

# Protection of Modern Architecture – Contemporary Theory and Practice

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Bearing in mind the time scope which usually separates monument conservators from the core of their interest, Modernism seems to be virtually a contemporary phenomenon, therefore works of Modern Architecture are not generally thought to deserve the status of monuments. However, this situation has been radically changing recently. The process of recognising the value of most recent architecture (the name given to buildings erected after 1850<sup>1</sup>), which started more than 40 years ago, had its own logic. Recognition of the value of eclectic and secession architecture marked the line beyond which contemporary architecture started. And, naturally, the border was crossed. This was first done by architecture researchers, and at present they must be followed by monument conservators. This is why protection of Modernist heritage becomes a rightful heritage preservation issue.

Awareness of the need to protect Modernist structures is widespread among conservators. It has become one of the most frequently discussed topics in Poland and elsewhere, which does not mean that the problem has already been solved. The analysis of publications and discussions related to protection of Modernism warrant the statement that no aspect that is relevant to conservation of Modernist heritage has been given sufficient consideration.

An uncompromising statement like this requires justification, of course. This can be achieved by referring to three problems inherent in the protection of any heritage group. These problems can be reduced to the following questions:

- 1.** Firstly: Is Modernist heritage worth protecting? Should the period that is so close to the present and has not been closed and summarised yet, and its evaluation is a source of controversies, be really a subject of preservation?
- 2.** Secondly: how to select Modernist buildings for protection? What criteria should be applied in selecting structures which should be protected?
- 3.** Thirdly: What principles should be observed in protecting Modern Architecture? Do the same rules apply to protection of Modernist heritage as to other historical buildings?

These three issues ought to be taken into consideration in order to create a holistic image of the problem, i.e. protection of Modernist heritage.

## **1. Is Modernist heritage worth protecting?**

The answer to this question may seem obvious. Contemporary conservation doctrine explicitly claims that there are no criteria that would exclude any element of the past from being treated as protected heritage. The age of a structure, its functions, circumstances of its erection, the material or form cannot be

1. The issues of protecting modern architecture discussed by conservators' circles was originated in Poland by a 1970 Poznań Conference (cf. *Problemy ochrony architektury najnowszej (1850-1939, "Biuletyn Muzealnictwa i Ochrony zabytków"*, vol. XXIX, Warsaw 1971).)

such a criterion. Thus, exclusion cannot apply to Modernism, which has been subject of systematic scientific research for a long time.

Acknowledgement by conservators of the value of Modern Architecture is actually nothing exceptional. In some countries the first monuments of Modernism were listed some half a century ago<sup>2</sup>. This is why formal grounds for Modernist heritage protection have become a general standard in the 21st century. Protection of this group of heritage is promoted and supported in numerous forms. For instance, an institution specialised in documenting and conservation of the Modern Movement (DOCOMOMO) has been operating since 1988. In 2002, the International day of Monuments and Sites was devoted to "Conserving Monuments of 20th-Century Heritage", and in 2005, a specialist International Scientific Committee of 20th-Century Heritage was established within ICOMOS.

If we take the number of officially protected Modernist sites as a measure of success, the results of these efforts are modest. The World Heritage List, which can be treated as representative for contemporary protection of heritage, shows this clearly in a global scale. Typological analysis of the List carried out recently (May 2003) showed that among 730 records only 12 were classified as 'modern heritage'<sup>3</sup>. Even more: the analysis of the so called "Tentative List", i.e. the sites nominated to be included in the List clearly shows that the situation is not going to change significantly in the nearest future<sup>4</sup>. Therefore "modern heritage" is in the group of of most 'under-represented' heritage in the World Heritage List<sup>5</sup>.

The problem looks similar in the scale of individual countries. Although Modernist heritage

is represented in national heritage registers, yet in most countries only few sites are listed, particularly when a lot of historical sites from earlier periods are registered. Even vernacular architecture or monuments of technology are better represented in the registers. Countries like Australia, where monuments of distant past are scarce, stand out against this background, and the most recent heritage is the core of protection<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, this situation is also reflected in the principles of conservation practice, which in Australia are adjusted to the specific nature of recent heritage, with great attention paid to local characteristics<sup>7</sup>.

