

Intervenções contemporâneas em contexto histórico: O papel da *abstracção*

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Nota prévia:

Todas as imagens, fotografias e desenhos, sem referência, são de autoria própria

“Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.”

T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, 1936

“It is universally recognized the intimate relationship between the experience of the existing architecture and the knowledge of the past; any practical decision implies a historical judgment about the previous events, justifying the operation to accomplish today, and every historical judgment has implied an orientation that can be used in the practical field.”

Extended Abstract

The urgency of the discussion about the attitude of contemporary architecture in relation to the physical historical context, in which it intervenes, is a real need of the current practice. This will certainly be an unavoidable issue for the new generation of architects and may help to understand the contemporary architectural culture. A new enthusiasm arises to extend a discussion about *contemporary architecture* and the necessary interpretation that it can develop on the *historical context*. Thus, this is the issue of this investigation: *contemporary interventions in historic context*.

Introduction

This theoretical investigation seeks to understand a possible *stance of contemporary architecture, in the intervention in historic context*. As a starting point, it intends to recognize conceivable discourses of *connection* between the new construction and the old, when completing a pre-existing structure. In this sense, it looks into the possibility of extending, in time, the pre-existing historical identity, through the process of *abstraction*. Thus, the intent of this investigation is to understand this process, which consists of the creation of a mental discourse on construction.

There are three specific goals of this dissertation. First: *to select, analyze, compare and distinguish two case studies within the announced theoretical framework*. Second: *to identify and present the theoretical, historical and authorial references that contextualize contemporary intervention in historical context and, in particular, the two selected interventions*. At this point, it is important to understand the reciprocal relationships between the discipline of Architecture and the one of Preservation and Restoration. Third: *to state the principles of abstraction that consolidate a possible contemporary stance – the concealment of intervention in the historic architectural form*.

BENEVOLO Leonardo, *Introdução à Arquitetura*, Lisboa, Edições 70, Março de 2007, p.9.

The title of this dissertation is, therefore, the following:

Contemporary interventions in historic context: the role of *abstraction*

The two intervention projects, objects of study, are the following:

Souto de Moura, Conversion of Convento das Bernardas in Tavira, 2006-2012

Diener & Diener, Expansão da Ala Este do Museu de História Natural de Berlim, 1995-2010

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1. Theoretical context

Abstraction, imitation, concealment and analogy

The idea of *abstraction* that one seeks to understand, in this investigation, is that which unifies the intervention and the historic context in one single identity. In this sense, the intervention makes use of *imitation* as a way to produce an *image* – expression of the *historical identity* – and not to fully repeat a construction model. This image, enhancement of the historical memory, requires two other instruments of abstraction: *concealment* and *analogy*. The combination of the two allows one to start a discussion on the ambiguity of contemporary intervention in the discovery of its own existence.

One important question is raised: considering the context of analysis of the two selected case studies, can one really refer to *imitation*? The purpose of producing a reference *image* could allow one to answer positively. However, there is an important acknowledgement to make: this imitation is not obvious in any situation of both case studies. In fact, Martin Steinmann's comment on the intervention in Berlin could also work for the one in Tavira: "the respect for the context doesn't mean to make a kind of wiping yourself out, making the new thing disappear. It has never gone to that approach about imitation. It's not imitation. It would be imitation if he had – which would have been possible – taken up that [previous construction]." ¹ Thus, one should be able to clarify the limits of imitative appropriation.

In this context, the analyzed interventions do not match the system of *imitation by image*, that is, through the *copy*. This notion is confirmed in the lack of correspondence to a possible original model. Now, what matters is *to look like* and not necessarily *to be* what was the historic context in the past. A new approach is, then, developed, to which Quatremère de Quincy opposed a long time ago: the confusion between "the *resemblance through image*, of the *beaux-arts*, and the similarity through identity, of the mechanical arts." ² One

¹ STEINMANN Martin in *Interview with Martin Steinmann*, José Maria Gonçalves Vieira, EPFL, Lausanne, 18th of September 2014 (available in Annex).

² QUATREMÈRE DE QUINCY Antoine-Chrysostome, *Essai sur la nature, le but et les moyens de l'imitation dans les beaux-arts*, in *De l'Imitation (Introduction de Leon Krier & Demetri Porphyrios, 1823)*, Bruxelles, Archives

could say the imitation model, in the analyzed interventions, is adaptable. In these cases, however, the model is not even easily recognizable. In fact, it is no more its historical validity – with its formal setting – what matters but the *effect* it produces: the permanence of a historical identity to which both the contemporary intervention and the pre-existing historic context contribute. In this sense, the model itself can be *invented* through a process of induction from the existing ruin. What is important is to ensure the efficiency of the produced effect even if a strange feeling of uncertainty and ambiguity is induced on the observer. Moreover, this true user of the spaces is strangely bothered when he realizes his misunderstanding as to the meaning of what he looks at for the second time.

