

# The Theoretical Foundations of Adaptive Reuse of Historic Buildings: From Classical Theories to Modern Charters.

Los fundamentos teóricos de la reutilización adaptativa de edificios históricos: de las teorías clásicas a las cartas modernas.

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Recibido: 28/02/2025

Revisado: 22/04/2025

Aceptado: 22/04/2025

Publicado: 01/01/2026

Sugerencias para citar este artículo:

Moghaddasi, Ahmad (2026). «The Theoretical Foundations of Adaptive Reuse of Historic Buildings: From Classical Theories to Modern Charters», *Tercio Creciente*, 29, (pp. 129-142), <https://dx.doi.org/10.17561/rtc.29.9524>

## Abstract

The concept of adaptive reuse of historic buildings has become a key topic in cultural heritage conservation in recent decades. Originating from postmodern architectural movements, this approach is closely linked to sustainability, energy management, and functional adaptability. In many developed and developing countries, increased awareness of cultural and environmental values has highlighted this approach as a means to preserve historical identity while addressing contemporary needs. This article analyses the theoretical and philosophical foundations of adaptive reuse through a review of library and archival sources. It examines the thoughts of key figures in 19th-century conservation and restoration, such as Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and John Ruskin, who presented two different yet influential approaches in shaping building conservation principles. Their theories on authenticity, reconstruction, and historical continuity are explored, and their impact on contemporary conservation doctrines is assessed. Additionally, the study analyses key

charters like the Athens Charter (1931) and the Venice Charter (1964), examining how conservation principles have evolved in response to modern challenges, including social transformations, industrialization, and environmental requirements. The aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive perspective on the theoretical foundations of conservation and adaptive reuse, serving as a reference for developing sustainable strategies in adapting the use of historic buildings.

**Keywords:** Adaptive Reuse, Conservation, Restoration, Athens Charter, Historic Building.

### Resumen

El concepto de reutilización adaptativa de edificios históricos se ha convertido en un tema clave en la conservación del patrimonio cultural en las últimas décadas. Originado en los movimientos arquitectónicos posmodernos, este enfoque está estrechamente vinculado a la sostenibilidad, la gestión energética y la adaptabilidad funcional. En muchos países desarrollados y en desarrollo, la creciente conciencia sobre los valores culturales y ambientales ha destacado esta estrategia como un medio para preservar la identidad histórica mientras se abordan las necesidades contemporáneas. Este artículo analiza los fundamentos teóricos y filosóficos de la reutilización adaptativa a través de una revisión de fuentes bibliográficas y documentales. Examina las ideas de figuras clave de la conservación y restauración del siglo XIX, como Eugène Viollet-le-Duc y John Ruskin, quienes presentaron dos enfoques diferentes pero influyentes en la configuración de los principios de conservación arquitectónica. Se exploran sus teorías sobre la autenticidad, la reconstrucción y la continuidad histórica, y se evalúa su impacto en las doctrinas contemporáneas de conservación. Además, el estudio analiza cartas fundamentales como la Carta de Atenas (1931) y la Carta de Venecia (1964), examinando cómo han evolucionado los principios de conservación en respuesta a los desafíos modernos, incluidas las transformaciones sociales, la industrialización y los requerimientos ambientales. El objetivo de este estudio es proporcionar una perspectiva integral sobre los fundamentos teóricos de la conservación y la reutilización adaptativa, sirviendo como referencia para el desarrollo de estrategias sostenibles en la adaptación de edificios históricos.

**Palabras clave:** reutilización adaptativa, conservación, restauración, Constitución de Atenas, edificio histórico.

### Introduction

Adaptive reuse, which is at the heart of architectural discourse, aligns with postmodern critiques and challenges modernist ideals. At the same time, it embraces historical context, ambiguity, and pluralism in design, emerging as a transformative approach in late 20th-century architecture. Authors like Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown (Venturi et al., 2017) emphasize the importance of context and integrating historical elements into new

designs, suggesting that adaptive reuse can serve as a means of expressing multilayered narratives in architecture.

