

# Constructing the Absent — Preservation and Restoration of Architecture

Remei Capdevila-Werning\*

*Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*

**ABSTRACT.** Architectural conservation aims to preserve, restore, and reconstruct damaged, decayed, and no longer extant buildings. This purpose entails that architectural conservation is constantly facing absence: a physical absence, when material parts are missing from a building, and an intangible one, when the physical absence stands for a missing people or culture. The role of preservationist interventions is to make all these absences present. This paper deals with the relationship of absence and presence in preservation practices. By examining several preservation processes, it aims to show the implicit and explicit ways in which absences are made present and also how the very task of making absences present may alter or even distort the absences' meaning. Depending on how each kind of preservationist intervention deals with absence, one can find reasons to prefer certain interventions over others. It can also be seen how the very process of restoring the past is simultaneously a corruptive one and how these preservationist procedures affect our aesthetic experience of such buildings.

According to a standard definition, architectural conservation (termed “historic preservation” in the United States) “constitutes actions and interests that address the repair, restoration, maintenance, and display of historic buildings and sites as well as their associated accoutrements, such as furnishings and fittings” (Stubbs, 2009: 21).<sup>1</sup> Hence, architectural conservation aims to preserve, restore, and reconstruct damaged, decayed, and

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\* Email: remeicw@alum.mit.edu, remei.capdevila@uab.cat

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I indistinctively use the terms “conservation” and “preservation,” although I am aware that they have been distinguished in both the practice and the literature on architectural conservation and historic preservation. Generally, “conservation” entails the creation of a new context to the building or site, whereas the aim of preservation is to maintain an artifact in the original condition.

no longer extant buildings. This enterprise is part of the broader interest of preserving cultural heritage and significance as a crucial element to better understanding humankind, as is reflected in the 1964 *Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites*, the internationally recognized code for the preservation of heritage and whose opening paragraph states:

Imbued with a message from the past, the historic monuments of generations of people remain to the present day as living witnesses of their age-old traditions. People are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage. The common responsibility to safeguard them for future generations is recognized. It is our duty to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity. (Icomos 1964, preamble)

Architectural conservation plays a central role in the enterprise of safeguarding monuments from the past for future generations. Within this endeavor, architectural conservation is constantly faced with absence: not only a physical absence, when material parts are missing from a building, but also an intangible one, when the physical absence stands for a missing people, culture, society, or tradition. One can say that the role of preservationist interventions is to try to make all these absences present, be it by bringing back what is no longer there or by making us aware of the absence so that it can be remembered.

This paper deals with the relationship of absence and presence in preservation practices. By examining several processes that intervene when preserving a building, site or area, my purpose is to show the implicit and explicit ways in which absences are made present and, most importantly, by doing this I want to show how the very task of making absences present may alter or even distort the absences' meaning and further determine our aesthetic experience of the building. Or, put it the other way around, through our aesthetic experience of a preserved or restored buildings we gain an understanding of the building and its social and historical context which may be altered by the preservationist strategies that aim to bring certain absences back. At stake is, as shown in the preamble of the *Venice Charter*, the authenticity of our common history and how it is transmitted to future generations. Note that there is a normative stance underlying the

purpose of the *Venice Charter* according to which truthfulness in preservation practices is preferable over deception.

This postulate is also the underlying tenet of this paper. I assume that for epistemological reasons non-deceiving preservationist interventions are preferable over deceiving ones, that honesty is a better option than trickery. However, it is important to note that there are many counterexamples that show that in some cases not being absolutely truthful may be preferable: the reconstructions of downtown Warsaw and the Frauenkirche in Dresden, for example, have another aim than transmitting authenticity to the future generations. They aim to recover the common and historically shared elements that would bring a community together. To overcome the atrocities of war, a complete reconstruction of the appearance of the city before war destruction seemed to be the best way to help in reconstructing a broken community, so to speak. In these cases, authenticity and non-deception are set aside to fulfill a more socially relevant task. In this paper, my assumption is that depending on how each kind of preservationist intervention deals with absence, one can establish criteria to determine the preference of certain interventions over others. The selection of intervention entails also an evaluative selection of what is being brought back and what not. Through this examination it can further be seen how the very process of restoring the past is necessarily and simultaneously a corruptive one. Or, put in other words, that construction and reconstruction are simultaneously evaluative interpretation and reinterpretation.

