Modern Approach of Conserving Historic Buildings

‘Castelvecchio & Palazzo Chiericati’

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The study trip itinerary had provided the list of historic buildings that are mostly designed by Andrea Palladio, an internationally well-known Italian architect from the 16th Century. With the influence of Greek and Roman style architecture, he also produced many of renaissance style buildings. Palladio is considered as one of the most influential architects in the history of European architecture. Many of his works were found in all over Italy. However, the three points of areas of study are in Vicenza, Verona, and Venice. With its historic buildings that were born earlier than United Kingdom, the Italian style architecture influenced the United Kingdom and showed the resemblance in many of the buildings as well. Therefore, it shows that nothing is really ‘pure’ in architecture styles, design and art- they are the group and compilations of everything that were affecting the object. This trip was considered as an architectural trail for where the students were trying to find and history and character of Italian architecture.

The purpose this essay is to analyse the conservation works of the historic buildings from the study trip, focusing on the observation of conservation works on both Castelvecchio (Verona) and Palazzo Chiericati (Vicenza). Even though Castelvecchio was not designed by Palladio, the castle was chosen along with Palazzo Chiericati to be part of the case study, focusing on their similar approaches of the conservation works for the building.

Figure 1. Castelvecchio, Restored by Carlo Scarpa in 1958 – 1974 (by writer)
The restoration of Castelvecchio was executed years before the Palazzo Chiericati. However, the conservation works of these two buildings were somehow resembled, or possibly, when Emilio Alberti was planning to do the restoration, he was inspired and influenced by Carlo Scarpa. Although they have similar idea of conservation, the two buildings were very different in terms of function, style, and age. Castelvecchio is a 14th Century fort, built in a compact size with quite of minimalist decorations with a Gothic architecture style castle, using mostly red bricks. Whilst Palazzo Chiericati, one of the iconic building designed by Palladio in the 16th Century for the family of Chiericati, built with the decorative ornaments and also the use of columns and pillars. It was interesting to see that both Scarpa and Alberti used the approach of modern style architecture to somehow emphasise the old materials and features of the buildings. Although there are probably many pros and cons of doing a conservation works for historic building with modern approach, both of these architects were surely consider everything in detail.

Article 6 in the Krakow Charter states, “conservation requires an appropriate ‘restoration project’ that defines all the methods and objectives. In many cases, this also require an appropriate use, compatible with the existing meaning and space.” In other words, conservation is always related with intervention, as both design and conservation complement and depend on each other. When this mutual factors happen, historic architecture become the protagonist of its own history. Gustavo Giovanni (1873 – 1948) as one of the authors of the Athens Charter, pointed that the “restoration architect” should embodied the triple role of all “historian, builder, and artist”. The architect should mastered the knowledge. Not just fully understand the project but also act as the ‘neutral’ person who worked in the field to experience the real problem.

Castelvecchio (Restored by Carlo Scarpa, 1958 – 1974)

Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1909 – 69), thought that “conserving and constructing are moments of a single act of conscience, because one and the other are subject to a same method: conservation does not make sense if it is not understood as updating the past, and construction makes no sense if it is not understood as a continuation of the historical process.” Therefore, the statement gave the
chance of Modern architects the opportunity to “transcend the limitations of previous historicist techniques. The recommendations of the Athens Carter are there: contrast between new and old, absence of ornament in the intervention, differentiation in the added elements and in the materials used” (Manuel, 2007). Before Scarpa’s intervention for Castelvecchio, there were already 4 major projects. The conversion for museum was originally designed by museum director Antonio Avena and architect Ferdinando Forianti in 1923-6. However, both Avena and Forianti’s vision of converting the building into museum seemed unclear, yet they have managed to re-build some parts such as the towers that were demolished by the French and the utilitarian barrack was also reinvented. In addition, they added the medieval fountain in the courtyard. (Coombs, 1992). After Avena and Forianti were done with their part of conservation, Scarpa was asked to be the partner of Licsico Magagnato, the successor of Avena, to design the museum.

By the drawings that Scarpa made during the year of 1957-8, they show his ability to understand the relation between conservation and design. This is something that required special skills to be able to achieve that sense of comprehend.

From the entrance, the big courtyard was the first thing to see in the castle. The site are covered by big and tall walls with many windows, typical style for fortress. The castle lies on a site by the Adige River, with two separated major wings that are connected by the bridge.
Scarpa managed to ‘polish’ the building to be clean and sleek, added nothing but simple design. Even though it was simple, it was also very complex. Scarpa was probably the only one who can restore the castle with modern approach at that time, he was not just offering the rehabilitation of the castle but probably also trying to explain its complex history by his new design. The action showed in the demolition of Napoleon staircase and one bay of the barracks. However, the roof of the demolished bay is peeled and reveal layers: with Roman tile on top, then copper, and steel beams.

Scarpa did not only consider the materials but also the change of use and probably its sustainability. He was in charge of both the renovation of the premises and the design of the exhibition. How he managed to turned the castle into an exhibition space was something special. Although, it is considered quite difficult to trace and imagine what was the complex history of the original castle looked like in the 14th Century. As if the visitors have to imagine how was the original space looked like, with the original elements that were left there, making the assumption that it wanted the visitors to make their own interpretations.