There is a clear rift between declared appreciation of the value of modern heritage and its actual protection, and this makes us ask further questions. If there are no formal doubts about the legitimacy of modern heritage protection, there must be some deeper causes of the *status quo*. We could point to a few factors, characteristic of this group of heritage sites, which make their protection more difficult and less efficient.

First of all, there is the problem of identifying beyond any doubt what is to be protected. This lack of clarity refers to both, the time and the object.

In a narrow sense of the word, the term '*modern heritage*' refers to sites constructed approximately between 1920s and 1970s. This definition, however, refers only to the architectural and urban sites which could be called '*functionalist*' and were erected as an expression of a specific ideological programme. This is a current directly related to the Athens Charter, i.e. the works of architecture and urban planning that could be related to the ideas of superiority of function, sincerity of structure, internationality of style and housing sites.

The term '*modern heritage*', however, is also used in another, much wider sense. It means the total achievement created after expiry of original styles and Historicism in architecture. This approach covers the whole of the 20th and the close of the 19th centuries, when attempts to master and make use of the possibilities lying in new materials, particularly in iron and reinforced concrete, became the main issue, rather than

2. First Modernist structures in Germany were recognised as historical heritage in early 1960s, and then the number of protected structures and buildings consistently expanded (the housing district of *Siemensstadt* was recognised as historical heritage in 1961). Cf. Haspel J., *The Heritage of the Berlin Modern Style. Nomination of Housing Estates for Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List*, [in:] *The Soviet Heritage And European Modernism, Heritage & Risk. Special Edition 2006*. Berlin: Hendrik Bassler Verlag 2007, p. 135; the first Modernist structure in Finland was listed in 1974.

3. *Identification and Documentation of Modern Heritage*, "world Heritage Paper" No 5, WHC 2003, p. 4e.

4. *The World Heritage List. Filling the Gaps – an Action Plan for the Future*, ed.: Jukka Jokilehto et al., "Monuments and Sites", No XII, ICOMOS 2005.

5. The problem was explicitly stressed in the „Moscow Declaration on the Preservation of 20th Century Cultural Heritage" adopted in Moscow in 2006. The problem still exists, although as early as 1997 a report *The Modern Movement and the World Heritage* was published, in which most eminent works of modernism were identified; from this list the sites should be selected for listing on the WHL.

6. In 2009 a major conference „The Twentieth Century Heritage" is planned in Sydney. The conference is organised by ICOMOS in cooperation with numerous organisations for protecting modern heritage, such as DOCOMOMO, or Art Déco Society.

7. Cf.: *The Illustrated Burra Charter. Good Practice for Heritage Places*, Australia ICOMOS, Deakin University, 2004

the search for new stylistic forms<sup>8</sup>. In other words, the term "modern heritage" may also be a synonym of the "20th-century heritage". This time-wide understanding of Modernism is applied by the World Heritage Committee or by English Heritage<sup>9</sup>.

The difference of interpretation of the word "modern heritage" may bear much deeper consequences than one might think. Behind the duality of meaning there is the selective approach to the heritage of the past century. On the one hand it implies that we deal with all the heritage of the previous century, on the other however, it allows us to limit our protection to flagships of mainstream Modernism (in the very narrow sense of the term); thus, periods or phenomena, which for one reason or other are not valued or convenient, can fall outside our interest. For example, the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s is considered to be worthy of protection, while works of social realism are deprived of this right<sup>10</sup>. German social housing estates of the 1920s and early 1930s deserve to be protected, but Nazi architecture does not. The World Heritage Sites (WHS) list accepts Modernist reconstruction of Le Havre, but not historical forms of reconstruction in Gdańsk. Tel Aviv's "White City" was declared a World Heritage Site, while protection of other 1950s and 1960s housing estates is not even considered yet<sup>11</sup>.

It must be pointed out that such exclusions are not supported by analysis or research. The criteria for excluding certain periods and 20th-century architecture from the conservator's area

of interest are mainly of political, ideological and doctrinal nature.

It is political and ideological connotations of the period in question that complicate modern heritage protection.

