

The Lacuna, an Empty Space in Urban Construction. Cesare Brandi's Restoration Theory in the Integral Preservation of Old Town Areas

Lilian Hansar

In view of the rapid changes in the country, the issue of the renovation and preservation of urban environments is particularly topical in Estonia today. It is an issue discussed by real estate developers, politicians and citizens, although they are not in agreement as to what to do. Even conservationists and architects are unable to provide solutions acceptable to all. Historical old towns and areas declared valuable in terms of their developed environment are particularly sensitive to the introduction of new elements. More and more buildings, which are out of scale, ignore the existing built structure and look out of place in the urban landscape, go up in environments of an established character. Could this be due to politics alone, which sees the destruction of old and the erection of new structures as development, or is it the architects themselves who lack clear visions and theoretical foundations to rely on in debates?

The legal acts and regulations pertaining to construction in architecturally valuable areas are worded generally, and the restrictions contained in them can be interpreted in various ways. Although the tradition of the protection of historical old towns is nearly a century old in Europe, it relies on general declarations and established practices. International documents concerning the protection of monuments are based on works by recognised restoration specialists, but it is difficult to find any theoretical basis for principles meant to guarantee the protection of urban construction and coherent development. Yet a better-justified approach is extremely important for the analysis of a valuable environment, in order to avoid the subjectivism that conservationists are often accused of.

This article is an attempt to widen to the urban developed environment the methods of Cesare Brandi, one of the best-known theoreticians of the restoration of single monuments, who also put his ideas into practice. As his theory is not very widely known, I will dwell at considerable length on its contents, the more so because his axioms are very succinct.

Cesare Brandi¹ (1906–1988) is one of the leading restoration theoreticians of the 20th century. In his theory, Brandi sums up the essence of works of art, including architecture, underlining art's specific nature and the role of critical historical definition as the basis for any intervention. His theory has served as the basis for many international basic documents on conservation. Thanks to the historical-critical approach, where all interference must be based on a concrete age, with its convictions, his theory is still recognised. Although the idea of European conservation is widening and moving in the direction of the protection of the non-material environment, Brandi's theory can still be regarded as an internationally recognised paradigm in the development of conservation policy.

Although Brandi is seen, above all, as a theoretician of the conservation of paintings, he often refers to architecture in his works. Relying on his theory, I have set myself the aim of finding associations and common points between works of art, architecture and problems of urban restoration. First, I will focus on the example of architecturally and aesthetically valuable old town areas. I will analyse ways of applying Brandi's restoration theory in the preservation of old town areas as integrities. Through the interpretation of *lacunae*, empty spaces, I will attempt to find a theoretical basis for the reconciliation of new structures in old town areas. The many meanings of the term 'lacuna' lead to interpretations and developments to which I will refer at the conclusion of this piece, but their deeper treatment would be an intriguing topic in its own right, to which I am hoping to return in the future.

¹ Cesare Brandi (1906–1988) was born in Siena, studied law and the arts, and launched his career in 1930 as a superintendent of monuments and galleries. In 1939–1959 he was the director of the *Istituto Centrale del Restauro*, and Professor of Art History at the Universities of Palermo and Rome. His restoration theory has served as the basis for specific training programs, such as international ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property) courses in Rome, as well as international documents on conservation (Charter of Venice, 1964, *Carta del Restauro*, a methodology commissioned by the Italian government, 1972). As the director of the *Istituto Centrale del Restauro* in Rome, he also dealt with the practical maintenance and restoration of monuments, apart from developing his theory. An active writer, Brandi debated issues connected with the philosophical problems of restoration and definition, which gave birth to dialogues in the spirit of Plato. He also produced a three-volume theory of restoration (*Teoria del Restauro*, 1963).

The city as a work of art

Brandi's theory is based on the specific nature of a work of art and the primacy of aesthetic values in restoration proceeding from it. He sees a work of art as the result of a singular process of creation, which begins with the artist's will and works its way through different stages to liberation in a figure that has gradually taken shape in the artist's senses and acquires physical form (Jokilehto 1999: 230).