The interactions between absence and presence are first of all found at a material level. When the appearance of a building has changed, some of its parts or even an entire structure is no longer extant, there are several strategies to bring them back to a whole or, following with the leading thread of this paper, to make absences present. These strategies or degrees of intervention range from simple cleaning and maintenance, through stabilization, repair, and restoration, to a total reconstruction or replication of a building or area. Rehabilitation and adaptive use are another kind of interventions that entail a change in the building's function while preserving the aesthetic appearance (Stubbs 2009: 23-24).<sup>2</sup> Each of these inter-

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<sup>2</sup> For a general introduction to architectural conservation see Stubb's work. For a

ventions deals with absence in a different way, which has further consequences at the immaterial level of meaning, interpretation, and aesthetic experience of a work.

Cleaning and maintenance of buildings is the less invasive of these interventions. Due to weather and other deteriorating conditions (leaks or simple usage) buildings may get dirty, the stone at the façades darkened, the wall paint chipped. Cleaning and minor repairs bring back the building's initial appearance; they make present that which through the passing of time was no longer there. From another perspective, it can be said that the role of restoring is to preserve the symbolic functioning of a work (Elgin, 1997: 97-109). When a building is too dirty that one cannot discern the features of the construction materials, aesthetic properties and meanings do not come through and a proper cleaning can bring them to light again. The Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. is regularly cleaned to attain the original whiteness and shininess that this US president deserves. It may seem that these minor cleanings have no further consequences, but restoring the past in a pristine way may not always be the best solution. Imagine that a building changed its colors throughout time after being built (a limestone became yellowish or a copper roof became green); cleaning and bringing it to its initial appearance, making present that which was absent may change some of its formal features and further meanings, because that which was missing had been there only for a relatively short period of time. Eliminating the patina of time thus eliminates a part of the building's history but on the other hand leaving it may overshadow the building's origins.

Nevertheless, some conservation solutions can achieve both the cleaning and preservation of the previous "dirty" state. Or, in other words, they can make the relationship between presence and absence explicit and in that way preserve several layers of meaning and a certain evolution of time. This is precisely the case of New York's Grand Central Terminal, whose main ceiling underwent a twelve-year restoration that unveiled the celestial sphere hidden behind layers of black dirt caused by tar from tobacco smoke. The whole ceiling was cleaned except for a small patch of grime at a corner, a remainder of the prior ceiling's color. By keeping this patch,

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history of the discipline, see Jokilehto, 1999.

both the original and the temporary appearance were preserved and the fact that the building had undergone a cleaning process is made present.

Other cases where absent parts are made present are rehabilitations and adaptive uses, which preserve appearance but not function. While some elements of the original structure are eliminated, the architectural intervention is explicit and deception is avoided. At the Hearst Tower in New York, architect Norman Foster maintained the façades of the original six-story building but eliminated the whole interior creating a huge lobby. In that way, one is reminded of the original proportions and stories of the building and the past appearance is indirectly made present.

A second possibility is that of restoration, stabilization, and repair at a major degree. There are two main strategies than can be followed here. On the one hand, the restoration can be clearly visible; it is then a purist or archeological restoration, which contends that any substitution or addition has to be visible to avoid any pretense of authenticity. Hence the processes to make the absence present are distinguishable. On the other hand, the restoration can meld with the extant parts and become indiscernible; this kind is termed an integral restoration, which intends to repair a work to make the whole look original, allowing no way to tell whether what was missing had been ever absent (Sagoff, 1978).<sup>3</sup>

