

# CONVERSATIONS WITH THE PAST

*EXPLORING HOW NARRATIVE CAN BE  
CONTINUED THROUGH INTERVENTION IN  
HISTORIC ARCHITECTURE*

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# CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION                               | 1  |
| CHAPTER 1<br><i>HISTORICAL CONTEXT</i>     | 3  |
| CHAPTER 2<br><i>READING &amp; DIALOGUE</i> | 9  |
| CHAPTER 3<br><i>CONTRAST AS DIALOGUE</i>   | 15 |
| CONCLUSION                                 | 23 |
| LIST OF FIGURES                            | 25 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY                               | 26 |

# INTRODUCTION

The interference into historic buildings is an issue that is rarely entered into without stirring up controversy. The question of how to approach dealing with elderly buildings that may be beginning to decay is met with conflicting viewpoints, where a middle ground may seem far from achievable. One may see the architect-restorer as breathing life back into a ruin, while another may see it as a further destruction of the past. This investigation aims to analyse these viewpoints and the reasoning behind them, with a focus on exploring a common policy that appears key to a successful intervention- dialogue between the old and the new.

Restoring and altering historic buildings today means strict guidelines must be followed to ensure the important historic fabric is respected. This investigation will begin by delving into the creation of these legislations that we follow today and the strong viewpoints of the key figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The attitude of the stylistic restorer, Viollet-le-Duc conflicted greatly to those of preservationists, Ruskin and Morris. Legislations such as the Athens Charter and movements such as SPAB aimed to address the issues raised by these men. How have these guidelines influenced restorations since?

Respect and understanding are at the root of controversy when integrating a new element to an existing site. The importance of a dialogue and a continued narrative will be explored as well as investigating how the important element of balance can be achieved. How can the new contrast with the old while also sharing poetic similarities? Contrast between existing and new is a major feature of today's heritage projects due to legislation such as the Venice Charter, but what are the various methods being used to achieve this differentiation, and how can we decide if the intervention has been a success?

## CHAPTER 1

# HISTORICAL CONTEXT

France in the 1800's was recovering from devastation caused during the French Revolution. At this time there was great debate over how to approach reviving some of the historic buildings that suffered damage. Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc was leading the debate in favour of their restoration, and in 1840 became the first Chief Inspector for the French Office of Historic Monuments (Donovan, 2008).

Le-Duc is best known for his work on the Notre Dame in Paris, the Château de Pierrefonds, and Carcassonne, among others. Le-Duc's theory when restoring these historic monuments was one of 'stylistic restoration' (Semes, 2009) where he incorporated much of his own personal judgement in the interest of completion. Before working on any restoration, Le-Duc would carry out a thorough investigation to critically analyse the building and understand its history in order to determine the best path forward.

*"He dismissed a priori formulas or fixed ideas in favour of judgement, weighing in the balance diverse and potentially conflicting values, choosing a course of action appropriate to the particular circumstances"*  
(Semes, 2009)

The course of action Le-Duc often took was to incorporate his own ideals into the existing, this can be seen clearly through his restoration of Pierrefonds (fig 1,overleaf). Through restoration, Le-Duc appeared to have resurrected the dead through completing this ruin as his personal ideal. Le-Duc said himself that the 'best thing to do is put oneself in the place of the original architect', yet his restorations may take the building to an exaggerated fantasy, never intended by the original creator, and are therefore met with great controversy (Semes, 2009).