Above all, Modernism still bears the burden of the associations with the ideology it was supposed to effect. New architectural and town planning forms were not accepted, and social effects Modernists had hoped for were not achieved. The ideological and social programme of the Modern Movement was rejected, and this rejection – although the attitude will probably change in future – influences the assessment of Modernist heritage.

The negative appraisal of Modernist programme somehow depreciates its achievements; as a result, even the most outstanding architectural works are underestimated. A significant example here can be Australia's iconic building, the Sydney Opera House: the decision whether or not to declare it a World Heritage Site took a dozen-or-so years to take (finally inscribed into the WHS list in 2007).

Numerous examples of the 20th-century heritage burdened with ideological associations can be found in the European transition countries. Common Polish examples here are Nowa Huta near Cracow and the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw: some developed areas of Nowa Huta gained the status of protected area only after years of discussions, while the Palace in Warsaw still evokes emotions and it has not been decided yet whether it should be conserved and if so – to what extent.

The protection of Nazi architecture poses equally complex problems. Nazism and fascism left behind numerous outstanding, monumental buildings, but their protection depends on their original functions and the reasons for their erection more than on anything else. Therefore, the protection of Italian and German heritage reflects today's differences in the perception of fascism in the two countries, although this determinant is far from being a factual assessment. This can be seen through the form of architecture as little dependent on ideology as sports grounds: the conservation of the survived sports structures erected in Rome during the Mussolini era is something quite obvious, while the conservation of the Berlin Olympic Stadium was disputed until a few years ago<sup>12</sup>.

8. P. Biegański noticed that in the period under discussion *all the elements that constitute a progressive engineering thinking should be treated as primary in architectural creativity*. Cf.: Biegański Piotr, *Potrzeba ochrony obiektów architektury czasów najnowszych*, [in:] *Problemy ochrony...*, op. Cit., p. 11

9. While working on the *World Heritage List: Filling the Gaps* there were 14 categories of properties marked off, one of them being Modern Heritage. All the properties created since the end of the 19th century are included in this category – cf. *Modern heritage: buildings, groups of buildings, works of art, towns, industrial properties (from late 19th century onwards)*, [in:] *The World Heritage List. Filling the Gaps – an Action Plan for the Future*, ICOMOS Monuments and Sites, XII, 2005 p. 33. Similar interpretation was suggested in the amended system of heritage protection in England, by introducing a category "architecture of the 20th century" – cf. Bowdler Roger, *New Ways of Working*, "Conservation Bulletin, English Heritage", No 52, 2006, p. 37.

10. E.g. cf. *Stalinistische Architektur unter Denkmalschutz?*, „Icomos Hefte des Deutschen Nationalkomitees", No XX, 1995; *Bildersturm in Osteuropa*, „Icomos Hefte des Deutschen Nationalkomitees", No XIII, 1994.

11. In Poland, an example of innovative urban development that should be under some kind of protection is the Juliusz Słowacki Housing Estate in Lublin designed by Oskar Hansen – see: Szmygin, B., Klimek, B., *Hansenowskie osiedle im. J. Słowackiego w Lublinie – dzieje budowy, współczesna wartość, propozycje zakresu ochrony*, "Scientific Bulletin of Chełm. Section of Technical Science", No 2/2007, pp. 1-12.

12. Cf: Casciato Maristella, *Sport and Leisure in Rome from the*

Therefore, this aspect of protecting 20th-century architectural heritage is burdened with negative criteria. This will probably continue for several decades to come, which means that conservators will have to learn how to work in these conditions in order not to lose the most valuable architectural pieces representing the “wrong” periods in history.

Another factor limiting a number of practical options of conservation of most recent heritage is the functional aspect. Modern Architecture, more than any other, was primarily functional: artistic, aesthetic, prestigious and symbolic values were less relevant<sup>13</sup>. Functionalism was decidedly a dominant (and often the only one) factor in creating contemporary architecture. It was functionality that determined the architectural forms, the plan, the structure, the materials, the fittings and the equipment of a building. Therefore, when after several decades one of these elements loses its basic (and only) function, the sense of its preservation becomes questionable. The more so, when the whole building’s functional concept becomes outdated, there is no reason why it should be maintained. This is the problem with the majority of 20th-century architecture.

