

David Chipperfield: Architecture Is Never Dead

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The work of the architect David Chipperfield represents a paradigm for the architectural conservation field. Only a few of his projects are strictly considered conservation projects in the traditional sense based on the material restoration of buildings. However, most of his projects built anew make reference to concepts such as memory, context, place, history, familiarity, archetype, permanence, fragment, ruin or legibility, finding a place within what can be considered the expanded field of conservation. The architect transcends the material dimension of buildings and offers a dialogue throughout time that includes the present. In this sense, his practice differs from the traditional practitioners who give priority to past's remnants. His conservation projects include strategies ranging from the most rigorous and scientific restoration to the most abstract interpretation and even invention without representing a conflict. This quality makes his work a referent in advancing the contemporary discourse of architectural conservation.

While describing your much known intervention in the Neues Museum you mentioned "The project strives to give significance and meaning back to the existing elements by understanding not only what exists but what doesn't exist". What do you strive to preserve in your projects apart from the existent material substance?

Any building or any opportunity to build somewhere is a chance to strengthen existent conditions, or to borrow things that are already there. In a way the virtue of architecture is that it is located somewhere – it is its weakness and strength. It is easier to do theoretical things that have no context socially, politically or physically, but actually architecture is limited by these things, which are also its opportunity. In my work I have always been concerned with what an intervention might somehow borrow, strengthen, protect or enhance. This comes from a number of things. For example in Japan, the concept of borrowing is applied to the landscape. You borrow a view of landscape to include it into a scenic composition of nearby and distant things. I really like that idea. I was brought up on a farm and I suppose I have a sort of sensitivity to place that comes from living in the countryside. Every place has its own distinct qualities and students are taught to be contextual in their approach, but this might only mean trying to keep buildings a consistent height, or the use of certain materials – things that are quite obvious. The question is whether there are other less explicit contextual elements to be found in the place.

In the issue of the magazine A+U published in 2004, you defined the idea of an expanded "context" of any architectural project that brings your architectural practice close to the definition of expanded conservation, where not only the physical, but also the historical, the social, the cultural, and the technological aspects, determine the project. Would you consider this close attention to context in your architectural practice as a kind of "soft conservation"? Or more broadly, do you think of yourself as a conservation architect?

I certainly see myself as someone that wants to protect and enjoy things which are there, but I also reshape things in the process.

So your work is not only about protecting what is there, but you also give place for invention?

Yes. It works in lots of different ways. I have a house in Spain, in a fishing village, and the fishermen have lived there all their lives, but sometimes when a local comes into our house and looks through a window they say "I never saw the sea like that before, your sea is not my sea!" The window, the framing, the borrowing, can intensify what is already there. Now, I could not tell if that's conservation or preservation. In a way it is a borrowing and a reaffirmation of values. There are two traditions in architecture, one is a questioning, a sort of revolutionary architecture, and the other is a confirmation of things. I was brought up with the influence of the radical modernist masters, for whom

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A+U Architecture and Urbanism Journal, Continuity, 2004.

★ Rafael Moneo (1937) is a Spanish architect. He teaches the lecture courses "On Contemporary Architecture" and "Design Theories in Architecture" in the Harvard Graduate School of Design. He won the Pritzker Prize for Architecture (1996). He is author of *Rafael Moneo: apuntes sobre 21 obras* (Gustavo Gili, 2010) (source: gsd.harvard.edu).

★ Álvaro Siza (1933) is a Portuguese architect. He has been a visiting professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, the University of Pennsylvania Los Andes University of Bogotá and the Ecole Polytechnique of Lausanne. He won the Pritzker Prize for Architecture (1992) (source: pritzkerprize.com).

★ Carlo Scarpa (1906-1978) was an Italian architect. He taught drawing and interior decoration at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia from the late 1940s until his death. He restored and remodeled Ca' Foscari, a gothic palace in Venice, now the main seat of Ca' Foscari University of Venice (source: wikipedia.org).

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★ GSD Official Fall Lectures 2011. Available in www.youtube.com/watch?v=E75qyuURn_o

architecture was a revolutionary tool. But in the end, the buildings I really like to go to are the ones that reaffirm what we all enjoy – the stone floor, the lights, the wooden window frame, the step, the holding, the view from the window – these are the affirming qualities that architecture can deliver. That is not to say that architecture must always deliver what is familiar, but architecture is there to sit between us and the world; it is a refuge that gives us a sense of place. Architecture is something to hold on to.