Brandi stresses the difference between a work of art and a general product. The basis of the former is the above-mentioned creative process, while the latter considers, above all, practical needs. He finds that architecture can be seen as the result of a creative process characterised by functionality, but at the same time recognises the impossibility of it being only functional. Brandi describes the transformation of architecture into a work of art as follows: 'When human spirituality feels urged beyond practical requirements, architecture becomes "de-materialized" and "decanted" in its form.' (Jokilehto 1999: 231.) Thus a building does not consist of just a certain amount of material, but its every single element and spatial-structural system expresses the architectural concept. Although the material of the building expires in time, human consciousness perceives its artistic concept.

If architecture is art, could we also regard the urban environment as art – for example an old town area – although it lacks a concrete author as the result of whose creative process the town was created, as a work of art? Although, according to Brandi's theory, it is not a work of art in the proper sense of the word, we can still sense the anonymous creator in a historical town, and human consciousness perceives the artistic concept. The picturesque skylines of the old town and the street views and ensembles of its squares have always inspired artists to paint beautiful urban views. A historical town also has other features characteristic of a work of art, such as poly-semanticism, integrity and harmony of the image. As a building does not consist of just a certain amount of material, but is a spatial-structural system and thus the product of architectural creation, a town also consists of streets, squares and houses that make up a figuratively integral pattern and spatial composition. Similarly to the poly-semanticism of a work of art, a historical city also contains strata from different ages, as well as memories and meanings connected with them. An old town is historically and aesthetically valuable as an integral monument, which makes it possible to regard it as a work of art similar to architecture.

Restoration axioms and principles

Brandi has formulated three axioms specifying the fundamentals of the restoration concept of objects defined as works of art, as well as the aims of restoration. Below I will analyse the possibilities of applying them in the context of urban environments.

Axiom One: '*Only the material form of the work of art is restored.*' (Brandi 1996: 231.)

The precondition of this principle is that restoration must have as an aim that the physical form of a work of art should last as long as possible. Brandi analyses the materiality of a work of art: '...the material in relation to the aesthetic aspect of a work of art could be understood as having two functions: one related to providing the 'structure' (*struttura*), the other concerning the 'aspect' (*aspetto*) of the object.' (Jokilehto 1999: 236.) In Brandi's opinion, priority in restoration has to be given to the material, which is artistically the most important element. For example, with the aim of preserving the architectural appearance of a building, it is necessary to reinforce the elements forming its structure by making the necessary additions with the material forming the structure. But Jukka Jokilehto² finds that the structural system is also important in the case of architecture, being the essential element and containing archaeologically important information (Jokilehto 1999: 236).

Relying on the example of a historical building, where the construction is the structure and the outward appearance is a composition of figurative elements, the structure of an old town could be understood as its spatial and plan structure made up of the buildings, street network and the location of plots and buildings. All this, together with the architecture of the buildings, shapes the appearance of the old town. Structural changes made with the aim of its preservation have to be made very carefully. So changes in the street network, or in the manner the buildings are located, change the outward appearance of the old town. Brandi suggests that when there are additions the material of the structure should be used, which means that the elements reinforcing or restoring the structure of the old town have to be in keeping with the elements of the existing structure

² Jukka Jokilehto has been Deputy Director-General of ICCROM, Chairman of the International Training Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and has been busy with UNESCO and World Heritage conventions. He studied architecture in Helsinki and defended his doctor's thesis in conservation at York University in England.

and their material. So the construction of new buildings, their dimensions and location should accommodate the characteristic volume and plan structure of the place and traditional materials should be used in their design.

Axiom Two: '*Restoration must aim to re-establish the potential unity of the work of art, as long as this is possible without producing an artistic or historical forgery and without erasing every trace of the passage of time left on the work of art.*' (Brandi 1996: 231.)

As part of the potential integrity of a work of art, Brandi includes the inseparability of its material and design: the work of art is a whole. It is not just a geometric complex of its parts, but all its elements together make up the whole in correspondence with the artist's or architect's concept. As a result 'a work of art ... will continue to exist as a *potential whole* in each of its fragments.' (Brandi 1996: 340.) Restoration of the potential unity of a destroyed work of art must be in proportion to the scale preserved in the original fragments.

