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Learning from Borja.
Heritage preservation processes in the work of the Porto School.

Borja is a small town (about 5.000 inhabitants) near Zaragoza, in Spain. It was quite anonymous until 2012, when the disastrous attempt made by Cecilia Giménez (a well-meaning 80-year-old) to restore the fresco *Ecce Homo* (painted by Elías García Martínez in the XIX century) became a story with global impact, spreading the name Borja on the internet and on television networks all around the world.

Of course, the media coverage of this event shows its exceptional character, which is a good sign for the professionals involved in the preservation of painting: the public is not accustomed to this kind of amateurish intervention – it is not usual, therefore it is news.

On the contrary, a disastrous intervention in an anonymous XIX century building in a small town in Spain (or, likewise, in Portugal) would never have this kind of public impact. It could be local news, but not global news. It would not strike public opinion worldwide as funny, laughable or ridiculous. It would be considered harmful and sad, but only by a small part of the public, the one that has enough culture and knowledge to know how to distinguish a good restoration from a disastrous act of reuse.

So, the first thing we can learn from Borja is that architecture still has a long way to go, in the education of the general public in the matters of heritage preservation.

But there is a second lesson in this episode that is far more interesting, concerning the evolution of the opinion of the local population.

Thanks to the work of Cecilia Giménez, Borja has become a tourist destination; according to "The New York Times" website (Caevalaj, 2014), in two years the painting has attracted more than 150,000 tourists.

For the inhabitants of Borja, what was initially perceived as an attempt to their heritage values has become a cause of economic growth; the initial criticism to the work of Cecilia Giménez vanished, and gave way to a public petition, signed by more than 6.500 people, which sought to prevent the fresco from being restored again.

This ironic episode can be seen as an allegory of the complexity of the processes of heritage rehabilitation / preservation / destruction in the globalized world: the arguments used for the preservation of an intervention that is unanimously regarded as disqualified are the same that, in most cases, justify the general approval of an equally disqualified project in our historic cities: public utility, measured solely in terms of immediate economic growth.

However, we should consider that the economic growth achieved in the short term is not, most of the times, sustainable (as we will also learn from Borja, soon), and there are other variables to consider, concerning public utility and built patrimony: the value of memory (Choay, 1982, p. 16), the historic, symbolic and affective heritage (Dias, 2003, p.3).

Bering in mind that it is our obligation to preserve the legacy that our grandparents left us for our grandchildren, we also have to assure that they inherit the memories of the present time, building patrimony for the future. But, of course, in this comprehensive definition we

face the risk of considering that patrimony is everything. In a world where the most stable feature is the permanent acceleration in the velocity of change, we tend to increasingly value our built heritage, as a reconciliatory mark of identity.

So, the task of the architects, urban planners and policy-makers is not simple nor easy, considering the need for authenticity of urban space (Solá-Morales, 1998) while facing the risk of *Default Preservation,™* "the maintenance of historical complexes that nobody wants but the Zeitgeist has declared sacrosanct" (Koolhaas, 2004, p.168).

We can't preserve everything... but we must avoid being caught in the misconception of considering an idea of public utility based on the foreseeable economic growth as the sole criterion of intervention. There are other decisive factors, quite consensual, that can contribute to distinguish some buildings and urban spaces as patrimony: time, rarity, integrity, meaning, authorship, quality, etc.

Nevertheless, there is a third lesson we can learn from Borja, the most obvious but also the most important one: the act of restoration is not easy, and it is not enough to want to do a good work, you have to know how.

In architecture, the question *how to intervene* is never a simple one; in the intervention in buildings and urban spaces with patrimonial value, it can be answered by an association of re-words: restoration, recovery, rehabilitation, reuse, reformulation, repair, refund, replacement, reestablishment, refurbishment, reorganization, reform, restructuring, reinterpretation, etc.

It is rare that a solution for this kind of intervention can be limited to one of these re-words. Most of the times, the professionals involved in the process have to consider, simultaneously, different options for the different parts of the same building.

So, the answer to the question *how* should be a direct consequence of the particular specificities of the context (the characteristics of the preexisting building and the necessities of the program), which can imply various design decisions, related to the aforementioned aspects of public utility.

In Portugal, during the decades of the fascist regime of Salazar, an intervention in an historical building implied, most of the times, the complete destruction of all the relatively recent intervention to maintain the integrity of an older one; this was a principle that was systematically applied by the General Directorate for the Buildings and National Monuments (DGEMN).

