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Some concepts on the problem of monumental restoration in Latin America

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At a time when Latin America is rapidly becoming aware of the importance of providing its cultural values greater protection and of intensifying the efforts of the revitalization and rescue of its monumental heritage, it is increasingly necessary to update the criteria and forms for the adaptation and incorporation of these cultural assets to the needs of contemporary life.

I. General principles

Understanding the need for the defense of the urban complex and not only of the monument, as well as understanding that urban harmony can exist without a complex entity necessarily made up of constructions that, due to their intrinsic quality, have been categorized as monumental, has led us to seriously consider the defense of many of our cities where their monumental quality is based on urban harmony, and on a volumetric profile composed of buildings, which, when analyzed in detail, do not meet the necessary characteristics to be considered monuments. However, the disappearance of some of these could seriously alter the volumetric unit of the complex and, consequently, its monumental quality.

Therefore, it becomes fundamentally important that legislation and regulations for the protection of monuments be extended to the defense of the urban character and the volumetric profile of the old centers. Given the prevailing situation in Latin America, the application of such concepts cannot be postponed, as the continent is entering a stage of economic and political stability, which will logically bring about a principle of renewal in its way of life. Moreover, that is the danger. Until now, with a clear contradiction, most of our urban complexes have preserved their original characteristics due to the scarcity of means. The struggle for survival consumed all of the resources and energies. Today, this stage is being overcome, and the first symptom of economic well-being is unquestionably the "modernization" of its habitat.

Hence, it is urgent to create the defense organisms necessary to achieve it and, in order to achieve this, goodwill is not enough, but rather a program of action and achievements, which should contain vandalism and the mystification of our cities. However, without stopping their



CARTAGENA DE INDIAS. Image: Magdalena Vences Vidal, 2001.

development and evolution in any way, it should instead lead the monumental complexes to be integrated into the needs of contemporary life. All of this should not be detrimental to their monumental quality, but on the contrary, value and enhance it appropriately.

These principles, which are logical for most of the technicians in these disciplines, are not so, however, for the majority of politicians in Latin American countries; we should not forget that a large percentage of monumental preservation efforts have a political character at their core. *Politics and monumental heritage are two apparently unconnected terms, which, however, the technician has to combine in a rare symbiosis of sensitivity.*

II. Guiding principles

Under the previous guiding principles, it will be seen that the work to be developed presents aspects of unique characteristics that we have divided into five main features, namely:

1. Knowledge of the problem
2. Awareness of the ruling classes
3. Integration of the community
4. Social and political approaches
5. Monumental activation

We will briefly explain the previous points based on our experience with monuments and adhering to the Latin American reality.

- 1) When we speak of the knowledge of the problem, we include in it, not only the physical and material state of the monumental complexes, but also their socio-economic reality; it must be understood that we cannot speak of monumental restoration if this does not entail, in addition to an environmental revitalization, a much needed human revitalization. We are not unaware that, with some exceptions, the historic centers of our cities have reached such an extreme that today they constitute the points of greatest human degradation; it is also clear that where there is human degradation, there can be no monumental quality. As governments become aware of this result, they either attack it or ignore it. It all depends on the degree of sensitivity and culture of the ruler in turn.



PANAMÁ. *Image: Pedro Rojas, 1971.*

- 2) That is why the sensitivity of the ruling classes is undoubtedly the greatest and most difficult task. The success of the result will depend on the lengths to which we address the problem, and this invariably will have to be linked, before dealing with the monumental preservation, to the social improvement of the existing population and to the projection that such work will have on the economic and political life of the country. The fundamental historic-state value will have to be strongly amalgamated with the previous one if we want to crown our efforts with success.

- 3) The fundamental importance of the active participation of the inhabitants who live in the historic center will pave the way for its undertaking, and at the same time, will form a platform to raise awareness regarding the preservation of its monument assets. This incorporation of the inhabitants of a historic center into an urban revitalization project can be done directly through physical work in the activities that need to be carried out or indirectly, through lectures and talks that illustrate the benefits that restoration will bring; not only will it improve their habitat but by allowing them to develop a remunerative activity within the work sources that are permanently achieved within the area. This integration of the community also includes the owners of the monumental sector properties. This will be achieved through an approach allowing us to see their attitude and disposition toward the project.

Experience has shown three things:

- a. That the majority of the owners have economic possibilities.
- b. That the property has been acquired either by inheritance or at a very low price.
- c. That they are not interested in restoring it, but in demolishing it, because it does not represent any economic advantage.

Faced with these perspectives, the approaches to the owners will have to observe one more aspect that we have not yet seen. No owner is interested in the restoration and conservation of a property, declared as a monument or as having environmental value if it does not represent a profit. *Financial skills will also have to be amalgamated with the knowledge of the restorer.*

4) Social-political approaches

The revitalization of the historic area should be approached integrally so that its inhabitants receive a social benefit that involves the improvement of housing, either within the area, through environmental sanitation, or outside it, if a change of habitat is necessary. In the first case, this will be achieved by giving priority to infrastructures such as water, electricity, drainage, etc., since it is useless to have a flagrantly restored façade if the social condition of the occupants of the property continues to border on the limits of the subhuman, given the low hygienic conditions that generally prevail in all the buildings in our historic centers. The reasons for high land value and human overcrowding are combined with low profitability and zero maintenance.