An interesting example illustrating this problem can be the building of the National School of Music in Havana which was designed to suit acoustic requirements. Its designer thought that the requirements would be best fulfilled by a length of small rooms, therefore he designed a sinuous pavilion 300 m long, later commonly called “the worm”. There were several attempts to adapt the building to other functions – all of them unsuccessful. This is why, although regarded as an interesting piece of Modern Movement architecture, the building is quickly dilapidating. However, it was declared one of the 100 Most Endangered Sites by the World Monuments Watch.

A vast majority of modern architecture gives similar examples. Railway stations, shopping pavilions, sports facilities, residential buildings – they all were constructed specifically

for one and only optimum function, according to short-term standards, without any additional forms or functions, with no options for conversion or modernization. They were supposed to serve only one, specific, and consequently, short-lived function.

All these elements are a significant obstacle in the protection of most recent heritage. In practice, the conservator simply does not know how to cope with political connotations of a historical building or how to handle a structure erected to serve a specific function or social vision, now totally rejected. This exceeds his/her experience gained while working on more ancient historical buildings.

Probably, political connotations will be left aside when the generations for whom they are part of personal experiences are gone. On the other hand, the problem of functionality strictly identified with utility can be solved by an increasing number of such buildings. Obviously, in both cases the flow of time will be a favourable factor in solving the problem.

As for now, many problems have not even been verbalized yet. They are pushed beyond the scope of discussion. They do not become tasks to perform, but they make the idea of protecting most recent heritage questionable.

## **2. How to select Modernist buildings for protection?**

Obviously, the above-said problems have an effect on protection of most recent heritage. Among other things, they complicate a difficult issue of establishing criteria for appointing an object for protection.

It must be clearly said that no criteria for selecting 20th-century buildings have been worked out so far, which was proved by analyses carried out in 2000 within the Montreal Action Plan. The aim of the plan was to carry out global research in order to find out how protection, management and presentation of the twentieth-century heritage are performed<sup>14</sup>. In individual countries, the following questions were asked: Are there any specific criteria for the assessment of twentieth-century heritage? Are there any separate regulations concerning this kind of heritage? The answers to both questions were negative. This means that no specific criteria

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*Fascist Years to the Olympic Games* [in:] Sports-Sites-Culture. Historic Sports Grounds and Conservation, „Icomos Hefte des Deutschen Nationalkomitees“, No XXXVIII, 2002, pp. 29-36; Bernd Nicolai, *The Berlin Olympic Stadium. How to Deal with the First „Gesamtkunstwerk“ of the Third Reich Today?* [in:] Sports-Sites-Culture..., op. cit. pp. 37-38.

13. Obviously, this attitude is questioned in reference to the most outstanding Modernist works. Cf: Richards J.M., *An Introduction to Modern Architecture*, Penguin Books, Middlesex 1967, pp. 9-15.

14. Burke Sheridan, *The Twentieth-Century Heritage at Risk and the Role of ICOMOS in its Conservation*, [in:] *The Soviet Heritage and European Modernism, Heritage & Risk*, Munich: K.G. Saur Verlag, Special Edition 2006, pp. 17-18.

and no separate regulations are applied to define methods of coping with twentieth-century heritage.

In practice then, what conservators have is criteria applied in the classical analysis of historical buildings, i.e. who is the author, how original is the building, does it belong to a closed stylistic group, is it authentic, is it representative of (or unique for) a given trend, author or period, what is its ideological or functional programme and what are its non-material values? These criteria are applied to the assessment and selection of the objects for conservation in all traditional groups of heritage. However, the application of these criteria encounters significant difficulties when it comes to twentieth-century heritage.

