

1 How can the House of Architecture strengthen the RIBA's conservation skills agenda?

2 What is the conservation skills agenda? What are we conserving and why? This simplistic question gets complicated when we see how hard it is to even clarify what authenticity means – a material, historic reality AND a convincing contemporary facsimile....

So are we skilled at keeping or copying? Keeping asks us to define what we would lose if we let it go. William Morris was clear- a building is a living document of accumulated human activity and the intellects that drives it. In other words don't skip the Crittall windows....

Copying is not allowed in an exam, so why is it ok for the built environment? OK, so it is not that easy, we learn to write by copying – we should remember however that it is what we say, not what we copy that delivers social value.

3 By understanding that keeping and copying are related through 'Authenticity' itself, we can place sympathetic repair at one end of the Authenticity spectrum, at the other a new Fire Station with a pediment – realising in the process that knowing how and where we deploy our Conservation skills is as important as the skills themselves.

So-called practical decisions are never neutral, innocent or value-free.....

Therefore the primary 'conservation skill' is how we openly place ourselves and our decision making on that Spectrum of Authenticity – consistently across every scale and every level of intervention in the building.

The act of 'conservation' itself creates an ethical benchmark that defines how we engage with people, source or specify material and communicate significance so that others understand a history and their role in its production.

Regarding how the House of Architecture can strengthen the heritage skills agenda, establishing a high quality programme of video-led interviews and "over the shoulder" documentary filming throughout the work would glean numerous CPD sessions and outreach if presented well, culturally contextualised and shared appropriately. Conservation Architects know only so much, they know more by asking trained craftspeople about what they do and can do in given contexts. They and everyone else will know even more by asking hard questions of a buildings political, social and ethical history. We can document this.

Conservation is after all not a new-build info-pipeline that drops documentation like an SVP into the building site, it is more tidal than that, with talking and listening moving both ways to get the project right. However reality TV is risky – there are few places to hide and we are assuming that the architects will get it right in the end.....

but documenting this House of Architecture literally 'in-house' could result in a very articulate training piece that shows how new design fits into a conservation project and how decisions about authenticity play themselves out. This exposure to scrutiny allows us to see the building as a document of a century of architecture and architects which is both illuminating and awkward, because there are truly great and some utterly depressing phases of RIBA activity undertaken since number 66 has been its home – mapping the highs and the lows of its policy positions, the work it has supported and the judgements that proved wrong is integral to a healthy evaluation of the institution and its social value.

This project is a platform to celebrate where people like Rod Hackney got ethical, inclusive practice that embraces conservation as a social practice so right - which is that community defines the heritage you serve.

RIBA attempted to draft a plan of work for Conservation – but still we see stage 0 vaguely drawn and attracting little fee – how can conservation architects – indeed all architects take on the conservation of social fabric as well as historic physical fabric when the entire process of practice edits this out of the fee? CDM says success starts in Stage 0 – so too does conservation, so too should architectural practice.

Skills in material consolidation go hand in hand with skills in cultural consolidation.