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Questioning Authenticity

Hilde Heynen

1 The call for authenticity is one of the important innovations brought about by the Enlightenment. Jean-Jacques Rousseau criticized the dominant culture of the eighteenth century because it was sophisticated, artificial, false, and presumptuous. He opposed it to the noble savage, who was direct, honest, spontaneous, and in touch with his inner nature. Rousseau's call for authenticity was taken up by nineteenth-century Romantics, who hailed the forces of nature, passion, and desire, and who glorified individuals who lived in accordance with these forces. Modern art and architecture adopted the notion of authenticity as one of their objectives. The longing for authenticity has thus been, with ups and downs, an important impulse in twentieth-century culture. At present it seems that, once again, it takes a central position in cultural debates.

Different notions of authenticity

2 Such a contradiction becomes apparent in the discussion about the conservation of Modern movement buildings. This discussion has been paramount since the establishment in 1982 of Docomomo, the organization for the documentation and conservation of Modern movement buildings.[1] Right from the beginning, it was clear that the conservation of modernist buildings evokes different problems than that of earlier architectural masterpieces. One of the reasons for this difference has to do with technical problems. Modernist buildings were not "built for eternity," but were often designed with only a limited lifespan in mind. After this intended lifespan, their technical integrity was no longer guaranteed—materials could crumble, technical systems could fail, and structural strength could be affected. Conservation of such buildings therefore requires far-reaching and expensive interventions, which are at odds with the originally intended logic of economy, rationality, and functional design. If one analyzes this difficulty, it becomes clear that the practice of conserving modernist buildings brings about the clash of two different notions of authenticity, between which it is not easy to find a balance.

3 Within the European practice of conservation "authenticity" is usually understood as referring to the genuineness of the material substance of a monument: an authentic

seventeenth-century church is thus a church that is, in its shape, appearance, and materials, essentially the same as it was when it was newly constructed. A closer look nevertheless reveals that the European usage of the term has also undergone shifts and changes. Lucy Worsley discusses them in an interesting study of the history of Bolsover Castle in England.[2] Bolsover Castle is a seventeenth-century mock-medieval castle built for the Cavendish family. Worsley shows how it has been treated in very divergent ways by successive owners, tenants, and caretakers, but always with a striving towards authenticity. She concludes that "'Authenticity' in each case appears to present the unobtainable—the medieval past, a family's former greatness, a time of idyllic social unity, or an unmediated experience of original historic fabric."[3]

4 The interpretation of authenticity that comes to the fore as dominant in the twentieth century—the attempt to re-create a situation that is as close as possible, in materiality as well as in appearance, to the actual historical origin of a building—is difficult to reconcile with the requirements for restoring modernist buildings. This has to do with the fact that the Modern movement itself attached great importance to the idea of authenticity. The modernists' authenticity, however, does not coincide with that of the conservationists.

5 The modernists denounced the eclecticism of the nineteenth century for its inherent falsity and pretentiousness, and advocated honesty in the use of materials. The outer appearance of buildings should reflect their inner construction and should be determined by their function. Modern architects should, as much as possible, use the new materials and technologies that were made available through industrialization. Historical style references and decoration were superfluous, not in tune with the time, and hence to be avoided. Architecture should provide a straightforward, honest answer to the requirements and challenges of modern life. Authenticity had to do with the courage to face up to the challenges of modernity. It meant to acknowledge the "poverty" of the times, without covering it up. One should refrain therefore from any unnecessary decorations and strive towards sobriety, purity, nakedness. This authenticity was also seen as the hallmark of "real" modern art and architecture, which differed from the impure, easy-going and comfortable forms of kitsch.[4]

6 The modernist credo of authenticity implies that buildings should be conceived of as straightforward answers to the requirements of modernity, that they should be up-to-date in terms of materials and technologies, and that their aesthetics should comply with the rationality and abstraction the times were calling for. The two cases that follow embody different aspects of this modernist authenticity, which clash in different ways with the authenticity requirements of conservationists.

Lever House

7 Suzanne Stephens discusses the recent restoration of New York's Lever House in terms of authenticity.[5] Lever House (1952) was the first glass curtain-walled skyscraper to go up in New York. It was designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's Gordon Bunshaft for a soap company that wanted to erect a symbol of hygienic modernity. In 1983 the building was designated as a historic landmark, to protect it against demolition plans by new owners. In 1998 it changed hands again and this time plans were made to restore it, for the building showed the wear and tear of its years.

8 The building's curtain wall in particular posed problems. The curtain wall was replaced according to a design by engineer Gordon H. Smith, with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill as consultants. Smith advised a wholesale substitution of the original skin, with new glass

—green-tinted and single-paned as in the original but heat-strengthened instead of annealed. Most parts of the underlying curtain-wall structure of carbon steel have been kept, but a new aluminum receiver system supplements the old. So Lever House has shed its skin, to appear, snake-like, with a new one, which closely resembles the original.

9 Stephens concludes that "one has to think differently about authenticity in preserving a modern machine-made building versus the handcrafted sort."[6] It is clear that in a case such as Lever House it doesn't make sense to preserve by all means the genuine construction materials. It is much more in tune with the original intentions of its architects to take advantage of technological innovations that are now available. What is most important, states Stephens, is that the level of quality and attention to materials, details and proportions, is up to the challenge posed by the old building. If the architectural quality of the restoration matches with that of the original building, one can truly call it "authentic" in the most modern (or newest) manner.

