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Architecture and Monument Restoration
(1966)

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In what concerns ancient monuments, in use or in ruins, we must observe that their valuing as what is called historical is very much of the moment, that is, it belongs to our day, and nobody can deny that such valuing, or qualification, as historical changed notably in the course of a few years, and will continue to change in the future; in the same way that what is now thought to have historical value was disqualified a century and a half ago. And if there remains any doubt, suffice it to look at what was done when the viceregal period ended under the influence of the taste prevailing in Spain then: several Baroque altars were demolished to be replaced by neoclassical ones. And now we have demolished the neoclassical cypress from the cathedral because we value it negatively.

It is perhaps disconcerting to affirm that because of those structures, and others that would take too long to mention, the historical valuation of a monument concedes actuality to it, because by considering it historically we incorporate it into our contemporaneity, if we are to accept advanced gnoseological theories (such as Nicolai Hartmann’s Fundamentals of a Metaphysics of Knowledge [Grundzüge einer Metaphysik der Erkenntnis, 1921]). It is like what happens when we stand in front of an old mirror. It reflects our image, which is not only ours but also of the present moment, independently of the age of the mirror, and says:

Knowledge can be defined . . . as a determination of the subject through the object. The object does not determine the subject in this action, rather the subject the opposite. What changes is not the subject, but the object. The former does not conduct itself receptively but spontaneously and actively, whilst the latter conducts itself passively.¹ This incorporation will result from a contemporary historical valuation, but also more objectively: from the monument’s appurtenance to the culture of its time, which makes it penetrate into ours.

The reference we made in the previous chapter to [John] Ruskin’s passage in the “Lamp of Memory” [in the Seven Lamps of Architecture] comes to mind. It speaks about the two obligations that we have toward the architecture of a nation; the first is to make the architecture of our time historic, and the second is to preciously preserve what we
have inherited from our ancestors. That first obligation, which is properly the “Lamp of Memory” and must guide the creative architect, converges or coincides with what we now think about all architecture, when we affirm that it is anchored to its historical time and place, and that it is therefore integrated in a culture; we accept the law of Chronotopos, both in relation to culture and architectural problems, because we recognize what history amply confirms, that every culture and every architectural program are located in a space and a historical time, and that therefore authentic architecture, and even mediocre architecture, remains in eternum rooted in its historical moment and culture. These thoughts on history, are built upon a body of current doctrines of undeniable authority, and although we know full well that within their consistency we would also find antitheses and contradictions, we must take a position, because in these days of crossroads there is no other stance to take, if we are to remain active and not only expecting. Other reflections, with equally deep roots, would lead us to see each man as a link in a chain that penetrates into the remote past through his progenitors, and also projects into the future as a type of continuity, propagation, and more importantly selection; not only does each generation draw nourishment from its ancestral past but, in so doing, it also becomes part of it, giving meaning to the present.

The individual life represents a part of a more general unit of life that embraces all the past and projects into the future. All former spiritual stages are preserved in the present. Otherwise we could not understand the meaning of ancient cultures, nor comprehend the thinking of their wise men, nor relive the creation of their artists. Our spiritual kinship is perceived in the echo that the ancient world finds in our soul. And just as sometimes the strata of remote geological eras appear on the surface of the earth, in particular historical situations, the tectonic of our soul and the life of man, both in its internal experience and in its outward acts, become inverted and flow from the most primitive layers.

We could not add quotes from such authoritative thinkers as Dilthey (Gesammelte Werke) or Plessner (Die stufen Organischen und der Mensch) about this fascinating notion of the life-time relationship without carrying on too long, and above all, without delving deeper into difficult themes, which have been brilliantly explored by renowned contemporary philosophers; let us modestly retain, in sum, the idea that anterior temporal stages of the spirit that animated our ancestors are found palpitating in our present; and that this idea is how gnosiology and the theory of culture explain the manner in which a civilization’s present draws nourishment from its past. We must therefore conclude that monuments, witnesses of a past that we now qualify as having historical value, are part of our present because whatever is from the past is already present in each one of us and in our culture, and because to value them as historical monuments is to make them into something new. This is how, in an elemental but also transcendental way, at the level of the Theory of Art, we can conceptualize the works we have inherited from preceding epochs as part of the continuous, flowing succession of existence.

