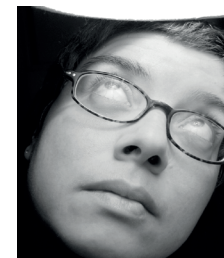


Comatose e Ricorso. Un'esplorazione ecclesiale

Comatose and Ricorso. An Ecclesial Exploration

Questa proposta si basa sull'esame di chiese abbandonate in Saskatchewan, una delle province periferiche del Canada, costruite durante la seconda ondata di immigrazione in quel territorio. Si procede con un'inchiesta sul loro scopo architettonico nella fase in cui non sono più in uso, e si esamina il significato di questi luoghi come rovine, come dispositivi mnemonici per l'uomo contemporaneo, e come ricordo della perdita. Per una di queste strutture sacre, la Convenzione della Chiesa Svedese, la teoria del ciclo della storia formulata dal filosofo XVIII secolo Giambattista Vico è usata come un modello concettuale per studiare una strategia di risoluzione della disunione tra materia, memoria e spirito, ivi sviluppatasi. Si conclude con uno schema di progetto che fornisce una risposta architettonica ai quesiti preposti.

This proposal is based on an examination of abandoned church buildings in Saskatchewan, one of Canada's prairie provinces, that were built during the second wave of immigration to that province. It proceeds with an inquiry into their architectural purpose at a time when they are no longer in use, and examines the meaning of these places as ruins, as mnemonic devices for contemporary man, and as a reminder of loss. For one of these sacred structures, the Swedish Covenant Church, the theory of the cycle of history formulated by the eighteenth century philosopher Giambattista Vico is used as a conceptual model to investigate a way of resolving the disunity that has developed between matter, memory and spirit. It concludes with an outline for a project that provides an architectural response to the questions posed.



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Keywords: **Abandoned; Heritage; Matter; Memory; Imagination**

Introduction

In the fall of 2008 I explored six abandoned churches and a synagogue scattered across the lower half of Saskatchewan, one of Canada's prairie provinces. The reality I encountered did not fit my preconception; I was surprised by this but not disappointed. I felt as if I was in a world of forgotten beauty, closer to dream than reality. The sacred places seemed like orphans, lost to the world and kept apart from the bustling cities. Silently holding onto a life of their own, they were waiting for someone to share their story. Despite the harsh weather conditions and the declining interest of the local communities, these sacred buildings were still alive, standing at the horizon between life and death. They appeared comatose.

The Western world has changed dramatically as it has experienced the shift from traditionalism to modernism. Every sector of life and culture has struggled with this change, including the religious institutions and buildings of rural Saskatchewan. As John Archer and Charles Koester suggest in *Footprints in Time*:

"Farm mechanization in the same period has transformed Saskatchewan agriculture into a motorized industry, and has resulted in decreased farm population and communities expanded in area. Such drastic changes in the rural landscape are affecting long established rural institutions such as one-room country schools, country churches, local hospitals,

*hamlets and indeed the farm family itself. Entirely new ideas about the meaning of agriculture and rural life are growing out of these changes and initiating a struggle between the old and the new."*¹

Can traditional buildings and places survive in our culture and recover their significance? Should we reject the traditional structures in the name of progress, or should we recall their history? Built on site without plans, drawings or power tools, these buildings are amazing examples of faith and determination. By revitalizing the architectural and spiritual traditions of the immigrants we open a gate of inquiry and perhaps rekindle some of Saskatchewan's vanishing heritage.

Swedish Mission Covenant Church

(Fig.1) Of the seven places of worship that I visited across Saskatchewan I found myself most deeply moved by the Swedish Mission Covenant Church². The main thing that I experienced was a sense of sorrow. The fact that there were no people, that the building appeared to be dying, that the landscape was so desolate, seemed to cry out that we are undergoing a spiritual crisis, a crisis for which this church is an architectural symbol. I began to ask how sacred buildings and places might persist and recover their original meaning. Giambattista Vico observes that in times of cultural upheaval one finds answers by

returning to historical origins. This is why it is important to recall the stories that have been obscured by time. It is the memory (*memoria*)³ of experience that makes continuity possible and provides a foundation for invention (*ingegno*).⁴

