

# Summarise and Evaluate the Key Developments of Historical Building Conservation in Western Europe: Past, Present and Future

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**Abstract:** This paper will focus on the conservation methods of historical building in Western Europe. In the historical background, I will go on to demonstrate mainly conservation theories and critical person in this field and then I will discuss three types of dominating conservation policies by Western Europe governments in recent decades. According to the above policies, consequently, I will attempt to speculate the prospect of historical building protective trends in the near future.

**Keywords:** Conservation; Restoration; Historical Buildings

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## Introduction

In recent years, the study of how to properly dispose the relationship between the old and new buildings has enabled the public to weigh the historical building conservation and how to protect the historical building has become a hot topic. The public have been increasingly aware of the issue of the demolition and redevelopment of historical buildings.

## Historical Background

In the late 18th century, the principle of protection of historic buildings had first been articulated. Since the French Revolution, all the ancient heritage had gained unprecedented attention. During the Napoleonic era when the classical style of Ancient Rome was regarded as the main objective of conservation and restoration, all the heritage were classified according to national assessment, including monuments of architecture and oil paintings. This approach influenced many other countries and was written into the relevant protection policy documents (Giles,1979). Moreover, during the Romantic period, in the England Gothic buildings and cathedral restoration project an Architect: James Essex appeared, who was the first architect regarding the medieval architecture as precious heritage. He repaired most of the buildings in the University of Cambridge and the cathedrals, such as Avery Cathedral and Lincoln Cathedral. He proposed that buildings would revert back to the state of their previous builders.

In the 1840s, there was a debate about heritage conservation. A number of architect thought it should be treated conservatively, while others thought it should be restored in a full range. Finally, the Stylistic Restoration ended this controversy (Braun,1953). Jokilehto (1999) further emphasizes that, at that time, because the buildings were rarely completed in the same period, a number of old buildings have been transformed due to different styles of architecture in different periods. Therefore, an architect needed to be familiar with the precise style of his restoration work and master the requirements of different characteristics and features of different genres, so that he could make accurate segmentations of the repair work. This repair method has become the most protective and widely accepted conservation method for historical building maintenance.

According to Riegl (1903), he had published a research report named as “Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen, seine Entstehung” (cited in Jokilehto,1999, p.301). In this research report, he firstly reviewed the development of historical building restoration principles. Then the values and ideas associated with modern conservation has been defined. The historical monuments were divided into two categories. One was artificial structures which were erected for a specific purpose. It included plenty of historical values, memorial values and temporal values. The second one was historical buildings which were consisted of art and history. That means those structures mainly in order to satisfy the practical and ideal demands of the times. It contained functional values, aesthetic values and additional values (Charles,1978).

From 1939 to 1945, lots of historical buildings were destroyed during the World WarII. For example, 15% historical buildings which were recorded in the protective list had been destroyed in France. A large amount of old cities has been damaged such as London, Florence,

Berlin. Due to the situation most countries have realised the importance of stimulating international cooperation.

## **Recent and Current Developments**

For historical building conservation, many conservation solutions have appeared in the western countries in recent decades. Although the conservation methods are diversified, the standpoints still can be classified in three categories.

One is to rebuild the historical building completely. This is the preferred alternative as an inheritance to the Stylistic Restoration in the last century, such as Saint Malo in France (Jokilehto,1999). Moreover, such an approach was also used in handling the relationship between the old and new buildings by the French government. In order to protect the integrity of the old town, the French government established a new district called La Defense in the western historical district. The government implemented the protection update method that the old and new towns would be completely separated. This way is the most intuitive method to restore old cities, but it also involves the largest quantities of protective work and it will lead to a high level of expenditure. The majority of residents of Paris work at La Defense in Paris during the day, but they still live in the old town. The main reason is that such a completely separation method results in no connection and communication between the old and new city. The artistic and cultural values of historical buildings and modern technology are not in harmony, making La Defense a dead city at night.

By contrast, a few governments choose to establish a new structure of modern form in the ruins. For instance, the St. Paul Cathedral in London used this way of conservation to build a modern office building in the 1990s and received severe criticism. For this situation, the governments believe that causing economical and developmental purpose, the modern building is the necessary part of city development. They also state that the expenditure of conservations is a high level.

Consequently, both of these two methods were extreme. The former overemphasizes the artistic values of historical buildings and the latter neglects the heritage of historical memory. Meanwhile, there are international organizations such as NPS Group that focusing on surveying and maintenance, claiming that the historical building conservation should be combined with the possibility of modern practical function (Baharuddin et al,2014). Thus several eclectic solutions appeared at present among which is the displacement function of the historical buildings' interior space. For example, the Spanish government recently reconstructed the Spain Colosseum which can be regarded as the toughest historical reconstruction project in Spain. Fortunately, it has innovated history building renovation. Since the government has legislated to abolish the bullfight, the Spain Colosseum is designed to become a commercial shopping centre. Historical facades are preserved entirely, however the interior space has been intactly modernized. It might be a necessary developmental trend of historical building conservation in the future.

## **Future Directions**

As science and technology such as 3D laser scanning of conservation play a role in restoration and the government policies on protection constantly update, it is difficult to predict the future trends of conservation (Barton,2009). Historic buildings would most probably be completely subverted into a concept in front of public.

For the historic buildings which have witnessed important historical events as landmarks, such as monuments, political centres, palaces, churches, the conservation might be continued with the Stylistic Restoration method, according to the characteristic of styles to restore the original design of buildings. Whether in Western Europe or around the world, this approach is the mainstream (Bridgwood,2009). The accordance with the construction reinstatement is not only to retain national tradition and history, but to convey national strength in a more effective way.

For historical buildings with functional transformation, the implementation of the interior space substitution principle would become an inevitable trend. For example, Harvard Art Museums Renovation and Expansion is an outstanding case of internal historical transformation. This way of transforming the interior of historical buildings would become the mainstream of protection in the future. The displacement space of modern design it not only makes the visit line inside the museum more rational, it can accommodate more exhibits as well.

For severely damaged houses, the principle of recycle of historical material is a new trend. That means retaining the old components of the building such as bricks, tiles, beams, columns and reusing them in the new construction. This approach can be adopted as a modern ar-

chitectural technique to express the historical elements which makes modern architecture contain more symbols of history and also is able to make a mark of history in a new form.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to summarise the principle of historical building conservation in Western Europe during different periods, in order to investigate the outstanding conservation methods of preservation projects and make speculations of the future direction of historical buildings. Because of the diversity of historical buildings, three conservation trends respectively the Stylistic Restoration, functional transformation and recycle of historical material may appear within 30 years.

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