

The Liminality of Earthquakes, Fragments and Palimpsests as Alternatives to Preservation

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1 For a detailed historiography of preservation theories, see Jokilehto, Jukka. *A History of Architectural Conservation*. Butterworth-Heinemann Series in Conservation and Museology. Oxford, England: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999.

2 See Gennep, Arnold Van. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960 and “Betwixt and between: the liminal period in rites de passage” in Turner, Victor W. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967.

The built environment, in its relation with time, is always changing. Its form, its materiality, its context, uses, and meanings are always in constant transformation. In some cases, however, because of their monumentality and age, but also due to diverse social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances, some buildings as well as urban and natural landscapes become objects of preservation. Though a detailed analysis of the common ways of preserving historic architecture exceeds the limits of the present article, I will state that great part of current preservation “good practices” have their roots in the works and writings of nineteenth and twentieth century European theorists and have influenced the way in which contemporary preservation is thought, policed, and practiced even until today.¹

In this context, I aim to interpret architecture as a process of continuous change that cannot and should not be fixed in time, a realm of inquiry in which history, earthquakes, preservation, and change can all be conciliated in order to find alternative ways for juxtaposing the past with the present.

Liminality

Located in a seismic area where three tectonic plates overlap, Mexico’s natural and cultural landscapes have historically been in direct relation with earthquakes. For this reason, I will delve into alternative ways in which historic architecture and common preservation practices can be conciliated with contemporary preservation theories as well as with the seismic nature of Mexico’s reality.

As I try to advance the way to think about the common preservation practices that prevent or discourage any contemporary intervention in historic contexts – appealing to international standards, heritage interpretations, national identity discourses and nostalgic views of the past – I want to bring forward the concept of liminality as a tool of analysis from which to think differently about the relationship between earthquakes and damaged historic fabric.

The concept of liminality was originally introduced in the field of anthropology by Arnold Van Gennep (1873 - 1957) in 1909 and further elaborated by Victor Turner (1920-1983) in 1967.² As part of the “process approach”

3 Wydra, H., Thomassen, Bjørn, & Horváth, Ágnes. (2015). *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*. New York: Berghahn Books p. 40

4 *ibid* p.2

5 Plan de acción ante sismos 7 y 19 septiembre. 17 the octubre 2017. Gobierno Federal. <https://www.scribd.com/document/361993553/Plan-de-Accion-Ante-Sismos-Sep-2017-171017>

6 Registro de daños Patrimonio Cultural. Official Spreadsheet by the Coordinación Nacional the Monumentos Históricos. INAH. January 2018.

7 The Ley Federal sobre Monumentos y Zonas Arqueológicas, Artísticas e Históricas is the current law regulating the catalogue, management and protection of historic monuments in Mexico. The federal law can be found here: http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/131_160218.pdf

8 George Kubler (1912-1996) was probably the most renowned scholar on the art of Pre-Columbian America and Ibero-American Art, with multiple volumes on the history of Colonial architecture in the New Spain.

9 Kubler, G. (2012). *Arquitectura Mexicana del Siglo XVI* (Segunda edición. ed.). Mexico, D. F: Fondo De Cultura Economica. p.62

10 Otero-Pailos, Langdalen, Arrhenius, Otero-Pailos, Jorge, Langdalen, Erik, and Arrhenius, Thordis. *Experimental Preservation*. Zürich, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016.

when studying rites of passage within tribal groups, liminality – form the Latin *limen*, literally threshold – understands the transitory stages through time that any society experiences and that help shape its identities and communal structures. In this way, overly simplified, “liminality is about how human beings, in their various social and cultural contexts, deal with change.”³ Furthermore, liminality “captures in-between situations and conditions characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes.”⁴

During the September 2017 earthquakes that hit the south and center areas of the country, the Secretary of Culture reported that a total⁶ of 1,821 historic buildings were affected, 20% of them being severely damaged⁵. The great majority of these 1,821 buildings –over 95% of the total – were catalogued as “Historic Monuments” according to the Ley Federal sobre Monumentos y Zonas Arqueológicas, Artísticas e Históricas⁷, which means that they were built between the 16th and 19th centuries, that is, during colonial times.

Since one of the most relevant criteria for listing old buildings as historic monuments is the historic period in which they were constructed, it becomes relevant to underline the significant role that the Catholic Church, and specifically the three mendicant orders – Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustines – had in shaping the idiosyncratic, economic, social and spatial relations during the colonial period in the territory that today comprises modern day Mexico. Parallel to the spiritual evangelization of the local population, the land and property distributions that existed during the 16th century made possible the construction of the huge convents that survive until today and that were severely damaged during the earthquakes.

The political-economical model of “encomienda”, which George Kubler⁸ describes as the “gradual dissolution, or forced dispersion, of the land rights of the indians,”⁹ allowed for the “encomenderos” (a social class of Spaniards who directly benefited from the control of indigenous labor and not necessarily from production or extraction activities) to gain control of huge portions of territory and of a big number of indigenous workers. This concentration of labor permitted both a better collection of tribute as well as the construction of the large convents that are now interpreted as national historic monuments, some of them even of “universal value”, and that otherwise, would not have been possibly built outside of these particular socio-spatial arrangements of control, exploitation and abuse.

Though I am not trying to diminish their architectural value—the 16th century monasteries are considered by various scholars, including Kubler, to be the most representative of all the *Novo Hispanica* architectures—the damage of the convents after the 2017 earthquake presents an opportunity to re-examine and re-think the narratives of the historical conditions that made the physical artifacts possible. What stories are we privileging when rebuilding a certain historic monument? Whose heritage is being told? What role did the political and ecclesiastical institutions have played, play and will continue to play in relation to these narratives? Which of these stories are transmitted to the community and why?