First of all, the traditional criteria can be applied only after a longer period of time, because such distance makes it possible to resolve many doubts – so to speak – naturally. Some time must pass so that architectural historians can catalogue and classify the achievements of particular trends and creators. Only then can we analyse them, which can be done in the context of other creators and their works. Some time is needed to make international comparisons, to decide which works are precursory, introducing innovative values, and which are merely failed experiments. It takes time to find out which creations start new trends, which represent certain trends most adequately and which are the most outstanding of their epoch. It takes time to find out which innovative practical solutions – forms, spatial solutions, materials – really introduce new qualities. This element of assessment is particularly important as far as functional architecture is concerned. And last but not least, it takes time for the buildings to acquire implications, and for us to decide whether these implications are worth preserving. Summing up, it can be said that the flow of time is a necessary condition for the application of traditional heritage evaluation criteria.

However, it must be added here that there is one more aspect of Modern Architecture being so recent which hinders its protection: undoubtedly, we are all influenced by the stereotype of a historical monument – proper age, patina, archaic forms and functions, different materials, different aesthetics. Modernist architecture does not meet these conditions. To make things worse, it not only lacks patina but is unfashionable and outdated. It is neither old nor new. It is something in-between, suspended halfway between the

past and the present, more likely to be removed and replaced than retained or conserved. Naturally, such assessment is subjective and not supported by any scientific analysis, but it is a common opinion which influences conservators' evaluation, because they must seek public acceptance of their decisions.

Thus, the specificity of the twentieth-century architecture causes that traditional criteria do not seem to be applicable for its assessment. Actually, such opinions are shared by the DOCOMOMO and ICOMOS circles. Their experts agree that traditional criteria for selecting and conservation of outstanding and exceptional architectural works are not enough for the assessment of the trend, whose essential assumption was mass-production, mechanical reproduction, unification and utilitarianism. Therefore, the DOCOMOMO is planning to *establish criteria for evaluation and selection, and criteria for protection, which will offer revised tools for safeguarding the ordinary treasures of the 20th century*<sup>15</sup>. ICOMOS presents a similar approach. Sheridan Burke, Co-President of Scientific Committee on 20th Century Heritage states that one of the major objectives of the Committee is to develop *charters, guidelines and criteria* which would foster the protection of this patrimonial category<sup>16</sup>.

However, the problem has not been solved yet. The actions undertaken aim at extending the area of conservators' interest: school buildings, hospitals, gristmills, factories, power plants – are all new types of the 20th-century structures conservators got interested in<sup>17</sup>. Summing up the problem of criteria applied to 20th-century heritage from the conservation point of view, it must be said that more work and study is needed.

### **3. What rules should be applied in protection of Modern Movement heritage?**

The third important obstacle to protection of modern heritage is the question of conservation principles.

15. Casciato Maristella, *Modern Monuments and Heritage and Risk*, [in:] *The Soviet Heritage and European Modernism, Heritage & Risk*, Munich: K.G. Saur Verlag, Special Edition 2006, p. 23.

16. Burke Sheridan, *Twentieth-Century Heritage at Risk and the Role of ICOMOS in its Conservation*, op. cit. p. 20.

17. The same refers to Poland. The values of the most recent buildings are recognised more readily when they refer to monuments of technology. See, e.g. *Dzieła techniki – dobra kultury*, Januszewski St. (ed.), „Zabytki Przemysłu i Techniki w Polsce”, vol. 6, Wrocław 2002.

As with criteria for Modernism assessment, the essential question to resolve is: Should traditional conservation rules be applied to conservation of this heritage category?

It should be noted here that the conservation doctrine assumes all monuments to be equally valuable, which in turn results in universalism of conservation activities. In practice this means that all historical buildings should be maintained according to the same rules, the most important of which is to preserve the monument's authentic form and substance.

However, even without any deep analysis it can be noticed that these principles do not apply to modern buildings. This is so because of the mass scale of this architecture and – above all – its technological and functional characteristics, which make conservation of 20th century architecture so different and difficult.

Modern Movement buildings were designed to serve their modern functions. This modernity covered all the elements: new materials were used together with new technologies, new forms, scale and spatial solutions. Therefore it was experimental architecture in many respects.

Several dozen years later it turned out that the life span of modern buildings was much shorter than that of traditionally constructed ones. Research has shown that modern buildings require all the repairs – from fittings and equipment to major repair – within about half the time of more traditionally constructed buildings<sup>18</sup>.

