

MODERN
HERITAGE
BETWEEN
Venice, 4-5th May 2021
CARE
AND RISK

Edited by Maria Bonaiti, Sara Di Resta

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The International Conference “Modern Heritage between Care and Risk” (Venice, 4-5th May 2021) was held at Università Iuav di Venezia, in collaboration with Fondazione Le Corbusier and Docomomo Italia. The event offered an opportunity for an international exchange on crucial issues of documentation and preservation of the 20th century architectural heritage in a time of rapid social, cultural and political changes. The first day has been dedicated to “Ahmedabad. Laboratory of Modern Architecture”, a site-manifesto threatened today by the demolition of relevant dormitories of the Indian Institute of Management by Louis I. Kahn. The second day has been dedicated to “Living the Architectural Preservation. Modern Houses in the Conservation of 20th Century Heritage”, focused on recent conservation/restoration works of Modern authorial houses and neighbourhoods. The proceedings collect selected papers presented by international researchers and architects involved in the fields of History of Architecture and Architectural Preservation.

Maria Bonaiti is a Full Professor in History of Architecture at Università Iuav di Venezia. In her research Bonaiti investigates twentieth-century architecture, focusing on post-World War II architecture in Europe and the United States, with particular emphasis on the debate that develops around the complex relationship established in those years between modernity and tradition. Among her publications are the monograph *Louis I. Kahn 1901-1974, Electa, Milano 2012*, and *Le Corbusier in India. Villa Sarabhai, Ahmedabad, 1951-1956, Electa, Milano 2021*.

Sara Di Resta is Associate Professor of Architectural Preservation at Università Iuav di Venezia. Her research activities are focused on the preservation of 20th-century heritage, with particular attention to the conservation of modern building materials. She is the author of more than 70 publications including the volumes “Le forme della conservazione. Intenzione e prassi dell’architettura contemporanea per il restauro” (2016) and “Materiali autarchici. Conservare l’innovazione” (2021). She is currently member of the executive committee of SIRA - the Italian Society of Architectural Conservation/Restoration and Docomomo Italia.

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Edited by Maria Bonaiti, Sara Di Resta
with the collaboration of Elena Sofia Moretti

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MODERN HERITAGE BETWEEN CARE AND RISK

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PART 2.
'LIVING' THE
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MODERN
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CONSERVATION
OF 20TH CENTURY
HERITAGE

PART 2.
INTRODUCTION

1 INHABITING THE FRAGILITIES OF MODERN HERITAGE

SARA DI RESTA

Università Iuav di Venezia

"The home must have a personality corresponding to the culture of those who inhabit it: the architect must arrange the services and fixtures, while everything else is the inhabitant's responsibility, and architects must only influence taste, culture and education in living. They must influence the 'production' of furnishings and not create all the furnishings themselves: as regards the exactness of the architect's work, the house must be a 'machine à habiter'; as regards the inhabitant, it must be their home" ①. (Gio Ponti, 1957)

The relationship between research and protection is a central issue in addressing the conservation of 20th-century architecture. Indeed, it is research that determines and guides protection tools and, even more importantly, identifies the notion of heritage recognized by contemporary society. This process takes place on the basis not only of historical knowledge, but also of the complexity of factors related to change, both physiological of the object and of the society that interprets it.

Underlying the concept of heritage, therefore also of modern heritage, is the construction of a community that recognizes and is recognized in elements of cultural identity, identified and selected as assets that must be safeguarded ●. As we know, the concept of heritage is not an invariant and static term. On the contrary, the extension of the meaning of the term and the consequent broadening of its scope, also suggested today by the Codice dei Beni Culturali (Code of Cultural and Landscape Heritage), have led, for the last forty years, to questions about the values conveyed by recent architectural production, its destiny and its protection. As Franco and Musso have observed, this approach coincides with a process of knowledge, first and foremost, as well as of selection, based on criteria that are ideally, but not necessarily, shared by the widest possible community of those interested in the subject and directly or indirectly involved in it ●.

The modern houses that are the focus of conference *Living the Architectural Preservation. Modern Houses in the Conservation of 20-th Century Heritage*, define an investigation framework that links the terms and tools of heritagization, conservation and use of a particular segment of 20th-century architecture. The status of “*auteur* architecture” accorded to the houses of Le Corbusier, Gio Ponti, Luigi Moretti, Carlo Scarpa and Vittoriano Viganò discussed in this volume is not proving to be a sufficient criterion for guaranteeing effective protection at national

and international level. The factors that make famous buildings, recognized for their cultural value, “endangered heritage” not only relate to – undoubtedly crucial – issues connected to the relevant legislative context, but also concern methods of social reception and use of the works, in which the inhabitant/user plays a central role in the proper management and transmission of this heritage to the future.