Restoration

The way in which people view the past is to a considerable extent reflected in the objects that they choose to preserve. Today we are very conscious of the need to preserve buildings that have historical and architectural value. This concern is not a modern development, for in the Middle Ages and other periods the value of a building was often determined by its historical significance. In Canada there are a number of ecclesiastical buildings that are of architectural and historical interest. A large percentage of these buildings are threatened with demolition because they are abandoned or because they do not meet current building codes. The ones that still exist are in what might be called a comatose state. They are destined to undergo either an anti-aging (preservation) process or a skilful forgery (restoration). Such methods treat the building as an abstract piece of design rather than as a living piece of history.

The abandoned churches of Saskatchewan embody architectural styles associated with the period of European immigration. If we destroy the phase of architecture that these



Fig.1 Covenant Church, northeast of Young, Saskatchewan, Canada, built in 1916 (photograph by author)

churches represent by aggressive restoration, they will in a sense cease to exist, and nothing will be left to record their story.⁵

“There was yet in the old some life, some mysterious suggestion of what it had been, and of what it had lost: some sweetness in the gentle lines which rain and sun had wrought.”⁶

With regard to these sacred places it is not simply a question of architectural meaning but a question of ethics and respect.

“We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. The dead have still their right in them: that which they labored for, the praise of achievement or the expression of religious feeling, we have no right to obliterate.”⁷

Our restless and disconnected present can unite itself with history only if we stop trying to eliminate the past.

Preservation

The attempt to arrest the workings of nature is like arbitrarily stopping a clock at some pre-selected time. Preservation attempts to maintain a building in a state of frozen existence. Yet dying is part of the natural cycle and interrupting this cycle is untruthful. The deep-freeze solution is ultimately unrealistic. Putting the church into a glass case does not reveal the full history of the building, it shows only one

stage of its life. This type of intervention aims to produce rather than discover history. The end of a physical cycle leads to a new beginning; from the ashes arises the phoenix.⁸

Preservation can prevent the deterioration of the Covenant Church, yet it is the golden strain of time that expresses the truth of our own mortality. We need the eulogies of the sacred places, however disturbing and harsh, in order to understand that death is unavoidable. The current mentality of anti-aging perpetuates the idea that things will always stay new and therefore creates a false reality. The resistance of time by our society produces a superficial amnesia designed to nourish our desire for new products that are not significantly different from the old ones. Hiding aging through the use of artificial materials erases our origin and leaves us with an uncertain future.

Ricorso

When someone first encounters the Covenant Church, they see it from our present perspective, *the age of people*.⁹ From within this age, we tend to evaluate things in terms of utility. Using such criteria a decayed and abandoned church has little meaning other than as a monument to our rejection of the past. Like the dying church, our memory of the origin of life has been lost.

“I tell you, most solemnly, unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich

harvest.”¹⁰

The seed, which in this context represents the church building, falls to the ground and dies. As the parable indicates, the dead seed produces blades of wheat containing many more seeds. In a similar manner new buildings will be born from the seed of the Covenant Church that embody its architectural characteristics and methods of construction. The new buildings will be built through *factura*¹¹ and serve as places for *factura*. The Covenant Church will be reborn in two ways. First the traditional method of construction will be embedded into each newly erected building so that the character of the original building is passed on to its “children”. Secondly the spirit of the church will be restored through the experience of traditional activities. The process of *ricorso*¹² involves letting the original building follow its natural cycle. By weaving the original church into the new buildings it will be possible to create the present form of a past life, not according to the fragments that remain but according to its past life as such.¹³

Project Description

The proposed project is to construct a group of buildings – a threshing house, a milling house, a mixing house and bread ovens – around the Covenant Church that will be used by visitors to make bread. Bread making is a form of *factura* that adds meaning to the architectural

intervention. In the process of learning, making, and consuming, the world of objects and the world of humans are reunited. An important objective of such a project is to place a unique experience into the hands of the visitors which can be passed down to the next generation.