Your work then may be defined as contextual. This reminds me other "contextual architects" such as Rafael Moneo in Spain, Álvaro Siza in Portugal or Carlo Scarpa in Italy, who have been influential in your career. Moneo defends a kind of "eternal" architecture non-temporal, non-fashionable looking back to classical values. Siza on the other hand, reframes tradition within a contemporary and modest language, updating architecture but preserving some sense of familiarity. How would you define your own approach to tradition? How do you use it in your work as different from the present context?

The problem is that often the traditions, construction for instance, are no longer available to us. Today we must simulate them artificially because we no longer understand buildings as we used to. In a way, Siza has an advantage having worked in a technically less developed society. Even when working on highly sophisticated projects, the window frames would still be wooden window frames, the metal door handles still made by an artisan. Siza plays very beautifully with this, maybe ironic, juxtaposition of the sophisticated and the naïve. He plays with radical ideas of architecture in a more conservative context. Most of us are the other way around, we work in a society which has no stability and therefore architecture seeks to provide some. I think Siza's work is particularly interesting because when he began his career there was a lot of stability – conventional architects and normal projects. In London, no one was making beautiful wooden doorframes; there were no artisans in garages making steel door handles. Nowadays, in London sophistication comes from displaying a marble basin that looks artisanal. In Portugal, the most sophisticated thing is to have a stainless steel basin because it looks technical. So tradition in construction is a technical issue. But at the same time, we have not lost our enjoyment of these things because we have a memory. If we had no memory then we would have no evidence of the past – we could build environments that adapt very easily – but we still find beauty in old towns and cities. And we still have an idea of how a city should look like or how a building should feel. So that makes it more difficult when we are in a time when it is more difficult to deliver these qualities anymore.

In a lecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 2011, you said: "Architecture is slow and with few exceptions is built to last. Architecture is grounded by the mud; it sits in and struggles to find an identity in a society

impatient for the new world, where the virtual seems real and where notions of permanence seem to contradict the spirit of the time". How could architects provide a sense of permanence today? Which are the architects' tools? Or more generally, how could architects work with time?

The whole way we deliver architecture, apart from exceptional projects, is about reducing risk and time and making the assembly of buildings as efficient as possible. This process is carried out in the factory instead of the construction site wherever possible. So we have architecture reduced, in simple terms we can say it is "panelized". Buildings are made out of panels normally of two meters by one meter, which is a generic sized "piece of architecture", and this creates an exterior surface. So when we say that the building is made out of brick, it is not actually made out of brick, it is made out of concrete with a skin of brick. The brick does not support, it is no longer a structure. The construction industry is going in a different direction to that which has given our architecture a certain quality in the past. Of course it is not entirely negative – there are opportunities in modern construction that we have never had before.

*But not only technology has influenced the way we deal with time in architecture, there are also theoretical ideas and cultural transformations that have halted the natural historic process that you were describing. Before **historic preservation** emerged by the end of the 19th century, every generation was allowed to add a new layer of history to buildings. In Spain we could think of the **Cordoba Mosque-Cathedral** as a clear example of this over time evolution of buildings. However, we cannot do it anymore because of preservation regulations and recommendations from hegemonic institutions such as **Unesco** have halted this process. What is your position regarding this paradox – of bringing buildings evolution to an end – and how do your projects challenge this established norm?*

When one undertakes any conservation project, there is an acceptance that the building is comprised of many layers. The question is, which history are we recreating? Intervening and adding on to historic buildings is a very rich tradition. Architecture is never fossilized, is never dead. As you suggest, this type of intervention is less and less possible and that's a shame. I would make a parallel here with protection regulations for the countryside. I have wonderful memories travelling through southern Germany, Switzerland and Austria, and seeing buildings engaged in the landscape – a cliff and then a little castle on it – so that architecture and nature are fantastically combined. It is no longer possible to build like this and I understand perfectly why, because we want to protect what we think of as nature. But we used to be part of nature; we are a type of animal that lives in nature! My office recently built a house in the English countryside, **Fayland House**, which has just been awarded a prize by the British architectural press. It was a sort of very interesting engagement



Architectural preservation as an autonomous discipline is associated with *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* by John Ruskin (1849) and with the antithetical position developed by Violet Le Duc in *On Restoration* (1875). One of the main contributions is Alois Riegl's *The Modern Cult of Monuments* (1903), in which the author distills and classifies the values that were associated to pieces of architectural heritage.



The Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba was a Catholic basilica built in the 6th century. Muslims converted it in a Mosque in the 8th century. After the Reconquista, Fernando III ordered the conversion into a church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The magnificence of the building determined that the area of greatest splendor, the Maqsura and the Mihrab, were not touched or destroyed. In the 16th century the present chapel, transept and choir were built (source: catedraldecordoba.es).



The Venice Charter of 1964 set the basis for historic preservation attaching value to the material substance of buildings and recognizing the significance of every layer of history despite stylistic inconsistencies in the resulting building. However, this appreciation of the buildings' stages of evolution as "sacred" historic documents excluded the possibility to add new layers in the present because they would obscure the past.



Fayland House (Buckinghamshire, 2009-2013) is a 888 m² family house located on a large plot in the Chiltern Hills, one of the most heavily wooded areas in England, designated an "Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty" since 1965. The proposed development restored a typical landscape by removing all of the conflicting features that had been superimposed onto it, restoring the native hedgerows and introducing woodland management. Fayland House won the Architectural Review House Awards 2015 (source: davidchipperfield.co.uk).

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The Sforza Castle was built in the 15th century by Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan, on the remains of a 14th century fortification built by Galeazzo Visconti (source: milanocastello.it).

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Luca Beltrami (1854-1933) was an Italian architect and architectural historian, known particularly for restoration projects. In 1892 he took the direction of a complex restoration and reconstruction process of the Sforza Castle (sources: milanocastello.it; wikipedia.org).

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Working with Michele de Lucchi, David Chipperfield Architects prepared a masterplan to reorganise the display of the Castello Sforzesco historic collections. The ravelins ruins will be renovated to form a new entrance and to create exhibition spaces, a cafeteria, a restaurant and a new lift. The new intervention, intended as a continuation of the existing geometries of the medieval building, will complement the existing forms, which are stripped of all decorative elements, quietly expressing the difference between the old and the new (source: davidchipperfield.co.uk).

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The Royal Academy will expand its facilities to Burlington Gardens, at the north of Burlington House, where it is based since 1868. In 2008 David Chipperfield Architects were appointed to develop a masterplan for the two acre site that promotes a refurbishment of the buildings, ensuring that interventions are kept to a minimum (source: davidchipperfield.co.uk).

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The Neues Museum, designed by Friedrich August Stüler, was erected between 1841 and 1859. Bombed during World War II, some sections were severely damaged and others completely destroyed. The key aims of David Chipperfield Architects project were to recomplete the original volume and to repair and restore the parts that remained.

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GSD official Fall Lectures 2011. Available in www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7SqyURn_o

with the landscape, but which is rarely permitted because landscapes cannot be touched anymore. On the other hand, as an observer I am sometimes very disappointed that where there was once a beautiful landscape, there is now a horrible building! One person's view differs from another's. But we don't often build within landscapes anymore partly because we have lost confidence in how to build and lost motivation. Someone who chooses to build a castle on top of a cliff certainly has heroic ambitions and commitment.

The Castello Sforzesco in Milan encompasses a diverse history of conservation. Luca Beltrami eliminated 15th century additions and undertook a restoration that aimed to bring the building back to a "medieval" and romantic idea of castle. Your intervention adds a new layer to the building filling in the gaps. On the other hand, the Royal Academy of Arts Master Plan represents a very light architectural intervention due to the fact that the building is listed as National Heritage Grade II – which means minimum intervention and maximum sympathy to the historic fabric. On the other hand, the fragmented stage of the Neues Museum required a holistic intervention. How does your work deal and overcome – literally or figuratively – preservationists' limitations?

In Berlin, the Neues Museum building was already in crisis because it had been through so many traumas. Everything in Berlin had been traumatized. The war and post-war destructions created very unstable conditions. There are then two choices: you either decide to re-stabilize it back to an imitation of what it was; or you accept that you have to find something else. At the Neues this choice was no longer clear because you had the original building of the 19th century, then it was bombed and then it was rebuilt during the GDR period in a bad way.

What do you mean by "a bad way"?

Well, it was a combination of modernistic laziness and lack of finances. But while the overall result may have been unsatisfactory, the layers of the story were quite interesting. And you cannot dismiss any layers of change – even the period during the GDR is a valid layer. The original buildings, the 19th century modifications, the destruction, all of these are valid layers. These layers force you to engage with the complex history. Berlin is a very unique case and it provokes an unusual kind of intellectual discussion.

