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Conservation theories from the 19th century, the SPAB Manifesto and its influence in modern times

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Nowadays conservation is seen as a well established theory, with legislation overlooking and protecting the national heritage. We have World Heritage Sites listed by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization protecting buildings (Westminster Abbey), cities (Bath, Edinburgh) or even entire territories (Henderson Island); in the United Kingdom, buildings placed on the Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest cannot be demolished, altered or extended without approval of the government agencies, otherwise it is considered criminal offence. The aim of this essay is to describe the precepts of the theory of conservation, explain the contextual development of it, especially in contrast to the restoration theory, and discuss its influence in relation to the interventions of Caruso St. John Architects.

On the 5th of March 1877, William Morris wrote and published in *The Athenaeum* a letter in which he was debating the conservation problems of the 19th century; more precisely, criticizing conjectural restoration. The letter not only opposed doubtful restoration, but also proposed an association to protect ancient public buildings. Subsequent to issuing the manifesto, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was established on 22nd of March, 1877. Many reputable personalities were early members of the SPAB society: Carlyle, Ruskin, Prof. James Bryce and Phillip Webb.

The SPAB Manifesto, following the foundation of the society, put emphasis on the unjustified restoration. Stating that it would be impossible to restore a building that was directly connected to its time, religion, materials, workmen, building methods and wider cultural context, the manifesto supports the idea that the architecture of an epoch is the expression of its social life. A beautiful building had its own 'living spirit', therefore, trying to bring it back to life, trying to rebuild even 'half inch' of its fabric, will destroy it forever, so the best solution is for it to be conserved and then to 'hand [it] down instructive and venerable to those who come after us'. Although Morris insisted that restoration was a destructive force of the time, he used to believe that a great part of the value attributed to a building came from alterations and additions, 'century after century, often beautifully, always historically.'¹

The manifesto became the formal basis for conservation policies and regulations, and had influence in Italy, Prussia, France, Greece and India, bringing more control over the architectural heritage. Numerous associations, corresponding directly with SPAB members and sending them reports regarding restoration practices, were founded abroad adopting the SPAB model and embracing the leading principles: 'conservative repair' and 'to starve off decay by daily care'. The manifesto came to conclude the debates on conservation and restoration that emerged after the 1850s.

In the second half of the 19th century, in France the Services des Monuments Historiques, led by Viollet-le-Duc from 1846, made numerous attempts at repairing buildings of national importance, although not always successful and usually conjectural.

Prosper Merimee, known as a dramatist, historian, archaeologist and writer, was aware of the fact that usually repairs can be as harmful as destructive², but the understanding he had regarding restoration was still a far cry from the conservation theory: 'All innovation should be avoided and the forms of the conserved models should be faithfully copied. Where no trace of the original is left, the artist should (...) study monuments of the same period, style and country (...) and should reproduce these under the same circumstances.' (Merimee, 1843)

¹ Jokilehto J. (1999). *A History of Architectural Conservation*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, p. 184-186

² Ibid. p. 140

The quotation suggests that where scrupulous replication of ancient buildings was not possible, architects should resume to the study of the present environment in which the building sits, yet not having any certainty and therefore having to resort to conjectural restoration. Furthermore, Merimee seems to talk about conservation as a passive process, depending on the quality of the materials and the durability of the construction rather than on continuous involvement of its inheritors.

Merimee, inspector-general of historical monuments, recommended the promising, well-traveled Viollet-le-Duc who had no official academic training in Architecture, for the work of La Madeleine at Vezelay. The acclaimed project represented the start of his career and brought him the position of Chief of Service des Monuments Historiques. The church illustrates well the approach regarding preservation and restoration of that time in France, which later had influence in England.

