

18th International Docomomo Conference & Students Workshop
Santiago de Chile, 2024

M O D E R N
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY
F U T U R E S

Editor
Horacio Torrent

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CREDITS

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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CONTENTS

- 14 **Introduction** / Mario Ubilla, Horacio Torrent
- 16 **Modern Futures: Sustainable Development and Cultural Diversity** / Horacio Torrent

20 **MODERN FUTURES**

- 22 **The Role of Technologies in the Modern Movement and in the Future of Docomomo International** / Uta Pottgiesser
- 25 **The Role of Modern Architecture in Shaping Tomorrow** / Ana Tostões
- 28 **Docomomo. Then, Now, and the Future** / Maristella Casciato
- 30 **Revaluating Docomomo** / Huber Jan Hencket

33 **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

A. ADAPTIVE REUSE: IMPROVING BY DESIGN

- 34 **01. ORIGINAL DESIGN INTENT, LAYERS OF HISTORY AND THE NEED FOR ADAPTATION TO A CHANGING WORLD**
Chair: Scott Bruce Robertson
- 34 Original Design Intent, Layers of History and the Need for Adaptation to a Changing World / Scott Bruce Robertson
- 42 Decline of Department Stores and the Issue of 'Third Places' in German Inner-cities: Decline, Obsolescence and Reuse Potentials / Anica Dragutinovic, Uta Pottgiesser
- 48 Adaptive Reuse of Modern Heritage: Attitudes in Relation with the Materiality of Déjà la. Case Study of the Citroën Garage (1934) Becoming Kanal (2018) / Chiara Fucelli
- 55 The Ocean Terminal Complex, Durban: The Search for Meaning in an Irrevocably Changed Context / Mike Scurr
- 62 Narrating the Layers of History: Exploring Temporal Changes and Practical Realities in School Building Renovations / Meric Altintas Kaptan, Aslihan Unlu
- 70 The Weissenhof Estate from the Point of View of the State Research Society for Economics in Construction and Housing (Reichsforschungsgesellschaft für Wirtschaftlichkeit im Bau- und Wohnungswesen, RFG) / Edyta Naworska

02. NOTABLE RENOVATIONS IN ORDINARY CONTEXTS

Chairs: Ana Carolina Pellegrini, Danilo Matoso Macedo

- 77 Notable Renovations in Ordinary Contexts / Danilo Matoso Macedo, Ana Carolina Pellegrini
- 84 A Church Changes Confession – a Transformation Project with Aesthetics between East and West in Munich (1980-1995) / Korinna Zinovia Weber
- 91 Pinacoteca Contemporânea / Carlos Alberto Maciel, Paula Zasnicoff
- 98 West Bund Shanghai. Think Tank for Art / Jacopo Benedetti, Carlos Eduardo Comas
- 106 Corporate Architecture in Brussels: From Obsolescence to Heritagisation. La Royale Belge as case-study / Jean-Marc Basyn
- 114 Preserving Through Transforming. Exploring the Conversion Processes of Emery Roth and Sons' Post-War Office Buildings in Manhattan into Residential Spaces / Caterina Barioglio, Elena Guidetti

03. TYPOLOGICAL EXERCISES AND THE SINGULARITY OF ITERATION

Chair: Maximiano Atria

- 121 Typological Exercises and the Singularity of Iteration / Maximiano Atria
- 125 The Confines in the Architectural Type Definition: The Modernity of Airport Terminals in the Extreme Regions of Chile / Boris Cvitanic-Diaz, Claudio Galeno-Ibaceta
- 132 Flexibility in School Architecture: The 1970s Mat-Buildings of Recife, Brazil / Larissa Morgana Leão Silva de Sousa, Fernando Diniz Moreira
- 139 The Gasometer in Viena / Markus Tomaselli
- 146 Concrete Abstraction / Jorge Gambini
- 153 Researching, Dismantling, Rebuilding: The Work of Emilio Duhart Revealed by Intervening on the Herman House / Loreto Lyon, Alejandro Beals

B. WELLBEING FOR ALL: SPACES FOR INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE LIVING

161 04. EDUCATING MODERN CHILDREN

Chairs: Louise Noelle Gras Gas, Catherine Rose Ettinger

- 161 Educating Modern Children. Local Solutions and Standardised Construction / Louise Noelle Gras Gas, Catherine Rose Ettinger
- 167 Learning through Experience: Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's Pedagogy in Hannes Meyer's Educational Building Projects / Raquel Franklin Unkind
- 174 Infrastructures of Child-Care: Establishing the Modern Language of Zagreb's Schools in the Agency of Ivan Zemljak / Mia Roth-Čerina
- 181 Cheste Worker University: Designing a Modern Educational Center Tailored for Children / Fernando Usó Martín, Maite Palomares Figueres
- 189 Pedagogical Experimentation and Modern Architecture: Experimental High Schools in Santiago, Chile / Ursula Exss
- 196 A Classroom to Change the World: The School Architecture of the Ministry of Public Works of Uruguay (1954-1965) / Alfredo Peláez Iglesias

203 05. ADOPTION OF REUSE AND SUSTAINABLE CONSERVATION FOR EDUCATIONAL SPACES IN THE MODERN ARCHITECTURE

Chairs: Zainab A. Murtadhawi, Ula Merie

- 203 Adaptive Reuse and Sustainable Conservation for Modern Educational Architecture / Zainab A. Murtadhawi, Ula Merie
- 210 Repurposing Modern Heritage Schools in Kuwait: A Framework for Adaptive Reuse / Rabab Raes Kazem, Naser Ashour
- 219 Ideas Behind the Form: Overlooked Qualities of the Experimental School in Bratislava / Nina Bartošová
- 226 Social Sustainability through Adaptive Reuse. Case study: Mt. Pleasant High School, USA / Armita Eghbali, Maya Weber
- 234 School Architecture and Adaptive Reuse: The Case of the Inmaculada Concepción School / Verónica Esparza Saavedra
- 241 Collaborative Redesign of Modern Schools: Rethinking Spaces of Coimbra Lyceum / Gonçalo Canto Moniz, João Mendes Ribeiro, Carolina Coelho, Pedro Brígida, Duarte Miranda, Valentina Gutiérrez

250 06. HEALTHCARE COMPLEXES: THE FUTURES OF MODERN URBAN ENCLAVES

Chairs: Claudio Galeno-Ibaceta, Ana A. Amora

- 250 Healthcare Complexes: The Futures of Modern Urban Enclaves / Claudio Galeno-Ibaceta, Ana A. Amora
- 257 The Power of Adaptation: The Conversion of a Teaching Hospital into a Justice Complex / Ivo Renato Giroto
- 264 Paimio Sanatorium – The Masterpiece in Change / Jonas Malmberg
- 272 Obsolescence and Vulnerability of Modern Hospital Heritage. The Challenge of Rural Psychiatric Hospitals in Mexico / Iván San Martín Córdova
- 279 Lelé's Architecture of Care: The Sarah Kubitschek Hospitals as a Strategy for Birth Centres and Healthcare Spaces / Carla Zollinger
- 286 The Instituto de Puericultura e Pediatria Martagão Gesteira (IPPMG). Between Glory and Risk / Helio Herbst

C. SUSTAINABLE TECHNOLOGIES: RESEARCH INTO ACTION

293 07. CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND BUILT HERITAGE: OBSOLESCENCE, CIRCULARITY, INSTRUMENTS AND FUTURE

Chairs: Renato D'Alencon, Dominga Teillery

- 293 Circular Economy and Built Heritage: Obsolescence, Circularity, Instruments and Future / Renato D'Alencon, Dominga Teillery
- 300 Stubborn Architecture: Preindustrial Principles of Slowing Building Material Use in the Use-Stage / Tobias Hentzer Dausgaard
- 307 Everyday Residential Heritage and Circularity: Potential and Limitations of Docomomo Full Documentation Fiches / Claudia Massioni, Wido Quist, Roberto Cavallo
- 315 Assessing the Environmental Impact: Office Building Reuse as a Sustainable Alternative to Demolition / Taylor Rose Quibell, Mario Santana Quintero
- 323 Curtains for Crown Hall: A Bioplastic Adaptation / Ryan Leigh Roark
- 330 Has Fossil Modernism Led us to a Dead End? / Wolfgang H. Salcher

