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THE ROLE OF QUASI-OBJECTS WITHIN THE SPACE BETWEEN ART, ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to redefine cultural heritage preservation spanning the space it occupies between social sciences, natural sciences and art. The concept of *quasi-object* defined by the anthropologists Bruno Latour is analyzed as an attempt to bridge the gap between the *milieu* as a subjective reality as lived and the environment as objectified by science. Such kind of a bridge is necessary in the definition of criteria for architectural/cultural value in the process of preservation of heritage, often oscillating between universality and subjectivity.

Ambiguity of Architecture and Preservation

Architects tend to see the world deformed through the lenses of architecture – an art and a science at the same time. Architecture can be defined as the art of space-making or the science of spatiality production. Architecture is the creation of intervals in space and time which are to be inhabited and enjoyed by various living creatures. In this sense any work of art creating spatial landscapes to be experienced can be defined as architecture.

This ambiguous zone where art and architecture meet is a kind of “chaosmos” (James Joyce) – a fusion of chaos and cosmos. It is a venue for experiment and interpretation *folds* in the meaning of Gilles Deleuze as non-human subjectivity. In this zone Stonehenge, a monument or a viewing deck over a pond are all “signs” that will push us out of our habits of perception into the conditions of creation” (Deleuze).

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Architecture essentially serves humans within their ups and downs during their transient passage through the world efficiently labelled as life cycle. It can be seen as a kind of a spatial enclosure to mediate human communication within nature or an extension of human body as the primary inhabited space with architecture as the secondary. Architecture of quality helps to ensure physical survival. However, it has been always a shelter for the soul, too.

As Rem Koolhaas stated in 2009, preservation is overtaking us as a forward-thinking celebration of life – a way of looking at something that seems to be fading or gone and incubating new life within it (Ref. 1). Furthermore, he states in OMA's preservation manifesto that preservation is architecture's saving retreat and architecture's formless substitution as it creates relevance without new forms.

"Architecture is saved from obsolescence and appears contemporary as it is framed and reframed by preservation as culturally significant" (Ref. 1, p. 80). In addition, Koolhaas reminds us that preservation is always suspended between life and death motivating us to get sharper and tenderer at the same time.

Establishing a vital link between preservation humble philosophy and contemporary architectural design, Koolhaas advocates preservation as the best approach to fuse architectural form with cultural significance.

Preservation derives from old Anglo-French and Latin words meaning *keep safe* or *guard beforehand*, implying adding a substance such as sugar to prolong food edibility or a protected place for animals or plants. It is essentially an artificial intervention within the natural process of biological metabolism – conception, birth, growth and decay.

James Marston Fitch has emphasized the unnaturalness of preservation as a supplement to architecture in installing an "unnatural interface" between the building and the observer (Ref. 1). He connects architecture and preservation in a symbiosis where the first provide the form and the second its cultural significance. As Koolhaas has noted, there is a vital link between architectural form and cultural meaning mediated by the role of preservation as a supplement.

Art, Counter Memory and Counter History – Preservation Gesture

If preservation is the screen onto which projections or through which frame architecture achieves its cultural significance, art is the canvas to experiment and test the grounds for a new awareness and sensibility regarding questions of cultural identity. Art is a constant exploration of counter-history and counter-memory in the sense of Foucault individual resistance (Ref. 2) against the official versions of historical continuity. Counter-memory excavates the past for the "hidden histories" excluded from the dominant narratives.

It raises fragile individual voices to counter-balance the authority of all invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger) as attempts towards a homogeneous construction of historical continuity and the roots from which it draws its identity. Foucault emphasizes the importance of archeology rather than history in trying to evaluate the relationship of past and present. According to Bergsonian continuity (Ref. 3), each instant can reveal the entire flow of the past and a preservation gesture as a fusion of art and preservation could reveal an eccentric intuition of individual counter-memory and counter-history.

