

# From Sentiment to Science — docomomo comes of Age

The following keynote lecture was presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> International **docomomo** Conference that took place in Espoo, Finland, in August 2012. The author, an active member of **docomomo** since its creation, used this opportunity to do what is traditional when someone 'comes of age', that is, use it as a milestone to look back at where **docomomo** came from, and forward to what it might become [figure 1].

By John Allan

It would be presumptuous of me to attempt this task on behalf of an organization embracing so many different countries and cultures, so I must approach it just as an architectural practitioner in the UK and my presentation will inevitably be somewhat autobiographical. However, by using some of my own case studies to identify certain themes, I want to suggest a wider interpretation of the **docomomo** mission as it has developed from infancy to adulthood, and how it might continue from here.

I still have the most agreeable memories of our first conference in Eindhoven in 1990, when the delegates from a mere handful of countries came together to share their concern over the fate of Modern architectural heritage. It seemed like a historic beginning, as indeed it has proven to be. Such initiatives however do not come from nowhere; it was our response to a context of ignorance and neglect. Many of the authorities who ought to have known better were ignorant of their MOMO legacy, and many of the owners of key buildings and sites had allowed them to fall into varying states of neglect. To those of us for whom this legacy was our inspiration, the situation was unbearable. So you could say that our response to this ignorance and neglect was driven by *sentiment*. 'Sentiment', is defined in our English dictionary as 'susceptibility to tender, delicate or romantic emotion', which I think aptly describes the impulse that brought us together 22 years ago—a shared love of the most precious built achievements of the heroic period of Modernity that had fallen into oblivion and were at risk of being lost altogether, almost accidentally.

What that moment ignited was a shared resolve to ensure that the best surviving achievements of that heroic period of the Modern Movement were firstly identified and recognized as such, then protected and conserved. Some of the success stories have been heroic in themselves and perhaps none more so than that of the building that started it all: the Zonnestraal Sanatorium saved by **docomomo**'s founders Hubert-Jan Henket and Wessel de Jonge.

This building, and the monumental task of rescuing it, has become a sort of metaphor for the whole movement. Many of the national groups here may likewise have originated in a particular rescue campaign, and I dare say that every country in the **docomomo** family could identify one building, among all others, that represented that optimism and innocence by which we identify

the early Modern Movement. In England we had the Penguin Pool at London Zoo, which I was privileged to restore in the mid-1980s and that for a time became an emblem both of English Modernism in its prime, as well as of the conservation initiative represented by **docomomo**.

I will come back to Eindhoven at the end, because it provides such a clear milestone from which to measure the distance we have travelled since. But that was then, and this is now. We may not need to re-write the Eindhoven Statement, which still makes persuasive reading, but do we have to re-define the mission to which it is applied? I believe we do. So what has changed?

Well, I think two things have changed. One has to do with **docomomo** itself, the other its external context. Firstly, our own position in relation to the Modern Movement legacy.



Figure 1. John Allan addressing the Helsinki Conference, Espoo, August 2012. Photo by Stella Maris Casal.

Figure 2. **docomomo**'s changing focus.

Figure 3. Balancing differing project priorities.

This might be imagined in the form of a pyramid where the very few, most iconic, examples sit at the top, and as heritage significance diminishes, so the numbers increase. In the centre, lies the largest collection of works that may not be sufficiently distinguished to be listed, but that are certainly too numerous and valuable as property to demolish. At the base is the residue of buildings that could surely be lost without a tear being shed.

Since many of the most significant monuments have now been identified and in most cases (if not all) have been saved or at least removed from the 'critical list', so our attention has turned to the other less rarified but more numerous elements of the legacy. Thus, the first change after 22 years, it seems to me, is the *change of focus* [figure 2].

The second change—relating to our context—is surely the cause of environmental sustainability, which in 1990 was little more than a gleam on the horizon, but that has now become the single most pressing issue to confront not only in building design and construction generally, but in virtually every field of endeavor in the 'developed' world. It is now unthinkable to embark on any kind of design undertaking without the question of its environmental impact and sustainability being at the heart of the project. It conditions everything we do.

