and to form, new critical perceptions in respect of the issues of preservation.

Over the last few years, we have come to note a – necessary – extension of the traditional concept of 'heritage[5],to now include also works that constitute vital tipping points along the path toward the formation of the identifying traits of the 20th-century. In other words, buildings that give expression to the end of one era while also pointing to the emergence of a new era. The students may, therefore, take intoaccount apparently marginal aspects of conservation/preservation, while updating the foundations of this discipline and extending its frontiers.

Fig. 3: Valdo hydroelectric power station, Valdo (VB), Italy, 2018, site plan. © Elena Lemma, Davide Tassera.

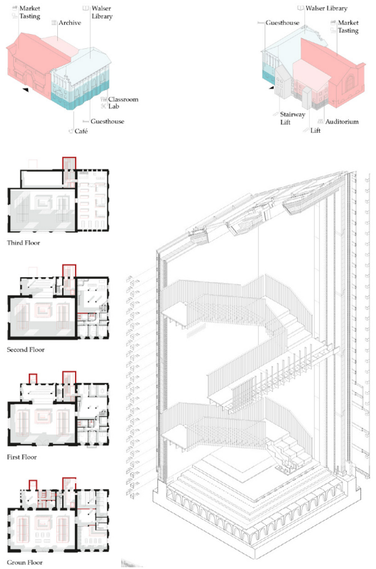

Fig. 4: Valdo hydroelectric power station, Valdo (VB), Italy, 2018, conservation and adaptive-reuse strategies (the new additions are in red). © Elena Lemma, Davide Tassera.

The educational path, therefore, starts out from recognition that the sphere of a legacy to be preserved will include such objects as these: the Valdo power station is clearly an instance of 'auteur' architecture but yet we may note that the building, by its very nature, is far from being 'iconic' as a creation, conceptually speaking. Here, we are not dealing with an architecture that loudly proclaims a social and cultural revolution. This work does not document the "Dionysian myth of the avant garde"[6]. It embodies, instead, a slow-moving revolution, a concept that does not, in itself, run counter to the concept of utopia.
Indeed, conservation of these buildings within the context of the combined efforts of education and research also means establishing a continuum between aspects such as society, culture and progress on the one hand, and, on the other, aspects linked to the material reality of the object.
While knowledge of construction features and of the decay – made all the more serious as a result of abandonment – are core concerns of the itinerary embarked upon by the final-year students, this knowledge clearly is not an end in itself with respect to the proposed work. The educational path focuses on more than technical and material conservation problems. Of prime importance, too, are strategies for re-use; which strategies must interface with the characteristics that endow upon the building its identity, also in view of the transformations that have already taken place, as part of a process that remains one of continuity with history. Lastly, we note that the lesson of the Bauhaus school that is perhaps of the greatest relevance to today's teaching activities ties in with 'knowledge contamination' processes. The project dedicated to architecture as a synthesis of art and industry, now free of the circumstances[7] that generated it, requires mediation of culture and science, and it perfectly represents this contamination.

2. ELECTRIC ARCHITECTURE

Between 1896 and 1914, the recently established United Kingdom of Italy (1861) increased the industrial production with considerable enthusiasm for the new electrical power industry. Since its foundation in 1883, the Edison Company has been the main promoter of the development of Italian hydroelectric engineering and of the building of several plants.
Architecture impacted the field of engineering invasively, with the vision of industrial buildings as genuine works of art. Outside the Italian borders, we see this in the urban power stations constructed in Paris, Berlin and London, presaging the development of electric architecture over the following decades. Architects such as Paul Friese or Franz Schwechten, harbingers of the "new realm of electricity", designed monumental works that were so audacious as to confer upon them an aura that we may compare only with that of religious buildings.
The power stations, constructed in the most recondite corners of the Italian territory, on the banks of rivers or in Alpine valleys, exploit the natural setting, which assumes the role of an amphitheater. Electric architecture pays homage to energy not just thanks to the insertion of industrial structures within Alpine landscape settings: the originality of these buildings is based on the translation – into functional and figurative motifs – of the idea of electrical energy derived from a natural source such as water.[8]
In 1912, when the first power station was commissioned to the architect (the Verampio power station), Portaluppi's idea was to develop the project as closely as possible along the lines of an 'electric

