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The Origins of Modern Conservation Theory in Fascist Italy: An Expanded Edition

August 22nd, 2013

No comments

This is an expanded version of the "Forum" essay published in the August 2013 issue of Clem Labine's Traditional Building magazine.

Yes, that title is intentionally provocative and, admittedly, simplistic. But so are all attempts to associate architectural ideas or actual built forms with particular political programs. One often hears new traditional architecture dismissed because Classical forms were employed by the Nazis and Italian Fascists, even if historically various styles were used by various political movements, both democratic and authoritarian.



The relation between architectural style and politics has always been complicated, but post-war misconceptions involving the political use of traditional architecture are often simply false. For example, those who say that the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini supported Classical architecture and discouraged Modernism have to explain how in 1938 this same government officially banned architecture in historical styles, whether in additions to historic sites or in new construction, and how suppressing traditional design has continued to be part of preservation policy worldwide until today.

In 1931, the Italian Charter of Restoration was drafted by Gustavo Giovannoni, just returned from the conference that produced the Charter of Athens, the first international agreement on the conservation of monuments. Giovannoni's charter, entirely consonant with international norms at the time, reflected the traditional idea that new construction in historic settings should be stylistically harmonious, though distinguishable from the historic monument. For additions:

The essential criterion to be followed should be that of limiting new elements to the minimum possible; such new elements should be given a character of nude simplicity in correspondence to the constructive scheme; and the continuation of the existing lines in a similar style can only be admitted when treated in geometric expressions without decorative individuality. Such additions should be carefully and evidently designed, either by the use of materials different from the originals or by the adoption of simple moldings without carving, or with marks or inscriptions, such that a restoration would never risk deceiving scholars or represent the falsification of an historical document. (Author's translation.)

This approach, undoubtedly inspired by Valadier's early 19th-century restoration of the Arch of Titus in Rome – in which the fragments of the ancient structure were reassembled and completed with infill pieces in similar-looking but distinguishable travertine – assumes that the new construction, like the old, will also have moldings and carving, though simplified.

The Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum, restored by Giuseppe Valadier, ca. 1820. The surviving marble fragments of the first-century Roman triumphal arch were restored and the missing parts rendered in a similar-looking but distinguishable travertine. The restorers only provided the basic architectural features but did not flute the columns or carve the moldings, and there is no sculptural decoration of the new parts. While this may have been a matter of economics, it has served as a model for restorations or new construction that is "differentiated" from historic fabric but also "compatible" with it. (Author photo).

Giovannoni does not mention avoiding stylistic contrast because *no one had yet imagined Liebskind-like glass shards erupting from the façade of a valued historic building.*

Giovannoni's ideas on restoration were part of an overall view of architecture and urbanism as a unity. His views are paraphrased by Paolo Nicoloso.

"(For) Giovannoni, the study of history, the recognition of vernacular architecture, and the restoration of monuments had assumed a central importance in the patient work of bringing a new style to birth. The study of history underscored the 'continuity' of the Italian architectural tradition, from the quattrocento to the beginning of the 19th century, and offered to the designer the lessons needed to realize that continuity in the present. Vernacular architecture was the expression of a tradition still alive, in which to seek models for an architecture of transition toward the new style. . . . The reconstruction of a monument. . . expressed in synthesis the lines along which to seek the new. Not by chance did Giovannoni, in presenting his theory, locate the problem of restoration at the center of a question of style and indicated in restorations of completion the example of that stylistic harmony required of the new architecture."



This passage is rich in suggestions for the way in which restoration and new design can inform one another: Valadier's work at the Arch of Titus reveals a "restoration of completion" aimed at wholeness and continuity without pretending that what structure we see today is identical to what existed in the first century. Continuity does not mean denying change but, rather, managing and integrating it. Imagine that concept applied not only to individual structures, but to city neighborhoods, in which infill buildings take as their first obligation maintaining the continuity of the streetscape, like the travertine bits used to re-scope the Roman arch. Giovannoni sums up this view in the sixth point of the Charter.

