Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc’s definition of restoration is the most often quoted piece of preservation theory ever written. Praised or reviled depending on the times, Viollet-le-Duc’s thinking has remained a constant part of the preservation canon for nearly two centuries. His interpreters have dwelled on his definition of restoration as a “level completeness,” and been confounded to determine exactly what he meant restorers should aim to complete. His detractors have caricatured his notion of completeness as an idealized period style, but Viollet-le-Duc was himself critical of such stylistic restorations at all costs and argued for the need to maintain additions and adaptations made to buildings over time. His criterion to retain alterations and use new materials such as iron if they increased the building’s structural soundness, even if they compromised the purity of its style, have earned him a reputation as a structural rationalist avant la lettre. In disciplinary terms, Viollet-le-Duc gave specificity to the knowledge and skills required of restorers. They had to know history, archeology, ancient and modern building techniques, and they also had to possess architectural design creativity. This last skill distinguished restorers from archeologists. Both science and creative art, restoration was the modern way of making historic buildings fit for contemporary use and habitation, while maintaining material fidelity to their constructive logic, and enhancing their historic significance. Viollet-le-Duc was born in Paris in 1814. He elected to train as an architect with practicing professionals, including François-René Leclère, rather than academically at the École des Beaux Arts. In 1838, he was appointed auditor to the Conseil des Bâtiments Civils, a government body overseeing state building projects, which was headed by Leclère. The Conseil oversaw numerous major restoration projects, including many churches as well as the ramparts of Carcassone. Through Prosper Mérimée, who headed the state Commission des Monuments Historiques, Viollet-le-Duc gained numerous architectural commissions for Emperor Napoleon III in the 1850s and 1860s. He developed his theories from his practical experiences, restoring numerous major and minor historic buildings, including private residences, royal palaces (e.g. his restoration, begun in 1857, of the Chateau de Pierrefonds into a Napoleon III’s residence), and places of worship (e.g. his and Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Lassus’ restoration of Nôtre Dame de Paris, begun in 1844), among others. His encyclopedic knowledge of Gothic architecture, accumulated from his hands-on work with medieval buildings, was collected in his Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture française du Xle au XVIe siècle, published beginning in 1854, and his thoughts on an appropriate modern architecture were published in his influential Entretiens sur l’architecture of 1858. He died in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1879.

Keywords: Restoration, Alteration, Discipline