Loss, Compensation, and Authenticity: The Contribution of Cesare Brandi to Architectural Conservation in America

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Abstract
International consideration of the contribution of Cesare Brandi to modern conservation theory has been needed for a very long time. In the realm of conservation discourse in America and probably for much of the English-speaking world, Brandi's words and concepts have been largely absent and, if acknowledged at all, often lost to translation. This can be attributed to the lack of an English version of his 1963 Teoria del Restauro [Theory of Restoration] until the first excerpts were published in 1996, with an accompanying editorial, in the Getty Conservation Institute's anthology of readings on conservation. That is not to say that Brandi's ideas were unknown, at least to some architectural conservation professionals and academics in the United States who encountered his theories through the lectures and translated excerpts of his writings at ICCROM, by its then Director-General, Paul Philippot.

Comments
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# Future Anterior

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1. The paradox of loss and its visual and structural compensation. (Photograph by K. Fong)
International consideration of the contribution of Cesare Brandi to modern conservation theory has been needed for a very long time. In the realm of conservation discourse in America and probably for much of the English-speaking world, Brandi’s words and concepts have been largely absent and, if acknowledged at all, often lost to translation. This can be attributed to the lack of an English version of his 1963 Teoria del Restauro [Theory of Restoration] until the first excerpts were published in 1996, with an accompanying editorial, in the Getty Conservation Institute’s anthology of readings on conservation. That is not to say that Brandi’s ideas were unknown, at least to some architectural conservation professionals and academics in the United States who encountered his theories through the lectures and translated excerpts of his writings at ICCROM, by its then Director-General, Paul Philippot. It was in fact Philippot who first introduced American professionals to modern European concepts of conservation, including Brandi’s, in his influential lecture at a 1972 seminal international conference on art conservation and historic preservation in the United States and its subsequent publication in 1976. 

A summary of Brandi’s basic principles of conservation, prepared by Brandi himself, as well as accompanying essays on architectural and monument conservation by colleagues Renato Bonelli and Paul Philippot were available to an English-speaking audience as early as 1966 in Volume XII of The Encyclopedia of World Art, a translation of the original 1958 Italian Enciclopedia Universale dell’Arte. Yet despite this early appearance, American professionals still remain largely ignorant of Brandi’s writings, not to mention the contributions of other important Italian restoration scholars, Camillo Boito (1836-1914), Luca Beltrami (1854 -1933), and Gustavo Giovannoni (1873 - 1947), all cited by Bonelli in his entry on the “Principals of Architectural and Urban Restoration and Conservation,” which accompanied Brandi’s lead essay in the Encyclopedia.

As Patrick Ponsot asked a French audience in 2003, “Why read Cesare Brandi?” It is an even more relevant question given a new English translation, complete with illustrations. As Brandi knew all too well, all restoration, regardless of whether applied to painting, sculpture or architecture, is a product of its inherited traditions (historical habits) as well
as contemporary concerns, and as such it is an act of critical interpretation. We restore with intention and it is that intention which needs to be continually examined and questioned as much as the work itself. In recent years, the privilege of conservation as an external act, outside tradition and history, has been challenged as older restorations have been viewed as part of the total historical evidence to be preserved.

Theory, without application, remains inert, a fact Brandi was well aware, since it was only after his experiences of 25 years of teaching following the 1938 founding of the Istituto Centrale del Restauro with art historian Giulio Argan that he chose to write his *Theory of Restoration*. This article addresses some of Brandi’s key contributions to modern architectural conservation theory as they have been recognized today through consideration of loss, compensation, and authenticity.

Loss and compensation have been important issues in the conservation of art and architecture since at least the sixteenth century beginning with Vasari, and they were of critical concern to Brandi, who devoted much of his writing to the subject. Deterioration and loss, from a conservation perspective, are destructive and negative—conditions that are deemed detrimental to the visual and structural integrity of the work. Such concerns are related to conservation’s dual interest in the aesthetic appearance and historical meaning of all visual works, the latter as proof of human decision, and owe much to Brandi, who considered “the reestablishment of the potential unity (wholeness) of the work” critical to conservation’s mission. Influenced by structuralist theories and Gestalt philosophy, Brandi gave voice to a new theoretical framework for conservation, which defined the whole of the work as its physical form and fabric, its history, and its context. This collective inherent unity defined the individuality of each and every work, and according to Brandi, remained accessible to the viewer even after alteration from damage and partial loss regardless of the scale.