In 1834, Merimee examined the church and discovered that it was badly decaying, with water pouring in through the roof and stones falling from the vaults, yet it took 6 years to receive final approval for the consolidation plans of Viollet-le-Duc to repair it and rebuild it partially, and all decisions were taken by the Commission in Paris. Buttresses, flying buttresses, nave vaults and transverse arches have been rebuilt, structurally stronger this time.³ For the roof repairs, same type of tiles have been used, *tuiles creuses*, as recommended by the Commission, although Le-Duc initially suggested zinc. The cleaning of white wash on the interior walls suggests the intention to bring the building back to its original state harmlessly. Reconstruction of the vaults not only served structural durability, but also fulfilled Le-Duc's and Merimee's ambition to bring back the building as it was before other stylistic interventions. In addition, changes to sculptural relief have also been made: a new one was added on the central door tympanum, with a scene different from the original, and a door capital has been replicated. The towers have been provided with pitched roofs, figures on the gables were replaced and a gargoyle, Gothic element, was added for a 'complete' restoration. Although valuable repairs were made, the intervention on certain aspects of external ornaments, for example, was possibly unnecessary and audacious.

In opposition there was a group of people supporting the conservative approach, among which was J-J. Bourasse. He believed that buildings should rather be preserved, even if damaged, than restored to their uncertain original appearance. Referring in particular to Christian monuments, he argued that architects should adopt a more respectful attitude towards national architecture and not abuse 'a work of art whose loss would generate everlasting regrets' (Bourasse, 1845). He divided buildings into two categories: living (such as Christian churches in use) and dead (such as Roman monuments), advising that the living should be used and even adapted, while the dead should be preserved just as they are at the present moment.

On top of this forceful opposition, Service des monuments historique had to face another difficulty: the budget cuts brought in 1848 by the new emperor, Napoleon III, whose ambition was to rebuilt Paris the same as Augustus did in Rome.⁴ It is interesting to mention that restoration and conservation works were almost exclusively government funded same as now in the United Kingdom they receive funding mainly from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

3 Jokilehto J. (1999). *A History of Architectural Conservation*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, p. 143

4 Ibid. p. 150

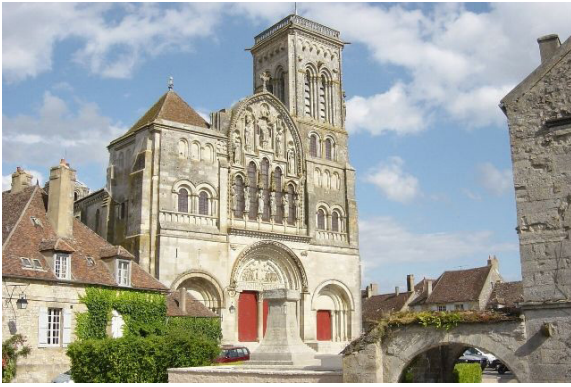


Image 1. Recent view of La Madeleine, Vezelay.

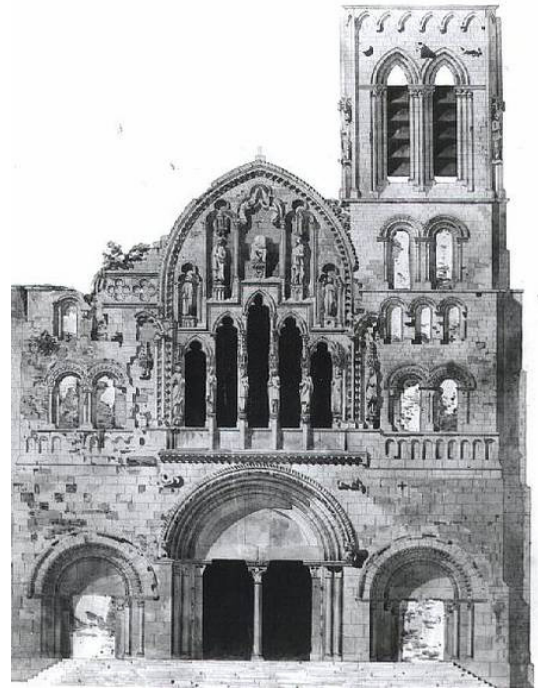


Image 2. La Madeleine, Vezelay, before Violet-Le-Duc's intervention



Image 3. Gargoyle of La Madeleine, Vezelay.



Image 4. Recent view of the tympanum of La Madeleine, Vezelay.



Image 5. Recent aerial view of La Madeleine, Vezelay.

