

## The possibility of abstinence

We live in a moment of extreme fascination with the past.

In his book “Retromania, pop culture’s addiction to his own past,” music critic Simon Reynolds investigates the fixation of the music industry with going retro, through remakes, sequels, re-enactments, mash-ups, and so on. He argues that there has never been “a society so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its recent past” and that generally, the current moment is one of cultural reminiscence. “Is nostalgia stopping our culture’s ability to surge forward, or are we nostalgic precisely because our culture has stopped moving forward and so we inevitably look back to more momentous and dynamic times?” By extension, the same phenomenon seems to permeate all aspects of western cultural production, from contemporary art to cinema, fashion, product design, etc. and obviously also architecture.

The implications of a nostalgic surrender to the past as opposed to a proactive relationship with history are deep. Svetlana Boym investigates this opposition in *The Future of Nostalgia*: “At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time - the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.”

The consequences for our practice of an increasing but nostalgic attention to the past are huge and potentially devastating: a growing resistance in accepting change and modernization as an inevitable evolution; philological restorations focused on a literal reconstruction of the past; preemptive norms forcing new projects to look like old ones, generating an undefined soup of past and present “authenticities.”

At the Venice Architectural Biennale of 2010, our office presented a body of work focused on our persistent preoccupation with preservation and with the past. The exhibition was symbolically named Cronocaos. It had the ambition to revitalize among architects the debate around preservation as a global and contradicting phenomenon with untheorised implications for architecture and beyond.

It showed the recent but exponential increase of scale and action of the “global task force of preservation to rescue larger and larger portions of our planet embedded in equally larger and larger areas of accelerated development”; the inability of the current moment to negotiate the coexistence of radical change and radical stasis; the absence of tools in the arsenal of preservation to deal and manage its effects, or how to keep the past “alive”; our growing fascination with the past and the “authentic”, not as a historical and objective category, but rather a nostalgic, reengineered version of it; preservation’s preference towards certain authenticities as opposed to politically uncomfortable ones, which are terminated even if historically relevant; the political implications of preservation as a tool for economic development, subject to political correctness more than to cultural concerns; the focus on preserving the exceptional and the lack of ideas for preserving the generic; the possibility of demolition as a necessary and opposite theory to preservation...

In tandem with our theoretical speculations, the exhibition also featured 27 OMA projects never “presented before as a body of work concerned with time and history”. Spanning across more than 30 years of practice, they showed OMA’s latent yet undeclared interest in preservation, highlighting 27 architectural concepts of how OMA dealt with the existing, in different historical, cultural and environmental contexts around the world.

Far from declaring any dogma, Cronocaos had the ambition to raise questions, highlighting contradictions and patterns, while implicitly recognizing the impossibility of a global single theory for preservation.

It is not a coincidence that Cronocaos happened at the climax of our theoretical interest in the subject and of our active involvement in practice through three key and very different projects, started more or less at the same time: Fondazione Prada in Milan, Il Fondaco dei Tedeschi in Venice, and the Garage Center for Contemporary Art in Moscow.

In Milan, Fondazione Prada occupies the spaces of a former 19th century distillery. Crafted as a catalogue of curatorial techniques and display strategies, the project is conceived as a rich repertoire of spaces for the arts, ranging in scale and character. Three simple new architectural interventions were added to the existing structures to complement the catalogue of museum spaces: a large open plan museum hall with a long beam gallery space on top, and a tower of stacked floors with incrementally increasing heights. Almost invisible from the outside, the project works as a continuous sequence of indoor/outdoor spaces, where old and new meet dynamically, hanging in balance in a state of permanent interaction. Two conditions that are usually kept separate here confront each other, offering an ensemble of fragments that will not congeal into a single image, or allow any part to dominate the others. While walking through the new complex, you are confronted with a collection of preservation techniques – from bare re-functionalization to the careful introduction of new volumes, from a verbatim reconstruction of a demolished building to the simple application of one layer of coating to inject new life into the preexisting. Far from any fetishist attachment to the existing, old and new seamlessly work together and sometimes are actually merged, to the point that one cannot say that Fondazione is either a preservation project or a new architecture, but rather a curated continuum of both.

In Venice we faced the challenge of transforming a former 16th century German trading warehouse (which became an 18th century customs office, then a 1930s post office) into a contemporary department store. Almost entirely reconstructed with modern concrete technology during the fascist regime, il Fondaco dei Tedeschi is a historical palimpsest of modern substance, its preservation spanning five centuries of construction techniques. Regardless of the history of its adaptations and the objective lack of authenticity of its structure, its legal status of “monument” places it today under a severe regime of preservation, forbidding almost any change. Dealing with it meant facing this paradox. After years of creative negotiation with the city authorities, national heritage institutions and with local groups of defensive citizens, the project is now materializing. It is based on a finite number of local interventions and vertical distribution devices culminating in a new roof terrace space. Each intervention is conceived as a brutal excavation through the existing mass, liberating new perspectives and unveiling the real substance of the building to its visitors. With an almost forensic attitude, each new component serves as a way to show the stratification of materials and construction techniques. The preservation of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi is the history of its change: it avoids nostalgic reconstructions of the past and it demystifies the “sacred” image of the historical building revealing its authentic brutality.

In Moscow the transformation of a soviet café’ into a contemporary art museum has offered the opportunity to experiment on the preservation of a generic modernist building. The original structure has been intentionally left bruised and repaired with minimal intervention, unveiling original tiles, brickworks, mosaics and exposing the

generosity of Soviet architecture. The focus here is the preservation of the history of a the building, and decay as part of that history; the new façade – translucent layers of polycarbonate panels containing all technical arteries – acts as an intelligent shrine around a concrete ruin. Almost as in cases of “unintentional preservation” – ruins of Pompeii after the eruption of Vesuvius, abandoned Chernobyl or Fukushima after the nuclear accidents – at Garage, we preserved the found condition, keeping the existing building as an artifact, and added new elements to make it perform as a contemporary museum space. There is no “political” selection of what to preserve, but rather the intention to freeze a moment in history.

It might seem strange for a big architectural office to develop an obsession for preservation. Normally challenged by the expectations – and the burden – of delivering the next exceptional building, the idea to shift the focus to a more subtle understanding of context and to a more delicate presence is a big release.

Less obsessed with the need to affect the skyline of cities, the attention to preservation and more generally to the reuse of existing urban fabrics challenges architects with a different set of questions which are less focused on form and more on program, histories, systems, technology, materials, etc. The implication is simple: a radical shift from the egocentric and iconic to the invisible and contextual.

By doing this, preservation is a political act. It triggers city planners, developers, architects and contractors to consider alternative models of operations, investing in the future of cities from their own past, reusing existing buildings as opposed to building new ones. Preservation can be an equally if not more efficient form of urban modernization and growth, avoiding inconsiderate accumulations of new buildings, subject to the fluctuations of the modern market and often left vacant before even coming into life.

In its ultimate manifestation and when the situation requires it, preservation can even shake the foundations of architectural practice, introducing the possibility of abstinence in the architect’s repertoire: doing nothing or almost nothing, avoiding designing and building, powerful tools as much as their opposites.