Introduction to contemporary intervention in historic context

The historical analysis developed on this issue starts with the importance of understanding the value of the old architectural form, identified in its *content*³. One should, then, recognize distinct dimensions of the architectural form that go beyond its formal expression and detach its understanding from the pictorial appreciation. The *form* is understood as a construction that carries an architectural knowledge, which is *interpretable*. This theoretical recognition – of validation of the pre-existing architectural form – is developed with greater enthusiasm in the seventies and refers to the references of Camillo Sitte and Alois Riegl who exposed, soon at the starting of the century, the necessary appropriation of a *critical* stance, with the ability of *mental* discernment, in relation to the historic context.

In fact, this truly *modern* critical stance plays a key role in the inversion of the ideological paradigms of Modernism, in the second half of the twentieth century. Now, “function follows *form*”⁴, which already exists. That is, the form can remain in an exercise of progressive adaption of the intervention to its historic context. It is, then, understandable that “the new function has to come and be appropriate to the existing form.”⁵ At this moment, the importance of bringing together the discipline of Architecture and the one of Preservation and Restoration is finally enhanced: “restoration and reanimation do not depend on two distinct spheres of activity, but constitute complementary processes of the same activity.”⁶ The reciprocity between the two disciplines allow a new theoretical enlightenment: these two areas of knowledge are now part of a single disciplinary activity of the intervention in historic context.

d'Architecture Moderne, 1980, pp.8-9.

³ *Content* – the set of ideas, values and spacial settings of an architectural form. The idea, pointed by Martin Heidegger about the *knowledge* of architecture is now invoked. He shows that it is presented in construction. Thus, this built matter carries a specific cognitive content. Cf. HEIDEGGER Martin, *Construir, Habitar, Pensar*, 1951, in AAVV, *Teoria e Crítica de Arquitectura, Século XX*, Lisboa, Ordem dos Arquitectos e Caleidoscópio, 2010, pp. 349-351.

⁴ CORBOZ André, *Old Buildings and Modern Functions*, in Lotus International, 13, Decembre 1976, p.77.

⁵ MOURA Eduardo Souto de, in *Entrevista com Eduardo Souto de Moura*, José Maria Gonçalves Vieira, Porto, 14 de Agosto de 2014 (available in Annex).

⁶ CORBOZ André in *Old Buildings and Modern Functions*, in *op. cit.*, p.71.

The adaption of the contemporary intervention to the pre-existing form is due to its *historical identity*⁷ and collective recognition. It no longer matters to rebuild the original shape but to replace its effect, that is, its image. The sensory and perceptual experience of space is, therefore, urged. In this context, one should include the references of Aldo Rossi and Robert Venturi, who are still major influences in the contemporary practice. The symbolic architectural elements, carriers of specific historical figures, are used as memory references of communication and appeal to senses. The appropriation of a pre-existing vocabulary is made an instrument of figurative abstraction. This new attitude, unique in the contemporary practice, returns to the theoretical thinking of the late nineteenth century when preservation, restoration and architectural production attended a disciplinary fellowship. It reveals, at the same time, the evolution of the progresses already made by Carlo Scarpa, a remarkable *modern restorer*. At that time, he searched for the harmonious dialogue between languages. Now, the old and the new are no longer easily distinguishable in the perceptual experience. The intervention dissimulates itself in the pre-existing form, freezing it in time. The appeal to the timelessness of the pre-existing form reflects the contribution of the intervention to its true *completion*.