The interior of the museum is distinct from the exterior part. Although, the overall plan of Castelvecchio has already supported the space conversion into museum- the similar sizes and the shape of square with linear axis, which made the flow relatively easy to access and linked one to other rooms. However, some of the spaces in the rooms were considered odd and not as symmetrical as the main rooms. This mainly because of the axis were not perfectly straight, the castle followed the shape of the site.
The art sculptures are mostly standing in the rooms, with the additional elements of ropes and timber to hang some of the paintings, and also steel beams. However, one thing that attracted the eyes were the fact that most of the floor did not directly linked to the walls, “Scarpa left a 10-inch gap between his new concrete floors and the building’s hoary walls” (Bernstein, 2004). There are always small gaps in between the wall and floor, made the assumption that the restoration design was not meant to disturb/interfere the original fabric of the building by purpose and gave the sense of 3D and layering of each aspects.

It somehow showed that Carlo Scarpa did not intend to restore the castle as the old fortress exactly like in 14th Century. With every aspect of detail that he considered to design this castle, he used the modern approach as his form of ‘respect’ to this old castle.

The design also adapted the style of Japanese architecture, it was shown on the steel frames that are used as filters for the windows, and also the minimalist hand rails design.
Scarpa carefully chose the new material and treat the old fabric delicately. The defects of the buildings that are already there and he left them as they are, especially with the holes caused by the scaffolding were somehow made the accents and new character of the building. He turned the flaws of this castle into charms.

What Scarpa did for this rehabilitation of Castelvecchio was, he also tried to explain the ‘honest conservation work’ by showing parts of the structure of the castle. As he was trying to explain that the combination of new and old could really work together in harmony for historic building.
Castelvecchio Today

This modern-historic architecture is now improved with the addition of accessible ramps, and great lightings to support the artworks, also managed to handle the problem of environmental problems. This castle surely is an ideal example for showing how modern approach could blend together with historic building. However, some may believe by looking at the work that Scarpa did for this castle, it seemed that he viewed the past without considering exaggerated respect, also added by Coombs (1992), Scarpa “shows the force of preservation work that incorporates a critique of the past, particularly a past in which that historic building played a role”, even though the result of conservation work itself is considered great with the good intention of combining new and old. Coombs also mentioned that the castle is significant more for the history than for its historic architecture. This suggests of pros and cons about Scarpa’s interpretation of Castelvecchio did not consider a broader historical context as he tried to make a message of his own.

Palazzo Chiericati (Restored by Emilio Alberti, 2005 – 2009)

This historic building is considered to be the final act of the transformation of the stone mason Andrea di Pietro into Palladio. Began in 1543, where Palladio created triumphal arches, colossal statues, obelisk, and painted scenes against house facades with wood, papier-mache, plaster, and fabric. (Paterno, 2012). The
series of architecture procession that Palladio made still have the character of Gothic Vicenza, with bricks. Palazzo Chiericati, the building that lies on a wide site for the Chiericati family, with its construction by laying the foundation of his own way, completion, and restoration is a good example of showing how Palladio’s journey was changed in the course of time and as one of the most unique and surprising in the history of architecture.

The restoration of Palazzo Chiericati was led by native architect Emilio Alberti, with several steps for the planning. The preliminary draft of general restoration and redistribution of the interior of the building was granted by Foundation Cassa Risparmio in 2001, following on approval of the final project that was divided by two installments in 2002. The 1st and 2nd phase of the final design of Conservative restoration of Palazzo Chiericati was approved in 2004 and the execution of the 1st phase was started in 2005. The building was closed for public for three years for renovation.

Palazzo Chiericati is a rectangular shaped building, in the double order of loggias and arcaded wings from the ancient Roman forum. The purpose of this conservation work is to bring its ‘Palladian’ beauty back to the city and the world. There are two parts of conservations. The 1st one is the exhibition area in the basement, and the 2nd part is lies from the ground floor to the next levels. Although there are two different parts, they are all integrated.

The first part of conservation that we saw was the basement area, where the ‘modern conservation’ was done. The use of steel beams and timber were the main materials for this part. Some original elements of the buildings such as brick structures are still remaining, and Alberti tried to show the visitor about the richness of the building’s structures by using modern fabrics to highlights them and also optimised the spaces.
Emilio Alberti also emphasised the ‘left over’ spaces to a whole new character and added lightings, to allow the visitors to sense them. The new materials do not interfere the old ones, as a matter of fact they ‘protect’ the old elements by framing them and indirectly give the direction to the visitors to see them as an exhibition. Although the ‘fake mortar’ is used for this part, Alberti managed to give the finishing touch as its best.

The next part of the building is starting from the main floor, there are two rooms that exhibit the portraits of the members of the aristocracy of Vicenza ‘500. Following the main hall there is a picture gallery that exhibits paintings. The second part of the conservation work for this building is somehow taking you back to explore the world of Palladio and his era. Different with the basement where the accentuation with modern material, as if there are two things that are happening in that part- the old and new elements. The first floor of the building, started with the main hall that shows paintings and sculptures, with some of the original tiles and integrated with the basement and could be crossed by a diagonal bridge. This part is more about emphasising the era of mid 16th, although of some of the modern fabrics are still used but distinct with the first part of conservation.

**Conclusion**
Both of Castelvecchio and Palazzo Chieracati have been approached by modern concept for their conservation and the buildings able to delivered and pointed that the use of modern approach could be appropriate if it considered carefully, as this is for the conservation of the iconic historic buildings. Yet, those two buildings are very different in terms of influence, use/ function, materials, and age. However, to use such new approach should be very carefully as it will deal with sensitive materials and story behind the buildings as well. Therefore, deep analysis for the old materials is required, with specialist for each field. As this historic buildings are nationally and internationally significant, before doing any intervention, it is required to involve the public to have opinions and express their thoughts as the initial step to prevent the disagreement regarding to the conservation plan.

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