The bread recipe that will be used combines flour, water, salt, honey and yeast. The process starts with fresh wheat that is brought to a threshing floor and pounded with flails. The threshed grains are crushed into flour in the milling house, the flour is kneaded in the mixing house and the dough is then baked in wood fired ovens. Each step of the bread making process involves methods that have been in use for many centuries. At the end of the day the bread maker stands before the church with a loaf of hand made bread. The church building, first seen as something alien and dead, is now connected to the bread that has been produced and is now seen as something that can provide a mystical type of nourishment.

(Fig.2) Due to its central position within the circular path of the new buildings, the Covenant Church will be the focal point of the site. The master plan embodies a strong sense of place for each function of the exercise, thus making a clear distinction between each stage of the bread making. Making bread is a circular process in that the same steps are repeated each time it is made. This repeated action emphasizes the idea that practice, work, and repetition are necessary to keep a tradition



Fig. 2 Covenant Church site plan with prevailing winds
(drawing by author)

alive. This can be seen in religious ceremonies that are repeated regularly to instill rituals that have been performed for centuries.

The journey begins on a stone path that leads to a pile of wheat in the threshing house, located on the right side of the church at the bottom of a natural slope. At this stage the bread makers need to carefully separate the chaff from the grain, a metaphor for separating the good from the bad in their own hearts. The wheat is spread out on the hard packed earth and hit with flails. The structure of the threshing house allows the prairie wind to pass through, blowing away the useless chaff. After the wheat has been threshed the grains are collected and placed in baskets.

In the milling house the bread maker refines the grains of wheat into flour as a metaphor for the temporal refinement that our character undergoes as life grinds away our delusions and vanities. This building is constructed on a slope that represents the rise from infancy to maturity. The floor of the building ascends towards the exit at the back wall. Upon entering the milling house through a porch one encounters complete darkness. Each bread maker is given an oil lantern and guided to a small milling station. By the light of the glowing lantern the grain is crushed into flour using hand operated mills and collected into wooden bowls. Once all of the grain has been milled, the bread makers leave the milling house through the rear exit and step out into the light of day.

After milling, the bread makers arrive at the mixing house. In the center of the building is a stone well that provides fresh water. At each station there are three jars containing yeast, honey and salt. The scriptures that inspire the Covenant Church provide a spiritual meaning for each of these ingredients. Water represents eternal life, salt is the spirit that gives flavour to our actions, honey represents the scriptures, and yeast is a symbol of the kingdom of God that starts out small and eventually grows to support all life. The round shape of the mixing house and the slope of the floor towards the center emphasize the importance of the well, from which the water of everlasting life flows. After arriving the bread makers combine the flour and other ingredients in a bowl and mix them together. They then knead the dough and leave it to rise while they go and start fires in the bread ovens. Once the dough has risen it is kneaded again and left to rise a second time. Once the dough is ready the bread makers take it from the mixing house and place it into the hot bread ovens outside. The bread that is made at the Covenant Church is truly nourishing for it has gone through a physical and spiritual transformation and can feed not only the bread makers but others as well. (Fig.3)

Conclusion

It is clear that in order to preserve the humanity of our traditions we should try to save buildings like the Covenant Church, yet it is not obvious

how this might be done. Most of the sacred buildings that were visited have in one way or another been stripped of their true origin. Despite the efforts that have been made to arrest their decay they are today used for worship only a few times each year, if at all. The Covenant Church is also unused, however it is unique in that it is the only building that has not been restored. For this reason it preserves its full history. The goal of the proposed project is not to rebuild this church but rather to build new structures that gather people around the church to discover the truths that inspired its construction. The Covenant Church will be protected from the ravages of time and neglect without any attempt to alter it.¹⁴

The activities proposed for the site are stages in the transformational process of making bread. The bread, a symbol of life, is a vessel that carries the bread maker back to the age of the gods, through the age of heroes, and finally into the age of people. Each step of the bread making is analogous to a step in the spiritual journey. The making of bread becomes a way of experiencing the divine. It is not the activities alone that determine the meaning of the experience but also the architectural and environmental realities. Architecture carries information that brings the past to life, and all of the buildings at the site contribute to this historic exploration. The design and purpose of each house connects us to something that we have forgotten. In trying to recover the heart of

a dying church we cannot use science alone, we must also encounter wonder, mystery, worship and symbolism.