If we banish history and monuments from our contemporaneity, we disintegrate our present, which we hold so dear. Without ancestors, traditions, or monuments, we could not subsist; and is not language also one of those monuments in which the past palpitates in every instant of our present? There is no doubt that it is so.

Such a transcendental conclusion demands an even more subjective one.
If, as mentioned before, the monument is incorporated into our contemporary moment through the double conduit of historical evaluation and, more objectively, through the continuity of culture; in other words, if the witness of another historical moment is as part of our present as are scientific ideas, beliefs, and language; then we need to understand how the restorer addresses the monument, regardless of the orientation that he may take when restoring it, be it simply consolidating it or restoring its lost splendor as an architectural work. In fact, the restoration architect does not abdicate the creative role proper to any architect. Regardless of how hard he tries to attach himself to what the monument signals, or to what written documents or drawings might illustrate, what happens to him is what I had the pleasant occasion to witness—allow me one more digression—accompanied by two famous personalities: [José] Luis Sert, the current dean of Harvard’s School of Architecture, and Lester Wiener, his associate at the time, with whom we had the impression of retrospectively living a few minutes in viceregal times. In an annex adjacent to the damaged Temple of San Francisco Ecatepec, the interior décor of which had been destroyed by a fire, a septuagenarian, bearded and dignified, thought that he was modeling in fresh plaster those Mexican ornaments popular in the eighteenth century, using a blurry illustration from some city daily as his model, when in fact he was creating, with charming modesty, what his decorative genius was able to see behind a pattern with a historical authenticity that was only a lure. Malraux’s thought comes to mind again: “Creating supposes a struggle between two forms, one that is latent and another that must be copied.”

But not only experience shows the possible exactitude of our assertion. When studying the structure of the arts, as tasks that are both intellectual and productive of objects that are extrinsic to their maker, one can clearly establish that, following from the two preconditions of all art making, as discussed in the previous chapter, namely, a final-cause and raw material, and supposing that they be the same for different restorers, they will all follow different personal paths and arrive at different restored forms; because the paths followed in the process of making art-technique concur only in their initial premises, and then divert as much as the genius of the artist or technician demands it in order to search for a solution, which will be more or less in agreement with the final-cause, depending on the amount of talent, but also on chance, as Aristotle so accurately expresses when talking to Agathon: “Art is true friend of chance, and chance of art.”

But there is something more to note: when operating with ideal objects, as understood by current ontology, using, for example, one of the three mathematical genres known in our culture, there is only one solution to every problem, and infinite nonsolutions. There is only one solution to drawing a perpendicular line at the end of another; every line that passes through the endpoint without coinciding with the one and only perpendicular line will be oblique and infinite in number.

When we restore, we do not address mathematical operations but factual constructions, creations in the most lax sense of the term, which are, as one says, very distant from all demonstrable exactitude and, on the contrary, subject to discussion and to a multiplicity of successes, in the midst of the diversity of solutions that different restorers might bring. […]

Yet, for many architects dedicated to preservation, any attempt to substantiate our affirmation that in the end any restoration, even if it is deemed archaeological, is more or less a positive creation is a vain or at least redundant effort, because for those that have
experienced restoration firsthand, documents and vestiges are only a program, a point of support for their flight through the legitimate and ethereal spheres of technical and aesthetic creation. Given this fact, zealous archaeologists, and no less zealous historiographers, reasonably demand that one must not discount the architect’s work’s lack of authenticity; especially when his work goes beyond restoration, as often happens when adapting to current uses an old monument, which time may have only barely damaged with a patina or with a rounding erosion of its ashlars’ old edges.

A more subjective facet appears in the case of restorations, adaptations, and additions: the need to establish if today’s man has the right, the natural right of course, to intervene in the inheritance of the past. Once more it is necessary to remember Ruskin when he says:

We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us. [...] what we have ourselves built, we are at liberty to throw down; but what other men gave their strength and wealth and life to accomplish, their right over does not pass away with their death: still less is the right to the use of what they have left vested in us only.

