

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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SARA DI RESTA, HANNIA GOMEZ, GIOVANNI VERGANI

Sara Di Resta in conversation with Giovanni Vergani, the current owner of casa La Scala (villa Bloc) by Vittoriano Viganò in S. Felice del Benaco (1956-58) and Hannia Gomez, president of Docomomo Venezuela, on villa Planchart by Gio Ponti in Caracas (1953-57).

Sara Di Resta: Giovanni Vergani is owner and inhabitant of casa La Scala, also known as villa Bloc. An exceptional building, heritage of the late twentieth century, which was built between 1956 and 1958 according to Vittoriano Viganò's project for his friend André Bloc, sculptor, and architect. Two massive reinforced concrete plates supported by steel pillars and beams. Moreover, a perimeter almost entirely made of glass.

Giovanni Vergani has been asked to show us some images representative of the private sphere, the familiar sense of living at house La Scala: unusual and personal photographs, and not pictures from magazines, that can witness a long-time permanence in the house, dating back to his father.

At a late time, we will ask him to reply to three questions in order to support us in understanding the meaning

of to live and to preserve an object of the recent past which is already heritage of the twentieth century. Thank you, Giovanni Vergani, and welcome.

Giovanni Vergani: Thank you for the kind invitation. I have to admit the effort made in looking for such non-iconic images, not focused directly on the members composing my family. Then, I tried to identify two photographs that can illustrate how the house interior had been realized by Viganò and how it transformed through time, as you can have an alpha and omega vision, at least until nowadays. In this first image (fig. 01) you can observe the original furniture of the interiors. The colorings themselves are authentic on both walls and ceilings. In this image you can observe approximately the fifty per cent of the whole volume of the house. On the background of the photograph, behind the corner, there is the bedroom. Behind the wall on the left, restrooms and another bedroom were located. This is the condition in which my father bought the house in 1969, when I was a child.

With the following image I am conversely showing you the actual status of the house (fig. 02). The angle is different, as the previous photograph was taken on the opposite side, while now we stand where the bedroom was originally placed. As you can notice, a fireplace made of stone of Verona has been built, with a big extractor hood. The space dedicated to the consumption of lunch is now on the opposite place.

SDR: I would like to begin with a first question related to the active role of owners and inhabitants in preserving the building: how much time do you spend in the house? Which is the perception of responsibility your family is being having towards the conservation of the house?

GV: I think all this was a big journey. We must try to visualize a person arriving to this house with a whole family, coming across the situation I showed you in the first image. The former owners, the Blocs, were elderly when the

house was built. We were six people. For this reason, it was important to reimagine space and understand how to live in this house. It is like a journey. And in this journey, which is still lasting, the object somehow communicates and historically positions itself. So you are, as a member of the family, educated to live and consider it with this approach. I am not an architect, so this is not my professional sphere. Our fortune was that we were able to make this place liveable thanks to the presence of a farmhouse for the keeper. We opted for an 'outsourcè' keeper, as it is labelled today, providing some modifications on that building, with no architectural value, that could let us comfortably host. With this approach, we were able to keep unchanged the space of house Bloc. A space that, even if almost preserved, has its limits: not liveable on winter season. In the image, you can detect in the ceiling all the heating vents that, according to Viganò, would work with warm air produced by a gas-oil system. Moreover, as you can imagine, the windows are single-glazed. Because of a still immature technology and a lack of a hermetic seal, there are draughts of one or two centimeters. For all these reasons, this house welcomes you only on summer, if you need to live in it.

In this itinerary of paying attention to the object, nowadays we are wondering if we need to 'restore' something. We may need to re-establish the colors. The fireplace is very complicated to remove. We should restore some objects that belonged here in the past, as only some of them are present. Maybe we should take it back as close as possible to its original condition, without transforming it into a musealization.

SDR: Some aspects are strictly bounded to new necessities of contemporary living. You have already discussed some of them: heat systems, thermic assets, fixtures frames. I would like to ask you to further analyze those aspects: which are the terms of comfort and security you demand to this house? How the chance to live in a "monument of modernity" do balance your small and big inconveniences?

GV: I have already spoken about some of these un-comforts. I have also told you which was our solution in order to live in the house: going somewhere else. I think this was the best possible compromise: in this way, we can benefit from this place also on a natural beauty point of view, beyond the house itself. In these images you are not able to see the landscape, which is something astonishing. Still today, the view continues to amaze us. So, living elsewhere, we were not forced to adopt this compromise.

SDR: You are underlining one of the biggest contradictions that the safeguard of an asset imposes us: in order to carry out the conservation of an object, sometimes, paradoxically, we give up in using it with the original function for which it was created.

GV: I have to admit that some intervention was made. We repurposed the space. As already stated, we no longer need the bedroom, instead of which we established a dining room.