- 337 **08. CONCRETE LONG-SPAN BUILDINGS' ADAPTIVE REUSE: SUSTAINABLE RETHINKING OF PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE AND INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE**
Chairs: Francesco Romeo, Giovanni Multari
- 337 Concrete Long-Span Buildings' Adaptive Reuse: Sustainable Rethinking of Public Architecture and Industrial Heritage / Francesco Romeo, Giovanni Multari
- 345 What if? Open Questions and Design Scenarios on the Upcycling of Long-Span Structural Components from 20th Century Authorial Architecture / Alberto Bologna, Margherita Maurea
- 352 Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace – Transformation of the Preservation Approach / Aušra Černauskienė
- 359 Methodological Approaches Through the Use of Advanced Information Systems (BIM-GIS and CDE) for the Management and Valorisation of 20th-Century Industrial Heritage / Antonio Maria Nese
- 366 Re-inhabiting the Modern Factory: The Former Milk Plant by Luigi Cosenza / Francesco Iuliano, Lorenzo Renzullo
- 373 The Marchiondi Spagliardi Institute and the Marxer Institute: Good Practices for the Care of Reinforced Concrete and New Forms of Dialogue with Existing Spaces / Bianca Maria Rodriguez, Chiara Assante
- 380 **09. PREFABRICATION IN REINFORCED CONCRETE AND INTERNATIONAL TRANSFERS DURING THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY**
Chairs: Pedro Ignacio Alonso
- 380 Towards a History of International Transfers in Large-Concrete Panel Systems / Pedro Ignacio Alonso
- 386 The Birth of Stavoprojekt, a Socialist Attempt to Collectivise Design Practice and Standardise Buildings and Technology / Petr Vorlík
- 394 Transposing the Discourse of Industrialised Construction in Housing Between Lisbon and Luanda During the 1970s / Inês Lima Rodrigues
- 401 The Role of Prefabrication in Housing Construction in the 1970s in China: The Case of Diplomatic Residential Compounds in Beijing / Yimei Zhang
- 407 Exporting Soviet Monumental Art from Soviet Tashkent to Europe and Siberia: The Works of Alexander, Nikolai and Pyotr Jarsky between 1969 and 1999 / Philipp Meuser
- 415 **D. BETTER CITIES: APPROACHES TO MODERN VALUES**
- 10. RESHUFFLING URBAN LAND: MODERN IDEAS FOR NEW URBAN MORPHOLOGIES**
Chairs: Francisco Díaz, Marco Trisciuglio
- 415 Reshuffling Urban Land: Modern Ideas for New Urban Morphologies / Francisco Díaz, Marco Trisciuglio
- 422 The Drivers and Outcomes of the Urban Renewal in Oklahoma City: Looking Back, Looking Forward / Selena Bagnara Milan
- 428 Building the Model City of Socialism: Post-WWII Reconstruction of Nemiga Street in Minsk, Belarus / Dasha Kuletskaya
- 435 CIAM Young Generation's Ideas of the Street as a Tool to Question Conventional Hierarchies of Postwar Spatial Structuring / Elena Giaccone
- 442 Alternative Cities. The PEVE Programme, Mass Housing Proposals, and Urban Form Transitions in 1970s Argentina / Santiago Gomes
- 449 The Lot in Modern Architecture Urban Planning: The Case of Brasília Pilot Plan's Central Sectors, 1957 / Helena Bender
- 456 **11. 'INFORMAL' MODERNISMS: URBAN DESIGN, PLANNING NARRATIVES, AND NEW CITIES**
Chairs: Kuukuwa O Manful, Emmanuel Kusi Ofori-Sarpong
- 456 'Informal' Modernisms: Urban Design, Planning Narratives, and New Cities / Kuukuwa O Manful, Emmanuel Ofori-Sarpong
- 462 Palmas (TO): Contradictions among the Ways of Living in a New City's Block / Mariana Verdolin dos Santos
- 469 The Work Encampment: A Utopia by Rodrigo Lefèvre / Ana Carolina Buim Azevedo Marques, Ana Paula Koury
- 476 Socialist Practice of Modern Planning in the 1950s' China: the Case Study of Minhang Satellite Town and the Associated Rural Planning Project / Pengcheng Zeng
- 483 Narratives-Within a Narration: Bridging Modernism and Cultural Identity in African Literature and Architecture / Ntletleng Orepa Mosidi
- 490 Between the *Mussequ* and the Neighbourhood Unit: Spotting "*Compagnons de route*" Architectures in Luanda (1961-1975) / Ana Vaz Milheiro, Leonor Matos Silva

- 496 **12. THE NATURAL HOUSE IN THE MODERN CITY: IDEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES, TECHNICAL DEVICES AND URBAN PROJECTS**
Chairs: Joaquín Medina, Horacio Torrent
- 496 The Natural House in the Modern City: Ideological Principles, Technical Devices and Urban Projects / Horacio Torrent, Joaquín Medina
- 502 The Growing City. The Hybrid Character of Nature in Schwagenscheidt's *Raumstadt* Concept / Moran Lev
- 510 From Eden to Babylon. The role of Nature in Lima's Neighbourhood Units / Sharif S. Kahatt
- 517 Modern Housing Production on the Axis of Industry: The Expanding Boundaries of Istanbul / Yıldız Salman, Burak Ozturk
- 523 Villages, Houses and Gardens. Catholicism's Contribution to Social Housing in Uruguay / Mary Mendez
- 530 Devices for the Perception of Nature. Richard Neutra's Suburban Single-Family Houses / Matthias Brunner

E. CONTEMPORARY LIFE AND THE MODERN PUBLIC SPACES

- 536 **13. ADAPTING MODERN PUBLIC SPACE TO ACTUAL NEEDS**
Chairs: Elke Schlack, Juliane Von Hagen
- 536 Adapting Modern Public Space to Actual Needs / Elke Schlack, Juliane Von Hagen
- 543 Take the Heat: Adapting Modern Public Space to Accommodate Older Adults' Needs / Ana Martins, Gisela Lameira, Ana Silva Fernandes, Rui Jorge Garcia Ramos
- 550 Public Space for Childhood, Art and Biodiversity in Burle Marx's Plaza Perú in Buenos Aires: Between Documenting and Demolishing or Restoring and Rebuilding / Martín Capeluto
- 557 Redefining the Role of Public Space as an Urban Connector in the Lord Cochrane Housing Complex in Viña del Mar / Anna Braghini
- 564 Open Spaces in Modernist Housing Complexes: Urban Ambiance in Three Cases of Santiago de Chile / Ximena Arizaga
- 571 Adapting a Brussels Urban Regeneration Tool to the Specific Characteristics of a Large Social Housing Estate. The Case of the Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract (CQD) Peterbos / Morgane Bos, Giulia Marino, Alexandre Bossard, Chiara Cavalieri
- 579 **14. COMMUNITY LIFE AND MANAGEMENT OF NEIGHBOURHOOD UNITS**
Chairs: Flavia Brito Nascimento, Umberto Bonomo
- 579 Community Life and Management of Neighbourhood Units / Umberto Bonomo, Flavia Brito Nascimento
- 586 The Implementation of the Salvador Residential Complex: From Modern Conception to the Contemporary Appropriation of its Common Spaces / Joaquim Nunes Junior, Ana Carolina Bierrenbach, Aline Maria Barroso
- 593 Just Patios Make Cities? A Review of the Town Planning Associates Project in Maracaibo, Venezuela / Andrea Castro Marcucci, Daniel Belandria Gutiérrez
- 600 The Empart I Housing Complex in Iquique, Chile. Collective Housing in a Desert Landscape / Victor Valenzuela-Grollmus
- 606 Re-negotiating Modernity: Appropriation and Everyday Life at Centro Urbano Antonio Nariño in Bogotá, Colombia (Liliana Andrea Clavijo García
- 613 Social Housing and Urban Ideals: A Case Study of Quito, Ecuador / Verónica Vaca Proaño, Néstor Llorca Vega, Enrique Ferreras Cid