In England, there have been few personalities attempting to create societies following the French example: John Britton and Joseph Hume, George Gilbert Scott in 1841. Different acts regarding protection of Ancient Monuments were given at the end of the 19th century, but the extended one was approved in 1913 with the formation of Ancient Monuments Board, offering guidance to administrators. Listing proved to be an efficient measure for the protection of historic buildings, especially after the destructions of the Second World War. Yet this denouement was brought after decades of debates on principles of conservation and methods of dealing with ancient buildings manifested in England, especially during the second half of the 19th century.

The debate started in 1839 when Cambridge-Camden Society was founded. It was soon to be destroyed and brought back under the name of Ecclesiological Society in 1845.⁵ The Gothic admirers

⁵ Jokilehto J. (1999). *A History of Architectural Conservation*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, p. 156

group's aim was to bring ecclesiastical architecture to its original, pure state, to its 'former glory'⁶, removing all traces of other styles that interfered with the building during its lifetime. In the case of previous additions, the architects suggested that these should be repaired 'or even carrying out more fully the idea that dictated them' (*The Ecclesiologist*, 1842, I:65), affirmation that clearly suggests the predilection to replace rather than to preserve.

Anthony Salvin, John Loughborough Pearson trained by Salvin, and William Butterfield were favorites and members of the society and all applied similar principles, usually ending up destroying churches or replacing elements, leaving no clue of the dishonest restoration performed, which brought the critique of the anti-restoration movement: 'We regret for our own sake and for his reputation's that he was ever called in to deal with a single ancient fabric'. (RIBA Journal, 1900, VII:242)

George Gilbert Scott was an architect with experience in the field of church restoration, supporter and member of the Cambridge-Camden Society, often put side by side with Violet-le-Duc. His restorations of churches all over England generated criticism: 'Delay the ruthless work awhile, (...) Thou stern, unpitying demon of Repair (...) handle with reverence each crumbling stone' (John Louis Petit, 1841). This led to the publication in 1850 of *A Plea for the Faithful Restoration of our Ancient Churches* which contained his views on conservation, inspired by the recent *Seven Lamps on Architecture* of John Ruskin. Albeit he appreciated the historical value of a building and agreed that the risk regarding restoration was doing too much and not setting limits, that destruction of parts should be made only when unquestionably necessary and reconstruction only with clear evidence, he did not always stay true to his beliefs.⁷ It was only in 1964, in the Venice Charter, that limits to restoration were imposed: '(restoration) must stop where conjecture begins', case in which the changes made have to be distinct from the original.

On the other hand, John Ruskin (1818-1900), well-known art critic of the time, was the one to reject the restoration movement and declare his wish to replace the word that gained negative connotations in the past few years with the word 'conservation'. He managed to direct the conservation movement with his writing criticizing the careless approach towards historic buildings and the loss of authenticity.

He identified the values of ancient buildings in his book *Seven Lamps of architecture*: sacrifice, truth, power, beauty, life, memory, obedience. Ruskin adopted the principles of authenticity and honesty, saying that the restoration of a work of art, even with methods of the historical period and accurately, meant reproduction of its own forms in new material, therefore destruction of the unique and time weathered monument.

He encouraged the 'ennobling' labor, appreciated creativity and good quality craftsmanship, and advised that unnecessary manufacturing should not be supported as the invention and creativity of the workman will not contribute to the result anymore: 'Never encourage the manufacture of any article not absolutely necessary in the production of which invention has no share' (Ruskin, 1851).

⁶ Jokilehto J. (1999). *A History of Architectural Conservation*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, p. 160

⁷ Ibid. p. 162

To emphasize on this aspect and that of the importance of the quality of materials, an attitude similar to Alberti's, he referred to 'a good man's house' (Jokilehto 1999, p 182). This was his personification of the memories, the life, the love and other emotional values attached to the architectural inheritance and passed on to posterity which has a duty to preserve it and respect it.

While Ruskin and Morris brought arguments favouring conservation, Viollet-le Duc and Scott represented exponents of destruction.

The process described above was identified as the modern conservation movement, important for its call for action and regulation to protect the heritage, to stop it from decaying or being destroyed by man. Yet society felt responsible for preserving its architecture long before that, always because of nostalgia, appreciation for past accomplishments, the wish to learn from them and to leave them to posterity. The Pantheon was restored, undeniably beautifully, to serve as a legacy, as a demonstration of power and interest in art. Vitruvius wrote about the importance of the context and orientation and set rules for builders and architects. Then, in the Italian Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti talked about the importance of the quality labor and material, and how the human instinct can identify the right and wrong in a building and imagine a subjective improved version of it.