"That together with the respect of the monument and for its various phases there must be respect for the conditions of its setting, which should not be altered by inappropriate isolation or by the construction of new adjacent buildings incompatible in massing, color, or style."

In the same year the Charleston Zoning Ordinance was passed, creating America's first historic district, Giovannoni stipulates that the setting of the historic monument should not be invaded by inappropriate new construction, a point virtually repeated in the ordinance's restriction against "incongruous" new building. This negative restriction does not mandate any style but puts the burden of proof on the designer to demonstrate the appropriateness of the proposed new work – although even in Charleston in recent decades the burden of proof has shifted to those who are critical of new work they find "incongruous."

Church of Sant'Andrea, Orvieto. An example of the restoration approach of Gustavo Giovannoni, who rebuilt the church and its campanile and added a new arcaded loggia on the left side 1928-30. Without documentation of the original design intent and with much of the original fabric in an advanced state of decay, Giovannoni stabilized what was sound and rebuilt what was missing or degraded, based on physical evidence when available and on his own knowledge of the style and practices of the period when necessary. The loggia, for example, is entirely his design, though "seamless" with the whole restored structure. It was this kind of "restoration of completion" that Argan and Brandi rejected as "false." (Author photo)

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Despite the respect given him as a leading figure in the field over four decades, Giovannoni's views were always a minority position and often at variance with official policy. The Fascist government was divided on architectural matters. From his rise to power in 1922, Mussolini refused to recognize a "Fascist style," though both traditionalists and the Modernist Rationalists lobbied for this distinction.

Instead, he would support now one and now the other until, in the 1930s, a semi-official style emerged in the "stripped Classicism" promoted by Marcello Piacentini that sought to synthesize the Classical and Modern. Giovannoni remained a committed classicist throughout his career and led the traditionalist camp, but he was countered from within the government by the minister of public education, Giuseppe Bottai, a supporter the Modernist camp. Two young protégés of Bottai, Giulio Carlo Argan and Cesare Brandi, would play important roles in shaping Modernist conservation theory both before and after the war.

The Ponte Santa Trinità, Florence. The original 16th-century bridge, designed by Bartolomeo Ammanati and characterized by its especially elegant elliptical arches, was destroyed by the Nazis as they retreated from the city in 1944. Reconstructed in 1957, the new structure is composed largely from original material retrieved from the Arno River. Cesare Brandi famously denounced the new bridge as a "copy" and a "fake." (Author photo)

In 1938, Bottai appointed Giovannoni to chair a commission to study the 1931 charter but, seeing no reason to rewrite his own work of seven years before, he soon resigned. Bottai then formed another commission, with Argan and Brandi as members, to write a new charter based on a completely different conception of architecture and its relation to its own past. In contrast to Giovannoni's vision of continuity, Argan wrote that "no stylistic category exists in the abstract and that every one of our experiences of ancient art is a finite historical judgment of finished and irreproducible artistic facts, and for that reason untranslatable in practical imitations."

New exercises in the architectural styles of the past, even in simplified and non-matching ways, "always work against our historical consciousness, affecting equally judgments of ancient and more recent art." The way to honor history is not to seek continuity with it, but to record in new buildings the progress of the historical narrative away from the forms of the past. Accordingly, he insisted that "every imitation [of historic architecture] is an outrage against rather than an homage to history." In his charter, the eighth point reads:

"For obvious reasons of historical dignity and for the necessary clarity in current artistic consciousness, the construction of buildings in historic styles is absolutely to be avoided, even in areas not having monumental or landscape interest, since this represents a double falsification with respect to both the ancient and the recent history of art."

This notion of "double falsification" is significant. Argan is concerned with protecting current trends in modern art from the corrupting influence of historical imitation as much as protecting historic resources from the possibility of confusion with imitative new work. While Giovannoni emphasized the importance of maintaining a sense of continuity between past and present, Argan defends the historical narrative of rupture and revolution on which modern art is based. This requires that historical and contemporary arts be utterly distinct. Suggesting otherwise, he thought, was not just a difference in taste, it was false.

