

PROTECTION AND REVIVAL OF

HISTORIC ENSEMBLES.

The problem of preserving an urban centre is complex. Norms cannot be established nor can principles.

First of all, it should be noted that whoever preserves a centre should try, paradoxically, to perpetuate an anachorism ; to protect within the real framework of a present-day city, a piece of a city and a slice from the past. Furthermore, he should do this with a contemporary outlook, and even as a forward step in progress.

Those who say that we oppose progress are completely mistaken. It is precisely because we are enamoured of progress that we try to stop it by fixing the clock of time at a moment long past.

What we try to preserve in an old city is not the physical, tangible element of the materials, as is done for individual monuments but that immaterial thing - atmosphere.

The great artist knows how to obtain immaterial effects and results while using tangible materials, coloured matter, or stone. Artists such as Vermeer of Delft or Velasquez succeed in painting an atmosphere ; Michelangelo makes marble speak.

In many old cities the construction materials produce the immaterial effect of evoking history and taking us back in time.

Unfortunately, absolutely pure historic and artistic urban surroundings are rare. For those that still exist it would be necessary take one of those dragons that the artists of the Middle Ages painted under St. George's horse and put it at the gate of the old

walls so that it would cut to pieces the rash architect who would dare touch them.

But centres of special interest, profaned by a few ill-matched modern buildings that spoil the atmosphere are numerous, at least in our country. Aside from the fact that, in my opinion, execution would be a kind death for the architect who has constructed them, I consider the presence of several incongruous buildings in a beautiful centre as not sufficient reason for considering it as lost and for abandoning it. We should take into account that present day buildings have a probable life-span of not more than seventy years, while an historic building lasts forever. A Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset has defined an historic monument as a thing "that has the supreme energy to survive", and a French poet has expressed the same idea in four admirably concise lines :

Tout passe. L'art robuste
Seul a l'éternité.
Le buste
Survit à la cité.

The bust, the historic building is what tends to survive. The city is the constant "becoming" of architecture which changes with the rhythm of successive generations.

The horrible modern building that we saw at Merida beside Trajan's Arch or the "skyscraper" in front of the cathedral in Plasencia will last seventy or one hundred years at the most. But Trajan's Arch and the cathedral in Plasencia will remain standing, not so much because of society's increasing respect for them, but because of their internal energy to survive.

Whoever undertakes the complex mission of preserving an historic-artistic centre, must, from a technical point of view, solve certain problems that are absolutely different. Among these problems, because I am obliged to be brief, I shall mention only the following :

- 1) The restoration of important buildings in itself.
- 2) The restoration of secondary buildings, of "semi-monuments", that do not present great interest by themselves, but acquire an interest in so far as they are integral parts of a centre.
- 3) The changing of dissimilar buildings which, at the cost of a small operation, can become creditable parts of the centre.
- 4) New buildings to be constructed in the historic centre.
- 5) Paving.
- 6) Immaterial factors of atmosphere.

I shall not speak of the great problem of the demolition of absolutely inadequate buildings or of that of reducing oversized volumes, since they are practically insoluble for us. However, I am convinced that they will not be insoluble for coming generations.

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The problem of the preservation and restoration of real monuments, of important monuments, such as a cathedral or a palace, is outside of our subject and therefore I shall not deal with it. The technique of restoring monuments, a technique founded essentially on the absolute respect of history of which the building is a distinguished witness, has its norms of which you are all aware.

But in centres problems arise that are different from those of the pure preservation of historic buildings ; the first is that of buildings that, in themselves, do not belong to the category of historic buildings ; buildings which, if found outside of certain surroundings, without having a framework or being part of a framework, could be destroyed without grave cultural damage, but which, because they are included in a centre have a value of the first order.

Concerning the question of secondary monuments, a question that is closely related to the one that we are treating, it must be said that during the last ten or twenty years the appreciation of the historic building, in general, as a cultural element, has gone up considerably on the scale of values. Consequently, the number of buildings ranked in the category of historic monument and considered as culturally untouchable, is much larger than it was formerly.

I cannot go more deeply into the causes of this elevating of the heritage of historic buildings - more especially of the urban heritage of historic buildings - among which are the phenomenon of urban concentration, the advent of a kind of universally uniform industrial architecture, and the general weakening in present-day society of the spiritual and human sense of life, against which it is necessary to fight with all the means at our disposal.