The intervention in the Guimarães Castle (1936-40) is a clear example of this philosophy of selective preservation: in order to restore the image of XII century fortress, DGEMN architects proposed the demolition of the various additions, constructed throughout the centuries, and the reconstruction (in a process of reinterpretation) of some of the elements that had been altered or destroyed in the past (Faure, 2009).

1 and 2. D. Pedro Pitões tower, reestablished in 1940, by Rogério de Azevedo; "casa dos 24", reestablished in 1995, by Fernando Távora (photos by the author).

These liberal processes of rehabilitation are typical of an understanding of patrimonial preservation that we can relate to the theories and the activity of Viollet-le-Duc, responsible for several interventions as auditor and architect for the "Conseil des Bâtiments Civils" of France in the second half of the XIX century. His romantic reinterpretation of medieval architecture lead to imaginative (but not necessarily reliable, from an historical point of view) projects of rehabilitation in the Notre-Dame Cathedral, in Paris, or in the French town of Carcassone, among others.

Rogério de Azevedo, director of Porto section of the DGEMN, was also responsible for some very imaginative interventions on various monuments, in the north of Portugal. The example of the reconstruction of the Palace of the Dukes of Bragança, in Guimarães (nearby the aforementioned castle) is widely known; less famous is the intervention in a medieval tower in the historic center of Porto ("Torre de D. Pedro Pitões"), that was dismantled and reconstructed several meters away from the original site, with some "gothic" improvements (Ferreira, 2004).

It is very interesting to compare this intervention (completed in 1940) to a recent one (1995) in the same context: the reconstruction of a medieval tower ("casa dos 24") located six meters away from Porto Cathedral, and only a few meters further from D. Pedro Pitões.

In this intervention, Fernando Távora shows a completely different approach to the same problem: he reconstructs the building on the exact same site, using the ruins as foundations for the new walls, but assumes a language that is unquestionably new, although considering and respecting all the information that he could acquire on the pre-existent tower: "The building (...) had once a hundred hand pans of height, one room levelled to the Cathedral Terrain and another one levelled to the S. Sebastião Street" (Távora, 1996, p.444).

The new tower does not present itself in a medieval revival form, it assumes its modernity, which is (as always, in Távora's work) expressed in the "quality and accuracy of its relationships with [contemporary] life", in a "seamless integration of all its elements" (Távora, 1952, p.153).

This timeless understanding of modernity is one of the main characteristics we recognize in the work of the so called "School of Porto", connected with a concern with social responsibility (perceived through the notions of collaboration and relationship with the context), the perception of architecture as art, the practice of manual drawing as a primary method of conception and the requirement of accuracy in the processes of work and communication (Fernandes, 2015).

This definition of a common identity for the work of Porto architects can be applied, almost in the same way, in the design of a new construction or in the rehabilitation of a building or space of patrimonial value: always showing a similar respect for the preexisting values of the site, bearing in mind that all the activity of the architect is conditioned by the preexisting circumstance, but his actions create a new circumstance, that is inevitably different (Távora, 1962, p. 85-86).

Fernando Távora became an uncontroversial reference of quality in interventions on the built patrimony in Portugal in the last fifty years, thanks to his work (1973-85) on the Convent of Santa Maria da Costa, in Guimarães. This was a milestone in the history of Portuguese architecture and became an example of a correct methodological approach: the rigorous historical and archaeological study informs the options that led to the final result, especially interesting in the formal relations established between the old building and the necessary new extension that houses the part of the new program (a State Inn) that could not be placed in the existing building.

Távora explains that he only intended to "contribute towards the pursuance of the already long life of the old building, by preserving and renovating its most important spaces or by creating spaces which are the outcome of new programmatic conditioning factors" (Távora, 1993, p. 116).

It is obvious that his intervention follows the recommendations of the Venice Charter (1964), restoring the ancient building (that was quite damaged in a fire, in 1951) with traditional materials and methods while assuming the contemporaneity of the new extension, without ascribing it with a prominent role in the global image. The dialogue between old and new is evident, because the façade of the extension is composed by a repetition of a tall and narrow window, clearly inspired in the preexisting ones.

