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A short genealogy of authenticity. Tracing concepts of the real in the preservation discourse from the 19th century to today

ABSTRACT

The essay describes a discourse analysis of the concept of authenticity on the basis of influential theories within the field of monument preservation. The phenomenon of reconstruction or the concrete treatment of (ruinous) historical buildings serves as an example for the concrete application of these theories in architectural practice. From a historical perspective, specific understandings of authenticity in Viollet-le-Duc, John Ruskin, Alois Riegl, Walter Benjamin or the Venice Charter are analysed, and it is shown how they lead to different concepts of architectural reconstruction.

KEYWORDS. Authenticity, historical buildings, architectural reconstruction.

The essay does not want to explain the essence of authenticity, but instead addresses the fact of how the understanding of authenticity has been subject to constant change over the last two centuries and how these divergent views ultimately decisively shaped the history of monument preservation and continue to do so today.

The concept of authenticity is thereby understood in a historical perspective as the result of discourses that are always – at least for a certain time – linked to a claim to truth.

The argumentation builds on the publication *Architektonische Konzepte der Rekonstruktion* (Architectural Concepts of Reconstruction, 2017), in which I explain that there is no such thing as one specific reconstruction, but rather that there are various types available (Stumm 2017).

I. HISTORICIST RECONSTRUCTION OR THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE ARCHITECTURAL IDEAL

Viollet-le-Duc developed the first comprehensive, and widely influential, theory of historic preservation with the concept of “restoration” described in his *Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture française*. Here, Viollet-le-Duc requires the restorer to “re-establish [a building] to a finished state, which may in fact never have actually existed at any given time.” (Viollet-le-Duc 1866, p. 14). In the case of Carcassonne, which he reconstructed in several stages from 1840 onwards, this meant removing all the dwellings built in post-medieval times that had in his sense “parasitically” – since they used the stock of the fortress itself – attached themselves to the city walls and uncovering the “original” shape of the buildings. Picturesque effects and maximum aesthetic impact are constructed through concentration, condensation and clarification, which at the same time goes hand in hand with an emphasis on the meaning, sense and legibility of the historical building. In a further step of the reconstruction, however, it is also possible to deviate from the restoration of the original in order to improve “defective or faulty” installations. For example, in the reconstruction of the tower roofs of the Narbonne Gate, he replaced the tiles commonly used in the area with slates.

Viollet-le-Duc formulates in his theory that the restorer should bring the building back to “life” by empathising with the historical builder and his artistic ideas (Viollet-le-Duc 1866, p. 27). The aim should not be to reproduce the building as “faithfully” as possible, but rather to rewrite it in the old forms. In his theory of restoration, Viollet-le-Duc proclaimed the architectural appropriation of the monument. That is why his contemporary critics, and art historical researchers still do so today, stated that the authenticity of the monument was not a decisive criterion for him. Nonetheless, the question of authenticity seems to me to be a very important one for Viollet-le-Duc, and his very idea of bringing the essence of a monument back to life through reconstruction, is a telling indication. One could call this an architectural-ideal authenticity that leads to a deliberately historically fictitious building. As Martin Bressani states, the “most provocative aspect of Viollet-le-Duc’s definition is not so much his aiming for a ‘finished state’, but his acknowledgment that such a state ‘may have never existed.’” This points to “his conviction that the *artiste-restaurateur* [...] should have so totally ‘internalized’ the original *spirit* that created the monument that he can restore the latter” (Bressani 2014, S. 109). What the undoubtedly most influential monument conservator of the 19th century understood by authenticity can, of course, hardly be reconciled with our contemporary standards.

II. ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION OR THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE MATERIAL BUILDING FABRIC

An important theoretical cornerstone for the understanding of authenticity in modern monument conservation is Viollet-le-Duc's contemporary John Ruskin. Ruskin also speaks of the "spirit" inherent in a building. By this he means neither its form and shape, which changes over time due to external influences, nor an architectural ideal, but the material: for him, the stones (of Venice), which can never be replaced or reproduced, make up the city. The juxtaposition of the positions of Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin is an example of how discourses can shift over time and how certain scientific views associated with a claim to truth can change. In the sense of Michel Foucault there is no truth *per se* but (competing) "regimes of truth", to which we will return at the end of the essay.

