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CRONOCAOS

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CRONOCAOS

Editor's note: *This text prefaced OMA/AMO's exhibition, "Cronocaos," at the 12th Venice Architecture Biennale.*

Architects – we who change the world – have been oblivious or hostile to the manifestations of preservation. Since 1980, in Paolo Portoghesi's "Presence of the Past" exhibition, there has been almost no attention paid to preservation in successive Venice Architecture Biennales.

OMA and AMO have been obsessed, from the beginning, with the past. Our initial idea for this exhibition was to focus on 26 projects that have not been presented before as a body of work concerned with time and history. In this room we show the documentary debris of these efforts. But 2010 is the perfect intersection of two tendencies that so far have untheorized implications for architecture: the ambition of the global task force of "preservation" to rescue larger and larger territories of the planet, and the – corresponding? – global rage to eliminate the evidence of the postwar period of architecture as a social project. In the second room, we show the wrenching simultaneity of preservation and destruction that is destroying any sense of a linear evolution of time. The two rooms together document our period of acute CRONOCAOS.

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Embedded in huge waves of development, which seem to transform the planet at an ever-accelerating speed, there is another kind of transformation at work: the area of the world declared immutable through various regimes of preservation is growing exponentially. A huge section of our world (about 12 percent) is now off-limits, submitted to regimes we don't know, have not thought through, cannot influence. At its moment of surreptitious apotheosis, preservation does not quite know what to do with its new empire.

As the scale and importance of preservation escalate each year, the absence of a theory and the lack of interest invested in this seemingly remote domain become dangerous. After thinkers like Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc, the arrogance of the modernists made the preservationist look like a futile, irrelevant figure. Postmodernism, in spite of its lip service to the past, did no better. The current moment has almost no idea how to negotiate the coexistence of radical change and radical stasis that is our future.



CONVENTION CONCERNING THE PROTECTION OF THE WORLD CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE

The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization meeting in Paris from 17 October to 21 November 1972, at its seventeenth session,

Noting that the cultural heritage and the natural heritage are increasingly threatened with destruction not only by the traditional causes of decay, but also by changing social and economic conditions which aggravate the situation with even more formidable phenomena of damage or destruction,

Considering that deterioration or disappearance of any item of the cultural or natural heritage constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all the nations of the world,

Considering that protection of this heritage at the national level often remains incomplete because of the scale of the resources which it requires and of the insufficient economic, scientific, and technological resources of the country where the property to be protected is situated,

Recalling that the Constitution of the Organization provides that it will maintain, increase, and diffuse knowledge by assuring the conservation and protection of the world's heritage, and recommending to the nations concerned the necessary international conventions,

Considering that the existing international conventions, recommendations and resolutions concerning cultural and natural property demonstrate the importance, for all the peoples of the world, of safeguarding this unique and irreplaceable property, to whatever people it may belong,

Considering that parts of the cultural or natural heritage are of outstanding interest and therefore need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole,

Considering that, in view of the magnitude and gravity of the new dangers threatening them, it is incumbent on the international community as a whole to participate in the protection of the cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value, by the granting of collective assistance which, although not taking the place of action by the State concerned, will serve as an efficient complement thereto,

Considering that it is essential for this purpose to adopt new provisions in the form of a convention establishing an effective system of collective protection of the cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value, organized on a permanent basis and in accordance with modern scientific methods,

Having decided, at its sixteenth session, that this question should be made the subject of an international convention,

Adopts this sixteenth day of November 1972 this Convention.

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE PAGE: TWO "EXHIBITS" FROM "CRONOCAOS": A UNESCO DOCUMENT AND THE OMA RESPONSE. IMAGES COURTESY OMA.



