

INTRODUCTION

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IMPERFECT MODERNISM

In this special issue of the Docomomo Journal, we introduce the concept of “Imperfect Modernism” and continue enriching the ongoing debate on Modernism, highlighting that it exists not only as an ideal but also as a fragmented, locally interpreted practice. It was shaped by geopolitical, economic, and socio-cultural constraints: shifts in power and political upheavals, resource shortages, the needs of local communities, and the integration of traditional architectural practices. Within this “imperfection” are encoded highly informative layers of heritage, which enable the reconstruction of the lived experience of 20th-century architecture, rather than merely its abstract ideals.

“Imperfect Modernism” does not contradict earlier interpretations but extends an integrative logic, emphasizing that the value of modernist architecture lies not in the perfection of forms and concepts, but in the imprints of historical and political constraints and local adaptations, which render it a vibrant, vulnerable, and diverse heritage of the 20th century.

In the special issue Imperfect Modernism, we aimed to highlight the geographical and civilizational diversity of modernist architecture, while also examining how it served not only as a witness to the pivotal moments of the 20th century—such as political and social utopias, technological breakthroughs, and aesthetic and social experiments—but also as a reflection of the dual forces of globalization and a unified architectural vision on one hand, and the struggle to preserve ethnic and religious identities on the other.

In the Call for Papers, we sought to address the following questions:

- How have changing political conditions affected contemporary attitudes toward modern heritage, and what are the current practices for its preservation?
- What challenges and solutions arise when dealing with the rehabilitation or critique of modern heritage?
- How have new societal needs influenced attitudes toward the technical condition of modern heritage sites, which are outdated typologies that are expensive and difficult to adapt?
- What are the practices for documenting modern heritage that is under threat of destruction or has already been lost?

Thus, the open call invited scholars and practitioners to submit research addressing the factors that contribute to the vulnerability of modernist heritage,

ultimately highlighting the aspects that render it “imperfect”. This issue comprises ten research articles, including studies presented at the conference in Vilnius as well as submissions received through the open call. It represents a curated collection of research dedicated to the heritage of Modernism across diverse geographical and political contexts, encompassing countries in Europe (Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia, Ukraine), Asia (China, Singapore, Uzbekistan), Africa (Sudan), and Latin America (Argentina, Chile).

The articles can be organized into thematic categories, although most authors address more than one area:

- Modernities in geopolitical transition
- Contextualized modernism
- Functional typologies at risk
- Theory and practice of preservation

This thematic sequence helps to illustrate the underlying causes of the heritage’s vulnerability, the pathways of its local adaptations, and the challenges faced by adopting outdated functional typologies. It provides examples of the use of contemporary conservation tools.

MODERNITIES IN GEOPOLITICAL TRANSITION

This section brings together studies demonstrating how political and social transformations have shaped the fate of modernist architecture in countries with varying political regimes. The research shows that this architecture functions not only as tangible heritage but also as a vulnerable witness to political transitions and shifts in power.

In Romania, leisure complexes of the 1960s to 1970s—restaurants, resort centers, and sports halls—have transformed from symbols of socialist modernization into problematic heritage, having lost state support and fallen within the sphere of contentious privatization. Public perception of these sites often remains negative due to their association with the former political regime, which further complicates efforts to engage with and preserve these buildings.

In Chile, the unfinished Ochagavía Hospital became both a symbol of the unfulfilled utopia of a welfare state and a stage for artistic resistance against the dictatorship, before ultimately being converted into a commercial property. The building’s condition and functional transformations clearly reflect the impact of shifting political and economic regimes, illustrating how modernist architecture can serve as an indicator of broader social and political transformations.

The Sudan National Museum, from its colonial inception to the post-independence period, consistently functioned as a site of identity negotiation and a political instrument: both its collections and the building’s own fate reflect the intertwining of international and local interests. The museum can be understood as an architectural archive, vividly revealing the consequences of political regime changes and the transformations of the socio-political landscape.

CONTEXTUALIZED MODERNISM

This section examines how the universal principles of Modernism were transformed through encounters with local cultural and religious traditions. Both represented cases illustrate that Modernism is not a pure, autonomous doctrine. In various contexts, it inevitably entered into dialogue with history, identity, and social practices.

During the second half of the 20th century, Tashkent in Uzbekistan became a laboratory for architectural experiments in aesthetics, where Soviet

standardization and features of the Modern Movement combined with regional forms and symbols. The city's buildings demonstrate how European Modernist ideas were "translated" into the language of Central Asian traditions through the use of ornamentation, climate-adapted solutions, and familiar spatial configurations. Today, this heritage faces preservation challenges amid post-Soviet transformations and the city's rapid development, while also reflecting issues of identity and engagement with globalization.