Methodology

The following is an outline of the different types of *factura* used in the development and design of this project. (Fig.4, Fig.5)

Step 1

Visited the sites, took measurements, produced drawings and recorded interviews with the local people. Details provided by the people interviewed were especially useful in determining whether a building was the original or a later replacement. In some cases details were difficult to uncover because the descendents had hazy recollections of their ancestral history. All of these activities played an important role in developing an understanding of the history of each site.(Fig.6)

Step 2

2a Used cedar shingles that had fallen to the ground from the Covenant Church to build a 1/8" model of the church. This process of transplantation (creating new life from old) was significant because it exemplifies the application of the past to the present.

2b Established a grammar of the Covenant Church building by conceptually taking apart its elements and building detail models, a full

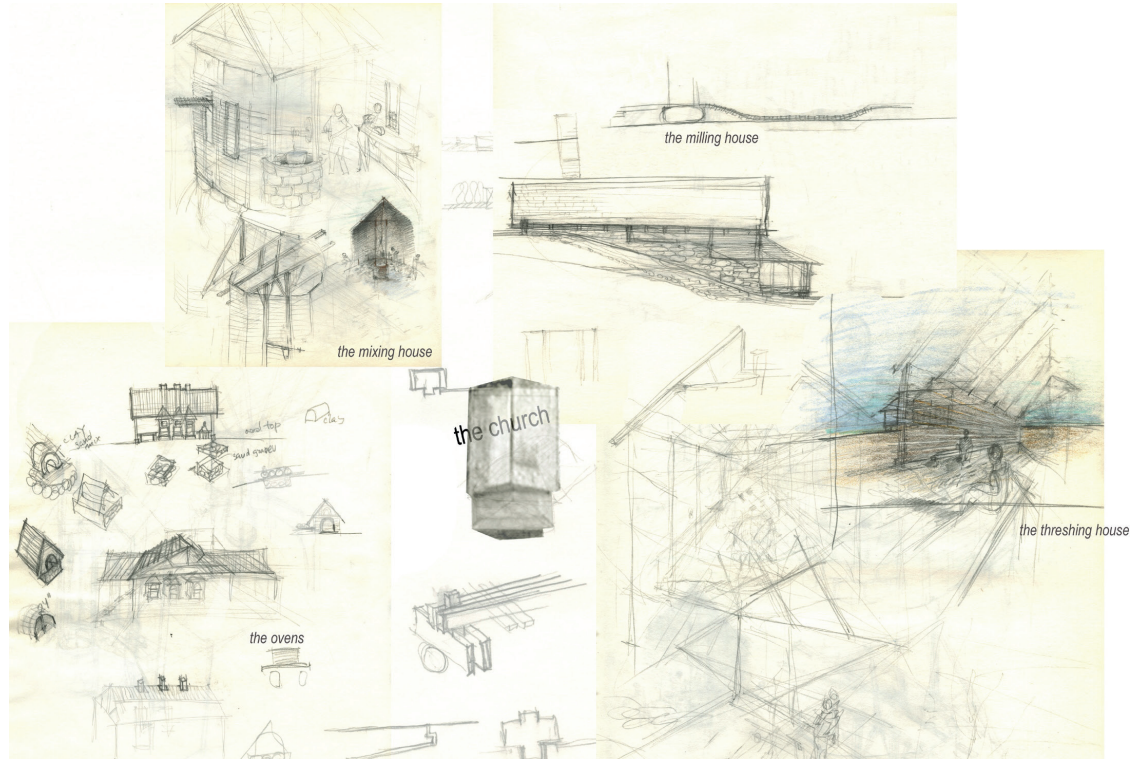


Fig. 3 Covenant Church design plan (drawing by author)

scale-corner detail, a rafters detail using a scale of $\frac{3}{4}''=1'-0''$, and a full scale wooden pew. Through this I came to appreciate a number of things about early pioneer methods. Clearly the architectural techniques were limited by the availability of local materials, and the design had to be reduced to what was manageable. This mode of composition appears restrictive, however the fact that one must work within boundaries encourages the designer to concentrate on solutions for particular problems rather than reinventing every form and shape. Such an architectural method is dominated by tradition, but this does not imply that the folk designers are less creative.