- 621 **15. RE-EXAMINING THE MODERNIST CIVIC BUILDINGS FROM THE "GLOBAL SOUTH"**
Chairs: Ying Zhou, Cecilia L. Chu
- 621 Civiness and Tropicality: Re-examining the Modernist Civic Buildings from the "Global South" / Ying Zhou
- 627 Urban Textured Paintings: Exploring Chen Chi-Kwan's High-Rise Modern Architecture and Overall Ink Paintings from the "Global South" / Ning Tsai
- 635 Architecture for Children: Colonial Architects, Climate Design and Enduring Nursery Buildings (1957-1964) / Ana Vaz Milheiro / Beatriz Serrazina, Inês Lima Rodrigues
- 642 Between Tropicality and Modernism: Exploring Robert G. Boughey's Architectural Synthesis in the Global South / Fatema Tasmia
- 649 Flexible Architecture for New Education: Nordic Institute for Development Management (IDM) in Tanzania / Maryia Rusak

F. LANDSCAPES AND TERRITORIES OF THE MODERN: TODAY AND TOMORROW

- 655 **16. POST-INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPES: PROJECTING VALUES AND USES FOR NEW LIFE CYCLES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE**
Chair: Osvaldo Moreno

- 655 Post-industrial Landscapes: Projecting Values and Uses for New Life Cycles in the Anthropocene / Osvaldo Moreno
- 661 Spring Bay Mill; The Transformation of a Peculiar Modern Industrial Heritage Site / Ross Brewin
- 668 Modern Pre-existing Structures and Urban Renewal: Cristina Xavier's Intervention at the Headquarters of O2 Filmes / Monica Junqueira de Camargo
- 675 Working on the Landscapes of Labour Between Ancient and Modern: Pin-point Projects for Industrial Archaeology in Tivoli / Edoardo Currà, Spartaco Paris, Carlo Vannini, Andrea Bonamore
- 683 Modernism on the Post-Industrial Riverfront: Heritage Site or Obsolete Relic? / Elizabeth M. Keslacy
- 690 The Social Construction of Post-industrial Heritage Values in Poblenou: New Urban Landscape Visions / Melina Guirnallos Diaz

697 17. RADICAL ROOF GARDENS: DREAM SPACES OF SOCIAL COHESION AND PRIVATE RETREAT
Chairs: Nathaniel Robert Walker, Joseph Watson

- 697 Radical Roof Gardens: Dream Spaces of Social Cohesion and Private Retreat / Joseph Michael Watson, Nathaniel Robert Walker
- 703 Caipiras' Roof Gardens in Rio de Janeiro / Silvana Nicolli
- 710 The Itamaraty Palace Roof Garden and a Possible Image of Brazil / Ana Paula Polizzo
- 716 One Thousand and One Flights: A Rooftop Airport Oasis in the Arabian Desert / Joss Kiely
- 722 A nocturnal roof garden for spectacles. The Luminous Ship by Carles Buigas / David Caralt

729 18. MODERN HERITAGE AND URBAN PRODUCTION
Chair: Magdalena Vicuña

- 729 Modern Heritage and Urban Production / Magdalena Vicuña
- 733 Addressing the Modernist Legacy Through the Historical Townscape: Re-evaluating Public Architecture of the 1970s-1980s in Ghent (Belgium) / Evert Vandeweghe
- 740 Modern Urban Landscape: Traces of Identity, Vectors of Sustainability. The Case of the Matthei Neighbourhood in Osorno / Hugo Weibel Fernández
- 747 Sun, Space, Greenery and Global Warming. The Potential of the Modern Housing Landscape in Climate Change Mitigation / Rodrigo Gertosio Swanston
- 753 Urban Values Heritage: Gilberto Gatto Sobral's Modern Architecture in Cuenca, Ecuador / Paola Preti, Fernanda Aguirre, Veronica Heras
- 759 Architecture of the Property State: Public Ownership of Land & the Production of the Built Environment in Post-Independence Singapore / Jacob Meyers

766 19. MODERNISM AND DIPLOMACY: PAYING IT FORWARD AT U.S. EMBASSIES (ROUND TABLE)
Chairs: Kathleen Gerner, Jorge Salcedo

- 766 Modernism and Diplomacy: Paying it Forward at U.S. Embassies / Jorge Salcedo
- 774 Case Study: The Major Rehabilitation and Expansion of the U.S. Embassy in Athens Greece, Originally Designed by Walter Gropius (1959-1961) / Kathleen Gerner
- 779 A Case Study in Modernism and Diplomacy: The Major Rehabilitation and Restoration of the Brutalist U.S. Embassy in Montevideo, Uruguay, Originally Designed by I.M. Pei (1959-1969) / Troy Thompson
- 785 Case Study: Historic Intent and the Renovation of Eduardo Catalano's U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires / Juan Villafañe
- 792 Maintaining Cultural History and Meeting 21st Century Expectations – Embassy in Montevideo as Example for Major Diplomatic Renovations / Frederick J. Poehler

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

798 A. RESEARCH AND DISSEMINATION AS OPEN FIELDS

799 20. ENGAGED RESEARCH: EXPLORING AND STRUGGLING FOR THE ARCHITECTURE OF WELFARE STATES
Chairs: Peter Szalay, Henrieta Moravčíková

- 799 Engaged research: Exploring and Struggling for the Architecture of Welfare States / Peter Szalay, Henrieta Moravčíková
- 806 Continuity and Transformation of Post-War Modernist Architecture: The Case Study of the Former Communist Party Headquarters in Košice, Slovakia / Monika Kicová
- 812 Away from Nostalgia: A New Approach for the Forgotten Welfare State Industrial Facilities / Maximiano Atria