To return to the case of buildings which, although they do not have any notable value in themselves, acquire a value because they are part of a centre ; what we call semi-monuments. The critical philosophy of the preservation of historic buildings should be more tolerant in their regard than for real monuments. Many changes, whose object is to create a greater unity in the surroundings or to facilitate the revivification of the centre, changes that would be unlawful for real monuments, would be lawful for these

semi-monuments

In the case of a semi-monument, the transfer, stone by stone, to a more adequate site can be admitted for a justifying cause ; in the case of real monuments this would constitute an absolutely exceptional measure imposed by unavoidable necessity.

Let us now take up the problem of relatively modern buildings without any kind of interest, and that cause detriment to the centre. Unfortunately, it is almost always a question of buildings constructed during recent years by bad architects. These architects either did not know the land before drawing up their plan or were insensible to aesthetic values... or sometimes by some architect from the provinces convinced of his own genius but ignorant of the fact that the first virtue of genius in architecture is to adapt the building to its surroundings and site.

When the atmosphere is spoiled by the large size of a building the immediate solution of the problem is difficult. Let us hope that (or rather universal culture hopes, for it will not be in our life time) in one or two generations when the general level of culture will be higher, the instruments of town-planning more perfect, and "sky-scapers" will be old and out-moded, it will be possible to solve the problem.

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We now arrive, in this rapid review of the technical problems of preservation, at new buildings to be constructed entirely or almost entirely in old centres.

In every centre there are inevitably gaps to fill : buildings without interest that should be demolished, land that has as yet no construction on it and should have. The problem of a modern building in an old city is simply a problem of good architecture, but, doubtless, it is a very difficult problem.

The principle of contrast, that is to say of the completely modern building in respect to structure and materials, serving as a framework or element of contrast beside an historic building in pure centres, is not acceptable.

The effect of a modern style building, constructed in glass and steel and situated, for example, in the historic heart of the city of Caceres, would be disastrous, whatever its architectural quality might be. Thus its construction cannot be admitted.

But since a building constructed at the present day that would imitate the style of one or two centuries ago is not acceptable either, there is no other solution than that of a building the facade of which would be in harmony with the centre and which would be subject to the following principles.

I - Principle of the unity of height. The facade of the building cannot be greater than that of the other buildings of the centre.

II - Principle of the unity of materials. The facade of the building should not only be constructed with the same materials as those of the already-existing buildings in the centre, but they should be of the same kind and colour. If it is in stone, the stone should be the same; where buildings are of granite, limestone cannot be used. If brick is used it should be of the same colour.

The use of artificial stone that imitates the quality of the old is not only acceptable but commendable as a honourable detail, so that what is authentically old can be differentiated from what is modern.

III - Principle of the unity of roofing. Not only because aerial views are more important, but because unity of roofing in the silhouette of the city is one of the things that gives the most charm to the city seen from the outside.

IV - Principle of the constancy of proportion between empty spaces and occupied spaces.

V - Principle of constancy in the proportion of spaces.

For Spanish cities it is necessary to add another principle which is not applicable in other countries ; the principle of dominating horizon.

On these necessary foundations, along with the talent of a discreet architect animated by as modern a spirit as one would wish, the problem of the construction of new buildings in old centres is solved.

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I have set out, with the brevity imposed by the circumstances how one can act in the different cases that can arise to preserve an historical-artistic atmosphere both in regard to the old and new buildings that make it up, whether they have value as historic

buildings or not.

But there is another element which, besides the buildings, has a considerable influence on the atmosphere ; that is the pavement.

The unity of the buildings of a centre will lose much of their harmony and value if the streets are covered with asphalt or cement.

In the streets of old cities, at least in our country, only stone pavement is acceptable in any form or kind. Regular or irregular flag-stones, paving stones, pebbles etc. and their composition should be carefully studied. The surface of a square is an architectural problem at least as difficult as that of a building.

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Buildings and pavement constitute the material and plastic aspect of the atmosphere of cities.

But besides this material and tangible aspect, other immaterial elements have a decisive influence on the emotional impression produced by these cities and the cultural interest that they awaken ; for example, well proportioned nocturnal lighting and the silence resulting from the absence of automobile traffic.

The necessity of totally or almost totally suppressing this traffic - total suppression will be possible on certain streets or certain squares, but never in an entire district - is a necessity that we all feel. Up to now we have not faced this problem, maybe because we suspect that in a few years it will resolve itself. The day when traffic congestion in the central parts of the old city will have produced death by asphyxiation the preservation of the atmosphere of urban centres will have made a decisive step forward.

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