Step 3

For this project making bread is an essential part of understanding the process of *factura*. Each step of bread making was therefore carefully analyzed and later implemented in the design. Several loaves of bread were made in my home using a sourdough starter rather than yeast. The resulting bread was edible but took too long to produce. For this reason it is proposed that the bread maker use yeast.

Step 4

Videos were made of the construction of the site models and the making of bread. Capturing the process of making reveals what happens at each step and helps develop an understanding of the things that are being made.

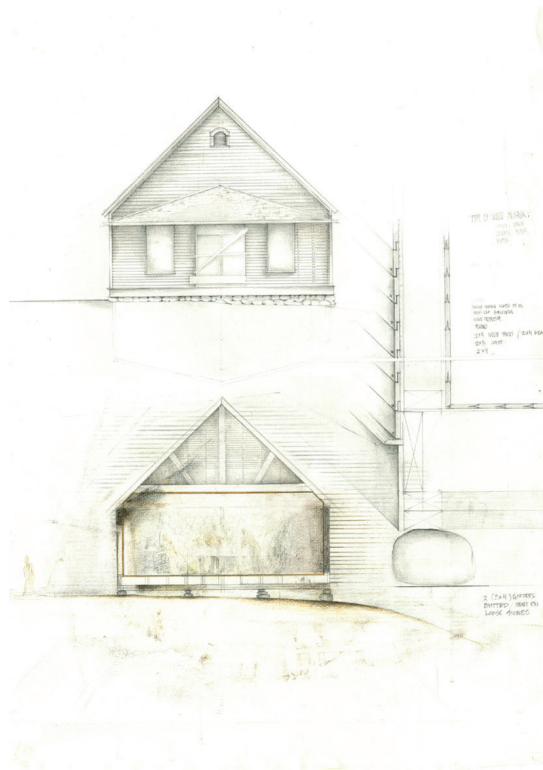


Fig. 4, 5 Details of the Covenant Church (drawings by author)