If the unity of a work of art is contained in the inseparability of its material and design, in urban construction this means that separate buildings, along with other elements of design, make up the built structure or image of the old town as a whole. Each house separately may be of architectural value, but an integral image can be born from the cumulative effect of many components. The requirement of the implementation of potential integrity is perhaps most comprehensible in a historical urban environment. The highest priority in the protection of old towns has been restoration of the integral urban environment. If potential integrity is contained in each material fragment of a work of art, then restoration of the image of an old town as integrity is immediately linked with the restoration of its buildings and other elements making up its structure. So restoration of single buildings does not suffice; restoration of the spatial composition or figurative integrity of the old town is even more important. In accordance with Brandi's theory, restoration of an image can be in proportion to the scale preserved in the original fragments. From the point of view of an old town, this may mean that urban integrity can only be restored to the extent that authentic buildings and other original structural elements survive. In the selection of protected areas, it is therefore necessary to take into account, besides valuable buildings, the existence of a sufficiently large historical street network to make it possible to restore the potential integrity of the area. It is with that principle in mind that old town conservation areas are identified: they comprise areas with extant historical buildings and plan structures.

Axiom Three: '*Restoration is the methodological moment in which the work of art is appreciated in its material form and in its historical and aesthetic duality, with a view to transmitting it to the future.*' (Brandi 1999: 231.)

To the question of what the moment of the appreciation of a work of art is, the answer is Brandi's explanation of the relationship of the work of art to time and space. A work of art has been historicised at two different moments: at its creation by the artist and at its present appreciation. The only justified moment of restoration is the present historical time, which contains both the past and the present. Restoration chosen with any other moment of time in mind will lead to arbitrary results.

The relationship of historical towns to time and space is one of the most problematic issues. It is in that respect that there have been different concepts. There have been periods in the restoration of old towns where copies were put up to replace destroyed buildings, and attempts were made to recreate old houses in their original appearance. Rebuilding of the whole old town in its historical appearance was quite recently considered in Narva. Is it right to restore separate destroyed buildings in their old form or should the houses built to replace them be modern? As the only justified restoration moment is the present, restoration of destroyed towns or buildings in any former shape cannot be justified. A copy, being a forgery, would also be unacceptable from the point of view of presenting historical truth.

As the central idea of his theories, Brandi emphasises the supremacy of the aesthetic value over the historical one. He also explains his views on when the historical content of a work of art should gain priority over the aesthetic one. If the work of art has lost what should be its content, its aesthetic value, and the object is only an amorphous mass of material, then we should be guided by historical significance in its preservation. In such a case, restoration can only be conservation of the *status quo*.

From the historical point of view, every trace of human activity is valuable. Here Brandi finds the aesthetic value to be prevalent over the historical one. So it is possible in an old town to dismantle houses that do not have an aesthetic or figurative value with respect to the city as a whole. The aesthetic value of an old town does not need to consist of the preservation of historical houses alone. New buildings may also add aesthetic value to it if they observe criteria set forth by Brandi, above all the preservation of the historical urban structure.

Lacuna

Brandi has formulated a principle of restoration, which can be adapted also to architecture and used in urban construction: ‘...any integration must always be easily recognizable, but without interfering with the unity that one is trying to reestablish. Thus, at the distance from which the work of art will be viewed, the integration should be invisible.’ (Brandi 1996: 341.)

Relying on the above principle, methods for the restoration of paintings were worked out under Brandi’s supervision, including the re-integration of empty spaces or lacunae.³ In a general treatment, ‘A lacuna in regard to a work of art is an interruption of the figurative pattern.’ (Brandi 1996: 341.) But in Brandi’s opinion, ‘...the most serious aspect in regard to a work of art is not what is missing but what is inserted inappropriately. The lacuna, in fact, will have a shape and color that are not relevant to the figurative aspect of the represented image; it is inserted into the work of art as a foreign body.’ (Brandi 1996: 341.)