1 Souto de Moura, Conversion of Convento das Bernardas, Tavira, 2006-2012



2 Diener Et Diener, New East Wing Expansion of the Museum of Natural History, Berlin, 1995-2010

2. Souto de Moura, Conversion of Convento das Bernardas in Tavira, 2006-2012

To summarize the main goals of the project for the Conversion of Convento das Bernardas, the main interventions developed until 2012 are listed. First of all, “the project is divided into two types of intervention, new construction and recovering of the existing building, an old convent and also factory.”⁸ The old monastery structure is used to comprehend fifty-seven residential units. In the large patio left from the demolitions of the nineteenth century two spaces are outlined in each half. In order to close the perimeter of this central patio, a new building is built in the interrupted area of the east wing. This new construction is merged with the old one. Through traditional means of construction, it is built in perfect formal and figurative continuity with the pre-existing object. The whole complex is expanded to south with a new patio which is closed by an ‘L’ shaped building and a ramp. A new building is placed taking advantage of the existing three-meter gap on the east limit of the complex. The new buildings include, in total, twenty-one residential units. In the old church, the complex reception is placed in its main space and a new cafeteria is placed in the old vestry room. These spaces are currently under construction, in order to comprehend a new restaurant that can be extended to the central patio. The pre-existing wall on the west limit is restored, and recognized as a very important element of visual contact.



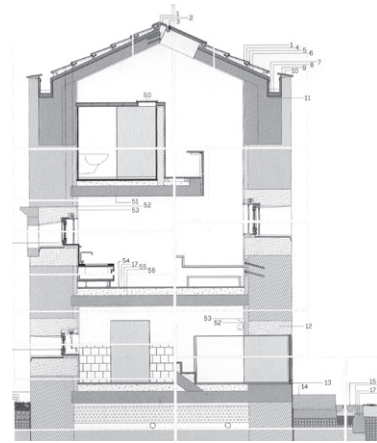
3 North façade of Convento das Bernardas

The *new object* is produced by the adaption of new residential uses to the

⁷ *Historical identity* – the set of features, of a specific place, that reflect its historical value.

⁸ MOURA Souto de in *Convento das Bernardas*, Lisboa, Uzina Books, Nov. 2013, p.21.

old structure of Convento das Bernardas. It reveals a complex reinterpretation of the pre-existing structure. The intervention was settled by an almost invisible handling of existing architectural elements. These were taken as matter to be modeled and, therefore, means of formal abstraction of the contemporary creation. The construction of Convento das Bernardas started in 1509 when its identity was generated. After more than five centuries, the building still has the same name as well as its social and urban integration in Tavira. In this sense, the *new object* is nonetheless the former. The intervention only gives a new meaning and reason to exist without having to declare its newness. This *process of abstraction* is perhaps what claims the success of the project for the Conversion of Convento das Bernardas.



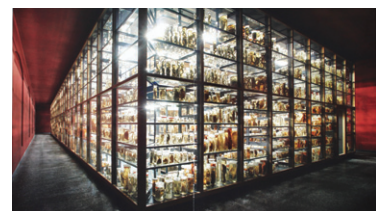
4 Convento das Bernardas, detail

3. Diener & Diener, New East Wing Expansion of the Museum of Natural History, in Berlin, 1995–2010

The project for the New East Wing Expansion of the Museum of Natural History comes from the participation in the international competition for the renewal and restructuring of the Museum. The project was selected in 1995 and it included, from the beginning, the reconstruction of the east wing building. The original project was adapted and phased due to the lack of funds. The rehabilitation process of the whole complex carefully involved distinct intervention measures due to the pre-existing architectural value and the multiple functions of the buildings. It was only between 2004 and 2007 that some of the exhibition rooms were restored. The construction of the east wing building was included in the first phase of the main project and developed between 2005 and 2010. This part of the museum hosts a display of a zoological collection with a huge quantity and variety of specimen.⁹ The intervention in the pre-existing ruin required the control of light, air and humidity related to the conservation and protection of the exhibits, with high precision.¹⁰ The new exhibition space gathers the collection of reptiles and amphibians that were scattered in the old museum. These samples are now arranged in a display that takes advantage of the whole height of the rooms (which goes from five to six meters, depending on the rooms). On the ground floor, the display structure is translucent. It encloses a working area for scientists. Both the visitors and the researchers are simultaneously provided with permanent access to the exhibition content. The remaining floors, with private access, include workspaces and storage. The second phase of the main rehabilitation project will take place until 2016. It is focused on the restoration of the remaining spaces of the museum, allowing the extension of the visitors circuit. It intends to build the technical infrastructures required for long-term storage of palaeontological and zoological specimens. In this sense, it assures the modern character of new investigation museum. In the New East



5 Museum of Natural History in Berlin, before and after destruction caused by the bombing of February 3rd, 1945



6 Exhibition hall of the East Wing, glass cube that shows the Wet Collection

⁹ In the East Wing, more than 276,000 samples of embalmed animals are kept wet in glass containers with ethyl alcohol.