This new volume, which provides "new complementary spaces, all identified with the new life that the building will start" (Távora, 1980, p. 342), assumes a secondary role, appearing in a lower level, as a platform that does not hide the preexisting Convent but emphasizes its presence in the landscape of the mountain.

So, the dialogue between old and new is "not one between the deaf who ignore each other, but one between listeners who will make an attempt to understand each other, asserting similarities and continuity more than cultivating differences and rupture". It is a "dialogue which is a method by which are synthesized two complementary vectors to be considered in the alteration of a pre-existence: the scientific knowledge of its evolution and its values (Archaeology and History) and a creative conception in its transformation process" (Távora, 1993, p. 116).

We can also recognize the same principles in the plan of Álvaro Siza for the reconstruction of Chiado, an eighteenth century area of Lisbon (planned after the great earthquake of 1755) destroyed by a fire in 1988.

In Chiado, Siza's first concern is to restore the buildings, without leaving clear marks of his authorship; but he also aims to create the conditions for the slow recovery of the ambience of that urban space, that was once so particular (Cruz, 2005, p. 26).

The attempt to recover the image still preserved in the memories of the population of Lisbon implies (to achieve economic viability) the "use of what is usually called *pastiche*", which is pointed out by Michel Toussain (1994, p. 25), referring to the stone plaques imitating the ancient window frames made of massive stone.

3 and 4. Convent of Santa Maria da Costa, rehabilitated between 1973 and 1985, by Fernando Távora (photos by the author).

5. New connection to the subway line in the Chiado area, 1988-96, Álvaro Siza (photo by the author).

6. Bernardas Convent, Tavira, rehabilitated between 2006 and 2012 by Eduardo Souto Moura (photo by the author).

But the most important feature in Chiado is that Siza considers time as an instrument of design: he believes that the architect can create the conditions for the natural evolution of an urban space, without expecting to see the immediate result of his plan, because the process of consolidation of the character of an urban area evolves in the long term.

However, one of the features on Siza's plan that can be a decisive contribution to consolidate the ancient character of Chiado (which was a popular commercial area before the fire) is the most evident trace of the contemporaneity of the intervention: the new connection to the subway line, which permitted a better accessibility to the general population.

In the work of Eduardo Souto Moura, in the Monastery of Santa Maria do Bouro (1989-97), we find a different approach to the relation between old and new: claiming that "the project aims to adapt, or rather, to make use of some of the stones available to build a new building", Souto Moura declaims any intention of historic preservation while, in fact, makes a great effort in the maintenance of the image of the ruins he found when he first visited the place.

The option of not using tiles in the roof and not reconstructing the cover of the cloister are the most evident traces of this intention, which is also assumed in his own words: "the ruins are more important than the *Convent*, (...) they are open and manipulable, just as the building was during its history" (Moura, 1996, p. 145).

This fascination for the ruins, which can be related to the writings of John Ruskin (1849), can also be found in his earlier work: in the house in Gerês (1980-82), Souto Moura invented a ruin in the place of an abandoned barn. A similar romantic approach can also be found in a recent intervention (2004) adapting one his first works, the City Market of Braga (1980-84), in which Souto Moura preserves the old pillars as ruins, after the demolition of the concrete slab of the cover.

However, the recent intervention of Souto Moura in the Bernardas Convent, in Tavira, presents a different attitude. Here, the idea was not *to make use of some of the stones available* (mainly because "the walls here in Algarve are made of raw soil"), but to relate the construction to the city, proposing both the form and the program ("Why not houses?") that could respond better to the necessities of the local context (Moura, 2013, p. 22).

Távora, Siza and Souto Moura shared common principles on architecture, that allow us to consider the history of their friendship and mutual influences the strongest evidence of the subsistence of an identity that is usually designated as "School of Porto". This identity (a way of thinking connected to a way of doing) is always recognizable on the work of these (and many others) Porto architects, and is based on slightly different personal interpretations of the aforementioned principles and methods: modernity, social responsibility, collaboration, relationship with the context, perception of architecture as an art, practice of manual drawing and modeling as a primary method

of design conception and accuracy in the processes of work and communication (Fernandes, 2011).

The reason we can find different options on the aforementioned processes of intervention on the built heritage, with different answers to the question *how* to intervene, derives from these slightly different personal interpretations of the same principles but also (and mainly) from the common conscience that "each case is different" (Moura, 2013, p. 32).

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