Increasingly alarming statistics tell us that we can no longer behave as if the earth's resources were limitless, and that we must learn how to renew the world with things that exist already. Indeed it often seems as if the Green Agenda were the *only* agenda.

Now I've identified these shifts for **docomomo** as two separate things, but their implications come very close to being a single proposition, namely that environmental and economic reasons may be more relevant than heritage sensibilities for keeping and improving the majority of Modern buildings that are not 'iconic'. Or, to use my earlier terminology, we are finding that initial 'sentiment' by itself either inapplicable or insufficient. We must find *other* arguments for conserving our legacy and these, I suggest, are likely to focus on economic and sustainability factors.

To expand on this, I want to say a word about heritage recognition. Whereas historic buildings usually attract instinctive public support, in the case of Modern buildings — because their recognition as *heritage* is still so underdeveloped—the arguments for listing must be made by specialists such as academics, architectural historians, etc. It's due to the prevailing unpopularity of Modern architecture in the UK that listing has become the conservationists' main

weapon against demolition. If their case is successful, then at least the building has the law on its side—even if not public opinion. However, this is a game of high stakes inasmuch as, if the listing case fails, then demolition is assumed to be inevitable.

This is exactly what happened with Robin Hood Gardens, Pimlico School, Broadgate, and conceivably, London's Southbank complex, which has now been turned down for listing 4 times. By relying so much on listing as the primary defence, and therefore on trying to convince sceptics of *heritage* significance, conservationists of Modern architecture have been seeking to win the most difficult type of argument for saving buildings in distress. This is how motivation by *sentiment* can have precisely the opposite outcome to that intended—since losing the heritage argument for listing becomes synonymous with losing the buildings altogether.

I am not suggesting that **docomomo** abandon the evangelical first article of its Eindhoven Statement—to 'bring the significance of the Modern Movement to the attention of the public'. What I am suggesting is that in the increasing number of cases, where we are *not* dealing with 'icons' and where a heritage argument therefore becomes that much more difficult to win, we should be exploring and promoting the many *other* possible motives for keeping a Modern building.

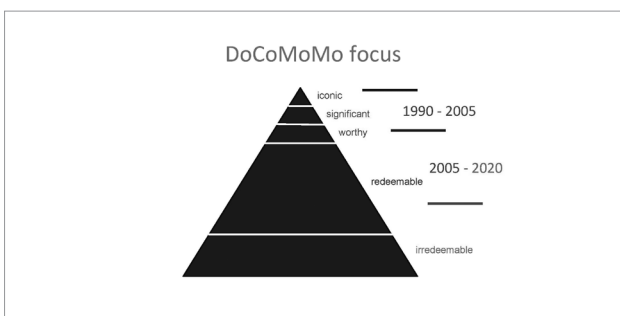
I want to examine this issue of motives because what has struck me from my own experience is how projects that the architect might deem to be of heritage significance are usually seen quite differently by the other participants, with heritage very low on their agenda—if at all. In almost every case, there are three types of need that require a response—of which only the first could be said to be purely heritage driven. This is *repair*—the requirement to shore up or reinstate original fabric to retrieve or prolong its authenticity. Beyond this however, there is *upgrade*—the need to improve the technical performance of a building or replace its engineering systems that have become deficient or unserviceable. And then, crucially, *re-formation*—the pressure to intervene and change buildings and their sites in order to add value or accommodate new requirements.

For the purposes of this talk, I hope to use these terms generically without getting tied up in the semantics of terminology. This pattern repeats so consistently that I have come to see the architect's role as one of trying to bring these 3 factors to a valid and sustainable point of balance. However, this will differ with each project, according to their particular priorities [figure 3].

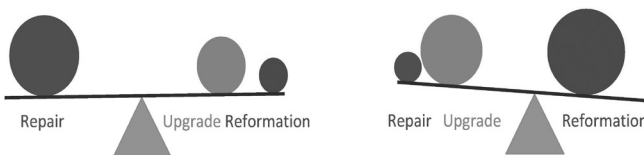
The conservation lobby is interested in authenticity and 'significance', and is therefore biased towards preservation and repair of original fabric. Users are concerned with whether a building is good to work in or live in, and so are inclined to focus on upgrading its performance and functionality. Property owners are interested in their building as an investment and so are concerned with intervening to maximize its exchange value and return. So the three needs tend to be identified with the three key types of stakeholder, *repair*—conservationists; *upgrade*—users; *re-formation*—owners/ investors.