A common problem is the quality of materials and workmanship. Many materials introduced in 20th-century buildings – concrete, plastics, metals, glass – were initially of poor quality, and after several dozen years their technical condition is bad. Moreover, some of them are now identified as hazardous to human health and natural environment.

Modern solutions like large, open rooms, glass partitions or concrete walls, constitute another serious problem, because they do not meet contemporary economic and functional standards.

Some Modernist functional and spatial solutions did not stand the test of time, either, e.g. large blocks of flats or housing estates.

According to traditional principles,

conservation should keep to the original form and materials used. Original materials should be preserved by means of conservation and supplementing. However, many of the materials used at the time are no longer produced, and there was no reason for working out techniques of their conservation. Because of rapid development of the building industry, worn-out or obsolete materials (and elements) tend to be replaced by more up-to-date ones, which totally agrees with the spirit of modernism.

It must be remembered that many materials and elements used in Modern Movement buildings were not intended to be distinctive. Prefabricated materials or concrete poured into formwork are not craft marked with the contractor's individual features. "Repeatability" and "replaceability" are intended features of modern architecture, therefore conservation of the original, historical materials is not so obvious. It seems acceptable and justifiable to replace original materials with new ones.

Therefore, the lack of full protection and conservation – in the traditional sense – of the 20th-century buildings seems justified. The problem is, however, that we do not know the limits to exceptions. Can the replacement of skylights of the library designed by Alvaro Alto with new ones – with different shape and material – still be called conservation? Is upgrading of bathroom fittings in a protected *Bauhaus* building acceptable or not?

Problems become particularly complex when it comes to industrial buildings and buildings with large cubic capacity.

In 1994, the German *Völklingen* steel plant was declared a World Heritage Site. This huge (200,000 m<sup>2</sup>) industrial complex was included in the List of Monuments in 1986, just a week before being closed down. It was decided that its preservation will cost less than its demolition. The complex is to be converted into "European Centre of Art and Industry Culture," which gives it an opportunity for re-use. However, it is difficult to imagine how conservation rules could be obeyed here. This is simply an example of treating heritage as a kind of stage design. Undoubtedly, the complex is worth preserving, but nobody knows what rules should be applied in this case.<sup>19</sup> And there are numerous large-space and industrial buildings which are important

18. Macdonald Susan, *20th-Century Heritage: Recognition, Protection and Practical Challenges*, [in:] *Heritage at Risk. ICOMOS World Report 2003/3 on Monuments and Sites in Danger*, ICOMOS, Munich: K.G. Verlag, 2003, p. 224.

19. Mendgen N., *Preservation and Re-use of the Blast Furnace Site – UNESCO World Heritage Site Völklingen Ironworks*, [in:] *The Soviet Heritage... op. cit.* pp. 119-123.

testimony of the 20th century.

To make things worse, there are also problems conservators have never dealt with before: there is an opportunity to complete the work of a living architect<sup>20</sup>. Such a problem occurred in Cuba, where restoration of five National Art Schools, regarded as outstanding modern buildings, has started. The buildings had never been completed, and now they are being restored with assistance from their original architects. This is a creative job, as no documentation has survived. But how should activities like this be assessed, given the whole theory of conservation?

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20. Elena Maria, Zequeira Martin, *The National Art Schools of Havana. Restoration of an Architectural Landmark*, [in:] *The Modern Movement in the Caribbean Islands*, „Docomomo”, No 33, September 2005, pp. 20-26.

There are no definite answers to all the questions asked. What can be stated for sure is that traditional conservation principles cannot be applied to 20th-century heritage, particularly in relation to authenticity of materials and workmanship<sup>21</sup>. However, this is too little of an indication to start conservation work.

One conclusion can be drawn to sum up the discussion above: protection of 20th-century heritage requires separate work at each of the three problems. This means that effective, systemic protection of this heritage group on a universal scale is not possible yet.

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21. The problem remained unsolved already while conserving Art Nouveau architecture. See e.g. Graf Ulrich, *Architectural Research and Documentation of Art Nouveau/Jugendstil buildings as a basic requirement of the preservation of cultural monuments*, „Newsletter Art Nouveau/Jugendstil”, No 2, 1988, pp. 8-9.

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