Additionally, researchers like Robert Venturi and Charles Jencks have noted how postmodern architecture responds to the complexities of urban environments (Jencks, 1991). Venturi rejected the postmodern label often attributed to him, instead identifying himself as an architect rooted in the classical tradition of Western architecture (Kahl, 2008; Venturi et al., 1984). Modernism, defined by a single, formal system, sought to suppress opposing viewpoints through the application of universal minimalist aesthetic principles. In contrast, Jencks associates postmodern architecture with eclecticism and inclusiveness (Morgan, 2012). However, postmodernism in architecture was not entirely aligned with the postmodern philosophy articulated by Lyotard (Crysler et al., 2012). In postmodern thought, disrupting modern concepts means challenging and rethinking established standards, theories, and practices in architecture, which often have roots in modernist thinking. This disruption can manifest through the integration of historical elements into new designs, supporting multiple approaches, and emphasizing context over form. In doing so, adaptive reuse challenges the rigidity and prescriptive nature of modernist architecture and heritage conservation (Hannabuss, 1999) while promoting a more flexible, narrative-driven approach that values heritage and user experience together. This shift encourages architects to rethink how spaces can function and be appreciated in contemporary society.

This article examines the philosophical perspectives of contemporary views on the restoration and conservation of historic buildings and their alignment with modern principles of adaptive reuse in heritage buildings.

## **Methods and materials**

### **1- Methods**

The methodology used in this paper is a review of library sources and their critique to uncover the historical roots of this new approach in the field of conservation and restoration. The research method involves reviewing library and archival sources, which is a fundamental approach in historical, theoretical, and analytical research. It involves gathering, examining, and analysing written sources, historical documents, and archival records to extract scientific data. In this method, books, scientific articles, theses, historical documents, maps, photographs, and technical reports are used, and the available data is analysed with a comparative and critical approach (Clary-Lemon, 2014; Das et al., 2018).

This method aids in understanding theoretical developments, foundational principles, and historical trends, and provides the opportunity to compare and critique various approaches. In research related to the conservation, restoration, and adaptive reuse of historic buildings, this method is essential for examining the theories of pioneers in this field, analysing charters and international documents, and extracting historical

and contemporary patterns. The use of reliable sources and a precise analytical approach ensures the credibility and scientific strength of the research.

## 2- Classical Principles

Ideas related to preservation in the 19th century emerged in response to significant socio-economic and cultural changes across Europe, which were influenced by distinct regional factors. According to Donovan (2007), in England, the need for preservation was largely shaped by the Industrial Revolution, which saw widespread urbanization, economic growth, and technological advancements (Donovan, 2007). The destruction of historic buildings to make way for factories raised concerns about the preservation of England's architectural heritage, leading to the establishment of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in 1877. In France, preservation emerged from national pride after social changes such as the French Revolution and industrialization (Bordes, 2013).

The next section briefly examines the key proponents of classical doctrines in architectural preservation, with a focus on their fundamental principles and lasting impact. This review also includes an analysis of their contributions to contemporary practices and current debates.

### 2-1- Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879)

The restoration philosophy of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, a French architect, emphasized idealized restorations. His focus was on aesthetic harmony, historical completeness, and functionality rather than preserving true authenticity (Akagawa, 2016; Cocola-Gant, 2019; Djabarouti, 2022; Hassard, 2008; Murphy, 1999; Plevoets & Cleempoel, 2019; Viollet-le-Duc, 1875). Viollet-le-Duc's interpretation of restorations, inspired by the Gothic style, is visible in his works on Carcassonne and the Notre-Dame Cathedral (Figures 1 and 2).