The Romanesque Monastery of Sant Pere de Rodes (in the north-east of Spain) is a good example for the former case. This complex was built during the tenth and eleventh centuries with some later additions built until 1798, when the monastery was definitively abandoned. After sporadic interventions undertaken in the 1930, the main restoration work took place between 1989 and 1999.<sup>4</sup> As a purist intervention, the missing arches, columns and capitals of the Monastery's cloister, for instance, were built using concrete, explicitly showing that they were prostheses to an extant work. In this way both absent parts and the preservation trends of a time are made present. This intervention enables again the appreciation of the building as a whole but, at the same time, makes explicit that it is not exactly the same work and that our experience and understanding of it cannot be the same, either. There is neither visual nor interpretative de-

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<sup>3</sup> The first kind of restoration is what Camilo Boito and Cesare Brandi termed "philological restoration" (Boito, 1893; Brandi, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion on this monastery see Lorés, 2002.

ception, but rather an unambiguous *décalage*, or time gap, between original work, restoration and current audiences.

While in Sant Pere de Rodes the intervention entails a time gap and, so to speak, makes only a single absence present without including the history of the place, other cases try to bring back the building's development. This is the case of the Neues Museum in Berlin. Originally built between 1843 and 1855 by Friedrich August Stüler, the Neues Museum was heavily bombed during World War II, and left a ruin for almost five decades in the core of East Berlin. Thanks to basic maintenance interventions undertaken in the 1980s, the building did not collapse; restoration works were planned to begin in the fall of 1989, but they could not begin due to the collapse of the GDR. In 1997, British architect David Chipperfield, together with architectural preservationist Julian Harrap, was commissioned the reconstruction of the Neues Museum, which reopened its doors in 2009. This very history is the one Chipperfield and Harrap aimed to show. In the words of the former, the guiding principle in the Neues Museum was "to create a new building from the remains of the old, a new building that neither celebrates nor hides its history but includes it. A new building that was made of fragments or parts of the old, but once again conspiring to a completeness" (Chipperfield, 2009: 11). As if it were a palimpsest, the Neues Museum displays the several layers of materials, each from a different time in history. At first sight, hence, it would seem that the Neues Museum should be a perfect case of truthfulness in architectural preservation, a perfect example of how all the absences can be brought back without any of them prevailing over the others. A closer look, however, shows that the intervention does not limit itself to put together the extant remains, but shows more than one could ever have seen – by exposing the brickwork without any cladding, for example. And other extant parts, other presences, such as the prefabricated doors added in GDR times, were eliminated, thus making the access to a certain period more difficult. It also shows how a very specific Romantic conception of the ruin is the aesthetic principle that guided the whole intervention. So, probably in this case deception is bigger because aims and results are at odds with each other: aiming at authenticity, falsification took place and, most importantly, one is led to believe that there is no deception.

All these aspects are imperceptible in integral restorations, such as the

one of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Frank Lloyd Wright's building – restored from 2005 to 2008 – was brought back to its initial 1959 appearance by removing several coats of paint and filling exterior cracks. In addition, corroded steel structures were treated and the concrete repaired and reinforced to stabilize the building. This intervention brought back the building to a pristine past, as though it were unaffected by pollution and the passing of time. Here the absence is made present, but not the process by which this presence was achieved. Hence deception is possible, and one could think that the Guggenheim had always been as white and shiny as it is now. Maybe one could have left a patch, like in Grand Central Terminal, to give a hint not only of the restoration process that the building has undergone, but also of the status of the object we are appreciating.

Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye is another case of integral restoration that poses a challenge similar to the GDR-time doors of the *Neues Museum*.<sup>5</sup> This icon of modern architecture underwent both structural and surface repairs to regain its initial appearance, notwithstanding the addition of security cameras and lights. Through this process one of the characteristics of the house was eliminated: it is well known that Madame Savoye complained constantly that it was literally raining inside the house, which was one of the main causes of deterioration. By repairing the leaks, the house became habitable, something it had actually never been before. Hence, even though the appearance was restored, one of the Villa's original features (the leaking roof) was lost forever. This absence causes that the visitors no longer experience the inconveniences of trying to live in the house, nor associate Le Corbusier with being a careless architect (he completely ignored the Savoye's complaints). Certainly, many documents recall these facts, which are even displayed in the house. But this example shows that even the most obvious repairs entail a loss in the building's meanings, absences that in some cases can be compensated by adding documentation.