Referring to the Neues Museum project you mentioned in a lecture: "Our vision was not to make a memorial to destruction, nor to create a historical reproduction, but to protect and make sense of the extraordinary ruin and remains that survived not only the destruction of the war but also the physical erosion of the last 60 years". To what extent is relevant to preserve a ruin being it a manmade or caused by natural destruction? Could there be value in the rubble by itself? What

happens when repair and completion is more difficult or more expensive than substitution?

Ruins are never cheap. The existence of ruins is normally the result of accidents. The only ruins which are protected on purpose are those that become monuments. For example, in Germany there are many remnants and often the question is, "do we rebuild the cathedral or do we just keep it in its existing state as a memory?" But one would not treat a house in this manner – there are very few war ruined houses because they would lack the same meaning. Ruins are only retained if they constitute a symbol that society can use. They became the subject of the 18th century **Picturesque** tradition. People were concerned with defining beauty and the differences between the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque. The idea of things in decay became very important in England during this period. The broken house, the broken bridge, the broken tree, these are all part of a very strong aesthetic tradition to which we are still somehow sensitive.

The concepts of "fragment" and "completeness" are recurrent in your work. In the project of the Castello Sforzesco, and particularly in the Neues Museum in Berlin, you talk about your aspiration to completeness while preserving the remnants or fragments identifiable. Do your interventions aim to be a neutral layer or material holding pieces together or does it aspire to have entity or character by itself?

In the case of the Neues Museum, the client wanted a building, not a ruin, which left us with two simple choices: one option was to restore it to its original state; the alternative was to give strong identity to the new and the old, and contrast them. According to this approach, the new needs clear identity because it exists in opposition. The building is then made of two characters leaning against one another. In the case of Carlo Scarpa's work there is a very interesting dialogue between the two. But Scarpa's architecture, the project of **Castelvecchio Museum** for instance, evidences certain incompleteness as well; the fascination is in the pieces. In the case of the Neues Museum the aspiration was for a new totality. The ambition is different because we weren't interested in just one of the characters in itself, rather in what one can do to the other, and chemically they can do something else entirely. This is super important, the new is not passive – its whole purpose is to work with the existent fragments to become something else.

*You have conducted conservation projects in historic buildings and nearly ruins. However, now you will begin the **rehabilitation of the Mies Van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie** in Berlin. How different would you approach the conservation of modern architecture? For instance, in your prospective rehabilitation of the Mies' Gallery in Berlin or in the Valentino store design?*



Picturesque is an aesthetic ideal introduced by William Gilpin as part of a Romantic sensibility. It challenged rationalist ideas by looking at beauty as being non-rational. It was first defined by Gilpin in *Essay on Prints* (1768), as "that kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture" (source: wikipedia.org).



Castelvecchio Museum is located in a medieval castle in Verona. It was restored by the architect Carlo Scarpa between 1958 and 1975 (source: museodicastelvecchio.comune.verona.it).



The Neue Nationalgalerie, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, opened in 1968. David Chipperfield Architects will oversee a major renovation of the museum, that requires new security and fire technology. The €101 million renovation project started in 2015 and is expected to last three years (source: wikipedia.org).

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The *Last Supper* is a late 15th century mural painting by Leonardo da Vinci in the refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan. Very little of the original painting remains today (source: wikipedia.org).

The Neue Nationalgalerie is a strange restoration in that it is a highly technical process. We do not need to reinterpret Mies or intervene in very visible way; the intention is not to make a different building, our only responsibility is to repair it. The most straightforward conservation activity is to repair, clean and stabilize but such a task still requires very sophisticated tools, both technical and intellectual. What does it mean to clean? How far should one clean? In restoring Leonardo's *Last Supper* how completely the damage be repaired? To what extent should a missing face be restored? Mies' design has failed and if we are going to repair it we must do so in such a way that it be corrected. The windows do not work properly because there is no insulation – if we just restore them to their original state, then the damage will eventually return; but if we protect them from future damage then we will change the design. There is an intellectual discussion between repairing to return the building to how it was and repairing to ensure that the same damage is not repeated. When you intervene in a 19th century building, you can add a layer of insulation or inject something into the walls. But in Mies' work, when you have a window made of metal and glass, there are not many alternatives. What is fascinating is the dialogue between the technical and the cultural, between the practical and the intellectual. We spent a year discussing the appropriate level of technical improvement and the acceptable level of intervention from aesthetic and historical standpoints. This is a huge task and despite being architecturally invisible it is an enormous responsibility. Our work will not be apparent to those who visit the Neue Nationalgalerie once it reopens. This is a high level of success when you are restoring Mies Van der Rohe. 

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