818	Wider than Welfare: Industry, Infrastructure and Eradication / Richard Brook
824	The Aylesbury Estate: Shifting Narratives on Urban Renewal / Lucia Concetta Vincelli, James Aston Lansbury
831	Architectural Conservation and Political Resilience: The 2023 Attack on the Palace of Congress in Brasilia / Danilo Matoso Macedo, Ana Carolina Pellegrini
838	21. INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES
	Chair: Paulo Dam
838	Transdisciplinary Approaches in the Construction of the Modern: Peru as a Quest / Paulo Dam
844	Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's Innovative Schools: The Modern Revolution of Objects / Mara Sánchez Llorens, Fermina Garrido López
852	Libeskind House: The Construction of a Modern Ambience Through the Protagonism of Joaquim Tenreiro's Work / Luciana Tombi Brasil
859	Digital Documentation Workflows and Training for the Conservation and Planning of Niki de Saint Phalle's Tarot Garden / Mario Santana Quintero, Flavia Perugini
866	The Link Between Architecture and Psychology in Japan: Yoshinobu Ashihara's Landscape Theory / Zahra Ramezani, Kenji Watanabe
874	22. MODERN MOVEMENT AS A MEDIUM FOR EXPRESSION AND AS A DISSEMINATION TOOL IN AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA
	Chairs: Susana Landrove Bossut, Sara Pérez Barreiro
874	Modern Movement as a Medium for Expression and as a Dissemination Tool in Audiovisual Media / Susana Landrove Bossut, Sara Pérez Barreiro
880	Stimulating Historical Identity through Alternative Media / Emma Veronese
887	Towards a New Metropolis: The Machinist Utopia in Urbanism and Cinema / Luciano de Topin Ribeiro
894	Experiences of Modern Space in the Central Valley of Chile / Glenn Deulofeu
901	Exploring Late-Modernist Domesticity in a Wooden Flexible House Versus a Concrete Brutalist House / Els De Vos
907	Parafictions of the Glitched Estate in Central Hill / Alessandro Columbano
	B. SCOPE OF MODERN: EXTENTS AND APPROACHES
914	23. BEYOND MODERNISM
	Chair: Lidwine Spoormans
914	Beyond Modernism / Lidwine Spoormans
921	Portuguese Architecture in the 1980s: Into a Dreamlike Everyday Life / Jorge Figueira
929	Irony and Experimentation in Jaretti and Luzi's Architecture (1960-1974) / Maria Luisa Barelli, Davide Rolfo
936	Parque Guinle Post-Modern? / Nathalia Cantergiani, Mara Eskinazi, Mônica Luce Bohrer
944	French New Towns: Last Avatar of the Welfare State or New Avant-Garde Proposals? / Catherine Blain
951	Modernism and Countercultural Architecture: Not Exactly a Neat Cut-Off / Elena Poma, Franz Graf
958	24. MONUMENTAL MODERNISM: LEGACY OR WASTE?
	Chairs: Claudia Costa Cabral, Fernando Diez
958	Monumental Modernism: Legacy or Waste / Claudia Costa Cabral, Fernando Diez
965	Housing Problem in Italy and Large-Scale Buildings in Second Half of the 20 th Century. A Fragile Heritage / Francesca Albani
971	Mending Wall – Continuity in the Modernist City: Interpreting Smallbrook Ringway Centre, Birmingham / Michael Dring
978	New Old London: Modern Large-Scale Housing for the Traditional City / Jaime Silva, Ana Tostões
985	Ibirapuera Gymnasium: Renewal of Use, Private Concession and Preservation in São Paulo / Renato Anelli
992	Revisiting Merihaka's Parking Structures P1 and P2 / Karita Rytivaara
1000	25. BEYOND CIAM: TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS OF LATE MODERNISM
	Chairs: Marta García Carbonero, Brett Tippey
1000	Beyond CIAM: Transnational Networks of Late Modernism / Marta García Carbonero, Brett Tippey
1007	Situated and Creative. Two Acts on Housing Design, Participation, and Methods in Latin American Late Modernism / Guido Campi

- 1013 Exploring Beyond Borders: The Significance of *Pequeños Congresos* in the Valuation of Spanish Architecture / Ana Esteban Maluenda
- 1020 From Valparaíso to Vancouver: Pan-American Networks and Poetic Visions of a Unified America / Oscar Andrade Castro
- 1026 Unveiling Post-Independence Discourse of Modern Indian Architecture: Insights from *Design Magazine* (1957) / Pappal Suneja
- 1032 Prishtina Shunning Critique: Yugoslavia's Encounter with the Radical Architecture Movement / Edmond Drenogllava

C. THEORIES AND HISTORIES IN TIMES OF CONTROVERSY

1039 26. AUTHENTICITY IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Chairs: France Vanlaethem, Éve Wertheimer

- 1039 Authenticity in the Face of Climate Change / France Vanlaethem, Eve Wertheimer
- 1046 Preserving Authenticity after Seismic Retrofit and Reuse in Japan / Toru Ajisaka
- 1051 Bridging Cultural Significance and Risk Assessment: Compared Analysis from Conservation Management Plans in Portugal and Cuba (1960-1966) / Teresa Cunha Ferreira, Davide Del Curto, Pedro Murilo de Freitas, Andrea Garzulino, Rui Fernandes Póvoas
- 1059 A Comprehensive Framework to Increase Modelling Credibility in Modern Buildings Energy Simulations. The Case Study of Chauderon Complex Façade by Jean Prouvé in Lausanne (1969-1974) / Giuseppe Galbiati, Franz Graf, Giulia Marino
- 1065 The Sustainable Shine Dome: Toward a Sustainability Plan for the National Heritage Listed Australian Academy of Science Building / Michael Jasper, Tracy Ireland

1071 27. NONCANONICAL CURATORIAL NARRATIVES. RETHINKING THE ROLE OF THE ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION

Chairs: Maria Cristina Cabral, Ana Esteban Maluenda

- 1071 Curatorial Narratives: Rethinking the Role of the Exhibition / Maria Cristina Cabral, Ana Esteban Maluenda
- 1077 Presenting Architecture, the Archive and Microhistories: The Opening Exhibition of the New Home of Hungarian Architecture / Ágnes Anna Sebestyén
- 1083 A New Period Eye: Learning to See Venezuela's Modernity with Docomomo Venezuela Exhibitions / Frank Alcock
- 1091 Beyond Modernism: Curatorial Clashes and Transformations in 1983 Portuguese Architectural Exhibitions / Ana Neiva
- 1098 War's Toll of Italian Heritage: Unveiling Italy's Postwar Reconstruction through Transnational Exhibitions / Jiayao Jiang
- 1105 Contested Modernities: Architecture and Propaganda in the *Exposição Nacional do Estado Novo* (Rio de Janeiro, 1938) / Catarina Flaksman

1111 28. REMAPPING MODERNISMS: CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

Chairs: Ruth Verde Zein, Patricia Santos Pedrosa

- 1111 Remapping Modernisms: Contemporary Debates / Ruth Verde Zein, Patrícia Santos Pedrosa
- 1118 The Narrative Triad of Nikolaus Pevsner: Recognising the Content Profile and Structure of the Book *Pioneers of Modern Design* / Tais Ossani
- 1125 Lina Bo Bardi: the Bad and the Ugly - Contemporary Formal Problems / Patricia Pereira Martins
- 1132 Being Modern, Building Modern. *L'Union Féministe Egyptienne's* headquarters in Cairo in 1932 / John Hanna, María Novas Ferradás
- 1138 The Value of the Material. An Economic Re-reading of the Modern Ideal in Chile / Paula Orta Camus, Cristian Muñoz Díaz
- 1146 Towards a Transient Understanding of Modern Built Heritage Documentation and Research / Adina Hempel

D. CONSERVATION TRAINING: THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

1154 29. HOW CAN EXHIBITIONS HELP CREATING A SUSTAINABLE AND RESPONSIBLE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE FUTURE?

Chair: Bárbara Coutinho

- 1154 How can Exhibitions Help Creating a Sustainable and Responsible Attitude Towards the Future? / Bárbara Coutinho
- 1160 Towards a Reparative Architectural History / Eduardo Augusto Costa, Junia Cambraia Mortimer