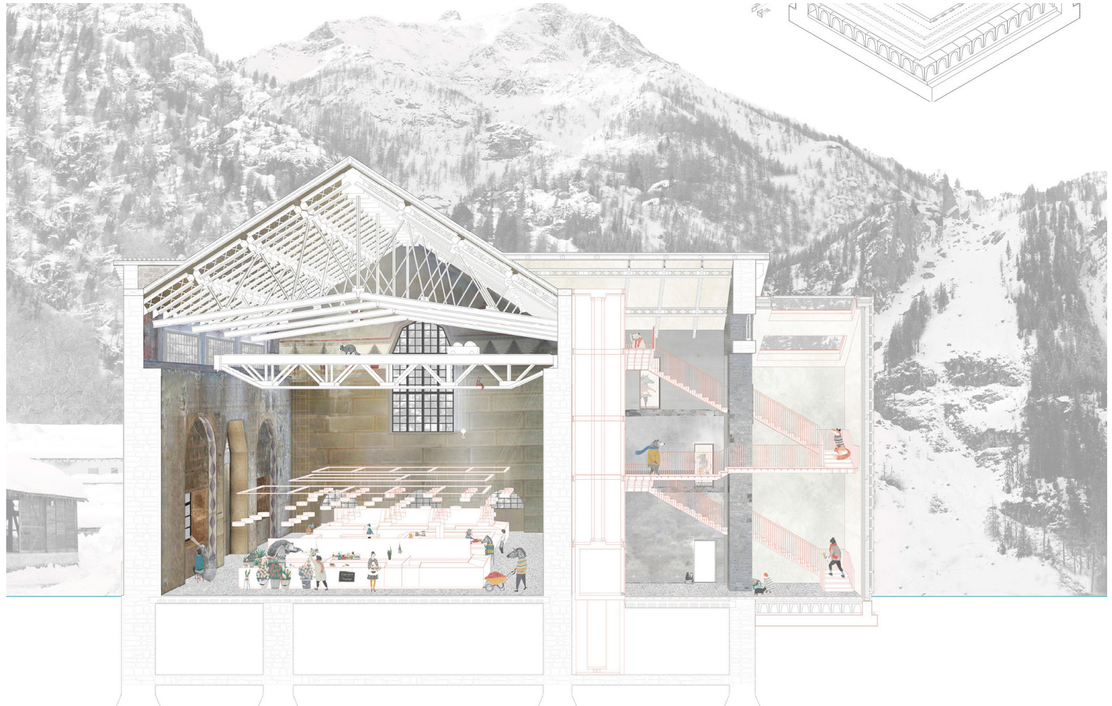

Fig. 5: Valdo hydroelectric power station, Valdo (VB), Italy, 2018, North façade, existing conditions. © Elena Lemma, Davide Tassera.

hamlet', a small township or borough – in which, around the 'castle' (the power station) we find workshops, the manager's residence, offices and the transformers. The turreted 'castle' stands within its setting like a Medieval fortress with its drawbridge, an ogival gateway, windows set in stone and a clock tower. This sturdily constructed building, itself, also attests to the will to create a work that is monumental in nature, connoting the work as an example of early 20th-century electric architecture.

Portaluppi's project for Valdo provides a further exercise in style. The register adopted for this power station relates to the world of fables or legends. However, there is a sense of irony here, too, reflected also in decorative motifs of the frieze inside the turbine hall, which look to the surrounding nature. In this vast space, conceived like the nave of a cathedral, the architect's inclusion of stylized pines in small vases alludes to humankind's manipulation of nature (**Fig. 2**). Furthermore, the decorative solutions selected refer more broadly to the geographic context (indeed, the Walser dialect word, "Wald", means forest).

By capably deploying the instrument of irony, Portaluppi bridged architecture and electricity, as well as the theme of the network and the relationship between humankind and nature. The special attention paid to the context within which the buildings have been placed is something of great significance even today. He also created a space in which the ornamental apparatus tells the story of the process of energy production. The outcome represents something totally new in the history of industrial architecture, as a result of which the power stations actually become the "string of gems"[9] that the commissioner desired, objects that not only enhance the landscape but also contribute to its transformation.