At the same time over in England, Sir George Gilbert Scott

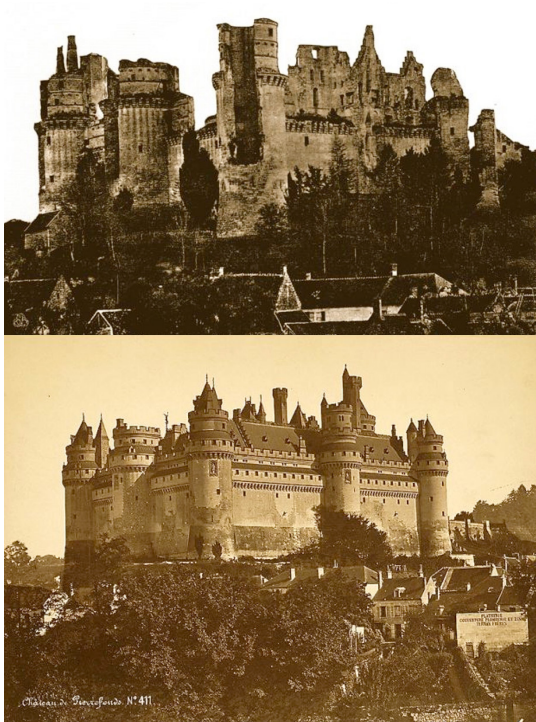


Fig. 1 - Pierrefonds before and after Viollet-le-Duc's restoration, 1855 & 1874 respectively

was working in a similar way to Le-Duc in his attempts to faithfully restore aging Anglican churches. Scott's restorations involved the removal of existing windows and sometimes entire façades and upgrading them to be more modern and conforming with his own interpretation. The term 'restoration' in the nineteenth century meant something quite different to how we understand it today, where large parts of a building could be destroyed and then rebuilt, often in the Gothic Revival style (Donovan, 2008). This is the practice of restoration that Le-Duc and Scott partook in.

John Ruskin was a notorious art critic at the time and despised the notion of restoring historic buildings. Ruskin wrote in his *Seven Lamps of Architecture* that restoration is;

*"The most total destruction a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered: a destruction accompanied with a false description of the thing destroyed"*

Ruskin was sorely passionate about, in his eyes, protecting the art of past architects. His biggest contention with the idea of restoration was the dishonesty of an intervention posing as part of the historic fabric, when in fact it is an impostor, alien to the original. In fact, two out of his *Seven Lamps of Architecture* belong to that of 'Truth' and 'Memory'. Ruskin saw "sweetness in the gentle lines which sun and rain had wrought" (Scott, 2008), he saw no such sweetness in a modern interpretation. The architecture of past generations and civilizations are not for us to interfere with, thought Ruskin. He is quoted as saying;

*"We have no right whatsoever 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"* (Scott, 2008).

It can be seen that Ruskin enjoyed the mystery of what once may have been in historic buildings, but to see the missing falsely resurrected would be an insult. Ruskin seeks to protect these monuments so they can be showcased for future generations. This viewpoint is disputed widely, as architects such as Le-Duc and Scott aimed to breathe new life into the buildings, so future generations could make practical use from them, Ruskin seemed to prefer to remove them from functionality in order to preserve them (Scott, 2008).

William Morris followed in Ruskin's views, and set into motion a movement in protest of proposed restorations by Sir George Gilbert Scott and alike (Scott, 2008). The Anti-Scrape Club was founded with Morris at the helm, later evolving into the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877.

The manifesto of the organisation pleads with architects to favour maintenance over restoring. Morris thought of restoration as vandalism (Donovan, 2008) and so the SPAB aimed to encourage only essential repairs to be carried out to reduce risk of further decay, therefore reducing the need for restoration. "Take proper care of your buildings and you will not need to restore them" -Ruskin (Donovan, 2008) .

The SPAB manifesto's rules were not dogmatic, and also suggested that if supports do need to be implemented, then they should not attempt to mimic historic fabric, they should be honest, contemporary and reversible (Powys, 1995), mirroring Ruskin's ideals of truth.

Ruskin and Morris appear successful at having altered the public's views of restoration and the overuse of Gothic revivalism in the nineteenth century, resulting in Viollet-le-Duc's stance becoming less popular; even altering today's perception of 'restoration' as less drastic due to SPAB's

influence (Donovan, 2008).