- 1167 Discovering a New Narrative: Interpretation Method Practices in the Exhibition *Modernism for the Future 360/365* / Viltė Migonytė-Petrulienė
- 1174 Archive Narratives. Curatorial proposals based on archive collection documents / Michelle Llona Ridoutt
- 1180 Elizabeth Mock's Curatorship at MoMA: a New Approach to Architecture and Architecture Exhibitions and its Echoes in Europe / João Miguel Couto Duarte, Maria João Moreira Soares
- 1187 Food Party: Reflections on Community Engagement through Food Projects in Architectural Exhibitions / Leyuan Li, Max Bravo
- 1194 **30. EDUCATION TO CONSERVE MODERN HERITAGE: METHODS AND TOOLS**
Chairs: Chandler McCoy, Andrea Canziani
- 1194 Education to Conserve Modern Heritage: Methods and Tools / Andrea Canziani, Chandler McCoy
- 1201 The CMAI's International Training on the Conservation of Modern Heritage / Margherita Pedroni
- 1209 Joint Master RMB, Re-use of Modernist Buildings / Michel Melenhorst
- 1217 The Conservation Planning as a Contribution to Education and Training for Twentieth-century Heritage Conservation / Santiago Beckdorf
- 1224 Remapping Modernism: MAPA Peru Arequipa 2023 / Carlos Torres Flores, Mariano Quiroga Robles, Rosabella Alvarez-Calderón Silva Santisteban
- 1232 What Do We Want from Architectural Education? / Artina Qehaja
- 1239 **31. RE-EDUCATION FOR REUSE OF MODERN SPACES. SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSION AS A PLATFORM FOR INCLUSIVE DIDACTIC AND RESEARCH**
Chairs: Carolina Quiroga, Gonçalo Canto Moniz
- 1239 Re-education for Reuse of Modern Spaces. Social and Environmental Dimension as a Platform for Inclusive Didactic and Research / Gonçalo Canto Moniz, Carolina Quiroga
- 1246 Education, Research, and Extension Practices on Sorocaba City (Brazil) Modern Architectural Heritage / Taiana Car Vidotto
- 1254 Implementing Democracy in Socialist Architecture. Adaptation of Former Soviet Schools for Contemporary Education Needs in Lithuania / Liutauras Nekrosius, Dolf Broekhuizen
- 1261 Pimp Danish Modernism: Drawing as a Pedagogical Tool for a Sustainable Future / Angela Gigliotti, Fabio Gigone
- 1268 Transforming a Conventional Rigid Classroom into a Stimulating Space / Adéla Šoborová
- 1276 (Re)signifying and (re)designing Modern School Playgrounds. Experiments on Collaborative Design in Portugal / Patrícia Lourenço, Alexandra Alegre, Teresa Heitor

E. EVERYDAY LIFE AND MODERN INTERIOR

- 1285 **32. ADAPTIVE MODERN HOUSING: SHIFTING NOTIONS OF COMFORT AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF DOMESTIC SPACE FOR CONTEMPORARY LIVING**
Chair: Zara Castelo Ferreira
- 1285 Adaptive Modern Housing: Shifting Notions of Comfort and the Transformation of Domestic Space for Contemporary Living / Zara Castelo Ferreira
- 1292 Modern Archaeologies: Sustainable Strategies for Social Housing Building in Athens, 1950-1970 / Chrysostomos Theodoropoulos
- 1300 Spatial Decolonisation of the Modern Middle-class Housing of Mozambique / Patricia Noormahomed
- 1308 Departure from the Chandigarh Style: Contemporary Adaptations to the Regulated Marla House / Priya Gupta
- 1315 Reflections on Minimum Space Living in Macau / Niccolò Arnaldo Galliano, Ana Tostões
- 1323 Exploring the Evolution of the Mass-Empty Space Relationship for Social Sustainability in Shushtar New Town: Insights from Kamran Diba's Design / Parisa Etemadi, Helder Casal Ribeiro
- 1330 **33. CAPTURING TIME INSIDE ARCHITECTURE**
Chairs: Ana Tostões, Marta Silveira Peixoto
- 1330 Capturing Time Inside Architecture / Ana Tostões, Marta Peixoto
- 1337 Recognizing Cultural Values in Changes to Modern Interiors / Juliano Loureiro de Carvalho
- 1344 Melchiorre Bega Corporate Interiors (1959-70): Transience and Care / Sara Di Resta
- 1351 Modern Over Modern. The SOM Interiors Restoration of Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House (1967-1975) / Davide Galleri

- 1358 Museum Building as a Living Archive and a “Time Machine”. The case study of MUDE – Museu do Design, Lisbon / Bárbara Coutinho
- 1365 Modernity and *Cubanidad*: Clara Porset, Time, and Ideology / Jean-François Lejeune
- 1372 **34. TEXTILES IN THE MODERN INTERIOR: DISCOVERING THE HIDDEN LOCAL AND GLOBAL STORIES BETWEEN THE WEAVES**
Chairs: Eva Storgaard, Deniz Hasirci
- 1372 Textiles in the Modern Interior: Discovering the Hidden Local and Global Stories between the Weaves / Eva Storgaard, Deniz Hasirci
- 1379 Weaving (as a Disciplinary Reference for) Stained-Glass Windows in Modernist Liturgical Interiors / Zsuzsanna Böröcz
- 1386 “Origin: Modernized from Ancient Turkish Motifs:” A Case Study on Hereke Sümerbank Carpet Collection in 1965 / Didem Yavuz Velipaşaoğlu
- 1392 Tapta-Simone Guillissen-Hoa: Collaborations and Crossing Borders Between Textile Arts and Modern Architecture / Apolline Vranken, Virginie Mamet
- 1399 Dumbara Weaving – Minnette De Silva Threading a “Modern Regional Architecture in the Tropics” / Inês Leonor Nunes
- 1406 Educating Communities Through Industry: John Cotton Dana’s, *The Heritage of 3000 Years of Art in Modern Rugs and Carpets Exhibition and Floor Coverings Exhibitions*, 1929-1930 / Anita Puig
- 1411 **35. THE MODERN INTERIOR: ESSENTIAL QUALITIES THAT REMAIN**
Chair: Zsuzsanna Böröcz
- 1411 The Modern Interior: Essential Qualities that Remain / Zsuzsanna Böröcz
- 1418 Women’s Advisory Committee-VAC and Johanna Kroep-de Jonge: the Legacy of Dutch Women’s Agencies in Modern Interiors / Carolina Quiroga
- 1426 Reclaiming the Outdoors: Challenges in Retrofit, Design for Ageing and Well-being in Modern Movement Access Galleries and Walkways / Gisela Lameira, Luciana Rocha, Rui Jorge Garcia Ramos
- 1434 From Provincial to International: Modern Interiors of a Curitiba in Transition / Giovanna Polonio Renzetti, Ruth Verde Zein
- 1441 Rationalist Architecture in Seville: José Galmes and the Project for the Tomás Alehouse / Antonio Huertas Berro, Germán Reyes Mota, Pablo Millán Millán
- 1448 Timeless Quality in a Social Housing Estate for All: The Transformation of Domestic Space and Lifestyles in Olivais Norte (1960s-2020s) / Zara Ferreira, Ana Tostões
- F. BREAKING UNITS: DIVERSITIES OF MODERNITY**
- 1456 **36. OUT OF THE CENTER: MEMORY AND ROLES OF OTHER MODERN HERITAGES**
Chairs: María del Pilar Sánchez-Beltrán, María Macarena Cortés Darrigrande
- 1456 Out of the Center: Memory and Roles of Other Modern Heritages / Macarena Cortés, María del Pilar Sánchez-Beltrán
- 1464 Multi-storey Buildings in Lima (1939 – 1970): A Peruvian Genealogy of a Modern Type / Javier Atoche Intili
- 1471 Memory, Legacy and Identity: Modern Heritage in Angola and Mozambique / Ana Magalhães
- 1478 The Ethics of Preservation or Repurposing of Yugoslav WWII Monuments / Tatjana Aleksić
- 1484 “*Un pueblo sin memoria, es un pueblo sin futuro*:” Memories of Modernism and Violence at the National Stadium of Chile / Valentina Rozas-Krause
- 1491 The recourse to the authenticity in the modern architecture of Mobutu’s Zaire / Manlio Michieletto
- 1499 **37. INTERSECTIONS OF ETHNICITY, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND MODERN ARCHITECTURE**
Chairs: Ivo Gironi, Maarten Goossens
- 1499 Intersections of Ethnicity, National Identity, and Modern Architecture: A View from Latin America / Ivo Gironi, Maarten Goossens
- 1506 Lúcio Costa on Aleijadinho: Race and the Building of the National Architecture / Jaime Solares Carmona
- 1512 Modern White: The Intersection of Racial Identity and Pentelic Marble Architectures in Twentieth-Century Athens / Angelos Chiotis
- 1520 A Network from the Middle of the World: Modern Architecture and Cultural Hybridization in Quito / Ingrid Quintana-Guerrero, Chiara Lucia Stornaiolo Jácome