3. VALDO

Following the construction of the first two hydroelectric power stations, the entrepreneur Ettore Conti initiated a new exploitation project for the River Toce valley, which included the construction of a new power station (**Fig. 3**). The project of the new hydroelectric plant went beyond the edifice itself, as it also required the construction of dams, channels and tunnels, including a new road suitable for vehicles. This road led to the expansion of the nearby village of Valdo while also attracting tourists (who, even today, visit Val Formazza).

When the premises were officially closed down, in 1941, the Valdo power station continued to be used, since the identity of the power station was strongly linked to the lives of workers and of the people of Formazza. Indeed, at this stage, the building was a focal rendezvous point. For example, a grocery was installed within the plant itself, alongside a small canteen for the ENEL energy company's employees from the nearby Alta Val Formazza. [10]

The north-facing elevation bears significant modifications occurred in the 1940s: two new volumes were added to this side and an additional floor was added to the control mechanisms hall, entailing the modification of the original 1920s roofing. Such transformations caused the substantial loss of the original unitary nature of the project. In fact, the new additions brutally broke the rhythm of the north-facing side and completely altered the symmetry of the west façade - a core element of Portaluppi's design - through the demolition of one of the two towers. The state of decay that this area displays today is mainly the result of these newer incongruous additions. Furthermore, seepage has rendered these spaces – completed in the late 1940s – unusable. Despite the modifications that occurred over the years, it is still possible to perceive the Valdo plant's original spatial configura-

Fig. 6: Valdo hydroelectric power station, Valdo (VB), Italy, 2018, conservation and adaptive-reuse, simulation of the north-facing front view. © Elena Lemma, Davide Tassera.

tion, as the spaces and the roofing system are in a good state of repair. Paradoxically, at least from the conservation angle, the building actually benefitted from the fact that it was abandoned so soon. Both the structural elements and the ornamental apparata have survived essentially intact. Indeed, even today, we can admire the "improbable painted angle stones"[11] and the "archetypes of an artificially re-created woodland"[12]. As opposed to Portaluppi's other power stations, where the need to modify and upgrade the machinery engendered the alteration of Portaluppi's ornaments and spaces. The fact that no protective restriction was provided for the architect's legacy undoubtedly contributed to the loss of a part of this heritage. In order to compensate for such shortcoming, the proposal aims at creating awareness around the value of such buildings and the importance of their reuse and transmission to future generations.

4. "IN-CENTRAL": A PROJECT FOR THE FORMER VALDO POWER STATION

The thesis path started from the idea that a 20th-century masterpiece as the former Valdo power station should be reused with the aim to keep its close contact with public life. The study is based on the adaptive-reuse process[13]– an approach closely related to historic conservation – that adapts building for new uses while keeping its features, also preserving its tangible and intangible values.

One of the main themes of the research concerned the criteria guiding decision-making in regard to new uses. On the basis of the study of the social and cultural context, and in view also of the imposing size of the building, it was decided to revive the power station's fortunes as a new operational multi-functional center for Val Formazza (**Fig. 4, 5**). This approach favors accessibility to users and interprets the power station as a territorial catalyst. The growing demand among tourists for new experiences that are linked to the qualities of the area, local culture and traditions, were also seen as factors very much in keeping with the proposal for a multi-functional center as a pole of attraction for the site. In particular, the project offers new market spaces to taste and buy local products, educational spaces and a library for the Walser Association "Walserverein Pomatt".[14]

The intervention planned for the original nucleus of Portaluppi's project had to be non-invasive. Only then could an itinerary be enabled, with all the due care and attention, which would serve as an introduction to this architectural work. The new elements inserted – required to functionally re-activate this 'machine' – were to be set apart as clearly distinct components from the pre-existing elements. They also ensure maximum accessibility on the part of the various types of visitors.

The north-facing façade was considered the part that might be most extensively modified. Indeed, it was decided here to remove the additions built in the 1940s, deemed architecturally unremarkable and of little value as a record of the past (**Fig. 6, 7**). The design also entails the removal of the inter-floor elements for the inclusion of a new volume hosting stairways and an elevator. This plan solved the problem of accessibility from one floor to the other while enabling a reassessment of the north-facing elevation.

