
PROFESSIONAL INTERDISCIPLINARY POSITION AND ROLE OF ACADEMIC CONSERVATOR-RESTORERS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Methodical symbiosis and transdisciplinary cooperation using the example of the rebuilding and conservation of two Ottoman palaces in Istanbul

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ABSTRACT: Professional ethics and tasks for conservator-restorers, in the preservation of cultural heritage in Europe today: considering the development of scientific conservation-restoration and the improvement of academic education for conservator-restorers in the course of the twentieth century, this paper will analyse the professional position of conservator-restorers and their role in the interdisciplinary cooperation with other professionals dealing with the preservation of cultural heritage. How does cooperation run in the planning stage and in theory and in practice on site? How can we differentiate between the specific professional contributions of conservator-restorers and the activities of other professionals in the field of heritage preservation? How can we improve communication and interdisciplinary cooperation between all professionals involved?

KEYWORDS: Conservation-restoration of built heritage, conservation-restoration profession, interdisciplinary cooperation, Ottoman palaces in Istanbul

Thesis

The ideal scenario for the interdisciplinary position and role of conservator-restorers (in theory and practice on the construction site) lies not in a narrow definition of their role, but preferably in methodical symbiosis and transdisciplinary cooperation. It is only conceivable if conservator-restorers also recognise the diversity of processes and participate in it.

The conservation-restoration of two Ottoman palaces in Istanbul

On the European side of Istanbul, directly next to the First Bosphorus Bridge, which connects Europe with Asia, are the last two –from formerly 80– surviving wooden palaces from the late 19th century. The palaces were given as a dowry to Fehime and Hatice, the daughters of Sultan Murat V, by their uncle Sultan Abdulhamid II. They are of particular importance in the context of Istanbul's urban architecture and represent the typical Ottoman architecture for wooden palaces. (See: Bachmann & Tanman, 2008; Bachmann, 2012)

Following a sensitive conservation-restoration by the high standards set in monument preservation, the palaces will acquire a new function –that of a modern hotel– without hiding their historical origins and use. Spatial structure, layout and the original dimensions have been preserved despite the new function and a large part of the historic surfaces have been conserved.

After a severe fire in 2002, Fehime Palace remained without any protective cover and therefore exposed to the elements for ten years. In order to rescue it from complete ruin, a concept was developed to dismantle it and subsequently restore the salvageable components (approximately 30,000 original elements were deemed salvageable). These include elements from the wooden and stone exterior cladding and its decoration, canvas ceiling paintings with their stucco ornamentation, wooden ceilings, wooden cornices with stucco decoration, wall paintings on plaster and marble floors. From 2012 to 2014, the conservation-restoration work was carried out on the dismantled elements in a 5000 m² depot with specialised workshops specifically planned and designed for this project. Dismantled elements were finally reinstalled on site by 2018. While the salvaged elements were being conserved and restored, the support structure of the palace, which is entirely new, was constructed using original techniques (wood and bricks), keeping in mind the dimensions of the original elements along with strict earthquake standards.

The second palace, Hatice Palace, was extensively altered and unscrupulously renovated several times over the years. Most of the original wall surfaces were lost, and much of the original support structure was changed, which compromised the static conditions of many of the walls. On the other hand, the elaborately painted canvas ceilings with stucco decorations, the ceiling cornices and the wooden ceilings have been preserved almost entirely. Only a small part of the conservation-restoration for this palace was executed in the workshop; the rest is done in situ.

In 2010 RAO¹, under the author's direction, took over the conceptual planning as well as the project management and supervision for the reconstruction, conservation and restoration of both palaces. The restoration concept was developed in collaboration with David Chipperfield Architects Berlin and implemented step by step on behalf of the client Turkish Do & CO together with the local project architectural team Arol Sevimlisoy, Sevimli Mimarlik Istanbul.

Besides developing concepts for conservation-restoration and reconstruction, project management, project coordination and quality control, also practical assistance in the training of the conservator-

¹ Jörg Breitenfeldt was a co-founder, and until 2018 partner and managing director of the company Restaurierung am Oberbaum GmbH (RAO) Berlin, which was founded in 2001. Since mid-2018 he has continued his business and the project independently under his name, Jörg Breitenfeldt – Büro für Restaurierung (Office for Conservation-Restoration), with an experienced team of experts, which includes conservator-restorers, architects, engineers, archaeologists and art historians.

restorers, artisans and craftsmen for preparing reference areas was given to evaluate the aesthetic goals from a historic monuments point of view while taking into consideration the new function of the buildings as a hotel.