Architects must serve all of these interest groups. However, depending on the project, the weight given to each need can vary considerably. In the few high profile projects I've called 'iconic', conservation is supreme, with upgrade and intervention being admitted only so far as is necessary to secure the key heritage objectives. On the other hand, with the great majority of Modern buildings in the middle of my pyramid, it is only realistic to assume that intervention and upgrade will play the dominant role.

This is really the thesis I want to put to you, that because the conservation of the Modern Movement cannot, in the majority of cases, expect to operate in a supportive heritage culture, but *has* to grapple with the sciences of upgrade and adaptation, we should be developing those skills and not just relying on heritage advocacy.



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Figure 4. 2 Willow Road, London, **Ernö Goldfinger**, 1938.

Figure 5. The Homewood, Surrey, **Patrick Gwynne**, 1938.

Figure 6. 66 Frognal, London, **Colin Lucas**, 1938.

Figure 7. Harbour Meadow, West Sussex, **Peter Moro** and **Richard Llewelyn Davies**, 1938-40.

Figure 8. Miramonte, Kingston-Upon-Thames, **Maxwell Fry**, 1937.

Figure 9. Hill House, London, **Oliver Hill**, 1930s.

Figure 10. The Isokon, London, **Wells Coates**, 1933-34.

Figure 11. New North Court, Jesus College, Cambridge, **David Roberts**, 1963.

Now, I don't want to be misunderstood here. I certainly do not underestimate the need for a scientific approach to conservation work *as such*, and projects like Villa Tugendhat surely provide supreme examples of this discipline. But the point *there* is surely that the science occurs *within* a conservation agenda, whereas in the cases I'm talking about it must find a place in a sceptical arena where even keeping Modern buildings, and working with them, *cannot* be taken for granted.

To illustrate my thesis I will therefore present my case studies by descending order of heritage motivation, that is, starting with heritage-led projects and progressing to those where heritage was increasingly peripheral—though still an important 'by-product'; in effect a step-by-step journey from sentiment to science. This I believe is the way *most* modern buildings will have to be saved if they are to survive—*not* by pleading special heritage privileges but by demonstrating how they can be made useful for the future.

If we start at the tip of the pyramid, the two house museums we've restored for the National Trust—Erno Goldfinger's House in Hampstead and Patrick Gwynne's House near Esher—could be regarded as the most straightforward in terms of motivation—that is where *all* key parties—client, conservation authorities, users and indeed ourselves—shared the same agenda—*heritage*. [figures 4, 5].

However, it must be noted that by privileging the heritage interest, the houses themselves ceased to be houses, (albeit the Gwynne house is tenanted). There are very few such cases where Modern Movement buildings can be expected to survive by just becoming exhibits in themselves.

We are in the rarified realms of Villas Savoye and Tugendhat, Sonneveld and Seidler.

We have undertaken many other rescue missions on Modern houses, but these have all been for private owners, where invariably there have been *other* aims on the agenda—most notably the desire to add value. So while I might want to present these as conservation projects in the **docomomo** canon, it would be disingenuous to suggest that this was the sole or even the main objective. The economic realities dictated otherwise, and it was *heritage* that was an 'extra benefit'. The challenge of these projects was to achieve the client's required interventions without detriment to their heritage value [figures 6, 7, 8, 9].

Staying with residential property, the Isokon, which you might assume was saved because of its iconic status, was really regenerated for its value to a social landlord whose agenda corresponded exactly with the local council's policy to prioritize key-worker housing.

The fact that this building was listed Grade I of course meant that conservation protocols were an essential element of the project. These were however not the project drivers as such [figures 10, 11].

Another residential example would be the hall of residence we restored for Jesus College, Cambridge University, where the underlying requirement was to make the building suitable for conference visitor use. Though a familiar challenge for British universities, this case involved the complete re-engineering of the service cores of this 1960s Grade II listed building. Nevertheless, I should still like to think that this was achieved without detriment to its special architectural interest.