Ruskin's eloquent defence of the fundamental link between authenticity and historical material is still virulent today, as a quote from Ulrich Conrad in the preface to *Denkmalpflege statt Attrappenkult* (2010) proves: "The architectural monument has a soul, it is an animated work. For we call the things and living beings that make up our environment animate when we elevate them to a rank equal to our own through the bestowal of meaning, so that in their sight they form a whole with us. An absolute sharing. [...] An inspired work cannot be replaced. With the material destruction, the essence, the soul of a building is also broken for all time¹".

The Neues Museum in Berlin is an example of how reconstruction is possible under these premises. Contemporary fixtures by David Chipperfields Architects are recognisable as such and blend harmoniously into the overall building. The archaeological reconstruction does not restore the historical form, but only the historical building volume documented by archaeologists. As far as possible, all time layers of the building, its changes in later epochs, damage due to environmental influences or violent interventions, are equally preserved. To a large extent, Chipperfield follows the maxims of the Venice Charter in his reconstruction.

III. INTERPRETIVE RECONSTRUCTION OR THE AUTHENTICITY OF DIALECTICAL APPROPRIATION

Strongly connected to the concept of interpretative reconstruction is the preservation theory by the Austrian art historian and monument conservator Alois Riegl, namely his monument values. The various present values: use value, art values (which include the relative artwork value and the newness value), as well as the commemorative values: intentional commemorative value, historical value and the age value do not need to be analysed in more detail here. Instead, the dialectical interplay of these monument values should be highlighted, for it illuminates Riegl's concrete attitude towards reconstruction. The age value, which Riegl puts the most emphasize on, means the age of a monument that can be seen from afar. It serves neither art-historical research nor the preservation of the historical building fabric, but rather aims at a "subjective mood effect" (*subjektive Stimmungswirkung*). However, since the age value is better preserved with a (new) function of the monument – a higher use value – "we find the cult of the age value in the compelling position of having to preserve at least serviceable monuments of the more recent period in a condition that guaranteed them the continuation of their use value²". The historicist

reconstruction that was common in Riegl's time, however, destroyed not only the historical value, but also the age value.

Consequently, Riegl says: "The modern view demands not only an impeccable unity of form and colour for the newly created work of man, but also in style, i.e. the modern work should also be as little reminiscent as possible of older works in its conception and in the detailed treatment of form and colour. Admittedly, this expresses the unmistakable tendency to separate newness value and age value as strictly as possible; but in the recognition of newness value as a major aesthetic power lies the very possibility of a compromise [...]". Riegl is thus by no means against any form of reconstruction, but for him it must take place in contemporary forms.

Carlo Scarpa is to stand here as an example of such a maxim, which further develops the historical building in modern forms. To this end, interpretive reconstruction works with the technique of the collage, in which elements of history and the present are put together and contrasted. A new overall picture emerges that is marked by acute breaks. The interpretive reconstruction defines itself through a dialectic of contrast and continuity.

Ultimately, therefore, I do not see any necessary development of Riegl's fundamental work into what is anchored as a monument conservation concept in the sense of the Venice Charter. For Riegl does not mean that the contemporary work should fit harmoniously into the historical building; on the contrary, he speaks of separating age value and novelty value as strictly as possible and recognises novelty value as an independent aesthetic form. What is out of question for Riegl, however, is that (architectural) history continuously develops new stylistic forms and thus produces new newness values – there is no provision for "going back". Riegl's values of a monument are based on the historical-philosophical idea of a teleologically progressing history in the tradition of Hegel.