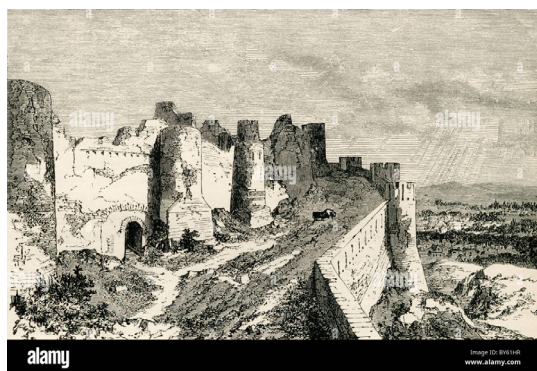


Figure 1 The Fortifications of Carcassonne, France in the early 19th century, before restoration in 1853. (Source: Alamy Stock Photo)

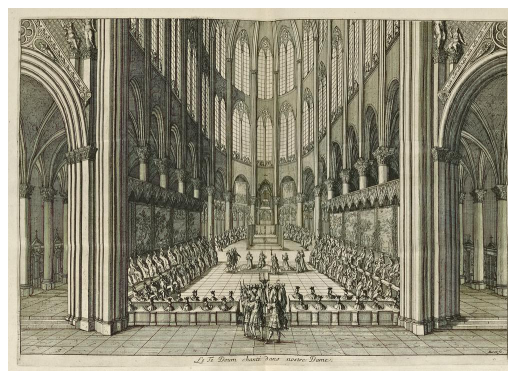


Figure 2 Notre-Dame Cathedral, 1662, by Jean Marot. Etching. (Source: The Getty Research Institute)



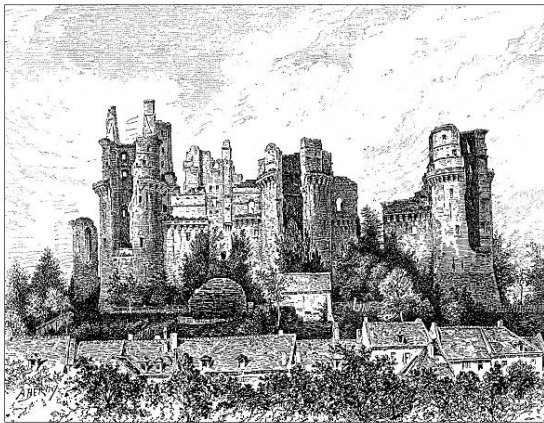


Figure 3 Château de Pierrefonds France, before restoration (Source: Getty images, 2024)

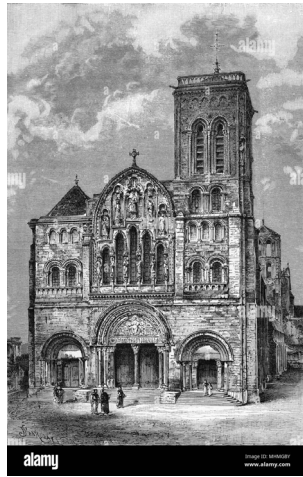


Figure 4 Vézelay Abbey, Burgundy, France, before restoration. (Source: Alamy Stock Photo, 2018)

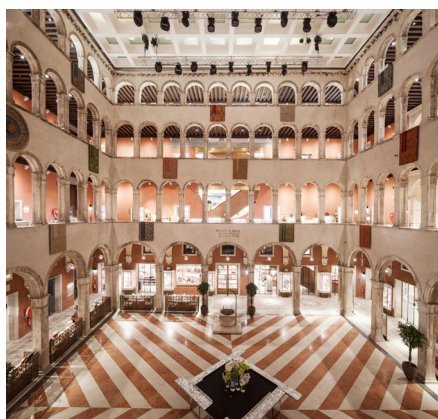


Figure 5 Fondaco dei Tedeschi by Rem Koolhaas (Source: www.margraf.it)

His approach often utilized modern techniques and materials to extend structural longevity, which aligned with the Eurocentric view of architectural authenticity (Murphy, 1999). His commitment to historical accuracy and aesthetic ideals often conflicted with practical needs such as temperature control, accessibility, and modern functionality—critical elements for adapting heritage houses into usable hotels.