Brandi’s discovery is based on Gestalt psychology,⁴ where a lacuna independently starts to depict figures and destroys the integrity of an image or form (Jokilehto 1999: 239–240). Relying on the structure of perception in Gestalt psychology, man’s spontaneous perception receives the lacuna as a dominant real figure, whose original figuration becomes the background. As a result, a design of empty spaces in which the original is reduced to the background must be avoided. The missing part must look like the background, with the original seen before it.

The first attempt to create a restoration theory that would avoid integrations based on fantasy is the ‘solution of a *neutral tint*’ (Brandi 1996: 341). Attempts are made to suppress domination of the lacuna by means of a tint that is free of tonality, that is, as neutral as possible.

A lacuna is interpreted in accordance with its nature, depth, position and scope. As a result, the following re-integration techniques are used in the restoration of paintings. Smaller surfaces from which patina or a layer of paint have peeled off are toned with watercolours. If the lacuna is not too critical, the *tratteggio* technique is used. It consists of the painting of small dots or vertical stripes.

³ Lacuna (Lat. *lacuna, lacunae*) – pit, hole, gap, shortage, loss, an abstract noun denoting the lack of something.

⁴ Gestalt psychology (from Ger. *Gestaltpsychologie*) proceeds from the principle that, from the very start, integrity, shape or form is characteristic of psychological phenomena, which, like a living organism, cannot be put together by simply adding up the components.

Seen from a distance, the colours and the tonality must fit the original, but from close up *tratteggio* creates the necessary difference from the original. If losses are too great and the potential integrity of the work of art has been lost, it is recommended to preserve the lacunae. The *acqua sporca* technique is used to neutralise them. The destroyed surfaces are covered with as neutral a tint as possible, so the preserved part of the painting can better come into view. Reconstructions larger in size than the original part should be avoided, as they make the whole look like a forgery or a copy.⁵

What might be the analogies of the painting restoration techniques in the urban construction context? *Tratteggio*, in the case of which the added element is clearly prominent from close up but has the effect of the original from a distance, is in fact reconstruction, exemplified by copies of old buildings or their elements. The *acqua sporca* technique could be represented in a historical city by new buildings of neutral design.

Extending Brandi's restoration principles to historical buildings and ruins, Paul Philippot⁶ found that, in the case of architecture that has preserved its social function, it is quite clear that the missing parts may be replaced to a much larger extent than would be justified in the case of archaeological ruins. Despite concessions, the principle that original parts must make up the main elements in the new structure or group of structures also applies here. 'Such creative integration requires a study of the old building, its context and perhaps the whole historical center where it is located in order to establish the peculiar rhythm of the old complex and to adjust the scheme of the modern creation to the basic modules and materials that already exist.' (Philippot 1996: 363.) Philippot finds that the aim must be to achieve a balance of the modern environment with historical architecture; otherwise restoration will give way to exercises in modern architecture made at the expense of old buildings.

Extension of Brandi's restoration principles and interpretation of the lacuna to architecture, after the example of Philippot, create a foundation for their use

⁵ According to Hilkka Hiiop, Associate Professor of the Estonian Academy of Arts, Faculty of Cultural Heritage and Conservation, the *tratteggio* and *acqua sporca* conservation techniques established in Italy are not yet widely practised in Estonia. In this country, the practice is of undertaking the reconstruction of paintings by filling in the destroyed area with new painting or conservation of preserved paintings.

⁶ Paul Philippot is Director Emeritus of ICCROM and Professor Emeritus of the Brussels Université Libre.

in the context of old towns. Lacunae, or empty spaces, are immediately visible in the housing structure of the old town: they can be the sites of destroyed buildings, or missing streets or quarters. Brandi's view that the most serious problem is not what is missing but what is inappropriately placed can also be illustrated in the case of an old town. Dominant buildings that ignore the established structure are such examples. Brandi's principle of the restoration of works of art requires that additions should be distinguishable from close up but should be invisible from a distance. This requirement is particularly applicable in the case of new buildings in an old town, where the new structure must be clearly distinguishable from old ones, but should not violate urban integrity and the general impression. The architectural form of the new house, and the design and finish of its façade should be as neutral as possible to prevent them from being conspicuous from a distance. Architects, however, favour the principle of contrast, where new buildings are put into sharp contrast with the old ones, both in material and form. If a house erected in a gap in the urban structure is in striking contrast with the environment, it shatters the figure of the established urban space and has the effect of not belonging there.