In the first two reasons, the political approach will clearly work with the social approach because, it is true that even working only on the façades, the results are visible and the investment is justified; neglecting the occupational nucleus creates a pressure pocket and this unifies the general discontent against the “tinsel works,” which in the long run will add a large number of opinions against monumental conservation, qualifying them as meaningless restorations. A common opinion in America is that only the palaces or grand viceregal mansions are restored, and these, in turn, only serve as museums. It has been forgotten that just as in religious monuments, there is a continuity of use; this can also happen not only in palaces and large mansions, but in the city itself; regardless of whether they have a tourism, cities must have a life of their own, with aspects of mutual interest for the same inhabitants. In other words, all the different angles that make up the active life of a city can exist. Tourism is positive when it is subjected to the various characteristics and expressions of a city, and not when these are subjected to tourism. By opposing the political aspect of the “tinsel restorations,” the social aspect of “urban revitalizations” will help our countries to not lose their moral and spiritual values in the face of materialism that deforms our idiosyncrasy and personality.

5) Monumental activation

Until a few years ago, the historicist sense in monumental restoration was the primary condition in any work to be undertaken. Restorations “in style” were the cornerstone in the work to be carried out, and, in many cases, not only was restoration work carried out “faithfully” following the style of the building, but it was complemented with the appropriate furniture that but for a few exceptions, was only a crude copy of the Spanish styles of the colonial era. Just thinking that “colonial style” decorations and friezes should not be reconstructed was a sacrilege. With an imprecise definition came imprecise results, almost always a grotesque mixture of styles and proportions. Despite this, today, the number of technicians dedicated to this specialty, who are aware of the inadequacy of following a historicist criterion, is growing. However, we must not fail to recognize that this can be a double-edged sword, since from the appearance of the “Venice Charter,” which in the final part of Article 9 says... “any extra work which is indispensable must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp.” Tyrians and Trojans, cultured and profane, found support in it many times, allowing them to commit actual attacks on culture. On this topic, we should note that the insufficient artistic preparation of a large part of the Latin American clergy, where despite the efforts of its high prelates and even international congresses on sacred art such as that of Bogota

in 1968, has not prevented that for the sake of a supposed and erroneous adaptation to the new liturgy, works of art and architectural monuments have been destroyed and modified, using, among other concepts, the articles of the "Venice Charter." Another factor adds to the previous ones, and it is the necessary use for practical purposes of the vast monumental heritage of Latin America, a poor continent where one cannot afford to have convents and large mansions just for aesthetic pleasure. These are white elephants gravitating on the economy of our meager resources. Their proper use will serve not only for their conservation but will also help to exalt their cultural values. It is logical that these adaptations cannot be made within the style in which the monument was built. Hence the delicate intervention of the technician to combine the demands of current needs, with the artistic value of the building, in order to achieve a true monumental activation.

If in the case of civil monuments, this activation was already underway in the religious monuments, by all accounts it did not begin until the Second Vatican Council; this unleashed a violent and uncontrolled reaction to adapt the churches to the needs of the new liturgy. The lack of effective control over the innumerable religious monuments of the colonial era—in Mexico alone, there are more than thirteen thousand—has caused that, in many cases, due to lack of artistic preparation and adequate technical advice, priests remove and destroy works of art that can be perfectly integrated to the new liturgical needs of the church and to implement the agreements emanating from the last Vatican Council. To the unnecessary destruction of altar tables, fronts, side altarpieces, and especially pulpits has been added an intense traffic of works of religious art, promoted by collectors, who easily convince parish priests and sacristans to dismantle the church, arguing with it that it is to adapt them to the new post-Council norms.

Some specific examples

Just as in monuments, it is a current concern to carry out works that do not mystify styles of the past and where new adaptations are integrated into the existing space in the monument; the same concern is accentuated in relation to urban works, in which it is essential to maintain the existing volumetry. If for one reason or another, a contemporary intervention in a historical environment is necessary, it must take care to integrate and denote its time and purpose, and not alter the existing atmosphere or urban harmony. This apparent logical solution in reality is not applied; the contemporary architect rarely pays attention to how his work is going to respond to the environment that surrounds it, and as a general rule and with few exceptions, he will adopt a solution that is the most different and stands out from the existing harmony and volumetry. The cases are infinite and urban disharmony spreads in all our small cities as an unequivocal sign of a misunderstood and wrongly applied progress.

Hence the fundamental importance that some countries have given to the "Urban Revitalization" of their old centers when undertaking general development plans, taking as a fundamental basis the unalterable preservation of the existing urban harmony in those cities. Thus, the examples of Salvador de Bahia in Brazil, Cartagena in Colombia, the Old Quarter of Panama City, and the Old City in Guatemala join those of Quito, Old San Juan in Puerto Rico and some of the most characteristic Mexican cities: Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Taxco and San Miguel de Allende, where the work carried out for this purpose is already beginning to bear fruit.

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NUESTRA SEÑORA DEL CARMEN, ANTIGUA GUATEMALA. *Image: Magdalena Vences Vidal, 2017.*



SAN FRANCISCO, QUITO. *Image: Valerie Magar, 2009.*