Bringing together scholars and professionals involved in the conservation of these buildings, while including the inhabitants/users of the properties in a context of exchange and dialogue, makes it possible to outline a very detailed state of the art on the fragility of this architecture and, above all, to define planning and management strategies for its active conservation.

10·2 PROTECTING MODERN ARCHITECTURE

An approach to the protection of 20th-century Italian architecture through current legislative provisions requires us to focus on the role of the declaration of cultural interest issued by the competent Superintendencies as a guarantee of the right to protect these works and, ideally, as a premise for high-quality restoration projects ④.

The regulatory protection tools adopted by a nation also testify to its sensitivity to the significance of architecture built in the recent past. However, as Carughi has observed, 20th-century architectural heritage appears to be progressively less valued and protected by Italian legislation ●, in total contrast to trends in the culture of the field, which is investigating this area with increasing intensity. A first critical step was taken in 2011, when the time limitation for the protection of properties under the *Codice dei Beni Culturali e del Paesaggio* (Code of Cultural and Landscape Heritage – Legislative Decree no. 42 of 22 January 2004) became

twofold: while remaining fifty years from the completion of privately owned properties, an extension to seventy years was provided for publicly owned properties. The direct result was that world-renowned architecture, built between the 1940s and 1960s, suddenly found itself without the prospect of protection.

A new amendment to the Code came into force in 2017, extending the seventy-year limit to privately owned movable and immovable property ●. With the removal of the reference to the fifty-year limit dating back to the Nasi law (Law no. 185 of 12 June 1902), the entire production of the second half of the 20th century therefore remains excluded from the recognition of cultural interest due to its “intrinsic value”. This time interval, motivated by the need to ensure an adequate perspective for critical judgement, has not proved convincing on a scientific level, since it excludes from protection objects that are already universally recognized for their cultural, architectural and documentary value. Carughi also notes that in the international context the time threshold for the so-called “constraint”, where present, varies from country to country and can be waived in most countries where it is in place.

Only in limited cases has the new time threshold not prevented a building, including very recent ones, from being protected in Italy for its links with aspects of national history or culture. This refers to the so-called “relational interest” attributable to an asset insofar as it is not material ●. Modern architecture protected under this regulation includes Ignazio Gardella’s Casa Cicogna in Venice (1953-58), Pier Luigi Nervi’s Palazzo del Lavoro in Turin (1961), Giancarlo De Carlo’s Colonia Marina in Riccione (1961-63) and Sergio Musmeci’s bridge over the Basento in Potenza (1967-75).

In a process undermined by regulatory limits and internal contradictions, Canziani opens up a further possibility for protection:

"recognition of historical value that is independent of the date of construction and of the author, but only applies if a clear relationship with cultural history can be identified, without considering the intrinsic architectural merits of the property, which alone cannot justify this type of protection. A rare, indeed very rare event in Italian heritage, which has occurred in the case of a handful of buildings, not due to a lack of objects that deserve it, but because of the difficulty of establishing such a constraint on the identification of a historical value of modernity" ●.

A final path emerges from the aforementioned issues connected to authorship. As Foucault observed in 1969, while highlighting the limits of the phenomenon, "the notion of 'author' constitutes the cornerstone of the individualization of the history of ideas, knowledge and literature, as well as of the history of philosophy and the history of science" ⑩. However, the author, the scholar emphasizes, is only one of the possible specifications of the subject-function. In architecture, recognition of authorship is often confused with that of authenticity or originality of the object, effectively supporting phenomena of restoration reproduction. Even today, we are still witnessing projects guided by a "neo-philologism" that transforms, in the words of Gio Ponti, monotypes into prototypes ⑪. Authorship is undoubtedly the factor that has fostered and continues to foster the fame of these villas, as well as the dissemination of images and content which, in some cases, have made these cultural documents closely linked to an idea of time, "icons" expressing an indeterminate idea of modernity.

In Italy, the necessary condition for a cultural heritage to be protected by copyright is that it represents a work of a creative nature; it must therefore have such a representative individuality as to distinguish it from previous works. In 2016, Rositani Suckert noted that there were dozens of cases

of architecture protected by the so-called “copyright”¹² procedure in Italy. Among the best known are Gio Ponti’s 1959 Pirelli Tower (1959) and Vittoriano Viganò’s Istituto Marchiondi (1957)¹³.

