

# Between Heritage and Innovation: The Delicate Balance with the Existing Heritage in Architectural Design

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## Abstract

When an architect embarks on a project, one of the central challenges they encounter revolves around how to engage with preexisting elements. Whether the canvas is a historic building, a heritage site, or an already-standing structure, the existing heritage can be viewed as both an opportunity and a constraint. This duality prompts intricate questions concerning the architect's role in balancing preservation with creation. In this regard, does the existing context serve as a valuable opportunity that enhances architectural innovation, or does it present a vexing limitation that stifles creativity? Can we simplify this complex matter into a binary judgment of either a beneficial opportunity or an inhibiting constraint? How can we broaden our perspective and understanding of this subject so it transcends a simplistic dichotomy? And what relationship should the new architecture maintain with the existing, ingrained heritage?

**Keywords:** Heritage; Authenticity; Renewal; Innovation; Dichotomy.

## 1. Introduction

At the core of every architect's creative process lies a fundamental challenge, a complex web where the legacy of the past and the ambitions of the present intertwine. When an architect considers a new project, an essential question inevitably arises: How to apprehend and integrate the existing heritage? Whether it is a building steeped in history, a site imbued with cultural significance, or simply an already-standing structure, this element presents itself as both an opportunity and an obstacle. The interplay between preservation and innovation then unfolds, presenting architects with an intricate dilemma as they navigate this delicate terrain. Should we consider the existing heritage as a precious source, a muse that enriches the foundations of architectural design? Or rather as a frustrating limit, threatening the growth of creativity and innovation? At the heart of this reflection lies the quest for the ideal relationship to maintain with what already exists, thus determining the path to follow in the search for a harmonious balance between heritage and vision for the future.

## 2. Literature review

To better understand this matter, it is important to go back to the 19th century and mention the theories of Viollet-le-Duc, in favor of reinvention, as well as John Ruskin, a theorist firmly opposed to restoration, and Camillo Boito, who chose a median position (Boito, et al; 2000).. Then we will see other approaches concerning the restoration of heritage in the 20th century and in the contemporary era.

Viollet-le-Duc, develops a bold thesis of reinvention according to which restoring a building implies bringing it back to a complete state that may never have existed at a given time. This radical idea is accompanied by several conditions: the restoration must be based on scientific evidence such as photographs and archaeological studies, excluding any modification that contradicts these statements. The thesis applies to the appearance and structure of the building, preserving old modifications unless they endanger the stability, conservation, or historical value of the building.

Ruskin opposes reinvention and offers a new artistic perspective. He embodies the romantic theories of the 19th century and severely criticizes the restoration, which he considers hypocritical. According to him, restoration is a profound destruction of a building. For the Romantics, a monument should be maintained discreetly, but left in ruins when its time has come, for ruin is seen as the ultimate and most inspiring stage of monumental expression.

Ruskin and his supporters advocate an archaeological approach and respect for the original building, even in its ruined state. They find an aesthetic harmony in this authentic truth. According to them, the work of art finds its meaning in its authenticity.

Despite his admiration for Viollet-Le-Duc, Boito questions the principle of "rehabilitation". On the contrary, it privileges the respect of the formal and historical values of the monuments while preserving their distinctive character. In 1880, two opposing visions of restoration emerged almost simultaneously, carried by Lucas Beltrami and Camille Boito.

Beltrami's vision considers that the restorer must also be a historian, relying on documentary evidence for his interventions. Boito, on the other hand, rejects romantic and historical conceptions of restoration, advocating conservation instead. For him, respect for monuments is essential, and authenticity must be preserved by giving priority to consolidation. These principles were not recognized until 1931 when they were adopted by the Athens conference.

In his book "Civilization and Its Discontents", Sigmund Freud uses the example of the development of the city of Rome to illustrate the concept of the preservation of the past in psychic life. It contrasts two notions of the city: one in perpetual evolution and one that juxtaposes all the layers of its history. This distinction raises a reflection on the notions of renewal and conservation in urban planning (Freud; 2015).

In his article "Continuing History through Architecture", Jean-Marie Duthilleul explains that architecture is part of historical continuity and responds to the need of time. It composes the space according to the era and its inhabitants, accumulating, transforming, and enriching the history of the place (Duthilleul; 2009)..

He specifies that each intervention transforms a site, and architecture must accept this reality and humbly contribute to the history of society.

In our contemporary era, some like Rem Koolhaas, consider the existing and the past as a constraint that prevents us from evolving: "The generic city is the city liberated from the captivity of centre, from the straitjacket of identity. The generic city breaks with the destructive cycle of dependence: it is nothing but a reflection of present need and present ability. It is the city without history." It is big enough for everybody. It is easy. It does not need maintenance. If it gets too small, it just expands. If it gets old, it just self-destructs and renews." (Koolhaas; 1995).

