

MATERIAL, IDEA AND AUTHENTICITY
LESSONS FROM THE MODERN MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

In Western culture, the effort to conserve the authentic qualities in a building or monument is primarily focused upon resisting the forces of change that cause materials to change and deteriorate over time, or, upon resisting the forces of change that paradoxically contribute to the authentic aura of the work while hastening its decay. The strategy of focusing upon material authenticity is further complicated in addressing the architecture of the Modern movement where:

- 1.) Material permanence was often not a focus of the work,*
- 2.) Materials were often used in an ambiguous fashion and*
- 3.) The materials themselves were often experimental substances whose conservation is either impractical or impossible.*

Is it therefore reasonable to postulate that authenticity particularly, but by no means uniquely, as it relates to Modern architecture, should more accurately be judged by the ability of the work to continue to communicate key concepts embodied in the building at its creation? In some cases material authenticity remains a critical component to understanding the idea, but in others it is more important that the work communicate ideas that focus on experiential, even transitory aspects of the work that may speak volumes to the work as architecture, but have little if anything to do with the particulars of the building fabric.

This paper will present and evaluate issues of authenticity in the alteration and restoration of buildings of the recent past in order to simultaneously broaden and sharpen our understanding of what should be considered authentic in dealing with these structures.

Introduction

In order to establish the role and importance of authenticity as it relates to the architecture of the modern movement, we must first ask the question: what does authenticity mean as it relates to an

artifact that is trying to communicate an idea of modernity? Authenticity is defined by Webster as “that which can be believed or accepted,” or, the state of “*being* in fact as *represented*.” We may believe or accept many concepts of modernity – abstraction, impermanence, transitoriness, dynamism, and then imagine how these ideas are embodied through form, material and space into something that we may define as being authentic relative to the intent of the idea – both as a modern artifact and a work of architecture. John Allan states that “spiritual authenticity” is critical in a work of the modern movement, as a measure of its *representation* of the social, technical and aesthetic principles of modernism, and a “commitment to change.”¹ This paper will consider those qualities of form, space, material and idea that contribute to the authenticity of a modern building, how these qualities are transformed in the process of modification, and how the resulting synthesis may continue to be *believed as being that which is represented*.

As a building ages, changes occur in the fabric that create patina, and to imbue the structure with Age value, one of the essential categories defined by Alois Riegl that have been used as touchstones for determining value in historic structures for the past 100 years.² It can be argued that these changes in themselves – rendered by nature and the process of routine maintenance – should not alter the fundamental perception or meaning of a work as it was originally intended. Material integrity has long been a cornerstone of the Western concept of authenticity as it applies to cultural resources, though the nature of this concern has changed significantly over the course of the last 150 years. Ruskin, who first articulates a strong argument on this issue, takes what might be called the extreme organic position asserting that it is not only material but the record of the transformation of that material by craftspeople that imparts authenticity, and that tampering with the material surface or patina – even in the process of ‘restoration,’ robs the material of the evidence of this interaction of being and material, and hence its authenticity.³

Riegl looks at a broader spectrum to find value in built form. He also identifies Newness as a value, particularly in “our modern view...(that) requires flawless integrity of form,” and this value is inevitably lost with the process of aging.⁴ Newness value became particularly important in establishing the power and difference of buildings of the modern movement, where the use of materials whose production or finish was only possible through industrial processes were often used to represent an *idea*. The idea could be about aesthetics, the nature of surface, systems of production, or something else that the particular material was called upon to represent. In many cases however, particularly in the early and most forcefully polemic phase of the modern movement, the idea took precedence over the desire to render explicit the innate qualities of the

material itself. Therefore, regardless of their use and aesthetic quality, a fundamental part of the original meaning of many works of the modern movement was their newness, as an expression of modernity, and their departure, as machine made artifacts, in concept, material and form, from their predecessors, which were designed to evoke and reinforce tradition. This position is first and perhaps most forcefully articulated by Marinetti, writing some 5 years after Riegl, in the Futurist Manifesto, who as paraphrased by Lionel Trilling “imputes to the organic as a social and moral ideal exactly the quality of *inauthenticity* against which the organic principle had itself been directed – not the organic but the mechanical is to be the authenticating principle of modern life.”⁵

The simplicity of this division is complicated by the presence of a strong “organic” strain that has asserted itself as a parallel movement in modernism, especially in the work of architects such as Alvar Aalto, Hans Scharoun and Frank Lloyd Wright; but it is important to recognize that the organicism promoted in the rhetoric of modernism is still based upon a rationalist philosophy that embraces the use of industrial processes and even industrial materials (this is particularly true in the work of Wright) in order to realize an appropriately modern architecture. Even where natural materials are carefully used and beautifully finished in one-off applications, as may be found in the work of Aalto or Carlo Scarpa, it is now not only the material but also the *idea of craft*, and its extension into the realm of industry, rather than the actual hand of the craftsman, that we consider authentic in this work.