All that he states must not be contradicted. It must be accepted. But the problem he lays out must be examined closer, because in a way he does not grant “the generations of mankind who are to follow” the right to create just like those who erected the monuments in the first place, and just like those who later adapted those inherited structures to new needs. It is therefore not acceptable to deny our architects and technicians the same right and capacity to continue or finish what previous generations started. I am circumscribing myself particularly to monuments in use. Following the argument we just presented about history and creation, if the monument belongs to the ancestral culture to which we are unavoidably linked, then it is already incorporated into our present, such that it is unacceptable to not lay a hand on it, clearly it must be a wise and able hand, in order to extend an existence threatened by ruin or abandonment, simply because it stands witness to a yesterday that others lived without obstacles, with the creative freedom that is denied to us. The law assists both whoever demands the conservation of the archaeological document and whoever demands to make it shine in its formal aesthetic plenitude. [...] Given this brief meditation, we assert that capable, prepared, and gifted architects have a historical and social right to complement what remained unfinished or must be adapted in order to satisfy new requirements. [...] We are nearly out of time; we must take advantage of what little is left to review and recount our buoys, with our hope set on more gifted researchers than me, whose findings should allow us to build on solid ground what we have only chased through quicksand: an authentic theory of monument restoration.

The first thing to mention is the gloss of essential contents obtained to define restoration as the art of preserving the solidity and the form-matter of monuments, through operations that exhibit their contemporaneity and programmatic end. Nineteen words in total, which could be further boiled down into a simpler expression: art of preserving the monument’s values through manifestly contemporary and functional operations. [...]


The second thing learned is that the monument has a reduced habitable utility in comparison to a new destination, that its mechanical-resistance has a lasting factual validity, and that the consolidation or adaptation of the factual involves, in most cases, an unavoidable sacrifice.

Third, we can draw the most interesting conclusion: the aesthetic validity of an architectural work persists beyond the permanence of its archaeological matter, because it stems from the objectified creation and not from the endurance of the physical-historical aspects of the material. From this crucial understanding emerges the difference and autonomy between a monument’s two types of historical authenticity: the aesthetic one and the simply archaeological one; and here we arrive at the affirmation that a perfect optic-haptic copy of a work makes objective the historical-aesthetic validity of its author’s creation even in the total absence of archaeological authenticity.

The fourth conclusion concerns the social validity, which dovetailing into what we just said reveals that in all cases, in the ruin, in the living and adapted monument, and even in the perfect reconstruction, a culture’s message is present above and beyond its archaeological authenticity. Some current examples are the Japanese monuments that we have referred to [in previous lectures] and even the relocation of the stone monument of Abu-Simbel, which will now be a reconstruction, with enormous ashlars assembled and joined, while the original was carved out of the continuous face of the rock.

After what we have just said, we must enumerate two conclusions, which follow from our line of reasoning: the subjectivity of every restoration, in other words that they are all subjective creations; and that when we qualify a monument as historical and when we value it aesthetically it becomes incorporated into, and mediated by, the very culture from which it originates, splicing into the time and culture to which we belong. Undoubtedly, this is a transcendental notion that invites further reflection.

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1 Johannes Hessen, Teoría del conocimiento (Mexico City: Espasa Calpe Mexicana, S.A., 1940), 26–28. The Spanish reads: “El conocimiento puede definirse . . . como una determinación del sujeto por el objeto. En la acción no determina el objeto al sujeto, sino el sujeto al objeto. Lo que cambia no es el sujeto, sino el objeto. Aquél ya no se conduce receptivamente sino espontáneo y activamente, mientras que éste se conduce pasivamente.”

2 Chronotopos derives from the Greek χρόνος (“time”) and τόπος (“space”), and can be literally translated as "time-space."

3 Roura Pareya, Educación y ciencia (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1940), 7. The Spanish reads: “La vida individual representa un miembro de una unidad de vida más general que abraza todo el pasado y se proyecta en el futuro. En el presente se conservan todos los estadios anteriores del espíritu. De otra forma no podríamos comprender el sentido de viejas culturas, ni comprender el pensamiento de sus sabios, ni revivir las creaciones de sus artistas. En el eco que el mundo antiguo encuentra en nuestra alma se percibe nuestro parentesco espiritual. Y así como a veces en la superficie de la tierra
aparecen estratos de remotas épocas geológicas, así también, en determinadas situaciones históricas, se invierten la tectónica de nuestra alma y la vida del hombre en su experiencia interna y en sus actos fluye de las capas más primitivas.”