Practice

The Ferrum department store,⁷ built in the central square in the old town of Kuressaare, could be regarded as a successful example of a new structure in a historical environment, having won favour both with architects and conservationists. Below, relying on Brandi's restoration axioms, I will analyse the urban construction situation and principles of restoration. These are the potential unity and figural integrity of the square and the neutrality of the new building filling the lacuna.

As the integral figure of the square was only broken by one gap, restoration of its potential unity was possible and necessary. The new structure fills a gap, which, created due to war damages, had violated the integrity of the historical town square. The new building restored the original spatial structure and plan of the central square, as well as its potential unity. Peculiarities of the vernacular town include an irregular street structure and fluctuating building lines. It is therefore

⁷ The Ferrum department store (Tallinna 8) was completed in 2002; its architects are Andres Alver, Tarmo Laht, Indrek Rünkla, Ulla Mets and Tiit Trummal.

essential to analyse the location of the new building with regard to the street line. The earlier building on the same site had been built away from the general street line so the Town Hall, the central building in the square, could rise into prominence. Therefore, the new building is also articulated both in its ground plan and volume and retreats from the street line, leaving the dominant square well in view. The Ferrum department store meets the requirements of the restoration of the spatial figure of the old town. It does not violate the established rhythm of buildings along the street front or the street's figure. The dimensions, the shape of the roof and the special composition are similar in appearance to the old buildings in the vicinity. Even the department store's slightly heavy appearance is connected with the typical sturdy Kuressaare building type, with a high hip roof borrowed from barn dwellings. The new building does not have the effect of being out of place at the site, its neutral general appearance being a suitable neighbour to the historical buildings.

The condition presented to a new structure filling a lacuna, in this case a gap in the urban space, is the possibility of differentiating it from old houses from close up, and having it merge into the general picture from a distance. In this it is important to bear in mind the shape and height of the surrounding buildings, and the composition methods of their roofs and wall surfaces, which all together form a concrete figure. In this case, the old buildings have a rectangular main body, level wall surfaces with the windows spaced in a fixed rhythm, gable and hip roofs and natural finishing materials. All these methods of design can also be observed in the architectural solution of the new building. The new roofing material, cortel steel, provoked questions. It is a material similar to rusty metal, which, like ceramic roof tiles, changes its appearance as a result of oxidisation, becoming similar to them in tone. In addition, dolomite slabs characteristic of Kuressaare buildings were used in the exterior finish. As a result, traditional materials dominate in the general appearance, while modern details and construction technology can be observed from close up.

It is useful to apply the above analysis in any situation where it is necessary to restore the integrity of urban space. New construction in old towns is a natural process, as every age has left traces. Multi-layer architecture serves only to enrich the urban scene and add colour to it, as we are accustomed to seeing in our centuries-old old towns.

It would be interesting to continue this analysis, relying on the phenomenological theory of cognition. It is necessary, in particular, because at first the new structure described above provoked strong criticism among Kuressaare citizens. It is here that I can see opportunities for further development of the principles of restoration, opportunities modern conservation has begun to apply. But this is an issue that demands a longer independent treatment.

Interpretations

The abstract meaning and synonyms of the term ‘lacuna’ make it possible to interpret it in various ways. In French, lacuna (*lacune*) meant a lack of words in a linked text until the 17th century. In 19th century restoration theory, there was a novel philological approach by the Milan school (*restauro filologico*), which was based on linguistic research. One of the authors of that concept was the art historian Tito Vespasiano Paravicini (1832–1899), who compared monuments with documents, seeing them as a reflection of different periods of time, with all their shortcomings and advantages. ‘The loss of such a monument would leave a lacuna in history, but even more serious would be its falsification as a document.’ (Jokilehto 1999: 200.) Comparison of the monument with the document as a mirror of history makes it possible to call the loss of a monument a gap in history.

