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Re-integration of neoclassical stonework in Edinburgh

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Abstract

Biographical note

Dimitris Theodossopoulos is a civil engineer, he studied conservation at the Sapienza university in Rome and has a PhD in the safety of gothic vaults from the University of Edinburgh. Current projects in the performance, technology and conservation of historic structures include Iron-age brochs in Scotland, neoclassical stonework in Edinburgh, Gothic vaults and concrete shells by Sánchez del Río. He has published a book on the topic of structural design in building conservation (Taylor & Francis). He teaches structural technology through taught and studio-based courses applied in historic buildings and modern design practice at UG architectural and PG programmes in Edinburgh and abroad.
The paper

These are some thoughts I have gathered and attempted to structure towards a critique of the visual and technical re-integration of stonework in Georgian Edinburgh.

Ashlar sandstone masonry is an almost modular system that characterises Neoclassic Edinburgh (1750-1890). The purity of its lines was essential in the quest to break from the culturally ambivalent precedent eclecticism, while standardisation as notoriously observed by J. Ruskin enabled speed of procurement, construction and sales. Long-term weathering and soiling of the stonework causes differential damage which usually does not affect the load-bearing rougher rubble wall behind the ashlar. This has prompted for blocks replacement through a technically sound process that matches mechanical and physical properties with the existing ones – stone-matching.

Driven by a quest to preserve the fabric’s authenticity (as also by financial constraints), intact stone is often left untreated, i.e. blackened at the expense of the unity of the original scheme. This effect subscribes either to a very conservative approach (minimum intervention – a term that was inherited to us by the scientific approaches of Camillo Boito or Gustavo Giovannoni) or an extreme one where all signs of time (and occasionally historic events) have to be shown invariably, even indiscriminately on the fabric, a more disorientated palimpsest.

The problems I identify are multiple and were prompted initially by a visual dissatisfaction that fragments the calm simplicity of the Georgian environment we have inherited. This architecture eventually calls for a balanced integration of each generation’s ideas because not only of its character but also of the absence of major dramatic events in the city’s history since 1750. In fact, Edinburgh is an example of a successful conservation movement that operated at every level of the process, engaging and supporting building owners and designers alike (New Town Conservation committee and now EWHT). The successes in preserving single buildings or ensembles is a value that is in our interest to be highlighted in the fabric, as a micro-scale application/ representation of what happened at urban scale.

The patchy result of differential restoration pays no service to the appreciation of the original design, which has never been seriously altered by new ideas or major events in the city, as has happened in other cities in the UK (post-industrialisation in the Midlands) or the Continent (warfare in Central-East Europe). Or simply it has not had the time to be subject to such events as in long-standing cities (Rome, Thessaloniki). The continuous regime of maintenance has been affected mainly by soot and ash from the Auld Reekie times, and this does not bear any real cultural values, apart possibly for a curiosity for the ephemeral. (example Barony Street, with evidence of 2, possibly 3 stone replacement cycles)

The simplicity of the aesthetics is a result of a balanced synthesis, and this is the value we reflect upon.

The build-up of the crust and scaling is a process that belongs to the past or has been too slow to appreciate. However it happens in our generation as we see at the ongoing degradation of Clashach sandstone in NMS and Map Library, which are used as examples of bad detailing among designers, contractors and lay public alike. On the other hand the porous nature of the material does not help its cleaning, which is much easier in buildings of limestone that dominate the “before and after” imagery (especially in cathedrals or houses in France and Spain).
At a technical level, I also find a controversy in those techniques that fix the new stone directly on the rubble load-bearing back using steel brackets. This breaks the material system’s authenticity, which is the essential aspect rather than the stone blocks individually.

When the simplicity of the synthesis is broken with various textures, then aesthetic approaches used to the restoration or artworks are called in. Georgian compositions have managed to retain the unity of their original design in elevation in a rare manner that does not occur always in architecture (example Hotel Esplanade in Berlin???). Aesthetic theories would define how far the original fabric becomes the prominent element that is “completed” by the addition, or sidelined and overwhelmed.

Contrast with interior???

What I propose? More reflection above all, to define the values, along Brandi (the methodological moment of a recognition of a work of art as such); then on ways of updating the building in a critical act of similar nature to design. No need for restoration of an arbitrary stylistic unity (neo-neoclassicism? Example Lothian Road) or disturb using technically and visually distinct (alien) materials – cement or pastes? Current approaches are close to scientific restorations (reversibility, distinguishability etc)

A critical approach to conservation is vital as in a sense the architectural values of a building are put to date, while conditioned by its historic and cultural values. The choice and prioritisation of phases, their composition as also the removal of those distracting their reading becomes then the responsibility of the architect, the informed operator who can perform this critical act (Bonelli 1963). Palazzo Spada

Replicating the original fabric and its tectonics in order to minimise distraction as happens in some cases in Edinburgh or relying on new technologies (as in the work of F. Minissi) would be left on the architect. Georgian fabric does not have a complex history to be “told” and therefore involve a process of deconstruction to its parts (M. Tafuri) and recomposition (A. Bellini). Neuesmuseum, Altes Pinakothek - do we need catastrophic events?

Stonecleaning (Bedlam before and after)