The new X-Lam structures are distinct from – but never dominating – the pre-existing elements. The main element of reference remains the power station itself, as part of a continuum with the history of innovation that the building itself represents. The profile of the new volumes reminds the angles of the pre-existing roofing systems. For the cladding, it was decided to use the same local stone adopted by

Fig. 7: Valdo hydroelectric power station, conservation and adaptive-reuse, photographic simulation of the north-facing front view.© Elena Lemma, Davide Tassera.

the architect, but to clearly identify it: a distinct manner of surface stone-working was adopted.
Unlike the restoration plans drawn up for many iconic 20th-century buildings, the project for this architectural work did not point to a return to the original state: the removal of the more recently installed volumes was carefully executed so as to leave visible surface traces of the various historical phases and the changes effected over time. Some constituting traits of the modern movement are echoed in fundamental considerations that guided the decision-making process of the thesis project: the aim (reflected both in the new use and in the insertion of new volumes) was to attain the "uttermost utility"[15] in returning the plant to the local community, not just from the functional angle, but also as a record of the past.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The research and the graduate education related to the preservation of these cathedrals/machines of Modernity entail the social recognition of the plant as part of the legacy of 20th-century and of its idea of the future.
The main issue emerging from their preservation is the need to stress the intrinsic dualism of the concept of 'transformation' that resides as much in changes occurred in the society – which no longer recognizes values/usefulness of these buildings –, as in crucial changes that adaptive-reuse process necessarily implies.
The strategy behind the principle of non-invasive insertion rejects the idea of Modern heritage as an unmodifiable image. In this case, the historical value of the building makes it capable of fostering and accepting the presence of new layers represented by contemporary visible grafts, without concealing all the historical layers that define the current architecture. They all represent new design occasions – something that encourages a dialog with the heritage – able to improve the research on the relationship between Modern and Time.

ENDNOTES AND QUOTATIONS

[1] Piero Portaluppi (Milan, 1888-1967) graduated in 1910 in Architecture from the Politecnico of Milan. In the 20's Portaluppi became one of the most important Milanese architects, mainly known for the city reconstruction between the two world wars. From 1939 to 1963 he was the Dean of the Faculty of Architecture at the Politecnico of Milan. He also cooperated with several architects such as BBPR and Giò Ponti.

[2] The Valdo hydroelectric power station was designed and built between 1920 and 1923.

[3]The famed Programm des Staatlichen Bauhauses in Weimar was presented by Walter Gropius in April 1919. The school was located in Thuringia. It was then closed and transferred to Dessau in 1925.

[4] Feininger's xylography "The Cathedral of Socialism" depicts a cathedral on which three rays are joined. The rays represent the three main arts: painting, sculpture, architecture. The building instead is the symbol of a common work which involves architects, painters, sculptors and craftsmen. The symbolic image of the cathedral was much appreciated in those years, thanks to the rediscovery of the formal problems of the Gothic in Worringer's studies. Cf. Wilhelm Worringer, Formprobleme der Gotik, R. Piper & Co., München, 1911; Walter Gropius, Bauhaus Manifesto and Program, 1919.

[5] The extension of the concept of heritage actually concerns utilitarian architectures like cooling towers, water reservoirs, service stations, motorways, parabolic silos, etc. On these topics, see Maristella Casciato, "Monumenti moderni e patrimonio monumentale", Curare il moderno. I modi della tecnologia, Venice, Marsilio, 2002, 451-457; Ugo Carughi, Maledetti vincoli. La tutela dell'architettura contemporanea, Allemandi, Torino, 2012, 21-52.

[6] Francesco Dal Co, "Preface to Italian edition", Il Bauhaus. Weimar Dessau Berlino 1919-1933, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1987, XIII.

[7] Louis I. Kahn, Silence and Light, Zurich, Park Books, 1969, 131.

[8] Michael Jakob, "Una estetica della sorpresa: le centrali di Portaluppi e le forme dell'energia", Piero Portaluppi. Linea errante nell'architettura del Novecento, Milan, Skira, 2003, 193-209.

[9] Cf. Ettore Conti, Dal taccuino di un Borghese, Milan, Garzanti, 1971, 58.

[10] This information was collected during the interview conducted by the final-year students with Ettore Valsesia, who headed Enel building sites after 1947.