Viollet-le-Duc's ideas had a significant impact on early restoration practices; for example, his work at the Vézelay Abbey and the Palais de Pierrefonds (Figures 3 and 4). However, his views often lacked sufficient consideration for regional cultural differences and environmental sustainability, leading critics to argue that his restorations prioritized an idealized, singular version of history over textual authenticity (Murphy, 1999).

Contemporary practices (such as the Fondaco dei Tedeschi project by Rem Koolhaas) and theorists expand on Viollet-le-Duc's principles, emphasizing adaptive reuse that combines modern function with respect for history and integrates conservation with new use (Fejérdy, 2014) (Figure 5). The Buray Charter by ICOMOS Australia and UNESCO's approval of post-World War II restoration of the Old Town of Warsaw (Figure 6) both reflect principles that go beyond Viollet-le-Duc's approach to restoration.

However, Viollet-le-Duc's idealized approach may conflict with two crucial aspects of a project—sustainability and cultural relevance. His methodology does not fully address sustainable practices, such as minimizing material intervention or reducing energy consumption, both of which are essential in the adaptive reuse

process. His primary focus was on creating a cohesive and idealized view of the historical form of a structure, rather than addressing modern concerns like material efficiency or energy consumption.



Figure 6 The Marketplace of Warsaw after the WWII bombings (left), and after its reconstruction (right) (Source: Philip McCouat, “Bernardo Bellotto and the Reconstruction of Warsaw”, *Journal of Art in Society*, [www.artinsociety.com](http://www.artinsociety.com))

## 2-2- John Ruskin (1819–1900)

John Ruskin’s philosophy of heritage was in opposition to the restoration trends of the 19th century, emphasizing the preservation of original materials and decay as symbols of cultural continuity. He was against changes that jeopardized historical authenticity and human craftsmanship (Ruskin, 1849; Wong & Berger, 2021).

Ruskin’s philosophy aligned with Morris’s belief in preserving the character of buildings, and he also sought to raise public awareness about the importance of preserving architectural heritage for future generations.

John Ruskin supported the preservation of the authenticity of historic works but also recognized the value of imitation in recording and maintaining cultural history (Vaccaro, 1996). Ruskin represented an extreme view on authenticity—meaning that authenticity only belongs to the untouched version of a building (Wong & Berger, 2021).

Ruskin’s heritage conservation philosophy emphasizes preserving original materials and historical integrity, viewing decay as a symbol of cultural continuity and craftsmanship (Nasser, 2003; Ruskin, 1849; Wong & Berger, 2021). While his commitment to minimal intervention is considered a foundational principle in conservation, it creates challenges for adaptive reuse projects, such as converting heritage houses into hotels, where functional updates are often necessary.



Figure 7 Facing the Grand Canal on the Piazzetta San Marco, with Doge's Palace (left). The Marciana Library (right) (Photo by: Benh LIEU SONG, 2015)

The Ducal Palace (Palazzo Ducale) (Figure 7), inspired by Ruskin's writings in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853) (Ruskin, 1867), made efforts to preserve the original fabric instead of performing a full-scale restoration.

A comparison with Eugène Viollet-le-Duc further highlights these challenges. Ruskin emphasized historical authenticity (Djabarouti, 2022), whereas Viollet-le-Duc supported creative restoration, prioritizing functionality and durability (Viollet-le-Duc, 1875). This contrast reflects the ongoing debate between maintaining historical fidelity and adapting for modern functionality in conservation practices.

Criticism of restoration, which can appear deceptive, challenges traditional ideas about historical accuracy and value (Crocker, 1857; Stammers, 2019). This view supports a restoration process that merges historical continuity with contemporary relevance.

In non-Western contexts like Iran (Hooshyari, 2023) and Australia, applying Ruskin's principles requires respecting regional cultural narratives and aesthetic traditions.