- 1527 (Re)discussing Miscegenation in the Historiography of Modern Architecture / Alex Matos
- 1533 Transcontinental Modernity in Ahmedabad: Contributions by Geeta and Gira Sarabhai / Maria João Moreira Soares, João Miguel Couto Duarte

1540 38. SHAPING THE NARRATIVE: THE IMPACT OF RESEARCH ON WOMEN IN ARCHITECTURE ON THE LEGACY OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE

Chairs: Ana Gabriela Godinho Lima, Klara Brůhová

- 1540 Revisiting the Modern Architecture Canon: Parallels and Distinctions in Brazil and Czech Republic through Feminist Perspectives / Ana Gabriela Godinho Lima, Klára Brůhová
- 1547 Remapping Modern Architecture: Three Modern Buildings by Female Architects in Maceió/AL / Manuella Marianna Carvalho Rodrigues de Andrade, Ítalo Monteiro de Oliveira Mariano Gomes
- 1554 The Archival is Political / Fabiola Solari, Manola Ogalde Gutiérrez
- 1560 Uruguayan Female Architects Research / Soledad Cebej, Laura Cesio, Daniela Fernández, Nadia Ostraujov, Tatiana Rimbaud, Elina Rodríguez
- 1567 Women in Modern Architecture: Regionalism, Otherness, and Gender in the Brazilian Northeastern Region / Guilah Naslavsky, Maria Luíza Rocha Mariz Valença, Rafaela Silva Lins

1574 39. ARCHITECTURE DISCOURSES AND CONSERVATION STRATEGIES

Chair: Elvira Pérez

- 1574 Architectural Heritage Discourses and Conservation Strategies / Elvira Pérez
- 1578 Towards a Construction of Heritage Assessment Criteria for Modern Architecture in Ecuador / Fernanda Monserrath Aguirre Bermeo, Verónica Heras, Santiago Vanegas
- 1586 Modern Territories and Local Architectures: Peru's Tourism Hotels from 1930 to 1970 / Trilce Bravo Guzman
- 1593 Situating Indian Architectural Discourse: Transnational Networks of Late Modernism / Saurajeeta Bose Paul
- 1601 Change to Preserve. A Conservation Strategy for Tashkent Modernist Heritage / Sofia Celli, Davide Del Curto, Ekaterina Golovatuk

1609 40. MODERNISM AND HERITAGE IN LATIN AMERICA AND AFRICA: CHALLENGES OF SHARED AND CONTESTED (ROUND TABLE)

Chairs: Warebi Gabriel Brisibe, Nwola Oluwakemi Uduku, Ernesto Valero Thomas

- 1609 Modernism and Heritage in Latin America and Africa: Challenges of Shared and Contested Heritage / Nwola Oluwakemi Uduku
- 1616 "No Holds Barred;" Behind Modernist Hotels in Nigeria and Brazil / Warebi Gabriel Brisibe
- 1624 Modernism and Heritage in Latin America and Africa: The Case of Sustainability Policies at UNAM's School of Architecture in Ciudad Universitaria, Mexico City / Ernesto Valero Thomas
- 1630 Whose Memories, Whose Heritage? Reflecting on the Spatial History of the Americas / Fernando Luiz Lara
- 1637 Modern Architecture and Ornament? / Ikem Stanley Okoye

1643 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1644 ORGANIZATION

1644 SUPPORTERS

1646 INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WORKSHOP

1647 DOCOMOMO INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERS & INSTITUTIONAL MEMBERS

MODERN OVER MODERN. THE SOM INTERIORS RESTORATION OF THE FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S ROBIE HOUSE (1967-1975)

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ABSTRACT

Despite being one of the world's most recognized modern houses of the 20th-Century, the Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House (1910) has undergone a complex series of events in more than a century as changes in ownership and function, threats of demolition, and restorations, whose traces are latent in the current appearance of the house.

This contribution aims at investigating and interpreting the 1967-75 phase, when the Robie House was turned into the headquarters of the Adlai Stevenson Institute through a project by the Chicago's firm Skidmore Owings and Merrill (SOM) that remodeled its interiors.

This prestigious tenant, entitled to Adlai E. Stevenson II (1900-1965), who was twice a candidate for the American Presidency, converted the house into a multipurpose building, with a reception area, a library, office rooms, conference halls, and public relation spaces, resulting in a rare and stimulating modern addition over a modern authorial house.

This study will provide information about the SOM phase, analyzing its related architectural interventions and their compatibility with the existing palimpsest through a bibliographical, archival, and on-site research.

The current image of the house, frozen in a suspended time, lacks any reference to this period, whose traces were lost, together with the original Wrightian furnishings. The most recent restoration, lasting from 1997 to 2018, led to a new configuration of the house where the Wrightian phase was favored through the salvation of the original vestiges and the partial reproductions of some fixtures.

The outcomes of this paper will ultimately provide new perspectives on a renowned international modern landmark prompting new considerations over its current use and configuration, trying to complicate the concept of authenticity and authorship in the ambitious intention to capture time evolution in a modern architectural interior.

1. THE INTERNATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ROBIE HOUSE FOR THE PRESERVATION OF MODERN HERITAGE

Since the early '90s of the 20th Century, within the cultural climate that led to the foundation of docomomo¹, it became central for preservationists to question how established strategies and theories would fit for Modern heritage².

More than one critical position came from Italy³ by scholars who aimed at reconciling the preservation of the Modern within the rooted theory of restoration⁴ against an emerging international tendency intent on opening to non-western concepts of authenticity⁵.

Famous restorations of modern houses in East and North Europe followed this second approach, such as the Tugendhat House in Brno, Czech Republic, (1928-30) by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), restored between 2010-12, or the Schröder House, in Utrecht, Netherlands, (1924) by Gerrit Rietveld (1888-1964) restored in the 2000s. These interventions raised questions related to the period of significance to which these houses were brought back⁶. Preservation, in both these cases, was seen as the process of refurbishing the architectural fabric as close as possible to the original conditions with the reinstatement of new seemingly-original materials through the help of diagnostic scientific processes, historical investigations, and photos⁷. This approach aroused again divergent visions from Italy⁸, with an underlying common appraisal intended to let the architectural palimpsest emerge also in modern houses⁹.

On the other shore of the Atlantic, the American approach towards conservation had already distanced from Europe with the refusal to adopt the Venice Charter, leading to a national theory applied mainly to patriotic landmarks, where intrinsic architectural values were often secondary to the narration of patriotic events¹⁰.

Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture represented the first spread American type of modern architecture in which intrinsic values were paramount. The restorations over Wright's heritage motivated in-depth studies on how the practice of preservation changed in the US to conserve this material legacy¹¹.

In the context of Chicago, a city that was the world's epicenter of modern architecture and suburban revolution¹², it was inevitable that pioneering events would occur also in the field of preservation of the Modern, with valuable outcomes also on an international level.

The Robie House, completed in 1910 and owned by three different families in its troubled history, was threatened to be demolished in 1957 by the Chicago Theological Seminary and then saved through an international protest¹³. Citing Daniel Bluestone, «the successful 1957 campaign to preserve the Robie house soon loomed nearly as large in preservation history as the building did in architectural history»¹⁴.

In 1963, after its salvation through the involvement of a private entrepreneur and the creation of the Robie House Committee, the house was donated to the University of Chicago, urging this institution to find other users not to divert funds from ordinary activities.

The Committee's mission was also aimed at collecting funds for a necessary restoration. However, out of the proposed \$250.000 they were

1. "What happened? Fourteen years of DOCOMOMO", in *Docomomo Journal – The History of Docomomo*, n. 27, (June 2002), 8.

2. H.J. Henket, H. Heynen, *Back from Utopia: the challenge of the modern movement* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2002).