Following this, the twentieth century saw the introduction of the Athens Charter in 1931, which aimed to reach an agreed standpoint on the restoration of historic buildings internationally. The charter advised against unnecessary alteration, promoting preservation and maintenance instead, in order to protect the character of heritage sites. The charter also recommended occupation of these buildings to help safeguard them (Semes, 2009).

World War II brought devastation, and cities and monuments began to be reconstructed, the Venice Charter of 1964 set more authoritative measures. The Charter ruled that the existing layers of history must be respected, and new additions must "bear a contemporary stamp" (Semes, 2009).

Today's regulations fulfil Ruskin and Morris's desired to protect the existing from dishonest replicas, while also allowing a building to extend a new narrative into the future and create a new dialogue with the present that will not impede on the past. Having understood the history of the regulations, it is this argument that must now be explored, how can continued narrative be established in interventions, and why is it so important?



## CHAPTER 2

### *READING & DIALOGUE*

The main concern when working with aging buildings is the notion that history may be wiped away, unable to be returned. History cannot be recreated.

When faced with a decaying building, architects like Viollet-le-Duc would prefer to 'complete' what was missing. Take for example Le-Duc's restoration of the Notre Dame. Statues that lined the façade had been destroyed by the French Revolution, and so Le-Duc replaced these with replicas. This is met with controversy from as, through the act of reviving the statues, Le-Duc has erased the story of their destruction, and their replacement bear no reference to the fact they are not original. What Le-Duc would consider a courtesy, others would see as an attempt to falsify, mislead, and forget about the history (Semmes, 2009).

However, it's important to note that Le-Duc was passionate about gaining complete understanding of a building in order to form his approach. ReReadings by Graeme Brooker and Sally Stone tells us of the importance of 'reading' buildings. It is so critical to listen to a historic building's voice and read its history that it is telling us through the way it exists in the present. Through intense research, architects can not simply make sense of what is remaining, but can begin to understand what was once there. There is a sense of beauty in the absence of what has been lost, and the thought of what once stood there.

Giancarlo de Carlo was also an advocate for reading places and spoke at great length of how the imprints on ruins help future generations to understand understated stories from the past; "There are events that are not recorded in the archives and yet are embedded in the architectural forms", DeCarlo as quoted in (McKean, 2004). Reading enhances our emotional relationship with a space, where its blemishes and imperfections are seen as much more than these, but as remnants of past events.

Buildings are ever evolving; they retain the scars of these stories, and unsympathetic restoration bears the risk of deleting these stories under the guise of correction. Even if an architect's work could be rebuilt in the modern day to the exact dimensions, the inscriptions of time gone by will never be able to be recreated.

As with rain and wind, the simple act of inhabiting a building will weather it, and these imprints being celebrated in the present gives us a glimpse into a time gone by (Brooke & Stone, 2004). It was Viollet le-Duc who said that "the best way to preserve a building is to find a use for it" and this idea is even echoed in the Athens Charter to "ensure the continuity of their life" (Donovan, 2008). Heritage buildings should not be stuck telling just the stories of the past. Occupying a building provides the opportunity for buildings to continue their narrative. If a building is preserved merely to showcase it as an example of its time, then this gives it a renewed purpose today, and adds a valid new layer to its narrative (Scott, 2008).

This idea is clear in Carlo Scarpa's intervention in Verona's Castelveccchio (fig. 2). Scarpa preserves this monument by giving a new purpose, a museum. Scarpa celebrates layers and stratification in Castelveccchio, new additions upon new additions show clearly the journey of the building. The newest layer by Scarpa reacts to, and forms relationships with the existing, giving both the new and the old an enhanced unity (Schultz, 2010). Like the many layers before it, Scarpa's museum is the newest chapter in this existing building's life, where the building itself is as important as the objects on display inside (Schittich, 2003). The story is left open-ended as future layers will have the chance intertwine later.