CONVENTION CONCERNING THE DEMOLITION OF WORLD CULTURAL JUNK

AMO on the occasion of the 12th International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale from 29 August to 21 November 2010,

Noting that cultural heritage and natural heritage are overwhelming us not only through the increasing need for identity and or history, but also by changing social and economic conditions which aggravate the situation with ever more formidable phenomena of preservation,

Considering that the proliferation of cultural or natural heritage constitutes a risk of trivializing the heritage of all the nations of the world,

Considering that protection of this heritage at the national level has at its disposal enormous economic, scientific, and technological resources in the country where the property to be protected is situated,

Recalling that the ideas of the organization provide that it will liberate oversaturated urban territory through the demolition of junk, and recommending to the nations concerned the new opportunities that will emerge,

Considering that the existing international conventions, recommendations and resolutions concerning cultural and natural property demonstrate the importance, for all the peoples of the world, of actively demolishing junk, to whatever people it may belong,

Considering that parts of the cultural or natural heritage are insignificant and transient and therefore need to be demolished to facilitate the growth and development of mankind as a whole,

Considering that, in view of the magnitude and speed of the global potential to produce junk, it is incumbent on the international community as a whole to participate in the removal of cultural and natural heritage that constitutes Insignificant Universal Junk, by the granting of collective assistance which, although not taking the place of action by the State concerned, will serve as an efficient complement thereto,

Considering that it is essential for this purpose to adopt new provisions in the form of a convention establishing an effective system of collective demolition of cultural and architectural heritage that constitutes Insignificant Universal Junk, organized on a permanent basis and in accordance with modern scientific methods,

Having decided, at this 12 International Architecture Biennale, that this question should be made the subject of an international convention,

Adopts this twenty-ninth day of August 2010 this Convention.

As we head toward a climax of preservation, ambiguities and contradictions build up:

- Selection criteria are by definition vague and elastic, because they have to embrace as many conditions as the world contains.

- Time cannot be stopped in its tracks, but there is no consideration in the arsenal of preservation of how its effects should be managed, how the “preserved” could stay alive, and yet evolve.

- There is little awareness in preservation of how different cultures have interpreted permanence, or of the variations in material, climate, and environment, which in themselves require radically different modes of preservation.

- With its own undeclared ideology, preservation prefers certain authenticities. Others – typically, politically difficult ones – it suppresses, even if they are crucial to understanding history.

- Through preservation’s ever-increasing ambitions, the time lag between new construction and the imperative to preserve has collapsed from two thousand years to almost nothing. From retrospective, preservation will soon become prospective, forced to take decisions for which it is entirely unprepared.

- From a largely cultural concern, preservation has become a political issue, and heritage a right – and like all rights, susceptible to political correctness. Bestowing an aura of authenticity and loving care, preservation can trigger massive surges in development. In many cases, the past becomes the only plan for the future . . .

- Preservation’s continuing emphasis on the exceptional – that which deserves preservation – creates its own distortion. The exceptional becomes the norm. There are no ideas for preserving the mediocre, the generic.

* * *

In a global groundswell of revulsion, one particular genre has escaped the embrace of preservation. Open season has been declared on postwar social architecture. At its zenith, a strong public sector created the conditions in which architecture as a social project could flourish. At its nadir, a public sector, debilitated by the market, destroys it. There is now a global consensus that postwar architecture – and the optimism it embodied about architecture’s ability to organize the social world – was an aesthetic and ideological debacle. Our resignation is expressed in the flamboyant architecture of the market economy, which has its own built-in commercial expiration date.

Authentic

Do not let us deceive ourselves in this important matter; it is *impossible*, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture.

John Ruskin, 1849



Restored

To restore a building is not to repair it, nor to do maintenance or to rebuild, it is to reestablish it in an ultimate state that never existed before.

Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, 1855



Just like modernization – of which it is part – preservation was a Western invention. But with the waning of Western power, it is no longer in the West's hands. We are no longer the ones who define its values. The world needs a new system mediating between preservation and development. Could there be the equivalent of carbon trading in modernization? Could one modernizing nation “pay” another nation not to change? Could backwardness become a resource, like Costa Rica's rainforest? Should China save Venice?

The march of preservation necessitates the development of a theory of its opposite: not what to keep, but what to give up, what to erase and abandon. A system of phased demolition, for instance, would drop the unconvincing pretense of permanence for contemporary architecture, built under different economic and material assumptions. It would reveal *tabula rasa* beneath the thinning crust of our civilization – ready for liberation just as we (in the West) had given up on the idea.

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