Analysis of the professional position of conservator-restorers and their role in interdisciplinary cooperation within the field of cultural heritage preservation today

If the example of the Istanbul project were to represent an ideal scenario, the question must be asked: What is the reality in conservation-restoration practice in general? What skills and expertise were conservator-restorers able to acquire and which ones will they be able to acquire in the future?

Using the current project in Istanbul as a starting point for the analysis of „The professional position of conservator-restorers and their role in interdisciplinary cooperation within the field of cultural heritage preservation”. A focus will be placed on the question of which influence conservator-restorers have on decision-making processes in practice and at which point they can intervene and become effective. When answering this question, we first try to clarify how the cooperation in theory and practice works. Furthermore, what is the self-perception of conservator-restorers concerning their competencies and role?

Starting with the academic education of conservator-restorers and taking a closer look at various occupational protection efforts and initiatives, it quickly becomes clear that conservator-restorers are in a particular dilemma concerning the positioning and classification of the professional group and that they encounter regulatory limits. On the one hand, conservator-restorers aim to identify and define themselves as highly qualified specialists. On the other hand, efforts are being made via occupational protection initiatives to draw a distinction and at the same time to find a balance between the specific academical profession and crafts as well as artistic activities. However, it is evident that these areas are not suitable for depicting the particularities of planning and coordinating activities on the construction site. Here, a comparison with architects, civil engineers or other professional planners would be more appropriate. This, in turn, shows that the responsibilities of conservator-restorers cannot be defined and named as precisely as those of a specialist planner, engineer, art historian or natural scientist.

Education

Concerning the question of academic education and taking the example of German universities and academies to simplify matters, even though it can be assumed that the natural science standard is very high, a discrepancy between the training of highly qualified „specialists” with scientific standards and the practical requirements in the planning area quickly becomes apparent. This involves extensive and all-encompassing challenges. The challenges range from concept evaluation, building investigations to understand the chronology and materials used, damage and deterioration analysis, documentation of findings, mapping, integration and coordination of specialist planners from other disciplines, conservation-restoration concepts, evaluation of the aesthetic concept, interaction with the authorities responsible for the conservation of historical monuments and the preparation of cost estimates to quantity calculations. It also includes project management, construction supervision, quality control, the training and further education of artisans and restorers, the creation of sample surfaces, the

execution of highly specialised individual tasks in conservation-restoration, the fine adjustment of the concept, which includes work planning and workshop organisation. As one might assume, not everything will nor can be covered in a 5 to 6-year university-level training. On the other hand, this is also true for the training of architects with complementary focal points to that of conservator-restorers.

Conservator-restorers certainly have more to offer in the field of monument preservation. The architect, as a natural and most important partner alongside the building owners, is first and foremost a design architect and rarely focuses on the area of cultural heritage or monument conservation. Here, the academic conservator-restorer can play a bridging role, from the theoretical requirements of the design idea to the concept. However, if conservator-restorers are not involved as authorised instances in the design idea and concept development, they quickly fall into the role of mediator at the level below project management or project control and, therefore, below the threshold of a direct influence on decisions of the building owners.

Therefore, the question is not: How can one differentiate between the specific professional contributions of conservator-restorers and the activities of other professionals? The right question is: What contributions can the academic conservator-restorer make? Alternatively: How can academic conservator-restorers improve communication and interdisciplinary cooperation between all professionals involved and which role can they play? Here, it is useful to consider the role of conservator-restorers and try to define it.

In planning and management processes, it is crucial to expand the range of services and diversify experience. This concerns the planning role conservator-restorers play in the pyramid of decision making. Due to systemic circumstances, decision-making on the part of a building owner takes place more in the overall context of the building project. The architect fulfils this role in both classical and practical terms. His focal points are complementary to those of the conservator-restorer and therefore symbiotic. A separate organisational approach as conservation planners can be used, which is generally a matter for well-managed architectural offices. It is referring to the coordination of specialist planners under the umbrella of conservation-restoration planning offices as the principal planner. In this way, the dilemma could be solved.

