The Restoration of a XVIIth Century Roman Noble Residence

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Abstract

Though always stimulating, working as a restorer architect in Italy, where time has left its trace on countless layers, is sometimes an arduous task. The idea of restoration has gone through a long series of philosophical dialectics that blossomed in the acts of the Athens Charter first and in the acts of the Venice Charter later. This paper shows a case study of the restoration of a wooden ceiling from a noble Roman residence in Italy. The aim of the restoration was both mending the damages done by fire and water from the wooden decorated structures and removing a modern steel beam that was placed to help the original structure to carry the increased loads due to the different use of the old spaces. Modern materials have been used along the practice of an old technique.

Keywords: restoration, philosophy, cultural heritage, technique of restoration

1.0 Introduction

In the delicate process of restoration of an ancient building, a lot of different factors play an important role in the understanding on how far and how much should the architect do to complete the task. In some cases, an ancient building is not only an iconographic insigna of a certain family - often of noble origins with their own whims and traditions - but it may also represent an historical value for the whole community. While in the former case, still having in mind the philosophy and meanings of restoration, is it possible to be quite free in some choices, for the latter it is extremely difficult, though extremely stimulating, trying to coincide the needs of the owner, the respect for the building and the regulations of the institutions in charge of cultural heritage.

2.0 Understanding the Building

A special thought should be given to the nature of the building and the architect should ask himself a series of questions such as: when was it build? Who did it and for whom? Which were the necessities of the owner? How many owners did it have? Were they part of the same family, did they have the same needs? These and probably a hundred more questions and answers should contribute to the project of restoration so that the first ever step is a survey in its broadest meaning. Restoring an existing artifact consist of all the actions needed to preserve its material consistency, to reduce its degradation and to make it suitable for the use of people. To achieve this it is inevitable to alter the artifact; but any action should be seen as a further stratification of historical signs going to alter the building's history.

3.0 A Brief History of Restoration's Philosophy

Restoration is sometimes interchangeably understood as maintenance, storage, consolidation, rehabilitation and sometimes even as a replacement.

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In the early sixties, based on a critical-aesthetic evaluation approach of the artwork, Cesare Brandi, an expert and theorist of restoration, gave a valuable contribution to the definition of the activities involved in restoration defining the problems of the alteration of the artwork according to two fundamental needs: the historical and the aesthetic. A few decades later, the art historian Giulio Carlo Argan, reiterated that the critic and scientific preparation, strictly necessary to conduct a restoration, is not achieved only through

Fig. 1: Wooden ceiling. Clearly Visible, on the Left There is a Steel Beam.

Fig. 2: Removing he Decorated Planks from the Main Wooden Beam

The critical examination and historical work but also through a series of technical surveys. The urgency of a monument or a historic building that is going to ruin must match the rapid actions that block its decay while waiting for the appropriate activities precisely defined by diagnostic stages, to solve the problem related to its survival. Paradoxically, a poorly done restoration is more harmful than a "non-intervention". While waiting for a definitive intervention, the required prompt actions may be of shoring, scaffoldings or erecting a reversible consolidation structure. Resulting mostly from critical and aesthetic considerations than from practical needs, the restoration process is a cultural act. It is more a philosophy intended as a research of the peculiarities of man's history, it targets the objects that with a common sense, constitute the cultural heritage. Depending on man's sensitivity in a certain moment towards the art of the past in relation to the values of the present, the relationship between man and these objects has varied over the centuries. In the Renaissance, a new artistic language, that was based on a reinterpretation of the ancient models but do not have any idea of the preservation of monuments, was searched into the rules of classical; it was normal to take action on the buildings of the past and to "actualize the space destination" or to "superimpose a new artistic look". In the eighteenth century, the study of antiquity brings on to a new thought and to a willingness to document the artwork. From this motivation derives the need for conservation. It is in the neoclassical age that the new art of restoration is born. This will develop with more and more engaging aspects, trying on one hand to recover that quality of life that has been lost with the advent of the industrial revolution, on the other hand to find a continuity with the present after the events of the social revolution. The two main schools of thought developed in the nineteenth century by the opposing theories by Viollet Le Duc, a French architect, active after the destruction of the French Revolution, which intended as restoration a full scale makeover in the same style; and by Ruskin, a writer from a full industrial England and staunch defender of the preservation of the works of the past as they are. At the end of the century, the italian Camillo Boito defined an intermediate position between the two theories and the term

Fig. 3: Detail of the Ceiling. The Structure Made by Wooden Beams was Enclosed in a Series of Decorated Planks

Fig. 4: Reinforcing the Beam Supports

Restoration assumed a more scientifically correct meaning. The new science indicated the intervention principles based on the differentiation of the materials, the historical documentation of the monument, the reputation of restorations, the prohibition of restorations in style and respect for the historical value of the object. From then on, a new cultural attitude was outlined that gradually recognized in the artwork the simultaneous presence of both the historical and artistic value, defining a theory of restoration which did not privilege one of the two aspects at the expense of the other. In more recent times, after the international debates converged in Athens Charter of 1931 and in the 1964 Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, that Cesare Brandi presented a critical-aesthetic methodology explaining the current attitude towards restoration. According to his theory, restoration is based on the recognition of the artwork in its physical consistency of appearance (as a vehicle image) and structure (as a material substance) and in its dual aesthetic-historical polarity.