In Singapore, modernist forms were integrated into a religious context. The mosque construction program from 1977 to 1983 demonstrated how the functional principles of the International Style and Brutalism were reinterpreted in consideration of traditional Indo-Saracenic elements. Domes, minarets, and arches were transformed into simplified geometric forms, creating hybrid structures that simultaneously reflected state requirements and the needs of the Muslim community. The term "imperfect" emphasizes the intentional architectural compromise that arises from the dialogue between modernist doctrine and local religious and cultural practices.

FUNCTIONAL TYPOLOGIES AT RISK

This section focuses on buildings where typological and technical challenges come to the forefront. The authors analyze how industrial and residential modernist projects confront deterioration, resource shortages, and adaptation difficulties.

The industrial architecture of Kharkiv illustrates these challenges. From the late 19th century, and particularly during the avant-garde and modernist periods, the city developed as an industrial hub, with its architectural language reflecting shifts in ideology – from Constructivism to extremely standardized and industrialized, reminiscent of late soviet architecture modernism. Following the transition to a liberal market economy in the 1990s, many factories and industrial complexes began to deteriorate, and recent military aggression by Russia has heightened the risk of losing these ensembles. The authors propose strategic directions for revitalization that could restore the significance of these spaces for the city's identity.

The Chinese example complements this picture from a different perspective: housing built between the 1950s and 1980s under severe resource scarcity demonstrates "adaptive modernity"—an approach in which standardized plans and industrialized methods were combined with continual local adjustments driven by material shortages, regional climatic conditions, and technological constraints. Projects of this era did not aim for an ideal housing typology but embodied pragmatic, incrementally developed solutions, which today face challenges in assessing historical and architectural value, functionality, and safety. Their preservation demands a comprehensive approach combining technical analysis, socio-cultural context study, and adaptive reuse strategies, reflecting the specificities of modernist typologies developed under resource constraints.

CONSERVATION PRACTICES

The final thematic category focuses on practical methods for preserving modernist heritage, considering digitalization, restoration, and adaptive reuse as key tools for extending the lifespan of architectural works.

The case from Argentina illustrates how digital technologies serve as a vital resource for conservation. The focus is on the work of architect Miguel Ángel Roca, whose projects epitomize Latin American Modernism. An interdisciplinary team of researchers from Argentina and Italy developed digital archives and

multi-scale models that support conservation strategies while actively engaging local communities. The study also emphasizes that digitization and interdisciplinary approaches help overcome existing weaknesses in the conservation of modernist architectural heritage, establishing standards for sustainable management and integrating conservation with contemporary functional requirements. This approach demonstrates that digital technologies open new possibilities for research, representation, and sustainable stewardship of heritage.

Another perspective is provided by the history of Kurnėnai School in Lithuania, built in the 1930s through the initiative of a local patron. This facility, constructed using contemporary technologies and materials, stood out among interwar educational buildings. Following its closure in the early 21st century, the school fell into disuse and gradually lost its architectural integrity, putting its future at risk. The 2019-2020 conservation reinstated the building's architectural and engineering features, emphasizing its significance as a rare example of modernist ambitions in a rural context. The preservation of Kurnėnai School demonstrates how attention can be returned to buildings that, due to their modest scale or peripheral location, are often overlooked in heritage discourse.

The case of the Home of the Army in Šabac, Serbia, is listed among the seven most endangered modernist heritage sites by Europa Nostra (2024). Conceived initially as cultural and community centers, buildings of this typology, following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, came under pressure from market forces while also reflecting the challenges of preserving local identity. The study illustrates how vocational and civic initiatives seek to maintain their role as spaces for culture and community interaction, developing adaptive reuse strategies. The analysis includes a critical assessment of contemporary approaches to rehabilitating modernist structures and demonstrates how these strategies can improve similar conservation efforts internationally. This perspective positions the Šabac case as a relevant example of modernist heritage preservation and intervention practices applicable globally.

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CONCLUSION

This special issue of the Docomomo Journal seeks to deepen the discourse on modernist heritage by introducing the concept of "imperfect Modernism" as an additional lens for interpreting its complexities. Instead of celebrating a seamless and idealized vision, the contributions demonstrate how modernist architecture emerged in fragmented, locally adapted forms shaped by political shifts, social demands, economic scarcity, and cultural encounters. Far from diminishing its value, these imperfections provide essential insights into the lived realities of the 20th century and the resilience of communities that engaged with modernity on their own terms. The articles gathered here highlight not only the vulnerabilities of modernist legacies, often contested or neglected due to political and economic transformations, but also their capacity for reinvention. From fragile typologies and hybrid traditions to digital conservation and adaptive reuse, the case studies demonstrate how Modernism remains a site of negotiation between global visions and local identities. By drawing together perspectives from Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America, this issue highlights the diversity of experiences that collectively redefine what modernist heritage means today. The notion of "imperfect Modernism" thus opens space for more inclusive, sustainable, and context-sensitive approaches, ensuring that the architectural legacy of the twentieth century remains a vital and relevant part of our present and future.