A preservation gesture is a form of questioning who remembers, what the context of memory is and who decides what to be preserved. It is a kind of "geological glimpse" (Anne Michaels – Ref. 3) of time to reveal heterogeneity and complexity of human existence. For this purpose it reconsiders the relationship of objects and space within abandoned buildings.

A preservation gesture is suspended between art, architecture and preservation as an archeology of memory or a philosophy of difference (Foucault).

Preservation gesture is an expression of humanity in the attempt to take care of neglected or ignored human cultural achievements often remaining at the shadows. It is a constantly evolving concept expanding our empathy to delicate and fragile cultural forms within our existence, ultimately linking our activities with the responsibility to our planet fate in terms of its limited resource exploitation and preservation. Preservation is safeguarding the variety of micro-worlds within our world and it should give room to fragile voices of authenticity and difference.

Quasi-objects and Preservation Gesture

There is an inherent duality and perennial contradiction in the process of preservation of individual dwellings. They represent a physical space which can be objectified by science and related to architectural standards and at the same time they constitute a subjective space – *milieu* (Ref. 4) as a lived individual reality. Often criteria for preservation include contradictory requirements – for example the requirement for documented old age of the building coexists with a requirement for a well-preserved physical state of the building. As a result, preservation projects of individual houses turned into museums usually demonstrate a purified past stripped out of the personal subjective traces of individual life histories and homogeneously unified within a common architectural standard of spatial treatment.

To reconcile this contradiction, abandoned buildings of churches and houses offer a venue for experimental approach to preservation. Abandoned buildings always contain various types of objects or things discarded to remain there by chance or considered without any value.

These forgotten/discarded objects within abandoned buildings awaken the mind to reconsider phenomena which cross the lines between nature/culture and subject/object dichotomies in our “modern” mode of classification (Ref. 5). Such quasi-objects are “actants” as they possess a mysterious intentionality or self-directedness like animals able to bend our intentions in unpredictable ways. As such they are “participants” not mere “recipients” in our actions. Quasi-objects influence human actions in various ways in a constant process of reconfiguration of relationships. Preservation gestures can explore this nature of metamorphose or the change as a permanent condition of life.

Abandoned spaces (once inhabited) constitute a neutral zone of ambiguity – hence a stage for various kinds of metamorphose, a venue to explore the intrinsic texture of space-time continuum in its *non-humanity* – relationship between things, objects, beasts, humans and non-humans (Ref. 5). In this context non-humans (quasi-objects) cross over or step into our reality – life threads to weave traces of human life within the dwelling as a contained and personal space-time continuum. Is it possible to preserve one’s life traces as a cultural heritage at a personal scale?

Preservation started as to defend and protect single buildings, street ensembles, cultural zones, urban districts, historic cities and humanly formed landscapes. Furthermore in Japan there are people designated as living cultural treasures for the possession of a particular art or craft technique inherited through various generations. I find the meaning of preservation in a constant attempt to grasp/encompass and re-define new fragile fragments of reality in accordance with an ever-evolving spirit of time and collective awareness.

Is it possible to evaluate a space of *non-humanity* as having a cultural value? – it aims to reach a perspective beyond our narcissistic top-down human centered approach toward life on our planet into a more precise awareness of the practical mode of our living within the

simultaneous superimposition and overlapping of imagination and experience of our relations to things, animals and non-humans.

This neutral (at present non-human) zone could be seen as a stage for beings on the edge of reality and imagination who play a vital role at the level of collective consciousness through quasi-objects as mediators/attractors of energy between expanding fields in space/time.

Preservation gestures to expose discarded objects in abandoned buildings as spatial attractors can focus attention on current topics such as

- 1) Waste and global environment preservation.
- 2) Politics of preservation – who decides to preserve what.
- 3) Relationship between art, architecture and preservation.
- 4) The intrinsic texture of space-time continuum.