IV. SIMULATING RECONSTRUCTION OR "AURALESS" AUTHENTICITY

This may already address the core of the problem why "true-to-the-original" reconstruction is sometimes met with rejection in heritage conservation. An example of this simulating reconstruction is the Old Bridge in Mostar. This culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse place in today's Bosnia & Herzegovina, was destroyed in 1993 during the Yugoslav war and reconstructed by UNESCO after the end of the war until 2004. In the following year, this "true to original", i.e. simulating reconstruction, was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. UNESCO's justification: "The reconstructed Old Bridge and Old City of Mostar are symbols of reconciliation, international cooperation and the coexistence of diverse cultural, ethnic and religious communities. With the 'renaissance' of the Old Bridge and its surroundings, the symbolic power and meaning of the City of Mostar – as an exceptional and universal symbol of coexistence of communities from diverse cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds – has been reinforced and strengthened, underlining the unlimited efforts of human solidarity for peace and powerful cooperation in the face of overwhelming catastrophes".

What is particularly emphasised in the explanatory memorandum are the symbolic and social values of the bridge. Even if it is only a reconstruction that is as identical as possible in terms of its historical form – and cannot claim any actual monumental value in Riegl's sense – it is attributed

a function in the reconciliation of the ethnic groups (Croatian Christians, Bosnian Muslims and Serbs) that had lived together peacefully for a long time but then became enemies.

Nevertheless, the designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site is astonishing, maybe even uncomfortable. This unease has been formulated particularly lucidly by Walter Benjamin, who in his fundamental *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility* assumes a hypothetical perfection of reproduction achieved at a future point in time, which no longer allows for a material distinction between original and copy. But how can the two then be distinguished at all? Benjamin coins the term aura for this. A reproduction lacks an aura, the “its presence in time and space”, the “authenticity”. With the loss of aura the “historical testimony [...] is jeopardized”; Benjamin also speaks of a “tremendous shattering of tradition” (Benjamin 1969, p. 4).

What does such a perfectly reproduced object mean for Benjamin? What does it mean when a building can be seemingly perfectly reconstructed in its historical form? Is such an aura-less building without values? Certainly not, as Benjamin sees the artwork there in a polarity to the exhibition value of the artwork. The technical reproducibility pushes the former back in favour of the latter: “In the same way today, by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental.” (Benjamin 1969, p. 7).

For Benjamin, a simulative reconstruction would never be an “auratic” work. But it has the maximum achievable exhibition value. While historical authenticity or the aura coined by Benjamin found its way into the discourse on monument conservation, the idea of exhibition value, on the other hand, was ignored. In the sense of an updating of Benjamin’s exhibition value, the simulating reconstruction can be ascribed, if not an auratic, then at least an aura-less authenticity.

V. DISCURSIVISATION OF AUTHENTICITY

As the last monument value, I would like to talk about the dispute value (*Streitwert*) coined by the monument conservationist Gabi Dolff-Bonekämper. According to her, the dispute value should be seen less as a separate, additional value category to the monument values formulated by Riegl, but rather the “the dispute runs through all social valorisation processes; the dispute value is thus given to each and every one of the other values as its form of possibility⁵”.

Dolff-Bonekämper reinterprets Riegl’s monument values in this respect: “For although the differentiated valuation developed with the help of his concepts appreciates certain, possibly long-standing properties of the monument, the values stated are not themselves properties of the monument, nor do they attach themselves to the monument. Instead, they are socially attributed to it in ever new presences. [...] It must therefore be conceded that the value, and thus logically also the monument property defined in the law, is ultimately not essentially inherent to the monument, but is likewise socially ascribed to it⁶”. In the case of the value in dispute introduced by Dolff-Bonekämper, one can speak of a discursivisation of monument values. She understands the interpretation of monument values as “negotiation processes between interest and function holders”. Taking this idea further, it is not only the interpretation of the

individual monument values that must be considered socially negotiable, but actually the system of monument values itself.

If we take the tools provided by Michel Foucault during his development of discourse analysis, however, from a historical perspective, monument values can be fixed to a specific moment in the history of monument preservation: We can generally assume that in the 18th and especially in the 19th century, the discourse of monument preservation on the appropriate treatment of historical buildings increased considerably. It is significant that monument values are developed at the very time when a modern trend in monument conservation is attempting to distance itself from a specific discipline of monument conservation that is being applied on a large scale: Namely, that of the “*artiste-restaurateur*” in the sense of Viollet-le-Duc. The monument values represent the intellectual foundation for the argumentation and implementation of modern monument conservation. The system of monument values is a formation whose main function at a given historical point in time was to respond to a state of emergency, namely the rampant practice of a multitude of “*restorers*”, who admittedly rarely possessed the high-level practical and theoretical understanding of monuments of Viollet-le-Duc.