Understanding the host building is like an act of translation. The words exist within the ruins, and these words can then



Fig. 2 - *Layers of history at Castelveccchio, Verona, by Carlo Scarpa*



be taken and translated into a modern-day interpretation, complementing and increasing our understanding of what we're given from the past. A translation may never say the exact same words as the original would intend to say, however a relationship between the existing and the translation may establish a new understanding beneficial to both the past and the present (Benjamin, 1999).

A dialogue between the old and the new can be established, where the new aids us in interpreting the past, while also furthering the dialogue in a new chapter of the buildings story. Fred Scott in 'On Altering Architecture' refers to this as a 'fresh conclusion' of the work. However, can a building ever be concluded? If a building's narrative is forever continuing, its ultimate conclusion may come on the day there is zero trace remaining. Thinking back to Ruskin's aim of freezing ruins in time, and stumping their narrative, could this, in turn, have further killed these monuments, instead of his goal of maintaining their life?

Marcel Breuer's 1968 proposal for Grand Central Terminal (fig. 3) in New York City is an example of disregard for the existing condition. It is clear that no dialogue exists between the Beaux-Arts host below and the modernist skyscraper insertion. This proposal feels uncomfortable, the two opposing styles do not work together harmoniously, the voice of the new overshadows the old (Semmes, 2009).

The challenge facing the architect as translator is a difficult one. A balance must be struck between respecting the past while incorporating a contemporary response. Layers from different styles often juxtapose while harmonizing. The rough of the old is often complimented by the freshness and cleanliness of the new. So, how can this balance be achieved? What methods help to create a comfortable and complimenting contrast between styles? And how is it ensured that they are not competing against one another?



Fig. 3 - Marcel Breuer's proposal for an intervention to Grand Central Station in NYC

## CHAPTER 3

# *CONTRAST AS DIALOGUE*

The art of incorporating architecture into an already present canvas is a very different challenge to that of designing a building from nothing. The charters and guidelines of today stipulate that new insertions must have a clear distinction from where they are set. This ensures the reinvigoration and continuity of dialogue, without introducing replicas that pose as impostors of the past. Cheap parodies like this could mislead the viewer, who would be left unsure of what is new and what is original, and the voice of the past is lost in the confusion.

This brings us back to Viollet-le-Duc's Pierrefonds restoration (fig. 1). This ruin was restored before new interventions were governed to be distinct from the existing. This resulted in the loss of the château's original voice. The new does not have a conversation with the old, the voice of the new replaces the voice of the old. Le-Duc's replica is telling 'a' story, but it is not the original dialogue of the site.

This rule of distinction leads to deliberate contrast between the new and old. This contrast is tricky to get right, and their unity and acceptance of one another is a matter of fine balance. Attempting to achieve this balance may seem like a daunting task, but when this perfect juxtaposition is created, the payoff is a harmonious piece of architecture, possible centuries in the making.

Many precedents showcase the various ways through which a balanced dialogue can be achieved. The first we will explore is colour. Fig. 4 (overleaf) shows the Gothenburg Law Courts in Sweden. The original building is on the left and was designed by Nicodemus Tessin in 1672. Erik Gunnar Asplund won the competition to create an extension for the courts and this is seen on the right-hand side, completed in 1937. Asplund takes the lead of the existing and allows it to guide his design for the new. The colour scheme of the existing is imitated in the new,



Fig. 4 - Sweden's Gothenburg Law Courts



Fig. 5 - Scholastic Building, NYC by Aldo Rossi

white for structure and cream for infill (Brooke & Stone, 2004). The structure of the twentieth century addition is much more modern and simplified in contrast to the doric columns of the original. The juxtaposition is clear, but the two are not battling each other for attention. The new allows the old to lead the conversation, its neutrality and freshness amplifies the grandeur of the existing. The two elements have a conversation through colour but also through replication of rhythm. Asplund follows the proportions of the existing window spacings and heights and allows already established lines to define the new. Asplund's addition exists to aid the storytelling of the past, its composition makes us appreciate the beauty of the old in a way we might not have been able to without its help. The new would not make sense if it wasn't for the connection to the old, both parties depend equally on each other.