As we contemplate strategies for the rehabilitation of works of the modern movement, what then should we consider to be the essential authentic qualities in these works, and how should we be prepared to acknowledge and express the changes of meaning that will inevitably occur once the interventions are complete? To begin to answer these questions, we should first consider Trilling’s observation of the curious correspondence between the reception of modernism in the early twentieth century and the Greek roots of the word authentic, with its connotations of the willful, even violent exercise of power (*authenteo*), and the notion of the master or doer who holds the power of life and death over others (*authentēs*). Trilling writes: “These ancient denotations bear upon the nature and intention of the artistic culture of the period we call Modern. Our habituation to this artistic culture over the decades leads us to speak of it as classic, not only as a way of asserting its greatness, but also to express our perception of its qualities of order and repose, even of transcendence. Sometimes we are a little puzzled to understand why this art was greeted upon its first appearance with so violent a resistance, forgetting how much violence there

was in its creative will, how ruthless an act was required to assert autonomy in a culture schooled in duty and in obedience to peremptory and absolute law....”⁶

This points out with particular eloquence the conundrum that preservationists face in sustaining the authentic aura of a modern building. As a culture we are decades beyond what Robert Hughes called “the Shock of the New,”⁷ and one might argue that many of the best modern buildings were in fact both conceived and received as orderly, transcendent, even reassuring works designed to invite human interaction. But there is nonetheless a polemic inherent in modernism – in its relationship to the entire past history of western architecture – that must be acknowledged and engaged when we propose modifications to these buildings. This polemic is both technical and aesthetic, but at its essence it is social, driven by a collective desire to create habitats designed with the instruments of modernity to uplift the human condition. This would suggest that in order for a modern building constructed with inherent social purpose to be considered authentic in the course of its transformation, it would have to continue to render a social purpose in some form.

Capturing the authenticity of the idea is less difficult where a work retains its original purpose and program, but to define and sustain authentic social meaning in a building as it is adapted to a new use requires more than simply a sympathetic architectural approach, it also demands a commitment to engage and serve the community for which it is built. Parenthetically, this is not meant to prejudge the skill and quality of a renovation project solely by its program; it is therefore important to understand that an architectural expression of social purpose and a dispassionate evaluation of the architectural quality of an intervention are not necessarily the same thing.

In order to begin to qualify legitimate approaches to the problem of defining and sustaining authenticity through the process of intervening in a modern building, we will look at how two projects use the essential strategies of extension and difference to accommodate intervention in a meaningful fashion. The attitude toward the original, the modification of the original, and the willingness to express change as a means of reinforcing the identity of both the original and the intervention are issues that will be examined in these studies.

The Van Nelle Factory

The Van Nelle Factory in Rotterdam (1926-31, Brinkmann and Van der Vlugt) is the largest and one of the best known buildings of the Dutch Nieuwe Bouwen movement, and an iconic early functionalist structure. Used for over 60 years as a packaging facility for coffee, tea and tobacco, the plant was closed in 1996, and in 1999 a master plan by Wessel de Jonge Architects established guidelines for its conversion to incubator space for design and technology oriented start-up companies.⁸ A reinforced concrete frame structure clad with a vast curtain wall made up of aluminum painted Crittal industrial steel sash and spandrels, the building has full landmark status in the Netherlands which mandated a rigorous process for the rehabilitation of the structure.

From an orthodox preservation standpoint, the Van Nelle building retains much of its material and contextual authenticity with the restoration of the curtain wall, the building's signature character defining feature, but the restoration has not obscured the fact that this icon of Modernity is now an artifact emblematic of technology that is over 75 years old, and that there is in fact charm – we may even call it patina of a sort – that contributes to the overall effect of the work. If the character of the wall is no longer about newness – it is about showcasing its protean industrial character as an historic artifact – it may also be argued that it is also no longer about the Modernity of which it is emblematic. Its significance is now based on age and historic value, and we have to acknowledge that its power now comes in no small measure through the nostalgia that inevitably informs the contemplation of the antique. We may question whether restoration is in fact the most authentic course relative to the ideology of the Modern movement and to the original design intent of the building. The Van Nelle curtain wall was an expression of state of the art building envelope technology in the 1920s', and one could conceivably argue that the present rehabilitation should embrace the Modernist idea of continuous change and progress with a new curtain wall that reflects contemporary standards of performance and sustainability.