### 3. Urban Palimpsests: When Architecture Writes the History of Past and Present

At the heart of each city, a complex story is woven, witness to the incessant march of time and of the generations that have contributed to shaping its identity (Aziz Amen, 2017; Aziz Amen & Nia, 2018; Song & Selim, 2022)

. Cities have always been formed by superpositions and juxtapositions of layers, thus creating what could be called urban palimpsests, parchments on which are inscribed the successive marks of the past and the present. These palimpsests are time capsules that capture and express the evolving essence of each place. They constitute both material and symbolic testimonies of the history and evolution of human societies.

Within these interlocking strata, each era has the opportunity to leave its mark, to write its own history in the fabric of streets and buildings. This ability to speak, act, and shape the built environment gives each layer uniqueness and relevance to the overall city narrative. Architecture, in particular, assumes a central role in this narrative, as it develops in harmony with the layers that preceded it. Each new addition becomes a visual conversation between the past and present.

An illustrative example of this idea can be found in Lucca, where current constructions rise above ancient Roman amphitheatres, symbols of spontaneous reuse of what already exists (Fig. 1). Likewise, emblematic monuments such as the Palace of Versailles and the Louvre in Paris embody the overlapping of eras, displaying the successive transformations and architectural additions that have shaped their identity over time. Rather than erasing or overshadowing the past, these transformations enrich the heritage of these sites, offering visitors a multifaceted glimpse into history. Each architectural intervention becomes a chapter in the ongoing saga of the city, inviting viewers to traverse through different epochs and connect with various historical moments.



**Figure 1:** Piazza "Dell Anfiteatro" in Lucca built on the ruins of an ancient Roman amphitheater.  
(Source <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/piazza-dell-anfiteatro> )

The constraints imposed by the existing are so many opportunities to push back the limits of creativity and invent unique solutions. Architects are offered a playground where they can marry history and innovation, creating architectural compositions that establish a dialogue between heritage and modernity. Indeed, the interplay between old and new, past and present, is not merely a dichotomy but a symbiotic relationship that enriches the urban landscape. Each new addition becomes a visual testament to the city's dynamic evolution, weaving together disparate threads of history into a cohesive narrative. As such, the built environment becomes a living repository of collective memory, where the stories of the past intersect with the realities of the present, shaping our understanding of urban identity and heritage.

In short, urban planning and architecture are constantly rewriting narratives, thrilling stories where layers of the past and elements of the present mingle to form urban fabrics of fascinating complexity. Urban palimpsests offer a dynamic view of human evolution and the ability of each generation to shape the built environment in harmony with echoes of the past.

By preserving the existing heritage, a fundamental question arises that of authenticity. Authenticity, understood as the sum of the historically attested substantial characteristics, ranging from the original state to the current situation resulting from multiple transformations over time, constitutes a crucial notion in architectural preservation (Krakow Charter; 2000).. However, this complex notion was brought to light in an acute way after the fire of “Notre Dame de Paris”, giving rise to debates over its reconstruction. The question that emerged was: Is it authentic to reconstruct the spire identically, using the same period materials, with the aim of pretending that the fire of 2019 had ever taken place? The tension between the rigorous preservation of the past and the acceptance of contemporary events became evident.

The reconstruction of “Notre Dame de Paris” gave rise to a complex dilemma, illustrating the various conceptions of authenticity that coexist in architectural preservation (Van Duijine; 2021). On the one hand, there is the approach that seeks to erase all traces of temporal disturbance by restoring the building to its former form, almost as if the fire had never happened. This approach raises profound questions about the meaning of authenticity: should we preserve only the external appearance of a building, or its history and the marks of its evolution over time?

On the other hand, some believe that authenticity should be understood in a broader sense, incorporating not only the material substance of the building but also the events that marked its existence (Poulot; 2019).. Rebuilding by integrating contemporary elements could be seen as an expression of the authenticity of a given era, thus inscribing recent history in the chronicle of the building. In doing so, we accept that the history of a building can be composite, made up of moments of glory and tragedy, creation, and destruction (Fig. 2).