Viollet-le-Duc's restoration projects exemplify another kind of integral interventions that may be called inventive or hypothetical. His works at the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris during the mid-nineteenth century not

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the Villa Savoye and its restoration see, for instance Murphy, 2002.

only are completely inserted into the original remains and thus undistinguishable to an untrained eye, but also entailed a high degree of creativity (despite being based on thorough research). At Notre-Dame, Viollet-le-Duc undertook several transformations. Among others, he added the spire or *flèche* at the roof, the chimeras and the gallery of Kings of France at the façade; he substituted late Gothic extant arches in the main nave for new ones that followed the earlier fourteenth century style; and he dismantled the monumental rose window at the southern façade to rebuilt it again tilting the whole window a mere fifteen degrees. All these modifications responded to Viollet-le-Duc's conception of restoration as to "reinstatement in a condition of completeness which could never have existed at any given time" (Viollet-le-Duc, 1875: 9). Thus, restoration is here mainly a process of perfecting an existing building and to bring it to its so far inexistent ideal state.<sup>6</sup> Instead of faithfully recreating the past, Viollet's projects are materialized nineteenth century interpretations of medieval architecture where neither the process of making the absent parts present nor the destruction of extant elements is explicit. Viollet-le-Duc's restorations are so ubiquitous in France that historians often approach French Gothic architecture with caution, for fear that their interpretations will be based on invisible reconstructions, rather than the original works that they intended to study.

This example shows, however, that preservation's aim to recover the material past necessarily entails an interpretative process that tries to determine how this past appearance would have been. Most importantly, by fixing this material past there is a whole immaterial or intangible past - a conception of society, culture, values, and so on - that is altered by the very process of trying to recover it. That is to say, there is a theoretical and interpretative context that determines (both implicitly and explicitly) how architectural conservation proceeds. At this level, which is the one of *heritage*, one can find also an interaction between absence and presence. The interplay between absent and present elements when preserving buildings reflects, in a certain sense, the interactions between absence and presence in the very conception of heritage.

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<sup>6</sup> In a certain sense, restoration entails to materialize the future anterior, the verbal tense that articulates this definition. See Vinegar, 2006.

A certain conception of heritage is what prompts us to preserve buildings, sites, monuments and memorials and thus constitutes the background and motivation of architectural conservation. Heritage can in general be defined as “a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present” (Smith, 2006:44). It goes without saying that this “cultural process” is manifold and differs depending on place and time, but, as with conservation practices, a common aspect is a constant back-and-forth between past and present.<sup>7</sup> This back-and-forth is determined partly by our current values and our current understanding of the past and on what we consider worth of remembering, keeping, or bringing to light. Our approach to the past is mediated by our present and it necessarily entails a selection or an elimination of events. It can even bring to a situation where certain absences are never made present, precisely because they are totally absent at present, i.e., we do not even know that there are some absences that we should be aware of. Preserving heritage is unavoidably an imposition of current values and conceptions over the past. Or, in Walter Benjamin’s words: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin 1968: 256). Preserving and restoring as an activity of a civilized people bears within itself a barbaric element first of all in an obvious sense: reconstruction may be prompted by war destruction and barbaric acts, thus preservation practices can only take place after an absence has been recognized. But it is also a document of both civilization and barbarism in a less obvious sense: the victorious, the winners of a war, the privileged, the ones that have also undertaken barbaric acts, are the ones that reconstruct and, by doing this, they transform their own barbaric acts into documents of civilization. Let me illustrate with the example of Colonial Williamsburg.