The principal character defining feature of the interiors are the open expanses of light filled space that served as the factory floors. While the essential interior infrastructure, including the perimeter lighting was restored to the greatest degree possible, the decision to maintain the un-insulated single glazed industrial curtain wall meant that the interior environment would be subject to considerable seasonal fluctuation, and that measures would have to be taken to mitigate this situation. While some of the public service spaces such as entry lobby, lounge and café areas were able to be accommodated under fluctuating environmental conditions, it quickly became apparent that the needs of the present office environment demanded both more controlled comfort and higher levels of energy efficiency. Given the size and configuration of the factory floors, a

consortium of renovation architects developed a scheme to create internal office units with a glazed partition system that would act as a double wall system and in effect create buildings within the building.

The design of the system – in clear anodized aluminum and silicone-glazed combinations of clear and obscure tempered glass – is contemporary in its slickness and the way that it creates an ambiguous relationship, through selective transparency, reflection and obscuration, with the relentless, straightforward concrete frame and exterior envelope. In addition, every attempt is made, through lighting and the placement and detailing of the interior wall, to minimize its impact on the perception of the building, especially at night, and we may in fact acknowledge that through these changes, the nocturnal appearance of the exterior is far closer to its historic appearance than it has been for many years. Complementing the new work, the stair halls, many of the WC's and the original office and reception areas for the Van Nelle Company have been meticulously restored, down to the unique hardware and fittings found throughout the complex. Difference is clearly the strategy adopted for the interventions, as no attempt is made to blend the new work with the old.

On the interior, because the interventions are in this case pure insertions within a robust and clearly differentiated armature, distinction is made between the new and existing fabric so that, materially, the nature of each remains discreet and intact – *each is as it is represented*. However, if we accept that one of the salient character defining features of the complex are the transparent space of the uninterrupted space of the factory floors, then the intervention changes the quality and the *effect* of the open universal space. The result is in fact a new synthesis, and the new glass partitions acknowledge both the potential of the open space, while referring to and engaging, through transparency and reflection, the original building skin. The insertions create a dialogue with the envelope that serves to remind us as they weave as ephemeral forms through the factory floors, of the cultural impact that the original curtain wall, by virtue of its scale and transparency, had when new.

Is Van Nelle any less authentic for this change? To answer this question we must also consider the change in use, and the continuing social purpose invested in the building. Van Nelle was constructed as a commercial enterprise, and as such may be construed as not being built for a social purpose, but it was also considered to be a model for providing a modern, safe and comfortable working environment. Its new purpose is also commercial, but of a very different

kind, reflecting in many ways the changed economic focus and direction of the developed world, away from manufacturing and the processing of bulk commodities and toward creative, technology intensive enterprises. In this way, the original social purpose of Van Nelle has been updated in a manner consonant with the needs of today's workforce. The modifications that have transformed the interiors reflect this change in an honest, contemporary fashion, but with sufficient delicacy that they do not overwhelm the stark power of the original architecture. The spaces have now been re-presented in a manner that will set a new, repositioned baseline for future interventions – which will then in turn have to determine what constitutes authenticity in this new synthesis.

Tweebronen

In 1936 construction began on the last work of Henry van de Velde in Belgium, the Technische School in Leuven. An urban infill project in the center of the old city, the building has two interesting but relatively modest street facades, while receiving most of its light and much of its architectural definition as an irregular “L” developed around an interior courtyard. While the street facades utilize van de Velde's signature large terracotta tiles and combinations of stone as honorific materials, the courtyards are treated in a straightforward fashion with exposed concrete frame, brick spandrels and industrial sash. The interiors were austere and functional, with exposed building systems and steel and glass industrial partitions used to divide the spaces formed by the exposed concrete frame. Between 1994 and 2000, the building was transformed into the Municipal Library and Archives of Leuven by a consortium of architects (RITO and Formanova) under the direction of Georges Baines, a leading Belgian architect of the post war period⁹.

Van de Velde's idea of the building, tectonically, urbanistically and as a social condenser, was an important theme to the renovation architects as they conceived their project.¹⁰ The exterior strategy was to restore and re-present van de Velde's work on the facades to the greatest degree possible, and to transform the interiors “in the spirit of van de Velde,”¹¹ but in a thoroughly contemporary fashion. The architects also designed an addition to serve as the third wall of the courtyard; this respects the scale and rhythm of van de Velde's work, but utilizes an elegantly detailed exposed steel frame, and large, unbroken expanses of glazing to give it a very different character from the original building.