Paraphrasing Jorge Otero Pailos¹⁰, new alternatives to common preservation practices should not try to find a unique, universal, one-size-fit-all solution that speaks for culture when dealing with damaged historic buildings, but rather to solicit a cultural response that, taking into account other alternatives to material preservation/restoration, allows for new

11 Harbison, Robert. *Ruins and Fragments: Tales of Loss and Rediscovery*. London: Reaktion Books, 2015

12 David Lowenthal (1923-2018) was an American historian who specialized in the reinterpretation of concepts of memory and heritage, thinking them in relation with historic architecture.

13 Lowenthal, D. (1989). *Material Preservation And Its Alternatives*. *Perspecta-The Yale Architectural Journal*, (25), 66-77.

14 *ibid.*

15 Latour, B. and Yaneva, A. "Give me a Gun and I will make all buildings move" in Eisinger, A., Staub, Urs, Geiser, Reto, Kwinter, Sanford, & Bundesamt für Kultur. (2008). *Explorations in architecture ; Teaching, Design, Research*. Basel [etc.]: Birkhäuser. p. 80-89

theoretical approaches that can impact institutional, official and community responses in benefit of an ever-changing and adaptive relation between historic fabric and post-disaster reconstruction.

Fragments

Following Robert Harbison, "fragments may be construed in both negative and positive ways: as remnants of achievements and plenitudes that are irrevocably lost, or as elements of a restorative power that can provide symbolic and poetic meaning to newly constituted wholes."¹¹ This appreciation of the concept of fragment, one that is intrinsically bound to their potential to engage memory, creativity and dynamism is the one I would like to propose as an alternative for preservation. In his critique of material conservation, historian David Lowenthal¹² says that: "fragments not only reveal what is missing, ghost presences of their past, they also refer to their rediscovery. Thus the fragment implies the history of both its deposit and its recovery. Implicating so many surrounding realms, the fragment is invested with repleteness and intensity."¹³

I will propose that the damaged architectural elements of the 16th Century Convents in Morelos, Mexico can be thought as fragments from which post-disaster reconstruction of historic fabric should begin to be imagined in inventive ways. Following Lowenthal, fragments "surpass wholes in joining the past dynamically with the present. Mutilated and incomplete, they impart a sense of life from the evidence of their struggle with time."¹⁴

By utilizing the architectural fragments left by the disaster, critical intervention in historic buildings will indeed preserve historic remnants and at the same time promote new interpretations of the past and future. After being structurally retrofitted and consolidated, the

historic fragments will serve as the material signs from which local populations and visitors will continue to relate to peoples, forms, technologies, narratives, stories, and worldviews of the past. At the same time, the juxtaposition of new forms, materials, textures, but also of new spaces, programs and uses will permit historic fabric to actively transform and adapt to novel inclusive visions of heritage, both in its tangible and intangible components.

Palimpsests

Palimpsests are often associated with writing surfaces that, in antiquity, were used and reused over and over again by the act of erasing. The material that was used, of animal origin, was durable in time but expensive in nature, so medieval scholars and intellectuals were forced to recycle it with every new writing. When it was needed, the old text was erased and the new one was written on top. However, with the passage of time the earlier writings tended to reappear, and thus a variety of texts, meanings and symbols came to resurface, giving a physical presence to different layers of the past.

To think of historic monuments as palimpsests will allow us to look at their complexity beyond mere historicist documents at the service of historians, preservationists and cultural institutions that see their value as mere vestiges of the past. To paraphrase Bruno Latour and Albena Yaneva, we should see historic buildings and monuments "as movement, as flight, as a series of transformations."¹⁵ Being temporarily/partially obliterated, the damaged structures and the meanings and uses associated to them in other times can be replaced by new interpretations and views, later to resurface in spatial or architectural elements not necessarily subjected to mimic their pre-disaster conditions.



Schematic representation of an historic building as palimpsest. Enrique Aureng Silva

Fragments and palimpsests are only two of many possible concepts to think alternatives to preservation. Because of this, they do not intend to be universal nor conclusive, as the nature of the subjective interpretation associated with them impedes any absolute, homogeneous definition of how to do intervene historic fabric. However, they try to be a starting point, a provocation to show that flexible possibilities to deal with historic fabric are indeed possible, applicable and enriching.

As they are constantly transformed to accommodate the changing requirements of life, monuments and historic buildings cannot endure in time. For this reason, the concepts of “fragment” and “palimpsest” – interpreted as alternatives to historic preservation – intend to conciliate the potential between post-disaster damage and the reassessment of historic fabric. These real alternatives to common preservation practices will not only be aesthetic opportunities for proposing formal and material interventions in historic buildings, but will mainly represent the inmejorable occasions for the acknowledgment and reinterpretation of heritage narratives that may have been historically obliterated until the present.

In this way, the conciliation proposed by the redefinition of historic buildings as fragments and palimpsests with future would allow for a continuous shift and reinvention of different identity(s) in inclusive and creative ways not necessarily conformed to current preservation practices that tend to ossify historic monuments. This will allow for a liminal change in the formal, material, programmatic and narrative qualities of historic architecture in time.

Enrique Aureng Silva is an architect. He received his Bachelor of Architecture from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in 2012 and the Master of Design Studies in Critical Conservation at Harvard GSD in 2018. His research focuses on the intervention, transformation and reuse of historic buildings in Latin America, especially in post- disaster scenarios. When not thinking architecture or editing texts, he writes fiction in the form of short stories.