The restoration of this historic landmark began in the late 1920s and consisted of an accurate recovery of the buildings as they were in 1775. All the changes that constructions suffered after this year were to be removed so that all the surviving pre-1775 buildings recuperated their pre-revolutionary condition. The then present idea to recover a certain mo-

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<sup>7</sup> There is extensive literature that has critically discussed the inherent problems of heritage. See, among others Herscher, 2006; Hewison, 1987; Huyssen 2000; Kaufman, 1998; Lowenthal, 1998; Muñoz-Viñas 2005; Philippot, 1996; Smith, 2006.

ment of the past entailed the destruction of later original building parts – anything built up to the 1920s, and the process of making certain absences present required making certain presences absent. At the same time, lack of proper documentation caused this step back in time to be hypothetical and inaccurate and several buildings central to the town – the Capitol and the Governor’s palace – were completely constructed without knowing their actual appearance. Hence what aimed to be a document of civilization was at the same time a document of barbarism, for all the history since 1776 was destroyed.

At Colonial Williamsburg, however, there is another interaction between absence and presence. Initially, the town was not only frozen in time but also in a social class, for until very recently the “peculiar institution” (Fitch, 2006: 189) of slavery was completely ignored by not showing any of the slave quarters.<sup>8</sup> It could seem that once the slave quarters are reconstructed and added to the site, a past absence is restituted without breaches and that some sort of reconciliation with past omissions is achieved. However, a closer look at Colonial Williamsburg shows that this restitution is already a corruptive interpretation of the past: the experience one has is that of an immaculate, clean place, with no traces of the brutality of slave’s everyday life. Hence, what is made present is not an actual absence but rather an interpretation of this absence. By not showing the atrocities of slavery a new narration and understanding of the past is created. In a certain sense, then, as soon as the absence is made present, it is absorbed into an official interpretation of the past, sometimes called “authorized heritage discourse” (Smith, 2006: 29-34), which purportedly presents objects as authentic and legitimate to the audience. Or, in Hegelian terms, this absence is *aufgehoben* in the triple sense of the word: it is simultaneously preserved or kept, negated or cancelled, and elevated or lifted up. Whereas the first and third meanings are unproblematic in the context of preservation, the second one is troublesome because it entails that the very process of preserving results in the negation of what is being preserved. This brings to a conundrum according to which preservation or making absences present is only possible through destruction and

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<sup>8</sup> The restoration of Colonial Williamsburg is problematic at many levels. For a critique, see Fitch, 2006.

corruption; it is both a document of civilization and barbarism.

Theoretical debates on heritage have already pointed out that mainstream and institutionalized conceptions of heritage have generally ignored minorities and excluded cultures and that, if they are acknowledged, then their own values are not respected or misinterpreted. One has only to look at the foundational charters and directives followed by UNESCO to declare World Heritage Sites to see that they are clearly of Western nature. The implicit imposition of Western values upon other non-Western cultures has brought transformations to the sites and cultures to be preserved that may further cause their disappearance. In order to contrast this tendency of mainstream heritage conceptions, “subaltern and dissenting heritage discourses” have risen, which challenge the authorized one and try to embrace the excluded cultures and world visions (Smith, 2006: 35-43). Nevertheless, as soon as these alternative discourses enter the heritage debate, they are also *aufgehoben* by the mainstream conception of heritage. Since the subaltern and dissenting heritage discourses lose their power and independence at the very moment that they arise, it may be worthwhile to examine whether there can be alternative ways to avoid this subsuming process; it may be worthwhile looking into whether there can be a critical preservation practice. Such a critical practice should be one that escapes this process of absorption and negation or that at least that makes this process explicit so that deception and misinterpretation is avoided. Precisely one of the problems of certain preservation strategies, such as total reconstructions and integral restorations, is that there is no way to discriminate whether the structure is original or not and to what extent it differs from that which was originally there. At their extreme, reconstructions and integral restorations may bring to a recreation that “is more real than the reality seeks to recall” (Hewinson, 1987: 95). This can be seen in the restoration of Notre Dame in Paris, and also in the reconstruction of Mies van de Rohe German Pavilion in Barcelona.