### 3- Modern Doctrines

During the eras of Brandi and Boito, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, industrialization and urbanization reached their peak, exacerbating the destruction of architectural heritage and increasing public awareness of cultural heritage. Unlike the earlier period of Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc, where debates revolved around preservation versus restoration, Brandi and Boito faced a more complex landscape where cultural identity was increasingly fragmented and multilayered. This shift required approaches



that went beyond binary frameworks and simultaneously encompassed both physical preservation and interpretive understanding, reflecting the social and cultural dynamics of their time.

### 3-1- Brandi (1906–1988)

Cesare Brandi's philosophy of heritage conservation, developed in the mid-20th century, emerged as a response to the rigid preservation practices derived from the earlier interpretations of Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc. Ruskin's emphasis on unspoiled authenticity and Viollet-le-Duc's idealized restorations often led to polarizing approaches in practice—either preventing any intervention or prioritizing stylistic restorations over historical context. Brandi responded to these limitations by offering a more balanced, historical-critical framework for restoration. His approach, integrating historical authenticity and aesthetic integrity, focused on preserving the “image”—the cultural and aesthetic essence of a structure—while allowing selective, reversible interventions. This philosophy remains relevant today, offering strategies for adapting heritage sites for contemporary use without compromising their integrity in the face of modern challenges such as sustainability and functional transformation (Brandi, 1977; Hansar, 2008; Staniforth, 2013).

At the time, preservation methods evolved, prioritizing non-intervention. These approaches, influenced by previous debates on restoration, included methods like covering ruins or using neutral colors to fill in missing sections to prevent full-scale restoration, reflecting growing sensitivity to balancing the preservation of original fabric with maintaining historical authenticity.

Brandi challenged these methods, arguing that art and architecture are not merely materials but aesthetic compositions, and any intervention that disrupts their visual harmony would destroy their essence (Jokilehto, 2009; Matero, 2007).



Figure 8 Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi, Italy. (Photo by: Berthold Werner, 2009)

Brandi's approach in the conservation of the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi (Ciatti, 2017) (Figure 8) balanced stabilizing structural damage with preserving the basilica's frescoes, ensuring both their aesthetic and historical essence was maintained while using reversible materials for structural reinforcement.



While Brandi's philosophy was groundbreaking in its time, it falls short in addressing modern functional needs such as climate control, plumbing systems, and sustainability.

### 3-2- Boito (1836–1914)

Camillo Boito, a key figure in Italy's heritage preservation during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, supported a more balanced approach to restoration (Boito, 1893). Boito allowed for greater functional updates that aligned with adaptive reuse practices, while Brandi's principle of reversibility often limited the scope of changes. Both, however, played significant roles in shaping contemporary conservation practices, emphasizing a respectful and nuanced approach to cultural heritage.



Figure 9 St. Mark's Basilica, Venice, Italy. (Photo by: Zairon, 2017)

Unlike Viollet-le-Duc's stylistic idealizations or Ruskin and Morris's minimalism, Boito stressed the importance of respecting the historical layers of a building while maintaining the authenticity of materials (Viñas, 2010). He believed that restorations should embrace the subjective nature of interpretation and integrate updates that reflect the historical evolution of a structure. Boito's approach, demonstrated in his position on cleaning the Basilica of St. Mark (Scott et al., 1888) (Figure 9), prioritized the inherent qualities of materials and aligned with modern conservation principles.

His principles, including the distinction between "repair" and "restoration" (Boito & Birignani, 2009), functional compatibility, and public engagement, continue to hold importance in the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings. By preserving original materials and techniques while integrating modern amenities, his approach maintains cultural authenticity while enhancing functionality.

While Viollet-le-Duc, Ruskin, Brandi, and Boito established foundational doctrines of conservation, their approaches often fell short in addressing modern concerns such as sustainability, environmental performance, and integrating contemporary functionality.

