



## Embedding Modern Heritage into Continuum of Conservation Practice

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### Abstract

The influence of modernism is strong in contemporary architectural practice, and architects practicing in this style are also engaged in the conservation of modern heritage. The swelling of the ranks of those practicing in this area with architects who are less familiar with conservation theory, methodology, and practice but who bring a deep understanding of modernist theory continually fuels the debate and the calls for specific doctrinal texts to guide modern heritage conservation. Those familiar with conservation practice have argued that existing conservation principles are fine, and that it is counterproductive to identify modern heritage as different.

**Keywords:** Modern conservation; Insular fraternity; Conservation fraternity; Architectural practice; Design significance; House bequeathals

### Introduction

The injection of new blood into the small and sometimes insular conservation fraternity has served to catalyse re-evaluation of some existing manifestos and tools, highlighting areas of confusion or areas where conservation has not been interwoven into general planning, development, and architectural practice. The joining of these sectors provides opportunities to integrate conservation into architectural practice more broadly and reinforces the idea that conservation is a creative process in which design skills are as important as technical knowledge [1]. The architects of the twentieth century whose work we are now conserving have also played an important role in the process first by advocating for the protection of their own buildings, second by a series of high-profile bequeathals of their houses; and third by providing access to the living memory of the design, construction, and materials of their buildings. The architects' actions have sometimes meant that conservation has privileged architectural or design significance [2]. Some architects faced with the conservation of their buildings seek to improve the culture [3]. It was recognized that some issues had already been tackled in the conservation of industrial heritage sites, cultural landscapes, and sites with predominantly social significance. Even so, the debate regularly reappears, recently prompting the creation of the aforementioned Madrid Document. Modern architecture has attracted a new generation of practitioners to its conservation. The influence of modernism is strong in contemporary architectural practice, and architects practicing in this style are also engaged in the conservation of modern heritage. The swelling of the ranks of those practicing in this area with architects who are less familiar with conservation theory, methodology, and practice but who bring a deep understanding of modernist theory continually fuels the debate and the calls for specific doctrinal texts to guide modern heritage conservation. Those familiar with conservation practice have argued that existing conservation principles are fine, and that it is counterproductive to identify modern heritage as different [4].

### Methodology

The injection of new blood into the small and sometimes insular conservation fraternity has served to catalyse re-evaluation of some existing manifestos and tools, highlighting areas of confusion or areas where conservation has not been interwoven into general planning, development, and architectural practice [5]. The joining of these sectors provides opportunities to integrate conservation into architectural practice more broadly and reinforces the idea that conservation is a

creative process in which design skills are as important as technical knowledge [6]. The architects of the twentieth century whose work we are now conserving have also played an important role in the process first by advocating for the protection of their own buildings, second by a series of high-profile bequeathals of their houses; and third by providing access to the living memory of the design, construction, and materials of their buildings. The architect's actions have sometimes meant that conservation has privileged architectural or design significance [7]. Some architects faced with the conservation of their buildings seek to improve them, some want to evolve them, introducing new architectural ideas that they have developed over time. While it is important to engage with the creators when possible, it is also important to place their advice in a context for making conservation decisions and to recognize the different perspectives of creator and conservator. It would be helpful to move toward a shared view on approaching conservation, if only so that efforts can be directed toward solving specific conservation problems [8].

### Discussion

Much has been written about the ideological confrontations, and the two areas that receive most attention are material significance and adaptive reuse. The technical challenges posed by conserving twentieth-century places undoubtedly raise the most difficult philosophical conflicts. The move from craft to industrialized construction introduced many new materials, new uses for traditional materials, and component-based systems [9]. Traditional detailing was abandoned, and it was often claimed that buildings were maintenance free. In the fiscally austere post-war era, limited budgets and shortages of materials such as steel and timber, together with the de-skilling of the building industry, meant that building quality was sometimes compromised. These factors have resulted in a building stock with a reduced life cycle. Shorter cycles of repair and higher rates of obsolescence lead to higher costs in the long term [10]. Costs of repair versus replacement will always be an

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argument used against conservation. But this argument may lose steam as sustainability audits are employed in assessing the environmental impact of new development, as compared to the adaptation of existing structures. However, while energy audits often prove the environmental value of retaining traditional buildings, this may not be the case for buildings designed from mid-century onwards designed during a time of seemingly inexhaustible, cheap energy and constructed of materials that require high energy to produce. Over the last twenty years, there have been limited advances in developing and adapting repair methods to conservation needs [11]. It has become evident that in some cases repair is not possible, and large-scale replacement or even reconstruction may be necessary. In these instances, balancing the level of significance of the place and the cost to repair it is difficult, and the situation demands creative solutions. There is no infrastructure for modern repair as there is for traditional conservation partly because of the vast array of materials and systems used, and partly because the knowledge is still in its infancy [12]. Early efforts challenging industry to identify new conservation repair methods and products have weakened, and leadership is needed to progress. It is also important to learn from the ways in which similar issues were addressed in the past. There are many examples of materials such as certain stones, timbers, and metals used in traditional buildings that today are unavailable, hazardous, or known to perform so poorly that replacing like for like is not an option. Research is needed to develop technical solutions for the most common and enduring problems, such as the repair of exposed concrete, cladding systems, and plastics. We need information on the ways modern materials deteriorate and on suitable repair methods that builds on the literature from the 1990s [13]. Guidance on diagnosing problems and systematically working through the repair options, as practiced in traditional conservation, and communicating this methodology to new audiences would also advance the field, as would case studies illustrating how others have arrived at balanced philosophical decisions. Materiality issues have been heavily discussed. Ultimately, conservation is case specific, and different practitioners will make different decisions. Current limitations on technical knowledge and available repair methods mean that the ability to be faithful to conservation principles may be challenged at times [14]. When significance is at the core of decision making, balancing design and material matters becomes a rational process, although one that is still subject to individual interpretations. Transferring knowledge on the values-based conservation approach to a wider audience would assist in developing a shared methodology. Buildings distinguish themselves from artworks when it comes to conservation simply because for the most part, in order to survive, they have to be used. This is true of most buildings, including heritage buildings. Only those functioning as monuments or as building museums are not continuously adapted in order to sustain them, although they, too, may require adaptation to fulfil their role as public venues. These sites, however, constitute only a small portion of protected heritage places. Conservation, in most cases, is about managing change in ways that retain significance. The explosion of building types over the twentieth century to provide for new ways of living and working, and the centrality of functionalism within the modernist ideology are constantly cited as the other major challenges for conserving modern architecture [15]. These challenges can be grouped as, adapting functionally obsolete buildings to new spatial and planning requirements, particularly if the use contributes to social significance, retaining significant design features relating to the building's use that are obsolete or materially problematic, upgrading buildings for modern environmental performance, managing scale identifying compatible uses for very large buildings, economic sustainability and the viability

of repairing large buildings. These issues, identified nearly twenty years ago, are still cited as problems specific to twentieth-century heritage. However, it is debatable whether functionality and therefore adaptability are any more problematic for modern buildings than for those of other eras. Adaptation for new uses or new functional requirements can pose difficulties, but it is important not to single out modern buildings as the only ones facing these issues, for to do so would likely reduce support for their protection and conservation. A heightened concern for design integrity can hinder adaptive reuse and pose dangers to mainstreaming modern conservation. We need a focus on good solutions by publicizing, in conferences and publications, examples of successful twentieth-century adaptive reuse projects and by demonstrating the ways in which difficult issues have been managed.

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### Conflict of Interest

None

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