Leading on from this, the next method used to continue a narrative is the reproduction of form and rhythm. The Scholastic Building (fig. 5) in New York is a sound example, where its form and proportions have taken their influence from its neighbours. Designed by Aldo Rossi in 1997, the building is a contemporary take on the nineteenth century buildings that line the street. Its form mimics that of the building to its left, where horizontal lintels line up perfectly between old and new. Rossi's building is respectful of its surroundings through its conformity; however, it forms its own identity through its modern use of steel and stone. The Scholastic Building has its own strong identity, while at the same time responding to its setting's narrative. A fine example of a balanced unity and continued narrative of the street.

Contrast of surface between the existing and the new also aids our understanding of the building's evolution. The modernist style is associated with flat surfaces, lack of decoration, and simple form. When incorporated in a tasteful

way (Littlefield & Lewis, 2007), this style can connect with the roughness of an aging ruin, this is the case in David Chipperfield's intervention in Berlin's Neues Museum. Originally built in 1859, bombing from World War II left this building as a shell. Chipperfield and his team undertook extensive analysis of the ruins and catalogued an intense understanding of what remained (Brooker & Stone, 2008). Due to this, the bomb-damaged central staircase could be reinstated in a modern style (fig. 6). The crisp blankness of the new monolith staircase is in direct contrast to its brick setting and makes no attempt to pretend it is old (Coles, 2007). Discolouration and imperfections left by the bomb are left as they are, as a stark reminder of the building's history (Brooker & Stone, 2008). The flat surface of the new highlights these indents and scars as stories within the surrounding brickwork. The new staircase returns functionality to the hall and is a practical place-holder of its predecessor. A remnant of the original architecture, a central door, pulls focus within the new material. The new allows this artefact to breathe and celebrates it through its incorporation.

Chipperfield's interpretation is interesting to see. Had it been Le-Duc who was faced with the Neues Museum project, the history of the damage may never have been able to be celebrated as part of this building's narrative.

Having explored ways to continue narrative through careful balance and mutual respect, it's worth noting an example where no conformity to the original is present, yet communicates an important narrative. The Documentation Centre for the Third Reich (fig. 7) in Nuremberg, Germany was built during the 1930's as a congress hall for the Nazi party.

Architect Günther Domenig and his 2002 intervention do not preserve this building. Instead, Domenig has mercilessly pieced a spike-shaped addition straight through the heart

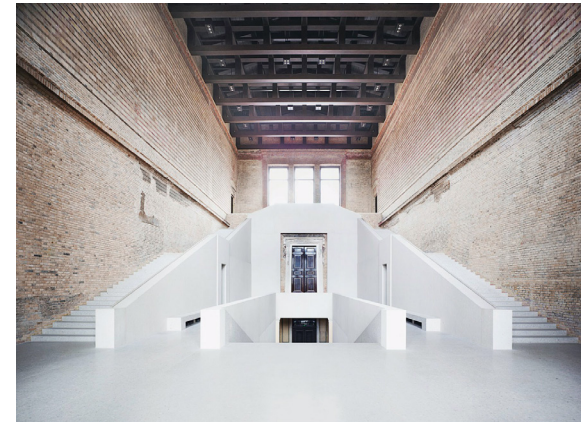


Fig. 6 - *David Chipperfield's intervention into Germany's Neues Museum*



Fig. 7 - *Günther Domenig's spike through the heart of Germany's Documentation Centre*



of the building, a strong metaphor of Germany facing up to the history of the site. This place's history is not to be respected nor reinvigorated, the architect has created an art piece that does not relate to the existing form in terms of colour, rhythm or surface. Yet this intervention works through its narrative of killing the old to make way for new exhibition spaces- this will be its new chapter in life. The cold, sharp, menacing feel of the spike stirs up emotion, with Christian Schittich describing it as "not just a contrast, but a confrontation" (Schittich, 2003). The existing is ripped apart viciously as this spike breaks through, the new is more dominant here, and symbolically takes away the power from the host.