It is important to remember that monument values are neither supra-temporal nor neutral criteria; they must rather be regarded as a construct: Invented by monument conservators for monument conservators, in order to be able to protect the historical fabric of monuments. In this respect, they are not superordinated principles, but must be understood as (power) instruments within the discourse. The fact that monument values are still relevant and discussed today therefore does not refer to a special truth content of monument values, but to the fact that they continue to function for the defence of certain argumentations - and power structures.

According to Foucault, power is not negative – repressive – from the outset. For the French post-structuralist, the power mechanisms themselves are essential for the functioning of discourse; there is no “*outside*” of power relations. For him, power therefore also has a decidedly “*strategic-productive*” aspect (Foucault 1981). A definition of authenticity can therefore not be given as an absolute answer but is in a historical perspective to be seen with a specific, limited scope.

A decisive question for the present must therefore be, in Foucault’s sense: How is the production of discourses around historical authenticity, which – at least for a certain time – are charged with a truth value, tied to the various power mechanisms and institutions in (Western) societies?

Notes

- ¹ “Dem Baudenkmal ist eine Seele eigen, es ist ein beseeltes Werk. Denn wir nennen die Dinge und Lebewesen, die unsere Umwelt ausmachen, dann beseelt, wenn wir sie durch Sinnverleihung zu einem uns ebenbürtigen Rang erheben, so daß sie in ihrem Anblick mit uns ein Ganzes bilden. Eine absolute Mit-Teilung. [...] Ein beseeltes Werk ist nicht zu ersetzen. Mit der materiellen Zerstörung ist auch das Wesen, ist auch die Seele eines Bauwerks für alle Zeit gebrochen.” (Conrads 2011, p. 7, translation by author).
- ² “...fanden wir den Kultus des Alterswertes in die zwingende Lage versetzt, mindestens gebrauchsfähige Denkmale der neueren Zeit in einem Zustande erhalten zu müssen, der ihnen die Fortdauer ihres Gebrauchswertes garantierte” (Riegl 1903, p. 50 f, translation by author).
- ³ “Die moderne Anschauung verlangt für das neugewordene Menschenwerk nicht allein eine tadellose Geschlossenheit von Form und Farbe, sondern auch im Stil, das heißt, das moderne Werk soll auch in der Auffassung und in der Detailbehandlung von Form und Farbe möglichst wenig an ältere Werke erinnern. Es drückt sich darin freilich die unverkennbare Tendenz aus, Neuheitswert und Alterswert möglichst strenge voneinander zu trennen; aber in der Anerkennung des Neuheitswertes als einer ästhetischen Großmacht liegt allein schon die Möglichkeit eines Kompromisses [...]” (Riegl 1903, p. 50f, translation by author).
- ⁴ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/946> (31.05.2021)
- ⁵ “Streit durchzieht alle gesellschaftlichen Inwertsetzungs-Vorgänge; der Streitwert ist somit jedem einzelnen der anderen Werte als seine Möglichkeitsform mitgegeben.” (Dolff-Bonekämper 2010, p. 37, translation by author).
- ⁶ “Denn wenngleich die mit Hilfe seiner Begriffe entwickelte differenzierte Wertung bestimmte, möglicherweise seit langem bestehende Eigenschaften des Denkmals würdigt, so sind doch die konstatierten Werte selber nicht Eigenschaften des Denkmals, noch lagern sie sich dem Denkmal an. Stattdessen werden sie ihm in immer neuen Gegenwarten immer neu gesellschaftlich zugeschrieben. [...] Es ist also einzuräumen, dass der Wert und damit logischerweise auch die im Gesetz definierte Denkmaleigenschaft am Ende nicht essentiell dem Denkmal eigen ist, sondern ihm gleichfalls gesellschaftlich zugeschrieben wird.” (Dolff-Bonekämper 2010, p. 30, translation by author).

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