Image 6. Tate British Museum. 2016

Image 7. Tate British Museum. Vestibule. The original building from 1897

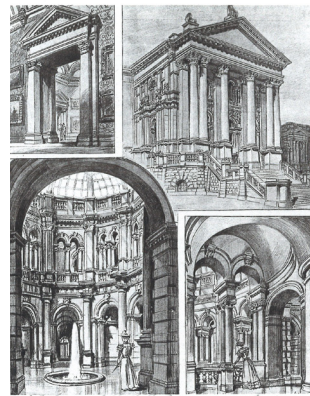


Image 8. Tate British Museum. First architect, Smith. Perspective views.

Image 9. Tate British Museum. Image showing Gallery 1, now gallery 17. Notice pediments over doorways.



Image 10. Tate British Museum. In 1897 the pediment have been removed and have not been replaced.

‘The factors that make up a successful art gallery are complex, but no one can deny that the quality of architectural space plays a significant part in the experience that it has become a matter for appreciation and debate among visitors, artists, curators and critics alike.’
(Searing, 2004)

Museum buildings are social and learning spaces, they have to fulfill the users’ aspirations and even go beyond them. They have to always adapt not only in accordance with their number of acquisitions, but also with consideration to the constant challenges coming from the public; art galleries and museums are the opposite of a static environment. Architecture, as said before, has an enormous role in facing these difficulties. Tate Britain in London has a history that proves this. It went through drastic changes and additions in 1899, 1910, 1926, 1937, 1964, 1979, 1987, 1990, 2001 and, most recently, in 2013; there is also a possibility for the museum to extend to the adjacent site in the future.

From 2006 to 2013, Caruso St. John Architects, having clear interest in conservation, conducted multi-million pound works to the original Tate building. Looking at previous conservation theories, one may ask whether or not the intervention was indeed needed. Although the public response was generally positive, the attitudes in the world of architecture professionals were not always sympathetic to the result: ‘radical changes, with a hint of the Dubai shopping mall’ (Wainwright, 2013).

Starting in 1897 as the exhibition of Sir Henry Tate, a wealthy entrepreneur from Liverpool, it gained popularity and required no less than ten extensions and interior interventions, most of which were respectful to the original neoclassicist building. It was eventually Grade II listed. The majority of the changes have been regarding functionality and minor interior changes which the need for adaptation can justify; yet there were also not so sensible changes, all to deal with architectural trends. The initial, partly opulent, Edwardian fabric has been slightly altered for the choice of simplicity. For example, the pediments over doorways in the original building have been removed and never replaced.

‘As one moves around the building in space, one also travels in time, an exercise that potently illustrates that museum buildings are subject to an ongoing and inevitable process of alteration determined both by architectural trends and by successive directors, designers, curators, conservators and government agencies, according to the perceived needs dominant at any given time.’ (Searing, 2004)

However, the original entrance and rotunda have been neglected since their inauguration. ‘Popular success has fueled the need for continue development’ (Searing, 2004). This is, in the end, part of the Tate history, therefore a careful restoration of the main entrance was truly necessary in order to help it meet contemporary standards and to satisfy the visitors’ standards. The images suggest that the space was wonderfully designed. The majestic vestibule overwhelmed and encouraged the viewer to go forward to the central hall, the rotunda, ennobled by the light and warmth coming through the glass dome above it. Under the dome, a goldfish pool; around it, niches with statues at the ground floor and on the floors above a balcony overlooking the court, surrounded by stone columns; everything made out of Portland stone.



Image 13. Tate British Museum. Rotunda after Caruso St. John Architects’ intervention, 2013



Image 11. Tate British Museum. Rotunda before the flood in 1920’s.