These are some major ways of continuing a narrative through contrasting contemporary means, but there are also some smaller scale methods of storytelling. Spolia salvages remnants from the surrounding context and recycles them by using them for a new purpose (Brooker & Stone, 2018). This integrates forgotten and seemingly idle remnants and gives them a new role to play in the present. Spolia can result in poetic translations to further a buildings narrative.

The SPAB advocated for the use of props when needed to preserve buildings and protect them from further decay. While rather rudimentary, a simple prop against a decaying element would not only protect from collapse, but also creates a special connection between the two. The prop's absence of identity contrasts to the importance of the object it supports, the suggestion of something missing, the outline of what was once there is powerful in communicating what has been lost (Scott, 2008).

A final method of dialogue is the simple shadow gap. This architectural device interrupts the flow in order to draw our attention to where the old meets the new. If incorporated

affectively, this subtle separation helps to celebrate the coming together of the past and present, and highlighting the respect the new has for the old.



## CONCLUSION

It is understandable why historic figures such as Ruskin, Morris, and Viollet-le-Duc were so passionate on their positions in the argument on what is the correct way to approach aging historic monuments. At the core, all sides of the debate have commendable intents of preserving the life of these buildings, while seeing the opposers as wanting to do harm to its narrative.

This investigation has explored why reading and thoroughly analysing the given context is of the utmost importance when it comes to understanding the voice of the space. The worn-down stone of a step, the bruise of a brick, and fragments of glass are reminders of past events and the passage of time. Celebrating and highlighting a building's understated stories within new interventions creates a special atmosphere of storytelling across a patchwork of generations.

*"To live is to leave traces" – Walter Benjamin  
(Benjamin, 1999)*

Contrast between the existing and the new helps us to visually interpret the layers of history within a space. The alien presence of a modern intervention can easily overpower an elderly building, but a poetic balance can be achieved through relative forms and colours with juxtaposing materiality and finish that results in a beautiful coexistence that is greater than the sum of its parts. Constant dialogue between the past and present paves the way for the future and allows the narrative to be extended far beyond its own time.

## LIST OF FIGURES

Cover Image- Chipperfield's Neues Museum  
<https://www.noreliusstudio.com/-now/2018/5/24/david-chipperfield-at-the-neues-museum-in-berlin>

Fig. 1 - *Pierrefonds before and after Viollet-le-Duc's restoration, 1855 & 1874 respectively*  
<http://www.raybishophistory.co.uk/lawrence-rides-south-and-into-the-middles-ages/a-selection-of-castles-visited-by-lawrence/pierrefonds/>

Fig. 2- *Layers of history at Castelvecchio, Verona, by Carlo Scarpa*  
<https://thelongroadtovenice.com/2011/07/31/verona-alla-scarpa-or-as-much-of-it-as-i-could-see/>

Fig. 3 - *Marcel Breuer's proposal for an intervention to Grand Central Station in NYC*  
<https://ephemeralnewyork.wordpress.com/2014/07/10/two-towers-that-almost-replaced-grand-central/>

Fig. 4- *Sweden's Gothenburg Law Courts*  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Radhuset\\_Gbg\\_med\\_tillbyggnad\\_crop.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Radhuset_Gbg_med_tillbyggnad_crop.jpg)

Fig. 5 - *Scholastic Building, NYC by Aldo Rossi*  
<https://sohobroadway.org/scholastic-right-home-soho-broadway/>

Fig. 6- *David Chipperfield's intervention into Germany's Neues Museum*  
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Fig. 7 - *Günther Domenig's spike through the heart of Germany's Documentation Centre*  
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