On the interior, the rhythm and sculptural qualities of the concrete frame are emphasized through the architects' removal of the existing interior partitions that had previously defined classroom and corridor, creating a "virtual" series of rooms. They make the most of the various forms of top lighting found in the original structure, as floors are dropped and balconies added that allow for far more dramatic effect in the renovation than was ever present in van de Velde's design. This is emphasized by the insertion of a new central stair within the library, itself top-lit with clerestory lighting that is also a major tectonic insertion within the space, recalling the formal language and material palette (wood and steel) of the addition.

But there is a twist. The structural capacity of the original concrete frame was insufficient to accommodate the live loads required for a library. It therefore became necessary, as the extent of this problem was revealed, to deconstruct and re-build much of the internal structure of the building. While the new reinforced frame mimics the original in surface material and form, it is now a reconstruction masquerading as the original, materially inauthentic, but in character as a modernist foil for the architects' contemporary intervention.

To what degree does this act of reconstruction destroy the authenticity of the original? This is a core debate in modern movement preservation, and it is usually necessitated for performance issues. To cite two examples, the façades of Lever House, an early hermetically sealed curtain wall building, were replaced with a system that meets present standards of weatherability and energy performance, and J.J.P. Oud's Kiefhoek housing estate in Rotterdam was demolished and rebuilt in kind (on the exterior) in order to meet contemporary life-safety codes and space standards. While there is no common consensus on this issue, it is at least broadly recognized that the choice in these and other cases often comes down to whether or not to accept the loss of the original fabric as the price to pay for retaining the form and the idea of the original through a replication.

At Tweebronnen, the building is stripped bare and redressed in contemporary guise, with a careful line being drawn between the suppression of change in the faithful reconstruction of van de Velde's structural armature and facades, and its acknowledgement in the language of the interventions. Although the original spatial qualities of the Technische School have been fundamentally altered, the architects and commentators writing about the project maintain that they have refreshed and re-presented the essence of van de Velde's original by foregrounding the fundamental qualities of structure and light that are at the core of the building. In this they are

clearly seeking to extend van de Velde's attempts at openness and transparency, both salient characteristics of the modern movement, which they are able to realize largely through the change in program. They are also careful to emphasize the social importance of their project, noting that van de Velde's "social commitment" in the design of the school "is now confirmed once again by housing a public library there."¹²

Tweebronnen, modifies through both extension and difference, though with the exception of reconstruction of the concrete frame and the requirements mandated by the regulatory authorities for the new windows, no attempt is made to mimic van de Velde's original vocabulary. While the architects manage to retain a flavor of the austerity of van de Velde's design, there is no question that here, as at van Nelle, the interventions have an air of preciousity that clearly identify them as contemporary work. We may argue that this is perhaps an appropriately authentic response, and that although this kind of treatment may be out of character for a building of the 1930s', it is an honest reflection of the society that has commissioned the new work, and the juxtaposition of these sensibilities – where they have been skillfully realized, as at Tweebronnen, will perhaps be the most authentic legacy of this project to the future of the building.

Conclusion

Van Nelle and Tweebronnen acknowledge that transformations establish new identity and hence new meaning, while raising the question as to how this new meaning squares with the representation of a modern building. A poignant component of this new meaning is the recognition of the reality of the historical status of modernism, and the paradox that is engendered when, as Hannah Lewi comments, "it still represents futurism yet is on the verge of being engulfed by heritage values."¹³ This conundrum is widely recognized, and while the temporal fact of this situation is inescapable, we should resist the temptation to draw the same heritage conservation box around the growing movement to preserve works of the recent past. Preservation is changing, and ironically, it is the present post modern condition of the preservation movement itself that is enabling a more activist approach to the engagement of our cultural heritage. Jorge Otero Pailos speaks of the possibilities of the regeneration of context and meaning through intervention in "The Contemporary Stamp of Incompleteness,"¹⁴ and we begin to see this occurring at Tweebronnen, where van de Velde's vision has been mined and extended to include and celebrate the unintended consequences of his original architectural strategy. A broader view, from Vittorio Gregotti – with his roots firmly planted in the modern movement –

acknowledges that modification must embody “interest in the materials of memory, not nostalgically, but in terms of juxtaposition...forming new orders and groupings by shifting the context of those materials that belong to memory’s heritage.”¹⁵

While these are principles that can be applied to buildings of any age, the polemical character of modernism – and its continuing resonance in contemporary building culture – suggests that extension can apply to meaning as well, and that the contemporary notion of incompleteness can in fact extend some of the dynamic and transitory qualities of a modern building in a way that some of the visceral power of the original can be reconceptualized in the new synthesis. Perhaps this new entity can only succeed through evoking nostalgia, even if it is “nostalgia for the avant-garde,” but one can also maintain – for better or worse – that nostalgia is a quintessential post modern attribute. If we look at Van Nelle and Tweebronnen, it is possible to perceive a real dialogue, animated at times, between the modernist’s search for truth and the post modern hunger to extract meaning from this truth and re-present it in contemporary fashion. The willingness to acknowledge that there are parts of the dialogue that are left hanging, that the work may be finished but not complete, and that use and process will continue to allow these structures to evolve and potentially to surprise and to configure unimagined meanings; these are perhaps their most authentic qualities.