What we are seeing is the changing argument in moving down the pyramid toward the less iconic, more generic elements of the Modern Movement legacy [figure 12].

A good example of the latter type is Priory Green, a large and troubled early post-war housing project by Lubetkin, which we regenerated for another social housing association. Here there was *no* question of heritage driving the agenda. On the contrary, the local authority who owned the estate was ready to demolish in favor of redevelopment. By-passing heritage arguments, we maintained that a more *sustainable* approach would be to retain and rehabilitate the estate. This could have been done in various ways as the buildings were not listed. Overcladding and plastic windows might have been accepted as the client was more pre-occupied with viability than how it was achieved. The heritage ambitions were simply our own. Eventually however, on seeing the completed result the local council declared the whole estate a Conservation Area [figure 13].

Plymouth Civic Centre was another case of a local authority disowning its inheritance, wishing to sell the site for redevelopment and move into new offices elsewhere in the city. This fine ensemble dating from the early post-war years was opened by the Queen in 1962 and became a potent symbol of Plymouth's recovery from the blitz. Memories fade however. When the council sought to dispose of the buildings, English Heritage had them listed. We were commis-



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sioned to propose rehabilitation measures and potential future uses. We found that the buildings were quite capable of upgrade and adaptive re-use, and new developers are now being invited to express an interest in taking over the site whilst retaining and upgrading the buildings. Here again, the project drivers depended entirely on economic and sustainability factors [figure 14].

Much the same could be said of my final two examples from the education sector (and also listed)—Sheffield University Library and Haggerston School in East London, both now saved for an extended future through architectural and environmental intervention [figures 15, 16].

Almost all of these projects were saved by motives other than a concern for Modern heritage. In every case however, there has also been a heritage benefit in terms of enhanced authenticity. In other words, the dominance of *other* motives in projects involving important Modern buildings does *not* mean that heritage considerations can't play an important part. I believe there is a lesson in this for us at **docomomo**, and this is what I shall consider in conclusion.

I started by describing **docomomo** as a family, and I suspect that what binds us together is our predisposition to embrace the Modern Movement legacy as heritage first and foremost. *Outside* the family however, most people we deal with have no such predisposition. By all means we can continue to revere our legacy, but I believe that we must *also* get better at understanding and exploiting *other* arguments for keeping and working with Modern buildings than solely heritage ones. There are plenty of such arguments to pursue—and I suggest that they are likely to focus on the environmental and economic factors now dominating societal concerns.

It seems to me that the survival of most modern buildings will depend increasingly on demonstrating the feasibility of upgrading performance, adding value and exploiting opportunities for change to serve new needs. I would like to promote this broader interpretation of conservation over the more rarified conventional model usually derived from the well-known conservation charters with their focus on minimal intervention and their almost exclusive preoccupation with original fabric and its assumed survival.

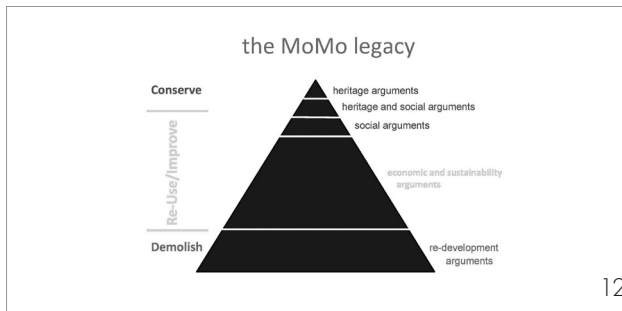
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In stressing the role of intervention, I do *not* want to give an impression of devaluing specialist skills and knowledge in the conscientious restoration of buildings of *any* period. Far from it. Conservative repair can still be regarded as the gold standard of conservation practice *in appropriate circumstances*. But we shouldn't forget that the Modern Movement, and Modern architecture, was supposed to be for *everybody*, and it's my opinion that beyond the celebrated high-profile cases, the greater challenge is to find ways of adapting the re-usable mass of the Modern legacy to serve the real needs of the majority.

I once described conservationists as falling into one of two categories—curators or alchemists—the former regarding heritage assets as *heirlooms*, the latter approaching them as a *resource*. It seems to me, in our current climate of uncertainty, when *everything* we now do is subject to the criteria of environmental

Figure 12. The Modern Movement legacy.