As an historian committed to a particular outcome (i.e., with a particular ax to grind in the present), his argument had the virtue of being simple, revolutionary and untroubled by the actual historical record, which, as we know now, was considerably more complex and nuanced than the categorical theories of Argan and other Modernist historians (Pevsner, Giedion, others) allowed.

The new charter was not immediately enacted, however because a ban on new construction alluding to historic styles would have set one ministry of the government against another. At the very moment Argan was writing, Piacentini and his colleagues were building EUR, the ill-fated world's fair showcasing the "official" style of abstracted Classicism with columns and arches galore. The war brought construction to a halt in 1942, and in that same year, as Allied bombs were falling on Italian cities and the regime itself was crumbling, Argan's charter was issued as an "Instruction" with the force of law to conservation and building officials throughout the country. While the war and the end of the regime prevented its enforcement, the "Instruction" remained the last word of the Fascist government on architectural and conservation matters.

The post-war government canceled the 1942 law and reinstated Giovannoni's 1931 charter, under which post-war reconstruction was completed to popular acclaim. In accordance with Giovannoni's ideas, dozens of important landmarks destroyed by bombs were reconstructed following the motto that had inspired the rebuilding of the Campanile in Saint Mark's Square in Venice after its collapse in 1902 – *dov'era, com'era* ("where it was, as it was").

But Brandi, who, like Argan, was forgiven for his participation in the Fascist government – they declared themselves leftists after the war, Argan going on to be the first elected Communist mayor of Rome in the 1970s – remained head of the national institute for restoration in Rome. He protested against the reconstruction of the Trinità Bridge in Florence, blown up by the retreating Nazis, calling the new structure a "fake," that is, tantamount to a forgery. In 1963, he published his *Theory of Restoration*, in which he attacked reconstructions or restorations that sought to recapture the historic form, or additions in forms or materials not plainly modern, because they violated the narrative of modern art history. Like Argan, he insisted that works of art and architecture were unrepeatable historical events rather than works of human skill that could be rebuilt as needed. The legitimacy of modern art rested on its break with the past, so to blur the distinction between new and original construction was "false" with respect to the progress of history.

While his arguments might seem highly theoretical, they had striking concrete effects. Brandi's book was the basis for the 1964 Charter of Venice, which required that additions to historic sites "bear a contemporary stamp." Brandi was an author of the 1972 Italian Charter of Restoration, still in effect, which definitively replaced the 1931 standards with a Modernist approach. Similar thinking, albeit in a more moderate form, inspired the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation of 1977, which requires additions to be both "differentiated" from and "compatible" with historic fabric, a provision often interpreted as banning new traditional work for the same reasons cited by Argan and Brandi, though the wording is actually more in line with Giovannoni's style-neutral approach.

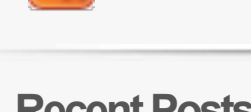
Giovannoni died in 1947, and his views were quickly dismissed by the leading figures in the field, many of whom had been his students. Ironically, his reputation was destroyed because of his seeming adherence to the regime, though he was never officially part of it, while Argan and Brandi, who were employees of a government ministry and formulated Fascist policy, were immediately rehabilitated. In all these cases, it was the stylistic commitment, not the political one, that determined who was denounced as a Fascist and who was cheered as a democrat by post-war critics like Bruno Zevi.

The next time you hear that new traditional design is "false history" or "diminishes authentic historic fabric," you can point out that this same view was, between 1938 and 1942, the official policy of the Italian Fascist dictatorship. That means that either the view itself is suspect for that reason or the political context of architectural ideas is not a decisive factor in determining their validity. In either case, contemporary preservation philosophy, which has yet to shake off the theories of Argan and Brandi, has some explaining to do.

Author's note: All translations from the original Italian texts are by the author. Background for this discussion and the texts of the relevant documents may be found in the essay by Paolo Nicoloso, "La 'Carta del restauro' di Giulio Carlo Argan," *Annali d'architettura, Rivista del Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio*, no. 6, Milan: Electa, 1994, pp. 101-115.

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