We extended the living room to the original dining room area. We also sharpened the kitchen and the small bedroom located in the backside. Despite this, I think the spirit of this house remained intact, or that is what we state in order to convince ourselves. In addition, we took advantage of a further historical juncture: the architect Viganò was our neighbor. He owned a property nearby where he came on holidays. He also used to join us for dinner. So, a sort of formal monitoring helped us to follow a precise binary. Viganò, even though the modification interventions were not conceived by him, never condemned them, on the contrary, he accepted them. He also blessed those intervention, somehow, and this comforts us. Maybe today he would agree with me. I do not know, but conflicts never took place. This is what I remember.

SDR: My next question would have been if Viganò ever wondered about time passing in this house, and how architecture would have aged. Nevertheless, finding out that the

architect himself witnessed the transformation leads me to another question: why do we have to give up the fireplace? After all, it is forming part of the itinerary this object is living. This is a question I am posing to you as well.

GV: I think nowadays there is another big aspect regarding this house. My brother, who is an architect, always states “bring back the colors, do try to contain the abundance of modification on the past years”. However, I think the main topic about this house is the restoration of the structures. Today that’s what is worrying us and keeping us involved. We realized that, even though the house is an expression of Modernism, it requires an artisanal approach. It is not only about wondering how today we can build, rebuild, or restore a house. This special case needs the competence to cure the reinforced concrete bars, to clean them, to upholster with protective materials and to rebuild a handmade concrete layer. You can all imagine what this means, on both terms of competences and costs. I think it would be easier to recreate a Venetian stucco, as it is already proclaimed. Restoring reinforced concrete is not that affirmed. It is also interpreted as a maybe poorer approach, if compared to other treasured that Italy proposes.

SDR: this is a topic that also recurs on other interventions. We noticed it also in house Balboni: an artisanal approach dedicated to materials and techniques that usually we associate to industrial production. Nevertheless, once they enter the restoration process, they require attentions and operations that differ from the ones strictly bounded to industrial production where they partially come from. Thank you so much for your contribution, you have been so helpful in highlighting themes and topics that will enrich the final discussion and debate. We do hope to keep in contact with your family, both to know how the adventure in the house evolves, and for the draft of the acts, as also the inhabitants will be part of the polyphony of this day

bounded to the relationship between the modern living and the time. Thank you again.

SDR: I'll now hand the floor over to our friend and colleague Hannia Gomez. We've been working a lot together in the last year and we also have to thank, apart from her, Docomomo Venezuela and Foundation Planchart which allowed us to apply our research in the precise place you are standing right now. As maybe the Gio Ponti's aficionados have understood, Hannia is located at Villa Planchart in Caracas. Thanks to the study co-financed by Iuav and Docomomo Venezuela, this collaboration allowed us to start the process of knowledge that will lead to the elaboration of the Conservation Plan dedicated to Gio Ponti's creation. Hannia Gomez is President of Docomomo Venezuela, architect, architecture critic and strong academic of Gio Ponti's works of architecture. She's been curator of Villa Planchart and author, among the many publications, of the important volume "El Cerrito. La obra maestra de Gio Ponti a Caracas" (2008).

Today she is here with us with a particular role, as Hannia is daily overseeing the care and protection of this building, which she studied for so long. For this reason, we asked her a testament of the villa as a place inhabited by a special couple: Anala and Armando Planchart. Later, we asked her to describe us the transition from dwelling house to contemporary monument open to public activities: what does this represent on a protection point of view?

Hannia Gomez: Thank you so much for hosting me today. I am going to tell you a story, a path we are taking together and that we want it to end with the restoration of villa Planchart: it is like a dream we want to come true one day. In this moment I am inside the house, in the main living room. Today the house is the headquarter of the Planchart Foundation, a private organization that owns the house as well as another beautiful building, a house for the elders here in Caracas, capital city of Venezuela.

This house is not only very important in terms of being a Gio Ponti's masterwork, but it is also a place for cultural events of this Country. This is a condition that does put the road to its restoration under the spotlight. Everything we do here, everything we have done and everything the Planchart did from the beginning becomes a historical lesson for the region, for the Country. This building is not only a house, but also a monument of Modernity, that works within a cultural environment. It can be considered equal in importance to the University City of Carlos Raúl Villanueva, which is a World Monument of the UNESCO list since 2002. Villa Planchart is, in a certain way, under the necessity of being acknowledged as a world site too, because of its importance. This is why the restoration of the house needs to become a lesson for the region, for teaching how to approach such a delicate, elegant, and complicated project of architecture, considered a masterpiece, as Gio Ponti described it.

In the narration of villa Planchart there is a beautiful relationship with conservation practice. Living together with the restoration works has been a theme since the beginning. In 1957, when the Plancharts arrived in front of the glass door on the first day of the house after its construction, their life changed completely. They came here only with their luggage, nothing else. When they entered their new house, they entered into a whole new life: a new modern life, that absolutely changed them since that moment, also in their relationship with architecture. They were fans of architecture since always, but this appreciation increased when they started living in a house which was a Gio Ponti's work. This building took seven years to be completed. It was such a long path through the projects, the preliminary drawings, all the letters and all the exchanges and trips that Gio Ponti did to come here in Caracas from Milan: such a long distance to achieve this big house.