La Concha Hotel, Puerto Rico

10 The La Concha Hotel in Puerto Rico presents us with a very clear example of the clash between the "heritage" and the "modernist" understanding of authenticity. John B. Hertz draws attention to this conflict in an interesting contribution to the *Journal of Architectural Education*.[7] The confrontation is brought about in this case because of the troubled relation of Puerto Rico to its colonial past and its more recent struggle with modernity. It is worth quoting Hertz in full:

11 The search for an authentic architectural expression in much of Latin America reflects the confrontation between the colonial period, when transformation occurred through a wholesale substitution of cultural values, and that of the recent past, which embodies the struggle with modernity. The pressures of contemporary development on that search, working through a misreading of history, can result in works that are more than inappropriate. A case in point is the project designed to replace the modernist icon, the Hotel La Concha in San Juan, with a more "authentic" complex with Hispanic references. However, the authentic expression of local culture is found in the modern building from the recent past, rather than in the historic model being proposed, in spite of the claims by its designers that it is "more Puerto Rican."[8]

12 Puerto Rico had lived under Spanish domination for four centuries, when the Americans took over in 1898 after the Spanish-American war. The Americans issued a massive construction campaign in the island in order to upgrade its infrastructure and public services. The preferred style for this huge building program was a kind of Spanish Revival, which the Americans used in order to underscore the difference between Puerto Rico and their homeland. This assimilation of Hispanic traditions into an American architectural expression, Hertz argues, reflected the lack of any serious interest in the actual cultural values of Puerto Rico, and offers little more than a picturesque background to act out their political and economic interests.

13 This changed, however, in the period after the Second World War, when prominent local architects took a conscious decision to develop a version of modernist architecture that would be consistent with the needs of climate and site—an architecture for the tropics. This development is prompted by the arrival of two modernist architects on the island: Richard Neutra, who was only to stay for two years, and Henry Klumb, the German disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright, who became a permanent resident. Both modernists had a notable influence on local architects, such

as Osvaldo Toro and Miguel Ferrer, who were to design the La Concha Hotel. The work of Toro and Ferrer was, according to Hertz, part of a heroic effort of the Puerto Rican society to transform itself and to come to terms with modernity. For Puerto Rico—unlike other Latin American countries—chose the path of change through reform. It looked for progress and emancipation without a revolutionary change in its political and economic structures.

14 The modernist buildings that were to underscore this option were privately operated hotels built with public (American) funds that catered to well-to-do foreigners. According to Hertz the Hilton Hotel (1949) and the La Concha Hotel (1958), both designed by Toro and Ferrer, were the first and the most notable of these buildings. They also received considerable international recognition, with La Concha e.g., making the cover of *Progressive Architecture* in August 1959. La Concha was clearly a modernist building, but it also displayed several features which bear reference to its context. It was organized around a central interior patio, like the traditional urban housing typology found in San Juan. Its articulated *brise-soleils* recalled traditional shuttered galleries and it disposed of a *mirador* on the roof that functions as a lookout space. Hertz: "The fusion of architectural roots and morphologies derived from Spanish origin found on the island and the vocabulary of modernism within a tropical setting created an expression appropriate to the uniqueness of Puerto Rico."[9]

15 However, this highly interesting building does not fit anymore in the logics of global tourism. It has become an economic liability and its present owners want to demolish it. The idea is to replace it with a convention center built in a revivalist style that supposedly reflects Puerto Rico's Spanish heritage and that is reminiscent of old San Juan. Such a project, it is believed, is much bettered suited to attract tourists, because it complies with their expectations of a 'Hispanic' tropical image – regardless of the fact that this image constructs a false identity. Hertz concludes:

16 The architecture—which to the casual, uneducated eye appears to be a more authentic expression of Puerto Rican culture—appears to be the imported architecture of colonialism, whereas the design that appears to be "foreign" is an authentic expression by local practitioners of an appropriate architecture that expresses a specific place and time in the struggle with modernity on the island. The proposed . . . project, in its use of a revival style . . . is the resurgence of an invented architecture brought to the island by the United States in its efforts at colonization some one hundred years ago. Rather than honoring and reaffirming the specific Spanish tradition of Puerto Rico, it reaffirms the continued colonial state of the island, a political condition that the voters in Puerto Rico totally rejected during the most recent plebiscite on its status.[10]

17 In this case the modernist authenticity, that is recognized and supported by Hertz, seems to be incompatible with the tourist expectations of "authenticity" that have to be met if one follows a purely commercial logic. These tourist expectations have been informed by a heritage industry that sanctions the very old or—in the absence of the very old—the illusion of the very old.

NOTES DE FIN

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RÉSUMÉS

Authenticity is an important category in cultural debates, which has emerged in parallel with the notion of modernity. Authenticity refers to the idea that something is "real" or "true," that its outer appearance is in correspondence with its inner being, in contrast with things that are "fake" or "false" or "dissimulating." Although the term thus seems to have a rather unequivocal meaning, its usage evokes quite some paradoxes. This paper focuses on one of these paradoxes: the different notions of authenticity that are at stake within practices of conservation on the one hand and within the modernist discourse of the Modern movement on the other. It shows through a discussion of two different case studies—the Lever House in New York and the hotel La Concha in San Juan, Puerto Rico—that both forms of authenticity are often at odds when it comes to the restoration of modernist buildings.

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