[11] Ornella Selvafolta, "Fulgura multiplicavit. Le centrali idroelettriche di Ettore Conti, Umberto Girola e Piero Portaluppi", Accoppiamenti giudiziosi. Storia di progettisti e costruttori, Milan, Skira, 1995, 40.

[12] Cf. Michael Jakob, ibid.

[13] Cf. Donatella Fiorani, Loughlin Kealy, Stefano F. Musso (ed.), Conservation/Adaptation. Keeping alive the spirit of the place. Adaptive-reuse of heritage with symbolic value, Hasselt, EAAE, 2017.

[14] The Walserverein Pomatt was founded in 1983. The association aims to preserve the culture related to the walser community (a Germanic population established in the Alps, who was able to adapt its lifestyle and economy to the mountain environment).

[15] Bruno Taut, Modern Architecture, London, The Studio, 1929. Reference is made here to the first of the five points set forth by Taut in summing up the characteristics of the Modern Movement.

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Ana Tostões, PhD is an architect, architecture critic and historian, and is president of Docomomo International and Editor of the Docomomo Journal. She is a Full Professor at Técnico, University of Lisbon, where she teaches Theory of Architecture and Critical History, and coordinates the Architectonic Culture research group. Since 2012, she has been in charge of the Architectural PhD program. She has been invited professor at FAUP, EPFL, ETHZ, UTSOA, RSA, ETSAB, ETSAUN. universities worldwide. Her research field is the Critical History and Theory of Contemporary Architecture, focusing on the relationship between European, Asian, African and American cultures. On this topic, she has published 13 books and 95 essays, curated 9 exhibitions, participated in 47 juries, 40 scientific committees and gave lectures in 72 universities worldwide. She has acted as peer referee for scientific journals. She coordinated the research projects "Exchanging World Visions (1943-1974)" and "Cure and Care the rehabilitation".

PHOTOGRAPHER

Jean Molitor, was born in Berlin, learned the profession of photographer and studied artistic photography at the College of Graphics and Book Art in Leipzig. As a freelance photographer he has been traveling around the world for a wide variety of projects for 30 years now. Since 2009 he has been dedicated to architectural photography and especially the so-called classic modern. In his publications, he is committed to the preservation of cultural heritage worldwide and founded the bau1haus project.

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Michel Melenhorst, studied architecture at Delft Technical University and worked for Wiel Arets (1991-1995) and OMA (1995-1999) before starting his own office in 1999. In 2005, he became a partner in DAAD Architects. In 2012, he switched to Detmold Germany to hold the chair for Contextual Design at the Hochschule Ostwestfalen Lippe, where he coordinates the Master's in Architecture. Michel Melenhorst has extensive experience in teaching and lecturing at institutions such as TU Delft, Design Academy Eindhoven, Lasalle University Bogota, HCU Hamburg, Arhus school of Architecture, University of Antwerp and K´Arts Seoul. He is a member of Docomomo international and is active in Docomomo Deutschland Workgroup education. At the HS-OWL he is coordinating the Master in Architecture, he is a member of the Researchgroup Urban Lab and co-organises the Universities annual workshop week and Conference ´Detmolder Räume´ Since 2016 he leads ´RMB´, an europewide intiative to start a specialized, two years master studies on reuse of modernist buildings.

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REUSE OF MODERNIST BUILDINGS V

In 2019 DOCOMOMO Germany and the Detmold School of Architecture and Interior Architecture at Ostwestfalen-Lippe, University of Applied Sciences (TH OWL) with the Erasmus+-Project 'Reuse of Modernist Buildings' (RMB) organized the 16th DOCOMOMO Germany and 3rd RMB Conference. The international conference in Berlin took place on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Bauhaus and as an opportunity to discuss the significance of modernity in the 21st century. The conference focus lies on the concepts, visions, and impulses emanating from Modern Movement and how they can be related to today's social, economic, cultural and in particular creative issues.

This second Docomomo publication includes a selection of eleven papers that were not included in the original online conference proceedings (http://www.rmb-eu.com/publications/). The papers witness in a particular way the dominating themes and typologies of Modern Movement. They also demonstrate manifold reuse and conservation approaches—conceptually, aesthetically and technically. They are expression of the intensive investigation and documentation efforts of members and supporters of DOCOMOMO together with the academic and professional community.

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