Originally built for the 1929 International Exposition and reconstructed in 1986, the Barcelona Pavilion (as it is known nowadays) aims to be a faithful reproduction of Mies’s building.<sup>9</sup> However (and similarly to what

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<sup>9</sup> For an extensive discussion on the reconstruction of the Pavilion see Solà-Morales et al., 1993; Subirana, 1987.

happens at Colonial Williamsburg and its display of slavery) there are certain elements of the reconstruction that prompt us to interpret this icon of modern architecture in certain ways that alter some of the meanings of the original structure. For example, the elimination of the water lilies transforms the Pavilion from a living structure to a purely formal one and erases a possible connection between the previous artistic currents, such as art nouveau or impressionism. Also, the sometimes missing black carpet, which stands for the central color of the German flag, as well as the missing German flag at the entrance of the Pavilion, makes any reference to the fact that it was the German national pavilion very difficult. In this way, the Pavilion is no longer experienced as the German *Repräsentationspavilion* but an icon of modern architecture. Hence, also here the process of making an absence present involves an alteration of the absence that, in this case, is imperceptible and has further consequences in the understanding of the work: If from now on investigations on the Barcelona Pavilion are primarily based on the reconstruction without acknowledging that it is a built interpretation, certain meanings conveyed by the Pavilion will be lost forever and further interpretations of Mies's oeuvre will always be limited.

After discussing all these examples and sorts of interventions and taking as background the general directives established by Icomos or Unesco regarding preservation of heritage, some initial and tentative conclusions can be drawn. A critical preservation practice should help in avoiding misunderstandings and in showing that any intervention is already and necessarily an interpretation. This could be achieved by preventing deception, and hence by showing to our gaze the constructedness and the artificiality of a place that has undergone a preservationist intervention. There should be a material hint that would point to the fact that what we see is already mediated by interpretation. Certain adaptive uses and purist restorations can achieve this purpose insofar as they make themselves present by distinguishing themselves from the original fabric. In this way, one can not only appreciate the original construction but may also be prompted to reflect on the practice of preservation itself, i.e., to reflect in the very way that an absence has been made present.

I refrain myself to try to establish determinate rules or guidelines of

how this critical preservation practice should be because, by definition, as soon as we make them normative, they will be absorbed by the mainstream and lose their disruptive power. Probably only with creative particular interventions that point to the procedure of preservation itself subversion is possible. Thus, preservation understood as a process of making absences present should ideally involve also the making present of the very process of making present. A work that has undergone a preservation process consists then of both the remains of the original work and the preserving intervention or interventions. This is not to be understood as a detriment but rather as a gain, for it introduces a whole new set of meanings that should ideally resonate in the building and bring up further considerations on the intervention and its context.

The several discussed examples have also shown why the task of architectural conservation is relevant to aesthetics. Poor architectural interventions have a negative effect on our aesthetic experience: they can distort and even falsify the building's appearance and meanings thus making our experience partial or misleading. In the case of total restorations, one can have a complete and fulfilling aesthetic experience which nevertheless has nothing to do with that of the original building, and in this sense it would be false. The worry with such cases is that they are taken to be the "real" or "actual" experiences, thus bringing back again the issue of deception that I assumed as that which was less preferable. However, it is also true that in some cases having an experience of a restored building is better than not having anything at all, and yet in other cases that experiencing a copy is as good as it gets (for example, the prehistoric caves in Altamira, in the north of Spain, are now closed to the public because the mere presence of humans – their breath and sweat – is destroying the mural paintings on the wall; a replica just next to the original site was built). On the other hand, when architectural conservation succeeds the work becomes a remainder as well as a reminder of the various meanings and complex processes that created the work as it is now and our aesthetic experience is more comprehensive and fulfilling.<sup>10</sup>

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