In modern conservation practice, the term compensation is used to denote all aspects of intervention designed to address visual and structural reintegration resulting from material loss. (Figure 1) Compensation as a concept and physical process occurs in response to the fragmentation that results from the incompleteness of form while “...reconciling conscious [original or subsequent] aesthetic values with acquired historical values.” As Brandi himself noted, this concern with safeguarding the historical or documentary value of the work, especially as it is affected by incompleteness of form and meaning, draws its inspiration from philological models, whereby the completion and therefore meaning of any fragmented ancient text is dependent on the choice of...
the word inserted, itself dependent on a range of contextual clues based on the structure of the existing text (for example, spacing and meter) as well as other comparable versions. In this regard, modern conservation theory follows philological methods in that any insertion is clearly differentiated from the original, thus preserving the integrity of the original text and the possibilities for alternative interpretations now and in the future (that is, reversibility or retreatability). One significant difference is the importance of the visual appearance of the insertion in affecting the aesthetic value and formal meaning of the work. As one early example of this approach to reconcile aesthetic and historical interpretation, Brandi cited the 1823 intervention to the Arch of Titus by Gisor and Valadier. (Figure 2)

Both loss and compensation are inextricably tied to conservation's primary objective, the protection of cultural resources from damage and depletion, or, as Brandi's own words, "...an activity dealing with extending the life of a work of art and restoring its appearance... any operation that aims
to put back into effective order a product of human activity."  

With these definitions in mind, discussions of material loss and its remedy, compensation, ultimately confront the larger questions concerning all artistic and historic works: meaning, artistic intent, authenticity and value.

For the student and experienced professional alike, material loss and degradation can be among the most difficult problems to address regardless of whether the work is a painting, sculpture, tapestry, or building. But more importantly, in considering such fundamental issues as loss and compensation, we bring conservation as a discipline, increasingly defined and divided by its object and material specializations, back together to consider its essential and unifying issues and tenets.

Form, Fabric, and Function

For the visual arts, the idea of the work is closely tied to its formal and material aspects, and related to these, its function, the latter including the intangible beliefs, meanings, and uses associated (originally and subsequently) with the material correlates of form and fabric. (Figure 3) Conservation directly engages the physicality (form and material) of designed works and when possible, the function, assuming both can be recovered. Any attempt to position compensation within the larger conservation discourse must acknowledge these three basic constructs of material cultural works. All are tied together in defining works of art and architecture; however, depending on the situation, we can choose any number of compensation strategies that either privilege one aspect over the other, or instead attempt to present all three in balance. The balance of these constructs in the conservation project will of course be dependent on a great many factors: cultural, social, technical, utilitarian, economic, and visual, to name a few. And the scale of the intervention will dictate options: the visual and structural reintegration of a decorative element will require a different set of solutions than the replacement of a roof, the addition of a wing, or the insertion of buildings in an historic urban context.

Contemporary conservation theories argue that value and significance are arbitrary yet owe much to the material form and its perception by the viewer or user, which, in the case of conscious monuments, were neatly categorized by Alois Riegl as early as 1903 as artistic and historical-values, age-value, use-value, and newness-value. It is fair to say that artistic originality (creativity) and age (antiquarianism) have been the dominant qualitative values that have defined most art and architecture in a Western context since at least the eighteenth century; however, as we have come to discover in recent years, such values are not, nor have ever been, universal.
This is critical, because the concept of heritage has changed dramatically in the last few decades, and principles and practices of conservation, such as those proposed by Brandi, have been applied with little consideration of the original assumptions about the nature and values of heritage when those principles were first conceived. Critics of Brandi have argued that while he recognized that historical and aesthetic values must be balanced in any intervention strategy, his interests focused on works of art and architecture as high art: that is, architecture that qualified beyond its utilitarian performance as art. This is true by Brandi's own admission; however, he did recognize that it was necessary to have relative approaches to restoration depending on whether the work was "industrial" or conceived of as "art." In the former case, functional objectives would dominate, while in the latter case, the aesthetic and historical aspects of the work would both drive the intervention. In the case of architecture, functional requirements would be "secondary or concomitant" with aesthetic and historical values. 

Panofsky summed up the problem of the dichotomy: "[A] work of art is not always created exclusively for the purpose of being enjoyed or experienced aesthetically ... but it does demand to be experienced aesthetically." 

Regardless of intent, all works of art and architecture are dependent on the condition of their physical form for experience and meaning, a fact to which Brandi repeatedly returned through his interest in lacunae and their affect on structure and image. In architecture, materials define form through shape, color, texture, and light, and these properties in turn define space and structure. Unlike many created works of art and those currently housed in museums and collections, structures are spatially bound to their sites and therefore subject to specific environmental and functional requirements. The conservation of built works therefore often demands solutions different from those often contemplated for other works of art, especially for loss and compensation.