3. Dezzi Bardeschi Marco, "Conservare, non riprodurre il Moderno", *Domus*, no. 649, (1984), 10-13.

4. Giovanni Carbonara, *Avvicinamento al restauro. Teoria, Storia, Monumenti*, (Napoli: Liguori Editore, 1997), 591.

5. Susan MacDonald, "Moving On: Approaches and Frameworks for Conserving the Heritage of the Postwar Era and Beyond, in *The 6th Baltic Sea Region Cultural Heritage Forum. From Postwar to Postmodern – 20th Century Built Cultural Heritage*, (Riksantikvarieambetet, Swedish National Heritage Board 2017), 124.

6. Marie-Thérèse van Thoor, *Form and Space. Rietveld Schröder House. Challenging the Future* (Delft, Delft University of Technology, 2019).

7. Ana Tostões, Ivo Hammer and Zara Ferreira, "The Re-Birth of the Tugendhat House", *Docomomo Journal – The Heritage of Mies*, 56, vol. 1, 45-55.

8. Fabio Mangone, "Emblemi del Movimento Moderno e immagine fotografica: il restauro alla "Dorian Gray", *Confronti*, no. 1 (January 2012), 102-105.

9. Renata Picone, "Il moderno alla "prova del tempo". Restauro e deperibilità delle architetture del XX secolo", *Confronti*, no. 1 (January 2012), 52-61.

10. Donatella Fiorani, "The Other Shore. Preservation and the Past in the United States", *Loggia. Architettura & Restauración*, no. 26, (2013), 8-37

11. Richard Longstreth, “The Impact of the Work of Frank Lloyd Wright (and Louis Sullivan) on Historic Preservation Practice in the United States, 1950-1980”, in *Rethinking Frank Lloyd Wright. History, Reception, Preservation*, ed. by Neil Levine, Richard Longstreth (Charlottesville and London: the University of Virginia Press, 2023), 179-212.

12. Michelangelo Sabatino, *Modern Houses for Modern Living in Chicago*, in *Modern in the Middle. Chicago Houses 1929-1975*, ed. Susan S. Benjamin, Michelangelo Sabatino (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2020), 10-37.

13. Davide Galleri, “Raising the Stakes to Save and Restore Frank Lloyd Wright’s Robie House: A Modern Architectural Palimpsest Between Politics and Preservation Practices (1957-1967)”, *Prometheus Journal*, no. 7, (May 2024), 35-39.

14. Daniel Bluestone, “Wright Saving Wright: Preserving the Robie House, 1957”, in *Rethinking Frank Lloyd Wright. History, Reception, Preservation*, ed. Neil Levine, Richard Longstreth (Charlottesville and London: the University of Virginia Press, 2023), 213-240.

15. *Financing of Robie House Renovation as of September 30, 1968*, Chicago, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Research Center (hereafter HHG), Levi Administration Records 1918-1975, Box 69, Folder 7.

16. *The University of Chicago Robie House Restoration, 1967*, Chicago, Skidmore Owings and Merrill Private Archive, Project number 106179-000.

17. *Ms. Jean Duncan Hall, Requested for records by Charles D. O’Connell, March 11, 1988*, Chicago, HHG, Series II, Individual Buildings, Robie Hosue, Box 20, Folder 159.

18. Donald Hoffmann, *Frank Lloyd Wright’s Robie House: The Illustrated Story of an Architectural*

only able to raise \$65,000, used for an urgent roof repair in 1965¹⁵. Notably, one of the main individual donors of this campaign was the architect Walter A. Netsch (1920-2008), who had a pivotal role in the SOM interior remodeling of the house.

In 1967, the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs opted to set its headquarter in the Robie House, relieving the University from the management costs, and hiring Skidmore Owings and Merrill as architects for its restoration. In lacking the necessary funds for comprehensive conservation, the house only underwent interior remodeling. The main protagonists in the design were Walter A. Netsch as managing partner and director, Donald Ohlson as project manager, and Donald Powell and Robert Peters as interior designers¹⁶.

2. THE INTERIOR REMODELING OF THE ROBIE HOUSE BY SOM

The previous condition of the Robie House as a guest house for young ministers of the theological Seminary had hardly ever been photographed or recorded. An enthusiastic and rare memory of a Chicago Theological Seminary attendee recalled the emotions of living in a Frank Lloyd Wright’s house with a brief description of the house first floor used as a common space¹⁷.

Attracted by the demolition rumors, the most compelling authorial photo campaign was conducted in 1956 by Aaron Siskind (1903-1991) and Richard Nickel (1928-1972).

However, they were focusing on the original fixed elements such as patterned grids for integrated radiators, oak latticework screens, light fixtures, bulbs, and smooth oak trims, that together produced a Prairie version of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, disallowing in their reports to comprehensively understand the interiors arrangement before 1967. The house conditions before the remodeling weren’t even designed by the architects in charge of the project, keener on surveying the space feature to comprehensively modernize it, rather than catching minor elements of previous conditions.

Therefore, to figure out the SOM intervention it is practical to follow Donald Hoffmann’s extensive research on the Wrightian phase of the Robie House¹⁸, supported by the third owners’ photos, the Wilbers family, and symbolically walk around the interior space to understand the differences between the two configurations.

Starting from the disguised entrance on the west side of the house, secluded and darkened by an upper balcony, the entry hall was originally characterized by an intentional compression as a prelude to the spatial release exalted by colored sunlight beams at the first floor, directly accessible through the interior staircase. This entry hall was intended by Wright as a visiting ticket giving an immediate essence of the house in its smallest details, as in the cloth motifs above the entry table’s vertical rails connected to oak legs. These symbolic features, such as thin oak stiles, and cantilevered smooth planes, characterized the whole composition of Wrightian furniture.

From the entry, remaining on the ground level, two opposite doors opened to the two elongated rooms on the west and east sides, respectively the billiard room to the west, and the playroom to the east.

The SOM intervention of the ground floor consisted of a complete reinterpretation of the existing spaces (**fig. 1**). Originally, these two areas, as easily comparable in the Wilbers' photos, weren't furnished by Wright and were freely filled with sofas, carpets, fittings, and music instruments, whose forms were dissonant to the aspired homogeneity of the architect's conception.

In 1967, the western billiard room became the new public library of the Adlai Stevenson Institute. Its remodeling involved a partial reuse of the vertical back stiles chairs, originally used on the first floor around the dining table, and, at the same time, the realization of new pieces, such as the consultation table, made of stylistic Wrightian bands mitigated in their ornamentations (**fig. 2A**). This table was a reinterpretation of a typology typical in many Prairie houses, as can be seen in the original Ward Willits House (1902) in Highland Park, or in the Frank Lloyd Wright's Home and Studio (1898) dining room table, all characterized with embossed wooden strips to accentuate the horizontal dimension. In this case, however, SOM did not reuse an existing piece but realized a softened reproduction with the table's feet slightly rotated, in line with other furnishings.

In the creation of this pleasant atmosphere, SOM's design approach recalled the naturality of materials used by Wright flanked by a modernistic ideal, especially in the newly added elements, as for the bookshelves on the long sides, filling the void spots between the two radiators oak covers. Another bookcase covered the vault entrance at the western end wall, and the presence of box-shaped new armchairs defined a charming and relaxed reading space in accordance with the general volumes of the house.

The other side of the ground floor, the playroom, was equally devoid of Wrightian elements and was turned into a conference space with a table occupying the room in its length designed by SOM.

On the first floor, the remodeling scheme was analogous. As the plan shows (**fig. 1**), the eastern living room, characterized by the perspective continuity, saw the only permanence of a reproduction of the Wright-designed and George Mann Niedecken-supervised¹⁹ sofa, complemented by wooden stripes running on its sides to disguise and break its mass from its steps to the overhanging side armrests.

This uninterrupted spatial flow, lacking any doors or partitions at the sides of the main central chimney, was accentuated by SOM with a lounge area consisting of gathering spots made of modernist chairs, seats, sofas and coffee tables disposed to leave a void at the center (**fig. 3A**). As shown by the photos of the time, the SOM drawings were partially changed in the execution. Instead of a double-headed prow table at the west end, the angular alcoves were filled with *ad-hoc* designed chairs made of circular cushions inscribed in a square plan.