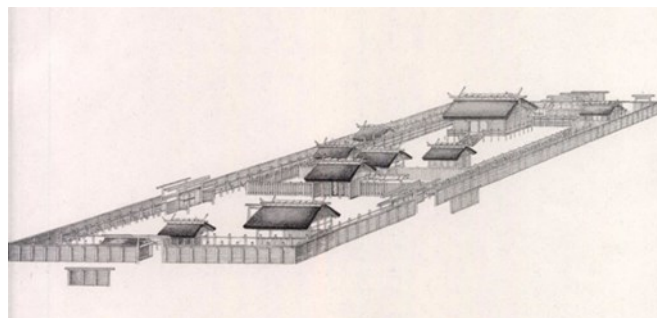


**Figure 2:** Some of the ideas for the reconstruction of “Notre Dame de Paris”: (1) restoring the former form building, (2) A spire made from bright spotlights, (3) A proposal of a glass spire`

(Source: [https://www.sciencesetavenir.fr/archeo-paleo/patrimoine/en-images-les-projets-de-reconstruction-de-notre-dame-de-paris\\_133484](https://www.sciencesetavenir.fr/archeo-paleo/patrimoine/en-images-les-projets-de-reconstruction-de-notre-dame-de-paris_133484) )

The “Notre Dame de Paris” fire therefore reflects a fundamental tension between the desire to preserve heritage and the need to accept change. The notion of authenticity is at the heart of this tension, forcing us to question the way in which significant events, even those that could seem destructive, can be integrated into the continuity of architectural history. Ultimately, acknowledging and accepting events as they happened could be another way to honor authenticity, recognizing that a building's story is woven with multiple threads, some of which are unexpected and tragic, but nonetheless part of the story.

In the end, the question of what exists cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy between opportunity and constraint, especially since this question has been approached and dealt with in various ways across cultures and civilizations. Recognizing this variety of perspectives can only strengthen our reflections by pushing us to reconsider this duality. In this regard, Japan's unique approach to the existing presents itself as a fascinating example to deepen our reflection on this subject. The example of Japan, in particular the exemplary case of the Ise Shrine (Adams; 1998), highlights the importance of continuity and transmission in the preservation of built heritage (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3:** Ise Japanese shrine torn down and rebuilt every 20 years.

(Source: Hvass SM. Ise: Japan's Ise Shrines, Ancient Yet New. Kunstakademiets Arkitektskole; 1999).

The Japanese approach differs from that of many other cultures in that it embraces the notion of change and renewal as intrinsic elements of preservation. At the heart of this approach is periodic reconstruction: old buildings are regularly dismantled and rebuilt, using inherited traditional techniques, to serve as models for new constructions. This practice emphasizes the value of authenticity passed down through the generations and helps preserve the essence and meaning of heritage.

The Japanese approach invites a fundamental change of perspective regarding the preservation of architectural heritage. Instead of freezing buildings in the past, periodic reconstruction maintains a living connection with traditions while adapting to the needs and changes of society. This dynamic vision of preservation is based on the idea that authenticity is not only anchored in the original materials but also in the continuous transmission of knowledge and skills.

As a result, this leads us to rethink our own approach to ancient monuments. Rather than freezing them in a fixed state, we could envision evolutionary and adaptive practices that secure their essence while integrating them into the ever-changing context. It is a question of finding a subtle balance between the conservation of the past and the adaptation to the present, thus ensuring the sustainability of knowledge and traditions.

#### 4. Conclusions

Reflecting upon the diverse approaches of various cultures, it becomes evident that there is no definitive or singular path to addressing our existing heritage. Each culture brings its own unique perspective to the table, enriching the discourse surrounding heritage preservation and architectural innovation. This diversity of perspectives stimulates a dialogue that is not only important but absolutely necessary, particularly in the context of our current era of global warming and the significant environmental impact associated with new constructions.

In an age where the environmental consequences of human activity are increasingly apparent, the role of architecture in sustainable development has become paramount. The choices we make in designing and constructing buildings have far-reaching implications for the planet, influencing energy consumption, resource depletion, and carbon emissions. As such, it is imperative that we draw upon a wide range of cultural insights and methodologies to inform our approach to urban development and heritage conservation.

Moreover, as available space for new developments becomes increasingly scarce, the need to repurpose and adapt existing structures becomes ever more pressing. Cultures around the world offer valuable lessons in adaptive reuse, demonstrating how historical buildings can be transformed to meet the needs of contemporary society while preserving their cultural and architectural significance.

By embracing the diverse approaches of different cultures, we not only broaden our understanding of heritage conservation but also cultivate a more inclusive and sustainable approach to urban development. This interdisciplinary exchange of ideas fosters innovation and resilience, empowering communities to address the complex challenges of the 21st century while honoring the legacies of the past. As we navigate the complexities of our rapidly changing world, the collective wisdom of diverse cultures serves as a guiding light, illuminating pathways towards a more harmonious relationship between humanity and the built environment.

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#### Conflict of Interests

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