4.0 On the Work of the Architect

The first step of restoration, then, is to recognize if the artwork has the quality to be forwarded as cultural inheritance. Such quality should be traceable through a system of thought and a critical act that verifies its artistic value and, as a product of human activity, its historical value. It follows that the conservation work is precisely motivated by this recognition and it is guided and influenced by the evaluation of the artwork, so that it is a critical act in itself. Thus, the dialectic of the restoration process is based on the simultaneous respect of both the historical and the aesthetic needs. In this perspective, it is clear that it is truly hard to full respect both needs and be able to find a solution that is objectively not criticized. If, from the historical point of view, each addition on the work that requires a restoration, by its very historical value, should be preserved; from the aesthetics point of view, to recover the beauty of the original monument, blurred and literally hidden by later additions, it should be removed. The consequent conflict must be resolved in favor of the instance that has more weight. Appraising the more substantial one is a subjective and individual act of evaluation and judgment, by no means arbitrary, that confirms the proper critical and non-empirical nature of restoration.

5.0 The Case Study

The building we are referring to has been built during three hundred years, from the XVII th to the XIX th century. Sometimes by annexing near buildings, sometimes by demolishing little houses and by building over them to extend the palace, what was only a small palace has grown over the time to a full block. The property passed from owner to owner until it came in the hands of a roman noble family around the half of nineteenth century; from that time, the same family has lived in the residence making it its heirloom. The building has followed the fortunes if its owners so that some parts of it are extremely well preserved, both masonry and mortar are still excellent and in extremely good shape, while some parts reflect the lack of money of the owners and was build with poor materials. In some cases, the famous roman double skin masonry is reduced to nothing more than a set of two one head brick veil with inconsistent earth in between instead of the most excellent rubble work of stone and cement. In the last ten years, the palace has undergone a series of restorations due to a fire, the passing of time and the carelessness of the owners from the early XXth century. In this paper we are dealing only with one of the large ballrooms whose decorated walls have been covered with plaster and lined with fabric; the original *cotto* floor has been dismantled and replaced by a typical XXth century *veneziana* and its wooden ceiling has been both damaged by fire and water used to extinguish it and tampered by the addition of a

Fig. 5-6: Top. The Irremediably Damaged Secondary Wooden Beams are Replaced with Steel Ones, the Next Step (Bottom) Is to Use the Same Technique Used in Ancient Times for the Primary Beams that Were Covered by Applying Decorated Planks

Steel beam to help holding the loads supported by damaged secondary wooden structure (Fig.1). The idea of the actual owners was to restore the palace removing the ill-handling of the first half of XXth century made by their ancestor in a period of serious monetary misfortune. In need of money and wanting to rent all the room he had, the last prince handled the property with such violence that big ballrooms were divided and made whole little apartments to let.

5.1 Restoring the Wooden Ceiling

The structure of the ceiling is made by primary large wooden beams of about 50 by 50 cm and by secondary smaller beams of about 18 by 18 cm. While the primary beams are raw and enclosed in a decorated wooden skin, the smaller beams are axe-squared, solid and decorated on their three outer surfaces. As was mentioned before, the richly decorated wooden ceiling was maimed by the use of a steel beam. All the decorations have been damaged both by the smoke of a fire that was set by accident some decades ago and by the water used to extinguish it. The first step was to remove, classify and number all the wooden decorated planks (Fig.2). After the study of the kind of paint and medium that was used to apply it when it was originally done, we begun a massive and careful work of restoration eliminating the smoke and water stains but maintaining the time patina. It is no use to bring a four hundred decoration to its 'as new' condition. Removing the wooden planks, the original wooden beams were revealed (Fig.3). These bore the signs of a series of restorations, mainly steel hoops, set to reinforce the splintered wooden beams. The footings of the beams were also very liable. To reinforce the footings we used a series of supports to hold the beams in their places and reinforced the masonry at their heads by using the same kind of bricks and mortar (Fig.4). It is very important to use the same materials that have been used for the original wall to ensure the continuity of the stress lines that flow through the masonry. The next step was to remove the steel beam that supported a whole set of secondary decorated wooden beams. Unfortunatly these were irremediably damaged. This time, the cause of their degrading was the passing of time and the work of the moths. How to intervene in this case? As the secondary wooden beams were not able to support the load, removing the steel beam would have made the structure to collapse; furthermore they were so damaged by moths that in a simple matter of time they would lose any static value.

For this task, we decided to imitate the decorations of the main beams As these were plated by wooden painted planks, we decided to cut off the skin of the old wooden secondary beams, and using it to plank the steel beams that would replace them (Figg.5-6). The decorated wooden ceiling was thus restored to its original beam weaving.

6.0 Conclusions

The dialectic of the restoration process is based on the simultaneous respect of both the historical and the aesthetic needs. Each act of restoration requires a scientific work of evaluation and judgment and it is essential to be able to have a constructive confrontation with Cultural Heritage executives. Sometimes it is easy to find a solution, sometimes not. As there is no 'in this case do this, in that case do that' manual, the architect should nourish all the skills Vitruvius refers to in *De architectura*, so that he should be an educated humanist technician.

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