A quasi object is an intriguing term of an object which provokes interactions among people as a participant or a kind of a stem cell potentially playing a variety of functions. It occupies the intermediate space between a human and a non-human. How the objects within the buildings can be revived to re-play & enact the spirit of the inner space as a witness of multiplicity of human dramas within entire building history? If a building could speak up what kind of stories it would share with us as a speechless and tolerant witness of the entire palette of human transience?

In my view the relationship between a building and the objects occupying its space should be reconsidered in its unbreakable links between each other in the process of establishing criteria for preservation. Those objects are related to space with invisible but substantially important threads as they are intrinsically related to human occupancy of space and therefore they have the same right to be preserved as the building itself.

Archeology of Memory – Two Preservation Gestures in the UK and Bulgaria

In 2017, initiated by Darren Barker from Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust, two projects with some students from the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy were implemented in two abandoned buildings in the United Kingdom and Bulgaria.

An installation at the abandoned fisherman church of St John, Great Yarmouth (Fig. 1, 2) was done in February 2017 as a preservation gesture to bring attention to the preservation of the building. There are many churches in Great Yarmouth as remnants of town communities historic spatial tissue. Once the space of the church used to be an expression of the community spirit and vitality inspired or orchestrated by religion. In the present fast food and fast life consumer society church buildings remain within our townscape as solitary monuments overlooking our convenience-driven modern development at the expense of expanding waste-production.

The variety of remaining trivia within the space of St John's is a precious challenge to try to valorise and exhibit them looking for the poetics of the prosaic. There is a Japanese aesthetic term *mono-no-aware* usually translated as the empathy toward things or a sensitivity to ephemera. To discover beauty within the mundane with a sense of transient gentle sadness is an aesthetic principle at the core of the tea ceremony practice in Japan, elevated as an art form by the tea master Sen no Rikyu in the 15th century.



Figure 1. Suspended between art, architecture and preservation, the Church of St John, Great Yarmouth (Photo – Nick Butcher)



Figure 2. Discarded objects from church sales were suspended in the nave (Photo – Nick Butcher)

By arranging all the leftover things within the church space it might be possible to trace an invisible pathway linking past, present and future of the building by questioning our present-day cultural values. Architectural space of St John's once marked a religious centred community life, but today is left functionless, a tempting ground for artists to stretch out the boundaries of our present.

To trace a pathway of detritus within the church space of St John is a task of creating an authentic rhythm of spatial-temporal intervals as a sequence of outcries and pauses aiming to provoke questions to the visitors. It is an architectural task to connect the spatial layout of the church with the spatial trajectories or threads of our thoughts on contemporary culture and meaning of preservation.

The second project was done in July 2017 in an abandoned house in the village of Karpachevo, Bulgaria (Fig. 3). The aim was an attempt to preserve one's life as a heritage within the space of a single room. Objects scattered within the room such as photos, wedding invitations, children birthdays cards, letters from children, food envelopes, clothes, tools, newspapers, books, etc. were suspended as life threads within the contained space of the room where they were discarded.



Figure 3. In praise of life threads – Darren Barker (photo – Violeta Chalakova)

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ПРОСТРАНСТВО МЕЖДУ АРХИТЕКТУРАТА, ИЗКУСТВОТО И ОПАЗВАНЕ НА КУЛТУРНОТО НАСЛЕДСТВО – РОЛЯТА НА ПОЛУ-ПРЕДМЕТИТЕ

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Ключови думи: културно наследство, полу-предмет, архитектурна ценност

РЕЗЮМЕ

Статията разглежда опазването на културното наследство в светлината на двойствената му природа в пространството между хуманитарните науки, техническите науки и изкуството. Понятието за полу-предмет на антрополога Бруно Латур се разглежда като опит да се намери баланс между субективното усещане за пространство като изживявана реалност и обективните характеристики на пространството като заобикаляща среда, станала предмет на техническите науки. Такъв баланс е необходим при определяне на критериите за архитектурна ценност в процеса на опазване на културното наследство, осцилиращо между универсализъм и индивидуалност.

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