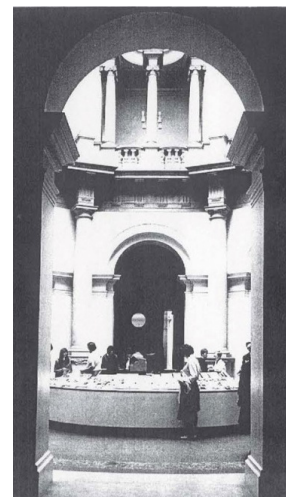


Image 12. Tate British Museum. Rotunda with reception bookshop, 1964

Pictures from the 1960s show the drastic utilitarian changes that have been made to the rotunda. The River Thames flood in 1928 destroyed part of the building and forced the staff accommodation to be moved upstairs where an apartment was built. This obviously meant the restriction of the public access on the balcony. Part of it was transformed into a library and became storage space, losing its initial purpose and appearance. Another element that can be observed in the pictures is the replacement of the flooring with a less appealing one.

In the case of the Tate museum, change was necessary not for structural reasons, but rather for social and aesthetic ones, dealing with the identity of the space, lost in the 1920s.

Caruso St. John Architects did an admirable job rejuvenating the space. The original floor was replaced with a modern version, which is a justifiable approach even when considering conservation theories. Replacing the flooring in the '20s has been a practical solution, but now a more considerate intervention was required. Clear evidence of the past was made available to public in an exhibition about the history of the museum, unlike the Cambridge-Camden society approach, and the subtle modern twist brought to the new element is a compliment, a tribute to the precedent from 1897. Also, the design of what was the reception space in the '60s was complemented by a new staircase, a new area for members and a Manet inspired bar. Some may say that the staircase does not fit well within the context, yet it is designed in conformity with the modern conservation theories:

‘[Restoration] must stop at the point where conjecture begins, and in this case moreover any extra work which is indispensable must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a *contemporary stamp*.’ (*The Venice Charter*, 1964; my italics)



Image 14. Tate British Museum. New staircase in the rotunda, 2013



Image 15. Tate British Museum. Basement with staircase

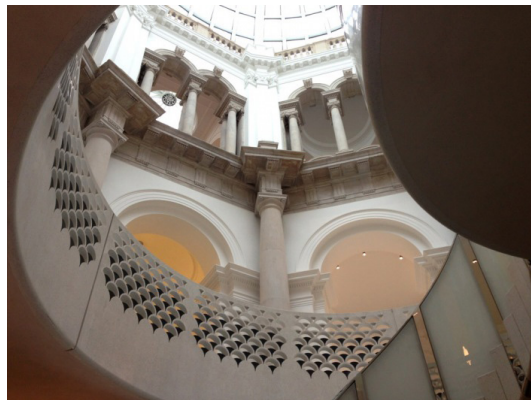


Image 16. Tate British Museum. Rotunda balcony and balustrade



Image 17. Tate British Museum. Members area on the first floor of the rotunda. Bar, 2013

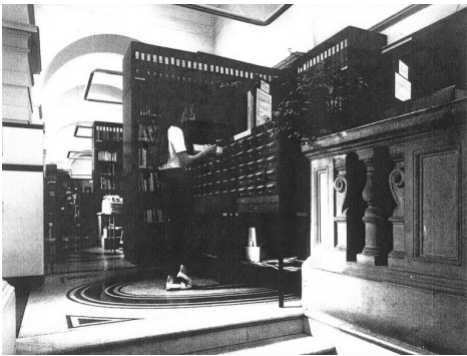


Image 19. Tate British Museum. First floor of the rotunda. Library, 1990



Image 18. , Edouard Manet.1882.*A Bar At The Folies-Bergere*. Paris, France

The biggest challenge the practice admits to have faced is combining the atmosphere found with new interventions and generating a place that people can go to at different times of day and have a sense of ownership attached to it.

The final product of their efforts is a space in which the line between old and new is elegantly blurred, with respect towards the history of the building, which is opposing to the ‘faithful’ restoration theories. It does not destroy the fabric of the building, it energizes the space, honors it with the sensible choice of materials and tones: ‘Peter St John suggests that the changes at the Tate are ‘radical’, but they’re not. The new interventions are architecturally logical, and fastidiously subtle.’ (Merick, 2013)

The precepts of the conservation theory first enunciated in the SPAB manifesto influenced the project, yet not directly. They played a great role in the further development of the theory and helped establish the modern associations to protect the buildings of great importance and to set limits regarding interventions.

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