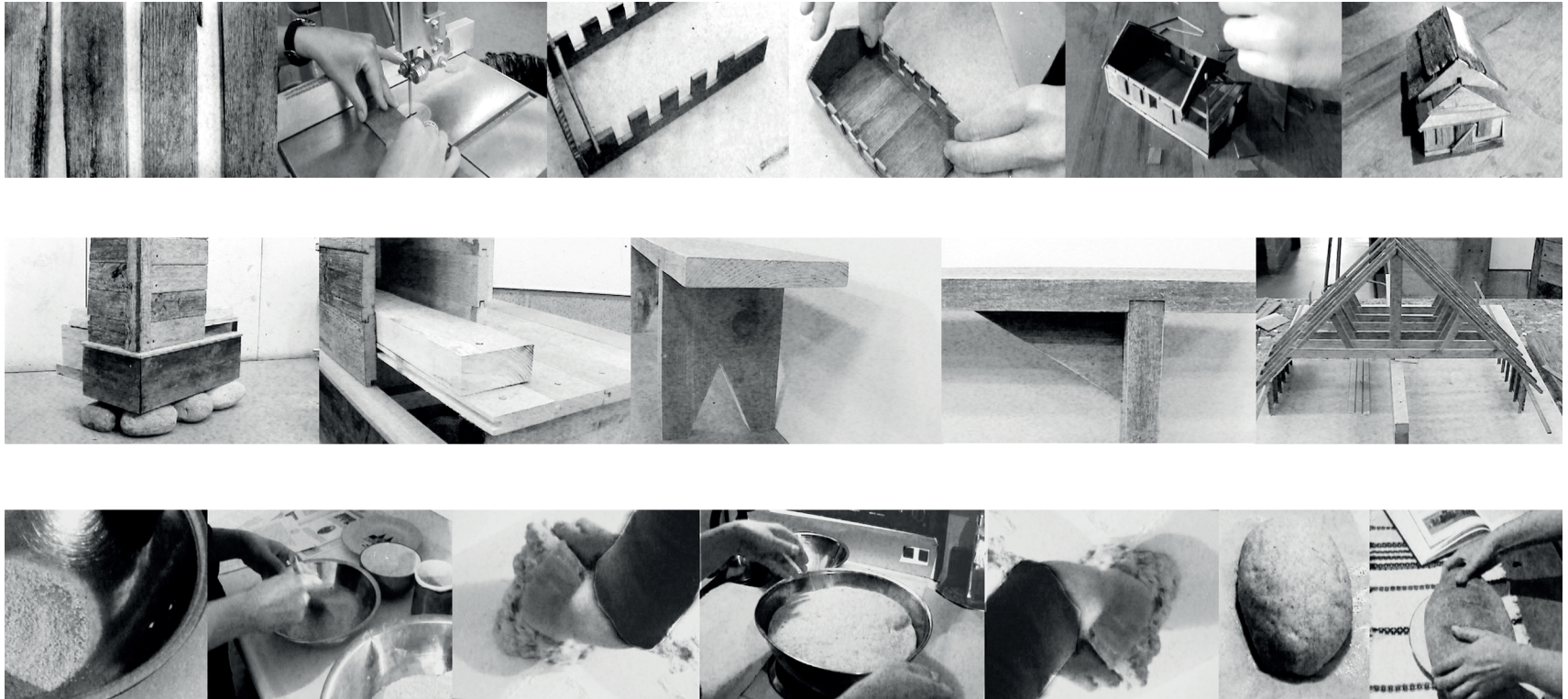


Fig. 6 (2a) Model of the church at 1/8"=1'-0" (2b) Full scale corner detail and rafter detail at 3/4"=1'-0" (4) Time lapse of bread making (design work and photographs by author)

Notes:

1. Archer, John and Koester, Charles, *Footprints in Time*, p. 108
2. In 1911, several Swedish families in the Yang area established a congregation of the Swedish Mission Church. By 1916, the congregation and constructed the small, vernacular wood-frame church on the property and established the cemetery. According to Canada's Historic Places website the weekly church serves ended in 1925, and periodic services continued until 1971
3. Vico, Giambattista, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, (axiom 819): "Memory is the same as imagination, which for that reason is called *memoria* in Latin."
4. Verene, Donald, *Vico's Science of Imagination*, p 105 According to Verene *ingegno*, like the Latin *ingenium*, means "perception, invention, the faculty of discerning the relations between things, which issues on the one hand an analogy, simile, metaphor, and on the other a scientific hypotheses."
5. Pevsner, Nikolaus, "Scrape and Anti-scrape", *The Future of the Past, Attitudes to Conservation 1174-1974*, pp. 51-52
6. Ruskin, John, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, p. 185
7. Ibid, p. 186
8. Vico, Giambattista, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, 1108
9. Ibid, (axiom 52 and 432): The three cycles were originally formulated by the Egyptians. Giambattista Vico's theory of the cycle of history postulates that the history of a nation can be divided into three ages, namely the age of gods, the age of heroes, and the age of people. The age of people is the age of humanity and in this age thought is dominated by criticism and logical judgment.
10. *The Jerusalem Bible*, John 12:24
11. Vico, Giambattista, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, (axiom 349): According to Vico "history cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also describes them." He also postulated that "truth itself is made". The concept of *factura* stems from Vico's principle *verum esse ipsum factum*
12. Ibid, (axiom 241, 242, 1096): Vico's theory of *corsi* and *ricorsi* postulates that human history moves in a cycle from progress, mature state, decline and fall. Vico says: "Men first feel necessity and finally go mad and waste their substance." After the fall the cycle starts over again.
13. Mostafavi, Mohsen, Leatherbarrow David, *On Weathering*, 64
14. Ruskin, John, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*,) p 184-186 Rather than restoration Ruskin recommends conservation, by which he means preserving the building from time and neglect without any attempt to add, alter or restore it. In his opinion time and neglect do less damage than restoration, which produces a good imitation of the original but destroys its authenticity. He suggests that proper care of a monument involves giving it a crutch rather than removing a limb.

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