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Modern Monuments and Heritage at Risk

The paramount importance of this conference is clear to me, being an architect and architectural historian and the chair of Docomomo International as well. The concern at stake here is the fact that the modern heritage in Moscow is under serious threat and that we as an active community are committed to inspire cross-cultural collaboration to ensure that our modern architectural inheritance survives intact – or, in some cases, to ensure that it simply survives.

Modernity is a complex concept based on the evolution of diverse sciences and theories, which fully influenced 20th-century architecture. They form the background for innovative ideas which found articulation in an architectural language whose spirit and aesthetic expressions represent a strong asset for our intellectual heritage.

Prior to their status of heritage, modern buildings are recognized as being of cultural and historic significance holding a direct social, artistic and technological significance. Due to the needs and changing priorities of society at the time of their design, they tackled specific welfare issues, and as such encapsulated the values and priorities of their time. In terms of artistic significance, modern architecture also broke away from pre-determined styles and saw the best architects display new and masterful uses of space, light and volume. Technically, modern buildings often produced some of the most innovative and thoughtful responses to construction. In the best examples, each of these areas of significance overlap, producing an architecture which is not only outstanding, representing a change in social standards, but also a leap in technology and ambition, offering enduring inspiration to us all. The conservation of these buildings presents an immediate challenge throughout the world. Modern masterpieces are failing due to inherent design problems and changes in the economic and political contexts in which they now exist. Despite some excellent works in the field of restoration practice, increasing numbers of architects, owners and communities are struggling to conserve modern architecture.

For the past 20 years, Docomomo International has given resonance to these issues. Docomomo is an association whose statute is quite unique when compared to other international organizations involved in heritage conservation, such as the World Heritage Centre, ICOMOS, mAAN, Europa Nostra, to mention the most renowned. Docomomo's main focus is exclusively directed towards our most recent past, to what we refer to as modern heritage, opening the debate to what has also been labeled "young monuments". Docomomo members and chapters worldwide understand this specificity as a great challenge.

Within this arena, Docomomo represents a network that is composed of different actors, mainly preservationists, historians, architects and managers in the field of conservation. This means a galaxy with a variety of interests and a large differentiation of objectives, from conservation and restoration to historical research projects and watchdog actions.

In this perspective, Docomomo seeks an interdisciplinary discourse, which implies that we wish to offer a wide platform for debate because there are many cultural and political attitudes in the field of preservation and many histories of 20th-century architecture to be taken into account. Initially, the iconic buildings, the so-called monuments of the Western Modern Movement, were under scrutiny. The ambition of Docomomo members was to create a group of experts who could develop strategies and know-how for safeguarding modern buildings under threat. Therefore, the disciplinary practice of conservation design was the main concern. I do believe that those early attempts to look at modern buildings under a different perspective, which may only be developed through the implementation of design processes of good practice, gave rise to a new awareness of the cause of modern heritage at national and international levels alike.

By the late 1980s, architects and historians found themselves in the felicitous conjuncture of an intellectual appraisal of the legacy and future of modernism. The discourse had developed out of the partisan history of the modern movement into a more nuanced understanding of the dangers of being modern, if a more general public awareness could not be raised. An appraisal of the aesthetic language of the iconic modern movement buildings, and of the technical innovations they embodied, contributed to a re-thinking of the potentialities embedded in the modern heritage discourse. Within this revision of the architectural manifestations of modernist idioms, Docomomo has made a manifest plea for a wider definition of modernity, for a reconsideration of the criteria to be applied to what could become modern heritage, for the hybridization between western and non-western cultures, for the importance of vernacular and local expressions, for the recognition of national identities. In this perspective, the modern movement has extended its borders to become a cultural attitude, thanks to which architecture, town planning, landscape and environmental concerns grew into a wider dimension.

If this is the frame for a re-definition of the essence of modernity, what does modern heritage in architecture mean? The new definition I have been trying to elucidate fully encompasses the multiple expressions of the modern

movement in architecture, as well as revealing the difficulties involved in the understanding of its patrimonial values, and therefore the need for its protection.

Another issue is that 20th-century architecture, whose essential feature was mass production through mechanical reproduction, reached different strata of our society in very diverse ways, which implies that a selection for conservation must be introduced. We will not be so naïve as to think that the entire built environment can be safeguarded and protected. When working with historic buildings, the philosophy of the conservation rationale is clear, focusing on the surviving physical fabric as the subject of primary value and interest. The problems of modern buildings, however, are more complex. Then too there is not the same level of public empathy for the conservation of modern buildings, because many people have strong prejudices against modern architecture.

I do believe that we need to distinguish at least two approaches to the question of conservation attitudes in terms of criteria for selection. The criteria of uniqueness and historical representativeness generally create consensus concerning the safeguarding of masterpieces and recognized monuments, because these are, according to the etymology of the word “monument”, memory holders. In such cases, the agreement and support from national legislators and the community is unquestionable. This policy will encourage modern monuments to speak for themselves.

But the task of Docomomo is to reconsider this principle and to foster other criteria as well, and to allow other modern heritages to come under scrutiny. This new policy for listing modern heritage will include buildings and artifacts that usually fall out of the more traditional grid of patrimonial categories. This is why Docomomo is in the process of listing the so-called “ordinary” heritage that represents *de facto* the other side of the same coin, that of the otherness of modernity. Docomomo Registers search for a more differentiated recording of such buildings, as equally representative of the cultural, social and economic mutations that occurred during the 20th century. More than simply defining better the modern heritage, what is at stake is the urgent need to envision a new notion of patrimonial value at the international level. This will allow Docomomo, among other actors, to establish criteria of evaluation and selection, and criteria for pro-

tection, which will offer revised tools for safeguarding the ordinary treasures of 20th-century architecture.

The centrifugal concept of the cultural landscape shows that a new model of appreciation of modern heritage must be developed, based on an anti-monumental approach, more inclusive of the traditional and ordinary, of the anthropological and gender-based dimensions, of the material witnesses of different global cultures. This new dimension of cultural heritage in the modern environment implies a capacity for historical abstractions in articulating programmatic values. It implies choices representing values that are open to revision as time progresses. This set of issues was largely absent from the initial debate undertaken within Docomomo in the early 1990s when the cause of modern heritage was first given attention.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Docomomo aims at fostering complex approaches through the strengthening of international exchanges. Preservation is not positioned on the other side of the barricade, on the side of those fighting modernization or innovation. Any cultural investment which deals with modernity recognizes heritage as a multifaceted result of a long history. To paraphrase Adolf Loos: Heritage is more congenial with an ancient truth than with the lie that accompanied the fiction of modernism.

In conclusion, I wish to recall the participation of Docomomo Russia in Docomomo Registers. The book published in 2000 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Brazil’s modern capital at the 6th Docomomo conference included two sections dedicated to Russia, namely West (Moscow and St. Petersburg) and East (Ekaterinburg and Novosibirsk). With the collaboration of the late Catherine Cooke, Russian scholars listed widely published masterpieces and little known examples of modern architecture in Soviet cities. The buildings represent the works both of different trends and the range of socially innovative building types pioneered in those cities. In retrospect the selection proposed by the Russian chapter fully complemented the *raison d’être* of that kaleidoscopic exchange characterizing the thirty-six chapters which then contributed to Docomomo Registers. Together with the extensive work produced for this conference and the most recent literature on the Russian avant-garde, I believe that the field is ripe for a serious move towards preservation of Russia’s modern heritage.