Coda

The two projects discussed in this essay are products of a Northern European sensibility that already makes less distinction between preservation and the design of interventions than we have been used to in the United States. It is interesting to speculate as to how these projects would have been impacted had they been required to conform to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. The Van Nelle Factory rehabilitation can easily be imagined as an adaptive reuse in the manner to which we have become accustomed with 19th century mill buildings, although the greater interdependence of the aesthetic of the interior and exterior at Van Nelle would naturally foreground the importance of the nature and quality of the interior changes, and would subject these to the kind of scrutiny that they in fact faced with the Dutch authorities.

Tweebronnen presents a more complex case, both as a reconstruction and as a more robust intervention that removes historic interior fabric and goes further to alter the internal workings of the building. With the exception of small restored areas at the two entrance lobbies, there is no

remaining trace of the original interior, which included steel and glass partitions that could easily have been listed as contributing to the character of the historic fabric. It would not have been possible however to realize the present project while retaining these elements. The architects depend upon the un-adorned concrete frame to serve as a rough industrial foil for the contemporary insertions; this is part of the deliberate transfer of the original meaning of the structure that has transpired with the adaptive use.

Tweebronnen is by nature a fragmentary structure that can never be experienced as a whole; the interventions accentuate this condition and contribute to the episodic quality of discovery one experiences in moving through the building. Thus, although much of the original purpose character of the building has disappeared, its architectural essence has been heightened with the revelation of the underlying tectonic logic of van de Velde's scheme. I believe that such a project could be considered as following the spirit of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards; especially since the exteriors of the original building have been restored as close as possible to their 1938 appearance, and the addition is clearly differentiated from but harmonious with the existing fabric. A challenge might come from advocates for a more sympathetic restoration of the interior, but given the ascetic quality of the original and the general aesthetic proclivities of the regulatory community, it is not likely that this would occur.

Louis Kahn's aesthetic of authenticity: A building that changes with the sun and the seasons – attuned to the infinite variety of nature, a building that “exaggerates, and so heightens one's awareness of nature's infinite variations.” ...subtly prods the viewer toward a recognition of the contingent historical moment in which one lives and the contingent place on earth where one stands.” – S. Goldhagen

¹ Allen, John: “A Challenge of Values” in Huber-Jan Henket and Hilde Heynen, editors, Back From Utopia – the Challenge of the Modern Movement, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 2002, page 21.

² Riegl, Alois: The Modern Cult of Monuments – on Age Value, quoted in Porphyrios, Demetri, “.Restoration and Value,” in Porphyrios Associates, Andreas Papadakis, Publisher, London, 1999, Page 203.

³ John Ruskin, The Seven Lamps of Architecture, Chapter 6, “The Lamp of Memory,” Section XVIII; (New York, Noonday Press, 1961), 184-185, .

⁴ Riegl, Alois: The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origins, 1902; reprinted in Oppositions Journal, No. 25, New York, Rizzoli, 1982, p. 49.

⁵ Trilling, Lionel: Sincerity and Authenticity, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1972.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Hughes, Robert: The Shock of the New, New York, McGraw-Hill and Co., 1991, 1980 and PBS

television series, 1980.

⁸ De Jonge, Wessel: "The Technology of Change: The Van Nelle Factory in Transition," in Henket and Heynen, op cit., page 58.

⁹ Jacobs, Steven, Verpoest, Luc, et al.: Tweebronnen: De Reconversie van de Technische School van Henry van de Velde to Openbare Bibliotheek en Archief van Leuven (English Translation by Gregory Ball), Leuven, Openbare Bibliotheek Leuven, 2000, page. 90.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Lewi, Hannah, "Paradoxes in the Conservation of the Modern Movement," in Henket and Heynen, op cit., page 354.

¹⁴ Oter-Pailos, Jorge, "The Contemporary Stamp of Incompleteness," Future Anterior , Volume I, Number 2, Fall 2004

¹⁵ Gregotti, Vittorio, "On Modification" from Inside Architecture, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1995