Figure 13. Priory Green Estate, London, **Berthold Lubetkin and Tecton**, 1943–52.

Figure 14. Plymouth Civic Centre, Plymouth, **Hector Stirling, Jellicoe, Ballantyne & Coleridge**, 1959.

Figure 15. Sheffield University Library, Sheffield, **Gollins, Melvin & Ward**, 1959.

Figure 16. Haggerston School, London, **Ernö Goldfinger**, 1964–65.





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and economic sustainability, that the curatorial challenge of preserving buildings and places from the past will increasingly be overtaken by the *creative* challenge of adapting the larger Modern Movement legacy for a sustainable future.

One of the early criticisms of **docomomo** was that its conservationist stance towards architecture of the Modern Movement was intellectually—perhaps even ethically— inconsistent with a movement originally dedicated to renewal. Yet to follow that 'logic' would mean that we should be bound by the circumstances confronting our grandfathers when half the world lay in ruins, and argue that what justified *their* need to rebuild should remain *our* justification to keep on demolishing.

Yet, as I said earlier, the conditions of *our* time have surely taught us that progress must now consist in learning how to renew the world with things that exist already. People may continue to debate the *heritage* values of the Modern Movement, but what *cannot* be disputed is that its legacy represents an incalculably vast investment of human labor and embodied energy. Doubtless some of it must be cleared and replaced. To suggest otherwise would be naive. But more, much more, must survive by being *sustained*.

As this conference title 'The *Survival* of Modern' surely implies, we should be leading the way in demonstrating how, for example, the embodied energy in an existing Modern building may make it economically more advantageous and environmentally more responsible to retain and upgrade it, regardless of whether it is listed or not. Although I'm well aware that there has been progressive work in the science and calculation of embodied energy, this kind of reasoning is still woefully underdeveloped in the discourse and politics of conservation. And yet many of the materials we are dealing with in Modern Movement buildings—cement, steel, aluminum, copper, oil based products—have some of the highest embodied energy values amongst building materials. We must begin to appreciate this investment in energy and material as *another* kind of heritage.

If, as the slogan has it, 'the greenest building is the one already built' then the question I put to **docomomo** is whether it is willing to venture into this territory and master the science and politics of sustainability and embodied energy in the cause of keeping modern buildings? Or would we rather stay in our comfort zone, immersed in history and culture and carrying on lovingly restoring our favorite icons?

Of course we can still be Modern Movement evangelists, pursuing article 1 of the Eindhoven Statement, and hoping to win converts from a sceptical or indifferent audience. My own view however is that we must now engage with this larger field and draw **docomomo** into the wider debate on *environmental* conservation.

The alternative, it seems to me, is that **docomomo** will increasingly become a victim of its own specialization.

Those of you at Eindhoven in 1990 will remember Peter Palumbo and his philanthropic role in rescuing the Penguin Pool. He was one of **docomomo**-UK's original supporters. So allow me to close by quoting from his Eindhoven paper all those years ago. He said:

*We hope that **docomomo** does not become backward-looking. We hope it is not just a pressure-group for conservationists. We hope that docomomo will not emerge as just a club for scholars. None of these things, we believe, would be in the best interests of the Modern Movement.*

**docomomo** is about the future, if it is about anything. It has to forge a connection between the past and the conditions which confront us today.

Surely 'the conditions that confront us today'—that is in 2012—are even more pressing than 22 years ago when these words were spoken. I put it to you that forging this connection two decades later must surely entail going beyond sentiment and grappling scientifically with the larger challenges of sustainability that I have indicated. In the terms of our conference title, it seems to me that the 'survival of modern', ultimately cannot be separated from SURVIVAL itself.

**docomomo** has achieved many glorious things in its coming of age. Now, I believe it is this difficult but compelling task that presents our movement with its next great challenge.

#### John Allan

Director of Avanti Architects for nearly 30 years. First Chairman of **docomomo**-UK 1989-91. Biographer of Berthold Lubetkin, John Allan has led all Avanti's Modern Movement conservation projects, including the restoration of Lubetkin's Penguin Pool, Highpoint Flats and Finsbury Health Centre.