¹⁰ The majority of the rooms are climatized in temperatures between 15°C and 18°C, to provide the required conservation conditions of the samples and reduce its deterioration time. This also intends to reduce the dangerous risk of fire, due to the strong potential of ignition of the samples.



7 New East Wing Expansion of the Museum of Natural History, detail of the east façade

Wing Expansion, the intervention includes the original formal references in its design. The interior spaces are designed with the old building proportions and their structure is covered with a completely opaque envelope. This final layer produces the impression of formal continuity between the parts that remained intact in the existing ruin and the new ones that fill the destroyed parts in the façades. Therefore, the intervention continues the design of the former façade with a new materiality.

The project for the New East Wing Expansion of the Museum of Natural History in Berlin had two primary purposes: the exhibition of the museum's wet collection and the restitution of the identity of the old building. The old architectural form, induced by the available ruin, is absorbed by the intervention to assure the historical continuity of that construction. The same intervention project gives new meanings to the elements that compose it, through their careful modelation. This ambiguous phenomenon of uncertainty is the reflection of an intervention that puts into practice, at the same time, new reflections in the architectural form and an almost complete *process of abstraction* of the creative entity.

4. Process of abstraction in the intervention in historic context

The process of abstraction, analyzed in both case studies – the Conversion of Convento das Bernardas in Tavira and the New East Wing Expansion of the Museum of Natural History – is developed by the critical look on the pre-existing architectural form and the adaption of each intervention to its own historic context. This process can be systematized into a group of *themes of abstraction* that consolidate a possible stance of formal dissimulation in the historic architectural form:

Mental Abstraction. Primary ability of discussing the cognitive content of construction.

Historical abstraction. Comprehension and compatibility of different theoretical and historical contexts.

Structural abstraction. Structural dissociation of the new construction from the pre-existing one.

Cultural abstraction. Integration of the old traditional means of construction that are needed to retrieve the pre-existing historical identity.

Construction abstraction. Concealment of contemporary construction details in the pre-existing form.

Semantic abstraction. Subversion of the operative meanings of architectural elements, keeping their historical figure.

Authorial abstraction. The authors release from their own theoretical references, guided by the process of adaption to the pre-existing historic context.

8 Convento das Bernardas



9 New East Wing Expansion of the Museum of Natural History





10 (left) Conversion of Convento das Bernardas, reinforced concrete windows

11 (right) New East Wing Expansion of the Museum of Natural History, prefabricated concrete windows

Functional abstraction. Mutual adaption of new uses to the pre-existing structure and resulting experimentation of new ways of dwelling.

Plastic abstraction. Construction modeling and formal dissimulation of the intervention in the old structure, defined by its pre-existing construction system.

Figurative abstraction. Appropriation of the historical figure, a universally recognizable sign, that re-establishes the pre-existing historical identity.

The expressions of the *process of abstraction in the intervention in historic context*, stated above, go beyond the limits of analysis of the case studies. They can be taken up as general assumptions for other contemporary interventions. It is essential to understand that these assumptions are complementary and they only make sense when comprehended in the global sense of the intervention.

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Future investigations

It is important to assume that the presented assumptions are not a set of doctrinal principles. They only concur to the consolidation of a possible way of thinking about an intervention in historic context. There are, therefore, other investigations to be developed which are also related to the role of abstraction in the intervention in historic context:

Creative production of the concealed intervention. It could be interesting to comprehend, within the scope of this investigation, other case studies where the existing historical identity is not be clearly recognized, that is, where the historical value would not be so remarkable. In such cases, the question of how to proceed would be open. To what extent does the absence of a historical identity justify the creative production of the intervention, when having to complete a pre-existing structure? The question could be presented in reverse. To what extent does the historical value of a pre-existing identity validate its extension in time? Which means of abstraction could help answering these questions?

Contemporary approach to traditional significations. This investigation uncovers the possibility of recapturing the traditional meanings of things, giving them a contemporary sense. This means to get back to the basics, the primary looks at things, with their *symbolic* meanings. This could be a possible research question: Does what one sees in the contemporary architectural form really correspond to what it is? This problem refers, of course, to semiotics, the study of the signs of communication. In this sense, a new investigation is revealed, the possibility of continuing to work with the architectural elements as perceived with their *traditional*, timeless meanings. A new question arises in the contemporary context: How can *contemporary* architecture proceed using the architectural elements that are of its own disciplinary field? Which are the means of abstraction that can provide it with the ability of working with them with a contemporary sense? To what extent can these architectural elements be modified, through the process of abstraction, just to the point before they are no longer perceived with their traditional meanings?