Although extremely concise, the outlined framework allows to observe that the criteria of *heritagization* of modern and contemporary architecture that emerged from the conducted research effectively anticipate the trends of the relative regulatory context, hopefully leading to future necessary revisions.

10.3 MODERN LIVING OVER TIME

The theme of the single-family house played a key role in the definition of the Modern Movement architecture as a symbolic and functional affirmation of the utopian turning of an idea of future into reality. As pointed out by Tostões, "nowadays, the growing emphasis on wellbeing goes beyond the seminal ideas that modern houses were 'machine a habiter' and is closer to an idealistic vision of stimulating shell for humans, which is shaped by imagination, experimentation, efficiency and knowledge"¹⁴.

As well as reflecting the status of the owners, modern design criteria for the house also document relevant aspects of social change. As noted by Torrent, "the desire to adapt domestic life linked spatial and material ideas with cultural, social and even political meanings that were present in the aims for change of society"¹⁵.

With the exception of Le Corbusier’s houses built in the 1930s, whose conservation experiences are explored in Bénédicte Gandini’s paper, the buildings considered during the conference are *auteur* villas that reflect the culture of the second half of the 20th century: Gio Ponti’s Villa Planchart in Caracas (1953-57), illustrated by Hannia Gomez, Luigi Moretti’s Villa La Saracena in Santa Marinella (1955-57),

the restoration of which is documented by Paolo Verdeschi, Vittoriano Viganò's Casa La Scala (also known as Villa Bloc) in San Felice del Benaco (1956-58), examined by Giovanni Vergani, and Carlo Scarpa's Casa Balboni in Venice (1964-68), investigated by Francesco Magnani and Roberta Martinis.

The modern house that emerges from each contributor's paper is a tailored creation that combines figurative heritage and the designer's idea of living with its owners' style. These buildings, resulting from a constant dialogue with the clients, represent an era. When entering their new house, the inhabitants enter a new life: a new *modern* life, including in the way they relate to the architecture. In many cases, these monuments of modernity are also inserted into a natural and/or cultural environment with which they establish lasting relationships.

Built for a limited number of people, villas also acquire new values through historical perspective. Their formal, compositional and fine material elements span the evolution of technology and living comfort.

Nevertheless, today these well-known buildings with their remarkable figurative power are scarcely adaptable to the idea of living possessed by contemporary owners/users. Documenting the characteristics of the modern house with the aim of outlining prospects for its protection therefore means, first and foremost, addressing the concept of living as a phenomenon of permanent and physiological change: changes in use, material, technological and performance modifications, as well as changes in how these places are perceived by the current inhabitants/users.

All too often Modern architecture has been treated as fragile or non-durable heritage because of its experimental materials and undeveloped building techniques, but this is just one aspect of a much more complex picture. The most incisive modifications over the years have been due to social and cultural changes connected to the idea of living, which

have brought new demands for comfort, safety and accessibility that have led to significant internal and external transformations of houses.

This phenomenon applies more generally to all modern architectural heritage. As highlighted by de Jonge, "increasingly stringent requirements have rendered many buildings from the modern era outdated and obsolete, even if they are still performing well according to their original specifications" ¹⁹.

To recall a few notable cases, cultural and social changes led to the extensive replacement of the windows and doors of the La Tourette priory in Éveux (1956-60) with new, standardized double-glazed elements, as well as to the destruction of the glass walls of Mies van der Rohe's Crown Hall in Chicago (1950-56), which became the symbol of the start of "restoration" in 2005. Similarly, it is the new demands of comfort that today damages the perception of the architectural component of the façades of Le Corbusier's Palace of Assembly in Chandigarh (1951-62), which have been filled with external air conditioning units.

These precedents alert us to a crucial issue: even before material fragility, lack of knowledge is the precursor to its loss. What, therefore, is the correct balance between the justified need to accompany this architecture into the contemporary world and the cultural responsibility of preserving its characteristics?

Central to the debate, once again, are the potential and limits of approaches which, in many cases, link *heritagization* to opening these places to the public. Only a few of the houses examined still have their original function: they have become museums, places of representation and, in some cases, exclusively summer residences in order to avoid the significant alterations that would be required due to their poor thermal performance.

The reception and the processes of appropriation of this heritage by the inhabitants/users emerge from the

insightful reports of Giovanni Vergani and Hannia Gomez, who emphasize how inhabiting Modern heritage also signifies education in beauty and detail for subsequent generations who did not participate in the realization of the house. These issues also emerge from the performance created in the Maison Blanche (villa Jeanneret-Perret) by Cristian Chironi, who uses the tools of contemporary art to raise important questions about the current meaning of the term “domestic”: living has to do with life, with contamination, a process contrary to musealisation.