**Presentation and Interpretation**

As an activity of mediation between the past and the present, conservation is responsible for what the present viewer sees, experiences, and can know about the past. Much contemporary practice is concerned with finding an acceptable balance between protecting the historical and documentary values inherent in the physical form and fabric, including evidence of age through weathering, with the aesthetic values implicit in the original work. This latter issue can be difficult given the fact that the aesthetic values can be either enhanced or degraded by weathering, depending on the cultural context. To understand the importance of loss and its treatment in
the development of contemporary architectural conservation practice, it is necessary to explore the concept through nineteenth-century restoration rhetoric. These formal debates in architectural conservation were largely polarized through the work of two prominent European theorists: Eugene Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879) and his theory of architectural restoration based on stylistic unity, and John Ruskin (1819-1900) and his preservation or conservation doctrine, which valued the effects of time and age to create monuments of human memory. While both men and their positions have provided a convenient and often over-simplified foil for debate, re-evaluation of their positions continues to offer insights into the problems of interpretation and intervention for culturally significant buildings and sites in our own time. Their work describes well the tension inherent in conservation between the emotional and humanistic on one hand, and the rational and scientific on the other.

The consideration of physical or material loss as detrimental and disruptive to cultural property seems an obvious concern given the fact that material or physical degradation can result in instability, illegibility, and possible disuse or devaluation. Yet physical loss can also result in a critical loss of meaning, significantly compromising both the aesthetic and functional value and cultural significance. Is the loss of a building facade on a public square or street the same as the loss of a sculpture's limbs or the details of a painting? Is loss resulting from social or political trauma such as war, or loss from use, not part of the story of the place or thing affected?18 Certainly any loss resulting in physical instability and collapse such as damage to a building's roof or structural system or to a painting's support will require intervention to save the rest. In the case of a symbolic or ceremonial object or place, legibility or power may be compromised by seemingly minor changes to the existing fabric or context. In contrast, repairs to losses caused by use or associated events related to the history of the object or place could rob it of important visual evidence, emotion, and meaning.19

The critical question therefore is whether a condition of wholeness or completeness is an absolute requirement of all architecture, assuming it is not a sanctioned ruin. Indeed most of the restoration debates waged during the late nineteenth century in Europe revolved around the decisions to complete or "correct" individual monuments, thereby establishing their architectural and stylistic unity. As Paul Philippot stated over twenty years ago, "what is to be considered the whole of the object, to which all operations must be referred? What is the context of the object? What has been the history of the object?" 20 These questions are necessary in consideration of
what constitutes wholeness, integrity, value, significance, and meaning for any given work and the assumed compromises which result from alteration, degradation, and loss, and the arguments for compensation.

In discussing painting conservation, art historian Kirby Tally described time and human interventions as resulting in a "flawed" work relative to the notion and importance of artistic intent. "And in defense of architect Antonio Gonzales' reconstruction of Gaudi's signature chimneys on Guell Palace, Andrzej Tomaszewski remarked."...were the Venus de Milo a work of architecture, to restore it would mean to put back its arms..." 22 In contrast, conservator Steven Dykstra has challenged conservation's long-standing concern with reclaiming artistic intent citing the principle of intentional fallacy, whereby the artist's original intent is neither available nor desirable, thus shifting the focus of interpretation and presentation from "artist" to "respondent." 23

It is in the context of such debates that Brandi's theory of restoration attempted to establish an approach that recognized and qualified the aesthetic, historical, and functional values of heritage in order to define intervention as a balancing act meant to re-establish the potential unity of the work, that is the material-image relationship, without compromising its historical context. Since Brandi's publication, post-structuralist and deconstructionist theories in particular have challenged the view that visual works have organic unity and that they are rather part of a cultural and temporal construct which is constantly changing, and which is always dependent upon the preparation and perceptions of the viewer.