Creative production of the diverging intervention. Finally, the investigation about the process of abstraction in contemporary interventions in historic context could be extended those where this process leads to the formal discrepancy between new construction and the pre-existing one. As an alternative to formal concealment, thoroughly investigated in this work, the process of abstraction can result in *contrast* solutions. Within this scope of investigation, numerous diverging speeches could be discovered. Other questions could arise: To what extent does the formal validity justify the dilution *suppression of the relation to the context*? Which dialectic relationships could be established to *clarify the reading of different languages*? Which archetypal structures, observed in the historic context, could be taken up by the contemporary design, *in the production of analogical relationships, generating memories*? Finally, what are the other speeches that remain to be discovered and exposed in the contemporary practice?

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Final statement

The relationship between a new architectural intervention and old architecture has been explored with a countless range of approaches. The contemporary practice is highlighted by the diversity of reactions it comprehends. The contemporary stance, purpose of this investigation, uncovers new ways of considering historic context. It is hardly found in the current catalog of examples. It certainly does not correspond to the relationship of dialogic complementarity with historic context, adding a contemporary language to it. It also does not correspond to imitative reconstruction, reducing its action to the repetition of an old construction. In fact, this new stance is more complex and difficult to understand.

What now matters is not to be more or less visible, contrasting or being similar. The stated stance is founded in the capacity for *abstraction*. This

is a key subject for contemporary architecture, the need to establish a mental discourse about construction. This critical attitude can result in sensitive and subtle operations which, in many cases, are strangely perceived: “it is just the minimum that is needed – to have the impression of something you see, you know what it is about and yet you feel strange, just that strange enough.”¹¹ These images it generates demand a second look at their construction, an active perception that makes the observer a true user of architecture.

Regarding formal dissimulation in an existing old structure, a new stance of abstraction is put in the centre of analysis. Contemporary architecture makes the pre-existing elements of construction its own means of intervention and acknowledges the values and meanings that are beyond their formal expression. As a result, it produces an image that retrieves the historical identity of the context in which it intervenes. This progress is made possible through a sensible process of *adaption*, a mutual correspondence between the intervention and the existing structure. Both the old construction and the new one can, then, be distorted, subverted and transformed, according to specific themes of abstraction. The subtlety and sensibility of these distortions reflect a peculiar ambition for the active perceptual experience, in a gradual discovery of architecture.

Now, neither the doctrines nor the ideological currents generated by cataloging distinct “types” of intervention, provide an intervention with any practical solution. The responsibility of architecture is restricted to its own discipline and field of action, regardless of its age. The contemporary intervention becomes, therefore, able to apprehend *time*. This ceases to be a further constraint. It is no longer the recognition of the *pre-existing* what one searches for but the discovery of the *timeless* character of construction, an essential aspiration of human nature. Is not this the true ambition of architecture, “*l’Art du Potier* et *l’Art du Poète*”¹²?

“There is one timeless way of building. It is a thousand years old, and the same today as it has ever been. The great traditional buildings of the past, the villages and tents and temples in which man feels at home, have always been made by people who were very close to the center of this way. It is not possible to make great buildings, or great towns, beautiful places, places where you feel yourself, places where you feel alive, except by following this way. And, as you will see, this way will lead anyone who looks for it to buildings which are themselves as ancient in their form, as the trees and hills, and as our faces are.”¹³

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¹¹ STEINMANN Martin in *Interview with Martin Steinmann*, José Maria Gonçalves Vieira, EPFL, Lausanne, 18th of September 2014 (available in Annex).

¹² QUATREMÈRE DE QUINCY Antoine-Chrysostome, *Le Dictionnaire de l’Architecture*, in op. cit., p.XLIII.

¹³ ALEXANDER Christopher, *The Timeless Way of Building*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1979, p.7.

“This is very useful... To understand that with this little shift... It is a very subtle way of leading into questioning of what is this building about... What is it? It arouses your curiosity to know more about it. This long term effect that makes you really thinking... comparing to a steel box... Puff! You have seen it, finished! No more questions. So, such an approach is made with little shifts.”

STEINMANN Martin in *Interview with Martin Steinmann*, José Maria Gonçalves Vieira, EPFL, Lausanne, 18th of September 2014 (available in Annex).

12 Conversion of Convento das Bernardas, figurative abstraction

13 New East Wing Expansion of the Museum of Natural History, figurative abstraction