Lacuna, in the sense of a loss or gap, could mean blanks in our historical memory. Jorge Luis Borges poetically writes about the role of memory in the preservation of monuments in his short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. He describes the imaginary world of Tlön, whose people are idealists by birth. This idealism, which has lasted for many centuries, has not failed to have an effect on reality: ‘Things duplicate themselves in Tlön; they also tend to grow vague or “sketchy” and lose detail when they begin to be forgotten. The classic example is the doorway that continued to exist so long as a certain beggar frequented it, but which was lost to sight when he died.’ (Borges 2000: 20.)

One of the English synonyms of the word lacuna – interval – means the time gap between two events. Relying on this, the notion of the lacuna could be interpreted as the separation of two events in time and space. A lacuna seen as an interval could be a space of time separating creation and destruction.

Returning to urban construction, any empty place in a town could be seen as a lacuna. Vacant lots, to which socially and architecturally suitable solutions are

being looked for, have recently risen on the agenda. In this article, I have used a comparison based on Brandi's restoration theory. The comparison is with an old town of an established structure that is aesthetically valuable in its integrity. Similar comparisons and restoration principles can also be used in other urban construction situations, where we are concerned with certain structures and urban construction images, on the precondition that they can be aesthetically valuable. But a similar treatment of even more extensive areas, where it is possible to observe integral figures and structural regularities, cannot be ruled out.

Conclusions

I believe that the application of Brandi's restoration theory, in the case of an historical urban integrity, is possible if we look at the valuable developed environment of an old town as a work of art. In the case of an old town, it is important to preserve aesthetically valuable buildings and spatial form. The relationship of a historical city with time and space is one of the most problematic issues. As the only justified moment of restoration is the present, it is not justified to restore buildings of a city as they existed before. The requirement of potential unity can most acceptably be implemented in a historical urban environment. The aim of the protection of historical towns has been the restoration of urban integrity. Replacement of destroyed buildings with new ones and fitting them into the historical architectural environment is topical in old towns. The notion of 'lacuna' and Brandi's neutral tint theory based on it can be very well used in urban construction. Relying on the theory, new structures in an old environment should stand out as little as possible in a general view, so they will constitute a neutral background to the original buildings. At the same time, they should be clearly differentiable from old ones from close up. Construction of new buildings in a historical environment featuring buildings from different periods and of different architectural appearance is a natural process – old cities have been renewed throughout history. To ensure continuity of development, it is necessary to take into account the established urban structures and building traditions. Cesare Brandi's restoration theory could serve as a theoretical pillar in working out more justified methods of the renovation of old towns. It should be complemented with a non-material perception of the environment, which could bring the somewhat alienated conservation activity closer to people and ensure a deepening of their sense of identity.

The notion 'lacuna' can be interpreted so that it means blanks in both history and memory. Lacuna, a gap in urban construction, marks empty spaces in the built structure, in more general terms a broken continuity in the historical development of a city. In the author's opinion, it is disregard of harmonious and coherent development that has created the present conflicts in urban construction.

References

- Borges, Jorge Luis 2000. *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. – J. L. Borges. *Fictions*. Trans. Andrew Hurley. London: Penguin Books, pp. 7–20
- Brandi, Cesare 1996. Theory of restoration, I. Theory of restoration, II. – *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*. Eds. Nicholas Stanley Price, Mansfield Kirby Talley Jr., Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro. Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, pp. 230–235, 339–342
- Jokilehto, Jukka 1999. *A History of Architectural Conservation*. Oxford, Burlington: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann
- Philippot, Paul 1996. Historic preservation: Philosophy, criteria, guidelines, II. – *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*. Eds. Nicholas Stanley Price, Mansfield Kirby Talley Jr., Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro. Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, pp. 358–364