It is in this regard that the tool of the Conservation Management Plan¹⁷ emerges as the only alternative to emergency restoration. The following studies clearly show that although those houses are an expression of the Twentieth century and its intense season of industrial production, their preservation always needs an artisanal approach. The challenge is to hold these two instances together, through interventions that provide a vision for the project in both the present and the future.



fig. 1. Palace of Assembly in Chandigarh (Le Corbusier, 1951-62), designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2016. External units of the air conditioning system on the façade. (© Roberto Conte, 2019)



fig. 2. Cité Frugès in Pessac (Le Corbusier, 1926). Housing unit. (© Sara Di Resta, 2017)



fig. 3. Casa Giavi in Cortina (E. Gellner, 1954-55). Wood and concrete decay. (© Sara Di Resta, 2019)



fig. 4. La Cupola, “the Dome”, in Costa Paradiso (D. Bini, 1969-70). State of neglect and decay. (© Giorgia Mellone, 2021)

ENDNOTES

①: Ponti (1957, p. 26).

●: Cf. Heinich (2009). See also: Giusti (2019, pp. 100-107).

●: Franco and Musso (2016, pp. 14-25).

④: Carughi (2012, pp. 21-52).

●: In tracing an excursus of the modifications of the regulatory framework on the protection of 20th-century architectural heritage, the author cites, among others, the draft law concerning regulations for the protection and enhancement of cultural and environmental heritage of 30 July 1984, which heralded a significant turning point for this heritage: “Contemporary art produced less than fifty years ago may be subject to the provisions on the declaration of cultural heritage, in accordance with the same procedures as those set out in Article 4, provided that they are works of deceased authors recognized for their intrinsic value and merit or as particularly significant”. The initiative ceased after 1985 due to the end of Legislature IX. Cf. Carughi (2018, pp. 57-63). See also: Tamiozzo (2004, pp. 15-16) and Picchione (2004, pp. 44-46).

●: Law no. 124 of 4 August 2017, Art. 1, paragraph 175, published in Official Gazette no. 65 of 29 August 2017 amending Legislative Decree no. 42 of 22 January 2004, Art. 10, paragraph 5.

●: Legislative Decree no. 42 of 22 January 2004, Art. 10, paragraph 3, letter d). Law 4 August 2017, Art. 1, paragraph 175 introduced an additional provision, d) bis that could open new protection prospects for modern and contemporary architectural heritage.

●: Paragraph 3, letter d) of Art. 10 of Legislative Decree no. 42 of 22 January 2004 reads: “The following shall also be considered cultural assets, where the declaration provided

for in Article 13 is applicable: [...] d) immovable or movable objects, belonging to whomever they belong, which are of particular interest because of their connection with political or military history, literature, art, science, technology, industry and culture in general, or as evidence of the identity and history of public, collective or religious institutions”.

●: Canziani (2016, pp. 45-51).

⑩: Foucault, 1969, published in Foucault (2004, pp. 1-21). Carlo Olmo, among others, returned to the definition of authorship and the fame of the work in relation to its author, drawing on the writings of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Cf. Olmo (2019, pp. 146-151).

⑪: “Engineering creates prototypes and architecture monotypes. It is laughable to think of a car that cannot be reproduced or a bridge with arches that cannot be repeated or lengthened. It is equally laughable to think that 'Fallingwater' or the Rotonda are 'for reproduction'. [...] This does not signify any subordination of values, it simply signifies a differentiation of values between Engineering and Architecture, both of which I regard with great honour and love” (Ponti, 1957, pp. 61-62).

⑫: Pursuant to Art. 2 paragraph 5 of Law no. 633 of 22 April 1941 and subsequent provisions.

⑬: Cf. Rositani Suckert (2019, pp. 176-183). In opposition to the above-mentioned approach, there are recent striking examples of the removal of monumental protection for modern architecture. Such is the case of Quartiere QT8, an experimental housing district built as part of the Milan Triennial VIII starting in 1947, for which the municipality’s appeal, contesting excessively onerous bureaucracy and costs for work on the houses and gardens, was upheld in late 2021.

⑭: Tostões (2021, p. 3).

⑮: Noelle and Torrent (2021, pp. 4-9).

⑯: De Jonge (2017, pp. 62-105).

⑰: Cf. Heritage in danger. Conservation Plans between protection and emergency in Villa Planchart case, International Research Project, Università Iuav di Venezia, co-founded by Docomomo Venezuela. In collaboration with Fundación Anala y Armando Planchart and Docomomo International ISC Education + Training, AA 2019-20. Scientific responsible: S. Di Resta.

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