In heritage conservation practice, more or less ad hoc constellations are usually created. The architects responsible for the project or the building owners are often responsible for determining which specialist planners are involved and will coordinate this. However, this can mean that unspecified specialist planners are determined too early on or that they have little or no experience in the field of monument conservation and are even reluctant to accept the demands of preservation and conservation. It is therefore essential to maintain general coordination and direct representation with the client. In order to achieve this, the young profession of academic conservator-restorers needs partners. This natural partner is the architect; in the field of archaeology, the archaeologist. In the best case, it is a highly experienced architectural firm. Conservator-restorers cannot assume the function of a good architect; however, they can come to a kind of symbiosis with the architect and operate together, which is beneficial for all sides.

Furthermore, the question must be asked: what skills can academic conservator-restorers acquire? The thesis is as follows: the ideal scenario for the interdisciplinary position and role of conservator-

restorers (in theory and practice on the construction site) lies not in a narrow definition of their role, but in methodical symbiosis and transdisciplinary cooperation. Nevertheless, this is only conceivable if conservator-restorers also recognise the diversity of processes and participate in it. However, it is important to point out a specific and perhaps also self-limiting predisposition among academic restorers, in addition to the given regulatory limits.

It is always striking that recent graduates of academic institutions are very uncertain due to the sometimes too schematically applied scientific methodology and have not learned to acquire haptic and empirical knowledge and to rely on their „eyes“ when making minor decisions. Responsibility is sometimes impermissibly quickly transferred to the natural scientists or other sciences. Often compulsive complications of processes take place, rather than coordination of processes and procedures and a co-determination of the conditions. Finding a balance here seems to be particularly important. If conservator-restorers do not establish this balance, other disciplines will take over. But, due to the diversity and depth of the extensive scientific scope in restoration-conservation and its practical application context, other disciplines will rarely be similarly qualified as conservator-restorers in practice and the field.

If, on the other hand, conservator-restorers take the coordination and the management more into their own hands, they also present themselves as a competent and authorised partner and will be able to better influence the conditions for the implementation of monument preservation matters.

Finally, we come back to the starting point. Other academic disciplines still seem to dominate the scene and the science of restoration-conservation, now even at some universities. Why is that so? It starts with the training. Is there a single university or academy that includes serious conservation-restoration project management or construction supervision in the regular curriculum? It can rarely be found. That is a huge shortcoming in the system especially when there is an interest in making conservation-restoration science and the profession self-sufficient. After all these years, it is time to readjust the professional role of academic conservator-restorers in the field of preservation of historical monuments.

One can only attain the roles which one strives to acquire!

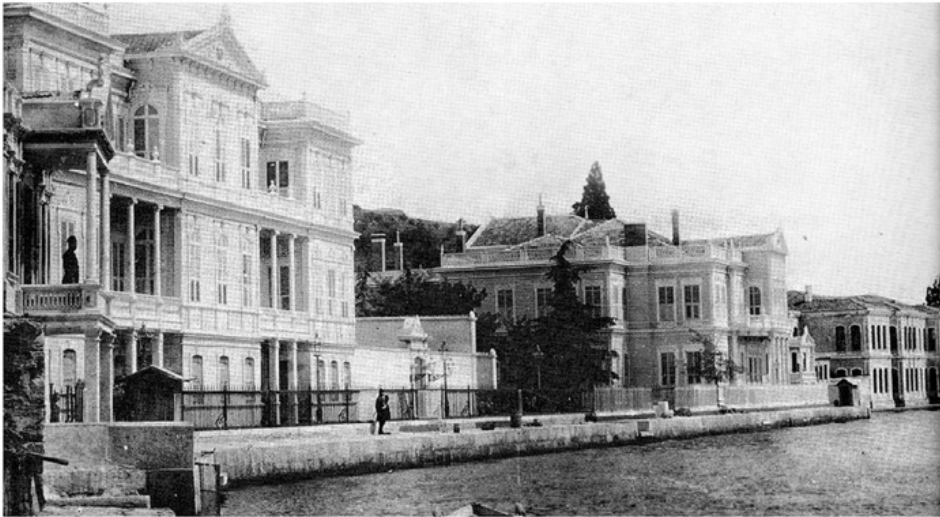


Fig. 1 Left building Fehime Sultan Yalısı (Fehime Palace) and right building Hatice Sultan Yalısı (Hatice Palace). Photo around 1900. Reprint from: Eldem, Sedad Hakkı; Bragner, Robert; Yıldızhan, Mehmetşah (1993-1994): Boğaziçi yalıları. The Yalıs of the Bosphorus. İstanbul: Vehbi Koç Vakfı

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