What is worth noting is also the absence of the original built-in cushioned inglenook attached to the fireplace. This void gave room to expose the plans of the new SOM Robie House replacing the original cupboards lost over the years (**fig. 3B**).

Masterpiece, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1984).

19. Cheryl Robertson, Terrence Marvel, *Frank Lloyd Wright and George Mann Niedecken: Prairie School Collaborators*, (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2005).

The living room image became partially modernistic with Bauhaus-like chairs that, instead of spoiling the comprehensive house idea, exalted with their neutrality the window geometrical patterns, the laylight grids, and the milky overhanging globes of the upper ornamentations.

What Wright didn't intend as an isolated work, but as a combination of art, architecture, and craftsmanship, was kept alive in this comprehensive remodeling through a general respectful sense of compatibility and distinguishability of the additions. Especially in terms of space, the dynamic fluidity of the plan "which springs from the south doors and returns at the north windows, expressing a plastic continuity of wall and ceiling"²⁰, was enhanced in its intrinsic architectural sense.

On the east side, the "majestic dining table guarded by its tall chairs"²¹ and decorated with art glass lights had already been taken out, sold, and exposed in a private collection in the 1950s²². The central space of the dining room was remodeled with a new table made of triangular movable elements suggesting a plurality of configurations according to various conference typologies and needs.

The realized reinterpretation of the dining room by SOM was the final executive result between a range of solutions all linked by the intention of reconfiguring the core space with a table, surrounded by the original corner oak caseworks, that survived the house changes with the only loss of the latticework screens separating the staircase.

The eastern end prow, as the western, was filled with another set of square-shaped chairs, while the adjacent kitchen and all the servants' areas were turned into offices, retaining their lower prominence in the new configuration.

Another space worth mentioning redesigned by SOM was the main bedroom on the top floor. This space was characterized by a fireplace in exposed roman brick and surrounded on three sides by art glass windows, which produced unique reflections on the wall plasters (fig. 2B). With the SOM intervention, it was turned into the main office, with a central table in a triangular base, whose bowling ball was wider than those characterizing the prow windows. In the wrong assumption that it was part of the original design, the triangular table was wrongly repositioned amid the prow windows on the first floor in the further phases of the house after 1975, with obvious differences in angles matching.

In 1975, soon after the Adlai Stevenson Institute left the house, the University of Chicago started to sublet the indoor spaces to a plurality of renters related to the University activities, such as the Center for Studies in Criminal Justice, the Center for Far Eastern Studies, the Ruth Adams of the American Academy of Arts, the Atomic Scientists Society, or the Shimer College, that led to the inevitable fragmentations of its use, opening to a progressive phase of dismantlement of this secondary phase, whose traces slowly disappeared over time, as happened to the first Wrightian arrangement.

20. Hoffman, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House: The Illustrated Story of an Architectural Masterpiece*, 70.

21. Hoffman, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House: The Illustrated Story of an Architectural Masterpiece*, 73.

22. Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago Collections, John Vinci Papers, Box FF.9.

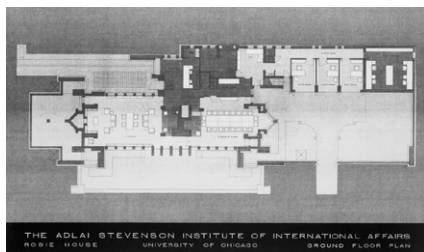


Figure 1. The Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs, Robie House, University of Chicago, First Floor Plan, Project by Skidmore Owings & Merrill (not entirely realized as shown in the plan). © 1967 Chicago, SOM Library Records and Archive, Courtesy of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill LLP.

Figure 2. (A) Frederick C. Robie Residence, Chicago, IL, 1906-1909. Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Nickel, photographer. © Richard Nickel Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archives, Art Institute of Chicago. Digital file #201006_240607-003. (B) Frederick C. Robie Residence, Chicago, IL, 1906-1909. Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Nickel, photographer. © Richard Nickel Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archives, Art Institute of Chicago. Digital file #201006_240607-002.

3. THE ERASURE OF TIME EVOLUTION IN THE FOLLOWING PHASES OF THE ROBIE HOUSE

In 1981, the University of Chicago reclaimed use of the house and, given the significance of this architectural masterpiece, only part of the edifice was turned into the Alumni Office spaces. The main floor, with a new configuration made of randomly organized furnishings and aligned velvet seats, served for touristic tours.

In the years 1980-1984 the architect John Vinci, an already established figure of the time in the Chicago's restoration movement, conducted several punctual interventions of repairs to keep the building operable, as tuckpointing, new water collection systems, and structural improvements.

From 1990, Wilbert R. Hasbrouck (1931-2018), another key figure in the local preservation field, begun a photo and survey campaign aimed at

Figure 3. (A) The Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs, Robie House, University of Chicago, First Floor Plan, Photo by Williams & Meyer, First Floor looking west, with the plan of the new configuration by SOM Shown on the right side. © 1967 Chicago, SOM Library Records and Archive, Courtesy of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill LLP. (B) Frederick C. Robie Residence, Chicago, IL, 1906-1909. Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Nickel, photographer. © Richard Nickel Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archives, Art Institute of Chicago. Digital file #201006_240607-001.

23. *Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie Vision, Frederick C. Robie Conservation Management Plan*, Frank Lloyd Wright Trust, May 2019.

drafting a comprehensive restoration plan, completed by his firm, HPZS in 1993. It included a thorough leaded glass windows analysis subcontracted to the conservator Julie L. Sloan.

The transformation of the ground floor into office spaces with the addition of temporary partitions, had overshadowed the space flow of the house. It set another low point for the house, aggravated by air conditioners, masonry degradations, and the loss of authentic interiors fragments. This phase was reported in Hasbrouck's documentation and can be analyzed today as an important testimony in the evolution of the house.

The restoration plan became effective only in 1997, when the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust became "perpetual" user of the house²³, and a slow process was set in motion, with a first step taken in the early 2000s, when the exteriors were fully restored and brought back to their original appearance, with an intervention conducted by the in-house architect Karen Sweeney. A second phase of extensive restoration, which is today the most recent intervention, was conducted between 2012 and 2019 by one of the leading American experts in this field, the Chicago firm Harboe Architects, directed by the former ISC20C international president Gunny Harboe.

The current condition of the house, following more than a century of alterations that compromised its architectural authenticity and material legacy, is a display of the remaining authentic elements and decorations. Rather than reproducing the Wrightian ornamental apparatus, the restoration architects let the primary authorial phase emerge by means of removal of all additions unrelated to Frank Lloyd Wright, in order to match the mission of the clients to highlight the connections between this architectural masterpiece and its master architect.

In the impossible condition to restore what lost, however, the house lies inevitably in a suspended time. Even if it still represents an international reference for its pioneering architectural modernity, it embodies also a microcosm of restoration approaches occurred within the conversion of the edifice from a house to a house-museum.

In the current international discourse on preserving modern architecture, the Robie House is undoubtedly one the most complex case studies that can arouse questions and undermine established certainties.

Inquiring approaches on modern houses open new lights and elevate the level of debate in conserving architectural masterpieces. These works are world-recognized milestones of the 20th-Century architectural revolution, and methodological inquiries should pursue the relentless ambition to defend the authenticity of this unique, fragile and universal heritage. ■

BIOGRAPHY

Davide Galleri is an Italian architect and Ph.D. Candidate in architecture at the University of Naples, Italy. He has been visiting scholar at the Illinois Institute of Technology of Chicago and is a Fulbright Fellow. His research is focused on interpreting different approaches on preservation of modern architecture, especially in the relationship between Italy and the US, with a keen interest in Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture and the Chicagoan built heritage. He has published several research papers related to modern heritage and won architecture prizes and bursaries on a national and international level.