

*The Notre-Dame
Translation Project*

VII. Restoration

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The Spirit of Restoration

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In modern parlance, the word “restoration” refers to an array of material acts performed on an edifice or structure to conserve the physical presence and memorial significance in space proper to a human society. This type of action has been attested from the start in most cultures, although traces of it are sometimes tenuous for the earliest periods, and the range of actions implemented are often difficult to define.

Before the 19th century, in Europe, it was most often a question of carrying on a function—in particular, but not exclusively a place of worship—by maintaining, repairing, enhancing, or reconstructing the building or buildings corresponding to this function, often a bearer of memory. In this context, such an intervention may or may not have taken into account, or did so to varying degrees, the form of the building that was subject to the intervention, seeking or not to perpetuate or reproduce it.

With the 19th century, it became a question of perpetuating not the function, but rather the physical present of the buildings, which bear, to a great extent, the memorial value attached to them. Architectural form—and even style—is the expression of this presence inherited from the past, which is the goal of restoration. This approach, subject to public action, was an archaeological and architectural undertaking, which sometimes went very far and proposed to give the building, as Viollet-le-Duc wrote, “a complete state, which may never have existed at any given time.”

Even if the two approaches mentioned above can, even today in some cases, underlie some or all aspects of contemporary interventions, conservation—restoration—is now committed to the conservation of the materials of which the building is made, as they alone provide an authentic testimony of the past, resulting from the work of craftspeople and artisans and bearing the traces of their actions. This paradigm has obvious limitations, such as the physical alteration of materials over time or due to the conditions to which they are subjected, as well as equally essential limitations related to the public’s use of or visits to the buildings.

Every restoration is, therefore, a complex, well-considered act, a balance between, on the one hand, several factors of alterations and constraints and, on the other hand, the solutions that modern techniques and available economic resources can provide. It aims to prioritize the safeguard of the authentic materials of the building understood as a human creation, without overlooking the identity of the building and its historical value in a given society.