Weathering as Loss and Gain
Weathering, the inevitable response of all materials to their environment, is a natural process, always resulting in a material transformation through physical, mechanical or chemical alteration. Weathering indicates the passage of time as visible aging. It occurs over the life of the work and its occurrence is predictable, even if not immediately apparent. Whereas structural degradation has generally been held as a decidedly negative aspect of weathering except in the unique case of ruins, the mechanisms of surface alteration have enjoyed varying degrees of acceptance depending on the subject and temporal distance. This can be observed for example in our taste for preserving archaic "old-fashioned" things as aged or incomplete, whereas no imperfection is tolerated for works of the recent past. 24

The term patina has been used since the seventeenth century to describe acceptable changes that are considered intrinsic to the material due to the natural weathering of that
material under normal circumstances. This is in contrast to excessive alteration resulting from decay and the obscuring of the surface by soiling, crusts and degradation. This suggests an acceptance of alteration that is judged or measured to have little physical effect on the durability or performance of the material or imparts an acceptable or desired visual appearance. This latter point is significant, for there is often confusion on the difference between original and historical appearance. Original appearance, often linked to artist's intent, is a transient condition that exists only briefly, if at all, after completion of the work. The notion is a false one, however, as few materials are truly inert or stable for long and many works continue to evolve and change over time as part of their natural life use. While change is inevitable for all material things, decay has not always been considered a negative force such as in the case of many native peoples' belief systems and certain twentieth-century design ideologies that embrace transience and obsolescence.

As Philippot has noted, the indicators and qualities of age, defined most directly by the physical affects of weathering and stylistic anachronism, became major issues in eighteen- and nineteen-century aesthetic theory, art history, and restoration philosophy linking the worlds of new art and architecture with historic buildings and monuments. Weathering as an indication of time and nature's finishing touches to human works was a major element in the aesthetic principles of the picturesque. It was John Ruskin, however, who gave a moral voice to weathering in his definition of historical monuments and their preservation, a concept later extended by Reigl, who differentiated unintentional monuments from deliberate monuments as those works which serve to commemorate past human activity through their appearance.

Yet age (and its appearance) is not the only consequential factor in determining value and significance. The older something is, the more powerful it is to elicit positive emotional response, yet this is incidental to real historical significance. Historical appearance acknowledges time as an essential component of architecture. It is time that distinguishes and separates such structures from the present and it is time that continues to shape and define them through weathering. However the concept of patina implies benign change over time, which acknowledges the natural processes of weathering we find acceptable or appealing. For centuries, weathering was accommodated in the original selection of materials and the design of construction details based on practical experience. Such traditional building materials and systems were designed for long-term retention, that is, permanence, or to accommodate gradual change or for periodic replacement (for
example, surface finishes). Whether by conscious obsolescence, intentionally shorter maintenance-free life spans, or simply flawed technology, many modernist works of art and architecture have challenged contemporary conservation's continued focus on age-value and material authenticity.

**Concerning Authenticity**

Central to the subject of loss and compensation is the notion of authenticity. Authenticity is perhaps one of the most powerful, elusive and debated qualities to be associated with cultural works and their interpretation. In common parlance, the word authentic means having an undisputed origin, worthy of trust, reliance or belief. It comes from the Greek authentes, meaning author, and in its earliest uses, its connotations were original, genuine, first-hand as opposed to copied, counterfeit, imaginary. The concept of authenticity is a cultural construct of the modern Western world, which, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Lionel Trilling, has ultimately had to do with the definition of our true self, our individual existence. Authentic objects, buildings, and sites are those original to their creators or possessors, they are unique to their time and place. As cultural property, they therefore stand for the people who made and used them. And in their collection, display, and interpretation, we appropriate their authenticity into our personal experience.

Contemporary conservation practice as defined by international doctrine such as the Venice Charter has tended toward considering and admiring works of art and architecture as documents, thus placing increased importance on their material expression of authenticity. Ruskin's indictment of restoration as "a lie from beginning to end" prompted him to favor visible and honest interventions, which defined and protected authentic character as age and evidence through the saving of historic fabric. In contrast, Viollet-le-Duc defined authenticity not by age, but according to three criteria: image (style), form (structure), and material. And these, he often improved, citing the utility of avoiding failure when any one factor was found to be faulty or insufficient. Years later, in his theory of restoration, Cesare Brandi placed material authenticity at the forefront of conservation's priorities, whereby the first aim of conservation was to conserve the original material of the work and therefore its material authenticity while at the same time the second aim was to re-establish its intended image and potential unity so far as this is possible without committing a fake and without canceling significant traces of its history.