#### 4- Emergence and Development of Charters

The Athens Charter (1931), the Venice Charter (1964), and the Burra Charter (1979) were developed sequentially, progressively addressing the limitations of previous charters while reflecting changing socio-political contexts. The Athens Charter, emerging after World War I, prioritized the preservation of grand and symbolic buildings. The Venice Charter, developed after World War II, expanded its focus to urban heritage and historical integrity. Later, the Burra Charter, with its emphasis on cultural significance and community involvement, responded to the need for inclusive and sustainable conservation practices, considering diverse cultural landscapes and living heritage. In this evolution, the Nara Document on Authenticity, approved in 1994, marked a significant advancement in heritage conservation, shifting the concept of authenticity from a rigid, universal criterion to a more flexible, context-based approach. Together, these charters and documents reflect an evolving understanding of heritage, emphasizing the importance of context, cultural diversity, and community participation in conservation practices.

The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), established in 1965 following the adoption of the Venice Charter in 1964, provided a global framework for heritage conservation. Its formation responded to the need for an international organization to promote conservation practices, facilitate knowledge exchange, and address the increasing threats to cultural heritage due to urbanization, industrialization, and modernization.

These documents emerged during a time when European cities were grappling with the consequences of industrialization, wars, and rapid urbanization—conditions that presented significant challenges for heritage preservation (Petzet, 2004).

Heritage conservation charters have evolved from classical doctrines such as Ruskin's authenticity and Viollet-le-Duc's restoration ideals, integrating Brandi's aesthetic integrity, Boito's historical cohesion, and contemporary priorities such as sustainability, cultural diversity, and public participation to address modern heritage needs.

In Australia, the Burra Charter remains a cornerstone of national conservation practices, guiding projects that balance respect for cultural and historical significance with adaptive reuse of heritage homes (Buckley & Fayad, 2017). Similarly, in Iran, adaptive reuse approaches have emerged that blend conservation principles with local architectural identity and cultural narratives to ensure both aesthetic and functional integrity. These approaches reflect the charter's commitment to preserving cultural continuity alongside practical and environmental considerations (Ardabilchi et al., 2024; Hanachi & Fadaei Nezhad, 2011).

A review of recent heritage conservation practices in Iran shows that the country does not adhere to a single, unified preservation charter. Rather, these practices are a fusion of principles derived from various charters, applied flexibly in different contexts. In some cases, the influence of a particular charter is more prominent, reflecting the context-based selection or application of international and local conservation frameworks.

## Conclusions

Adaptive reuse of historic buildings, as an effective solution for preserving cultural heritage, is deeply connected to the concepts of authenticity, sustainability, and functional transformation. This approach contrasts with traditional theories that either emphasized the unconditional preservation of historical authenticity (such as John Ruskin's approach) or idealized reconstruction of buildings (according to Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's perspective). Instead, it seeks to create a balance between conservation, usability, and contemporary needs. In this regard, the ideas of thinkers such as Brandi and Boito, with an emphasis on preserving cultural and aesthetic values alongside controlled and reversible interventions, have paved the way for the development of adaptive models in heritage conservation.

The transformations brought about by industrialization, urbanization, and social changes in recent centuries led to the formulation of international charters such as the Athens Charter, the Venice Charter, and the Burra Charter, which provide frameworks for the conservation and adaptive reuse of historic buildings. These charters emphasize the participation of local communities, preservation of historical layers, and respect for the cultural context of each region, stressing the importance of adopting flexible, localized approaches in conservation processes.

In both Iran and Australia, adapting conservation principles to the climatic, social, and functional needs has become a significant challenge in the field of architectural preservation. Analysing contemporary adaptive reuse projects in these countries reveals that the use of modern energy management methods, functional adaptability, and enhanced social participation in conservation processes has not only helped increase the longevity of buildings but also strengthened cultural and economic values within historical contexts.

Ultimately, this research shows that adaptive reuse is not only a technical solution but also a cultural tool for creating a link between the past and the future. Establishing theoretical and practical frameworks for the preservation and adaptive reuse of historic buildings, considering aesthetic, functional, and environmental dimensions, is an unavoidable necessity for developing sustainable models in cultural heritage management.

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