For the couple, it was a gradual learning of all the details, not only the building itself, but also a collection of furniture, objects of art, and many elements that are in the garden and everywhere in the house. This condition makes the house a very sensational and different object compared to many other projects in the world and makes the house such an outstanding example of modern living.

SDR: Hannia, you brought some photos to share with us. Would you please make some comments about them?

HG: The one you see is a very casual picture taken by Anala from the second floor (fig. 03). You can see Mr. Planchart sitting in the living room, where I am standing now. He is reading the newspapers in a very casual way, sitting on a lounge chair designed by Ponti. That is an image of domestic life for the Plancharts, one day in the 1960s when the house was already almost completed with all its decorations and works of art and also with the plans. This second photograph is from the 1960s too (fig. 04). In this image we can see Mr. Planchart in the studio-library. You can notice that there are many books, works of art, and pieces of design. In the third and fourth photo you can see his wife (figg. 05-06). In one of the two pictures, she is sitting on a sofa in a room of the house while in the other one she is standing in the dressing room. As you can see the wooden doors are full of pics. Anala didn't like to have pictures of the family all around the house, so she decided to print and put all of them on the dressing room doors.

The Plancharts were a couple that soon learnt that the only way to continue living in their modern house was to make continuous conservation works. So, they learnt to do conservation and restoration works by themselves. They did that for many years after Ponti left the house for the last time. He came back here in 1967, ten years after his previous journey to Venezuela, and he found that his house, which opened in December 1957, was absolutely the same as he left

it. He was amazed to see how this dream house was absolutely conserved by the inhabitants.

In those ten years, in which these photographs were taken, the Plancharts were already carrying out their path to restoration. Their restoration works, indeed, were undertaken by themselves, so they cannot be considered a cultural action, like it is nowadays. In the previous presentations we met a lot of beautiful projects of restoration, focused on technical issues and conservation of Modern architecture. For the Plancharts it was different: it was a natural action by modern inhabitants, who knew that the only way to pay a tribute to Gio Ponti was to make the conservation of the house a reality.

When Anala Planchart was old, she wanted to leave a legacy for the future, so in 1975 she created the Foundation, which owns the house today. She had the idea to write a testament in which all the pieces of the architecture, the garden, and every single object of the collection had to become part of the conservation practices of the Institution. A will for the future, in which every object couldn't be separated from the other parts. This is the reason why today we still have the house with all the collections intact and treasured. I think that in the world there are very few houses of this quality, size, and importance that are conserved like this.

SDR: Your words reveal on one side the important role of Foundation Planchart as place of care, conservation, and management of the house but, on the other side, they underline aspect of Villa Planchart as 'heritage at risk'. A risk not connected to violent actions but to daily choices of access. Nowadays, in fact, the house is open to the public for different activities.

HG: Yes, but do not forget that we are not in Venezuela, which is today a high-risk country that you cannot fully understand. It is not only about pandemic: the country suffers from a terrible political and social crisis. This house

is continuously in danger, as it represents a culture of usage and a way of life that doesn't match the political system of Venezuela today. During these years of Chavismo, the Foundation has done a very impressive job of taking care of this treasure of Venezuela. A treasure that is filled with works of art of absolute importance. I can show you with the camera, here we have the biggest Fausto Melotti's work of art in the world. It is a very fragile work of art, and it is located here. All the collection is important, besides the architecture. The Foundation kept its activities and kept the house open through these years (fig. 07). This has preserved the house alive and safe. But it doesn't mean that this is enough. As I said before, this house should be listed as a World Heritage. The problem is that we need the help of a government that, actually, doesn't do anything to save its heritage.

SDR: Thank you so much Hannia for your contribution, may it be a good wish for the continuation of our work and dialogue with Caracas.



fig. 1. Casa La Scala by Vittoriano Viganò, S. Felice del Benaco 1960s. (© Giovanni Vergani)



fig. 2. Casa La Scala by Vittorio Gregotti, S. Felice del Benaco 2021.
(© Giovanni Vergani)



fig. 3. Armando Planchart in the main living room of Villa Planchart, Caracas 1960s. (© Planchart Foundation Archive)



fig. 4. Armando Planchart in the Library-Studio of Villa Planchart, Caracas, 1960s. (© Planchart Foundation Archive)



fig. 5. Anala Planchart in the main living room of Villa Planchart, Caracas, 1960s. (© Planchart Foundation Archive)



fig. 6. Anala Planchart in her dressing room in Villa Planchart, Caracas, 1960s. (© Planchart Foundation Archive)



fig. 7. Piano concert in the main living room of Villa Planchart, Caracas, 2021. (© Hannia Gomez)