Both Brandi and Philippot have helped to forge a modern theory of conservation based on critical consciousness,
which tends to isolate and distance the work by considering it through the identification of historical and aesthetic authenticities. As a result, a new definition of authenticity has emerged which encourages us to acknowledge that all cultural works have a continuing history, that they are used, damaged and repaired, cleaned and restored, and sometimes destroyed. Their present state records not only the moment of creation but also a whole subsequent sequence of events. (Figure 4) Thus, as Philippeot warns, "[any] authentic relationship with the past must not only recognize the unbridgeable gap that has formed, after historicism, between us and the past; it must also integrate this distance into the actualization of the work produced by the intervention." 32

This has led to different yet equal expressions of authenticity for different groups of people and different types of work. As the art historian E.H. Gombrich wrote, we look at the works of the past through the wrong end of the telescope; assessment of meaning and intent through a visual reading will always be a question of "more or less," never exact. 33 By approaching all visual works through their constructs of form, fabric, and function, this simple model can offer a means of assessing the immediate outcome and long-term effects of any intervention decision including compensation for weathering and loss. Contemporary conservation must strive to seek a middle ground by acknowledging both product and process, as in craft tradition, whereby knowledge and experience are tied together. Conservation's primary obligation is to extend the whole life of the work, which in addition to the
creative energies of original and subsequent artistic intent, must also embrace the equally long and complex history of its reception over time. As a modern practice, conservation is a scientific activity where its aims and methods are involved, but at the same time it is driven by humanistic concerns. As such, contemporary practice now requires input from various conservation specialists, each bringing their disciplinary expertise to the problem. Conservation starts from a work and must come back to that work through a series of processes that belong to a broad range of fields, and it depends on the contemporary cultural and social context of the work. To that end, loss, weathering, and compensation play a major role in constructing heritage. As Brandi warned a generation ago, all restoration is a product of its time and as such is an act of critical interpretation. We restore with intention and it is that intention which needs to be continually questioned as much as the work itself.

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Endnotes
This article is adapted from a talk given at the October 4, 2006, symposium "Cesare Brandi and the Development of Modern Conservation Theory" at the Italian Culture Institute in New York City, sponsored by the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and the Associazione Giovanni Secco Suardo.
4. It should be mentioned that translations of the Italian restauro as “restoration” are an inaccurate use of the English word. At least from the time of the late nineteenth-century debates to the present, the term “restoration” has come to mean “the process of returning the artifact to the physical condition in which it would have been at some previous stage of its morphological development.” According to Brandi, restauro is “any operation that aims to put back into effective order a product of human activity” as opposed to “preservation” which is “preventive restoration.” In this regard, a better translation of restauro would be “conservation.” which “describes any physical intervention in the actual fabric...to ensure its continued integrity.” (English definitions from James Marston Fitch, Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1990) 46.
Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the destructive effects of pollution from industrialization began to be observed and distinguished from natural weathering processes thus prompting the entry of science into building and monument conservation. As early as 1860, compensation was a term associated with addressing or rectifying any kind of loss. (Oxford English Dictionary).

Although Brandi attempted to develop overall theories of conservation and reintegration for both two- and three-dimensional works regardless of scale, such generalities are insufficient in addressing the range of fundamental requirements of large utilitarian works such as architecture and landscape. For example, many indigenous and traditional societies favor process over product in defining authenticity. On the hegemony of style as creative indicator see George Kubler. The Shape of Time (New Haven: Yale University), 1962.

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As defined by Brandi, "In a work of art, a locuno [loss, gap] is an interruption in the representational context, similar to that in a text which has not been completely transcribed. The lacuna in an artwork differs from that in a text in that it assumes an importance of its own as a negative element." Encyclopedia of World Art, 182.

For restoration to be a legitimate operation it cannot presume that time is reversible or that history can be abolished." (232). "It must allow itself to be emphasized as a true historical event..." (C. Brandi, in Price et al. (1996). 233) See also P. Dent Weil. "A Review of the History and Practice of Patination in Price" (1996), 394-414.

Such was the case made for the conservation of articles of clothing from victims of the Holocaust camps where loss and continual mending were the physical evidences to be preserved and emotionally experienced as witness to the narrative to be told.

At the Science Museum in London, this distinction was observed where visitors were disturbed to see expensive old motorcars looking shabby, whereas when the Museum of London opened its stores to the public, the old looking horse-drawn carriages were preferred to the newly restored ones. Cited by Alison Richmond in a review of Restoration-is it acceptable, a conference at the British Museum 24-25 November 1994. V&A Conservation Journal 15 (April) 1995: 11.

Patina is the imperceptible muting placed on the materials that are compelled to remain subdued within the image. Patina is age value and the face of time and preserves the unity and equilibrium of the work."For restoration to be a legitimate operation it cannot presume that time is reversible or that history can be abolished." (Cesare Brandi, in Price et al. (1996). 233) See also P. Dent Weil. "A Review of the History and Practice of Patination in Price" (1996), 394-414.

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Ibid, 4.


Philipot, "Restoration from the perspective of the humanities," in N. Stanley Price et al. (1996), 225.
