The figure of Paolo Marconi can inevitably be found in any architectural heritage conservation debate which might have taken place in Italy in the 60's (and Italy, in those years, is, of course, the very focal point of all such debates throughout Western Culture). His name was not exempt from controversy and from a lively confrontation of viewpoints. He is a relevant landmark, both for the theory and for the practice of architecture. His work showed a singular brilliance and resolution right up until his last days; till that 13th August on which he left us all in Rome, his beloved city, and deprived us all of his acute thought and of that infrequent, ironical, lucid and critical ability with which he carried on defending his strong –daring, sometimes- positions.

With his degree as an architect in 1958, he was interested in the study and conservation of architectural heritage from the very first steps of his professional career; precisely, in those moments, after World War II’s devastating damage, in which the practical reality of restoration –if not a true ‘reconstruction’- of buildings and monuments ran in a very different direction from the principles set out in the Athens Charter (1931). Already, in his student years, he would very closely follow the reconstructions of the two historical bridges in Verona. At that moment, his father, the architect Plinio Marconi, was setting out the Piano di Ricostruzione of this city; and both bridges (the medieval one of Scaligero and the Roman Ponte Pietra), which had been destroyed by the German army’s retreat (F2), were being reconstructed by Piero Gazzola according to the motto ‘com’erano e dov’erano’. Naturally, Marconi always defended these reconstructions and other similar post-war works; and he even came to upbraid Gazzola for his later complete self-critical exercise (following the line of the Athens Charter principles). Marconi’s idea of restauro all’antica occupied a central place in his restoration theory and in his work as a practising architect. ‘Reconstruction in style’ practice, so criticized at that time (and explicitly condemned by the Athens Charter), was defended by Marconi with the naturalness of one who has witnessed buildings being repaired and has had to intervene in them; with the naturalness, above all, of one who knows the constructive-formal process of architecture.

The ‘Replica sapiente’. Some thoughts on the Theoretical Legacy of Paolo Marconi (Rome, 1933-2013)

Javier García-Gutiérrez Mosteiro
will—to restore the church to its city". This was the internationally so-called "Dresden appeal" (Ruf aus Dresden). In this reconstruction, given the support of the British company Dresden Trust, he could see a clear example of reconciliation of nations who had clashed in war; and he would regret that such actions—carried out with naturalness in other countries—did not find their way to Italian ground.

In Italy, even the reconstruction of the Trinità Bridge in Florence, carried out by the Americans and acclaimed by the Florentines with enthusiasm, had been unambiguously criticized by Marconi. Applying an identical line of argument to the one used against the reconstruction of the San Mark campanile, he said: if missing elements were works of art themselves, the possibility of their being reconstructed like copies is completely out of the question.

The atmosphere should be reconstructed according to the special data of any disappeared monuments, and not to any formal considerations. (…) A Santa Trinità Bridge must be put up again, but it cannot be Ammannati's Bridge.

Beyond these and other cases—which followed popular restrictive—, the defense of "redesigning" as a technology opened new fields of experimentation to him. In his own real restorations (the theatre of Carignano in Turin, for instance), he followed the same approach which he admired in the restorations of the Frauenkirche in Dresden (where he had worked what he held against that 'so grandiose and—at the same time—so detailed a work, so exactly reconstructed, having recourse to a courageous optimization due to modern technologies'). When he goes on to defend some very salient—and, from other standpoints, very contested—replica works (as is the case with the stoa of Attalos in the Agora of Athens or the already quoted Frauenkirche in Dresden), he does not forget to remark upon the merit that these experiences deserve in reclaiming 'a craft which was at risk—as in Italy—of disappearing in those years'.

Marconi's defense of traditional crafts conservation has a very deep meaning. In such a defense, he puts forth a claim for a new heritage value, going beyond Brandi's dimensions and even Riegl's centurian—but so current—axiology. He finds a specific worth in craft conservation: a question, obviously, that might well come into conflict with the Eurocentric value of authenticity (but, in any case, would be perfectly acceptable to Eastern Cultures). Together with this, there is another question which powerfully absorbs his attention and pushed him to study the paths of a semiotics: the transmission of expressive codes in architecture. Umberto Eco argues that, apparently, architectural objects 'don't communicate (at least, they haven't been conceived to communicate), but they work'; however, he adds, architecture, given that it is a matter of material and constructive operations, does not forget to remark upon the merit that these experiences deserve in reclaiming 'a craft which was at risk—as in Italy—of disappearing in those years'.

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He thinks that the architectural heritage good is not so much the work of a single hand but, rather, the result of "a long chain of interpretations of all those that execute the project" (when it is not the result of alterations due to upkeep or re-use). However, above all, Marconi beholds architectural heritage from the formal dimension angle—recupero della bellezza—and this is irreconcilable with Brandi’s standpoint, that is, architectural restoration is governed by 'the historical and the aesthetic dimensions'; and, consequently, calibrating and the critical weighing up of every different case are required.

So, where Marconi’s theory—and practice—of restoration is most directly at loggerheads with Brandi’s is in the negation of one of Brandi’s firmest principles (a principle which can be termed authenticity and here, in his off-quoted motto del restauro, he has set out unmistakable measures in order to assure the differentiation (regarding style, materials, simplification of profiles and ornaments...) between added and original parts. 

Following this line and reacting against the excesses carried out by the supporters of stylistic reconstructions of monuments and historical centers) was an expressive reductio ad absurdum. In that case, the idea of documental falsification of a work of art, such as a picture or a false document or a false coin). In the end, he denounces, the Italian use of calling falsification to refer to reintegration in architecture. For him, in essence, the negation of one of Brandi’s firmest principles (a principle which can be termed authenticity) is most directly at loggerheads with Brandi’s is in the negation of one of Brandi’s firmest principles (a principle which can be termed authenticity). He connects this circumstance with the criminal action of those who fake art objects and market as authentic (as would be the case of a false document, a false coin). In the end, he denounces, the Italian use of calling falsification to refer to reintegration in architecture. 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theory but also, to extrapolate, to reflect on other ideas. Quite probably, beyond ideological formulations and positions on architectural restoration, there is at basis another necessary—but not sufficient—condition: and that is to know how to enjoy the architecture aesthetic dimension (which, even in the most reductionist of cases, does not imply excluding the historical one—if we want to use the Brandian term).

For this aesthetic dimension, for this recupero della belleza, Marconi showed us the path; very often, a long and strenuous path: the one of integral knowledge of architectural fact, its history, its social function and its psychological dimension, its mechanics, its constructive practice, its materials and crafts. He showed how we should ‘listen’ to the building, to observe and to respect it in all its complexity and context, as a step previous... to put in our hands on it. So, we can understand that those who had closely treated with him, and worked with him, defend Marconi as one of the few voices who ‘till the end has tried to make all architects think about the complexly difficult relationship between the old and the new in architecture’.

To know before acting, the uso sapiente of architecture, is a message which has opened up for architects and for the Schools and Faculties which must train them. It is a lesson that—from positions close to or distant from his— we should register in the frame of architectural heritage culture in where—with more doubts than certainties—we have to move.

PAOLO MARCONI
ARCHITECTURAL RESTORATION
REPLICA RECONSTRUCTION
20TH CENTURY ITALIAN ARCHITECTURE
RECONSTRUCTION IN STYLE