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Reconstruction And Conservation In The Post-Truth Era. Historical Lies, Authenticity, Material Evidence

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Sulfaro, Nino (2018) *Reconstruction And Conservation In The Post-Truth Era. Historical Lies, Authenticity, Material Evidence*. ICOMOS University Forum . pp. 1-11. ISSN 2616-6968 [Article]



PDF

8_Sulfaro.pdf

Available under License [Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial Share Alike](#).[Download \(1MB\)](#) | [Preview](#)**Abstract (in English)**

The paper proposes some short reflections on two possible practices in the field of restoration of architectural heritage: reconstructing a vanished or ruined artefact or preserving the signs of its destruction or damage. The author deals with these two truly conflicting choices, underlining the opportunity not to compromise the possibility of future generations interpreting history on the basis of a wide range of material and verifiable sources. This aspect seems particularly relevant, especially in the light of the current 'post-truth era' problems, such as historical revisionism, manipulation of the recent and distant past and, more in general, a widespread relativism about knowledge. Starting from a consideration on the notion of "temporal paradox", the author – also through some case studies – focuses on the risks generated by the option to cancel or alter history without generating subsequent unforeseen consequences. Alternatively, an approach aimed at preserving traces of the past can be used as a tool for historiography, as this material evidence can be used as an essential source to reconstruct history, in the future.

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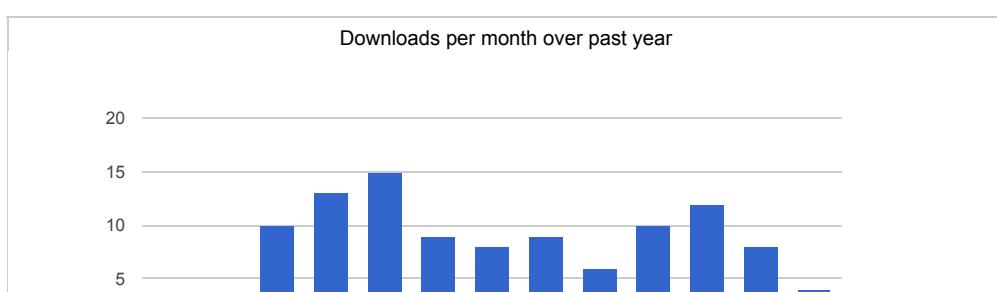
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Reconstruction And Conservation In The Post-Truth Era. Historical Lies, Authenticity, Material Evidence

Nino Sulfaro

Doc: Now remember, according to my theory, you interfered with your parents first meeting. If they don't meet, they won't fall in love, they won't get married and they won't have kids. That's why your older brother's disappearing from that photograph. Your sister will follow, and unless you repair the damage, you'll be next.

Marty: Sounds pretty heavy!

Back to the future (Robert Zemeckis, 1985)

In a famous 1980's movie, the main character, Marty McFly, catapulted thirty years back into the past by a time machine, accidentally prevents his parents from meeting, causing a chain of events that puts his very existence at risk. As in all happy endings, the risk is overcome, and Marty can go back to the future without having caused any damage to the time line (fig. 1).



Figure 1. A frame of the movie *Back to the future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) in which Doc ‘fights’ against the time.

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The plot was based on the well-known ‘paradox’ of the time traveller, according to which making variations in the past means altering the temporal fabric: after a short period of transition, the fabric achieves a new arrangement in which all that does not conform to it is destined to vanish.

This paradox has been widely used in cinema and literature, representing the impossible desire of man to change the course of events by interfering with past actions. In the novel “The Time Machine” by H.G. Wells (1895), just to mention one of the earliest examples of narration based on the paradox, the main character, after having created a time machine to bring his dead wife back to life, realizes he will never save her, because if she was not dead he would never have created a time machine.

These fascinating theories seem to have a lot in common with the theme of reconstruction of vanished artefacts, as it implies, in a certain way, the desire to alter the natural flow of time. Generally, the aim of reconstruction is in fact to bring back an artefact to the former situation, eliminating unwanted effects of the event that damaged it or even cancelling the event in itself. On second reflection, most of the history of restoration, in some ways, has been characterized by an ill-concealed desire to shift history and to bring back buildings and artefacts of the past ‘to their former splendour’. Albeit without a time machine, since the end of the 19th century, architects and restorers have often had the opportunity to travel back to the past and make some changes to the flow of history through their interventions on monuments, aimed at eliminating the consequences of a disaster, the damage of an event, or simply the effects of the passage of time on the materials. Often communities asked for that; sometimes reconstructions and restorations were carried up only in the name of art.

In this perspective, the well-known debate around the opportunity to reconstruct the two Buddhas of Bamiyan, deliberately destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, is really explanatory, as it involves most of the issues related to the processes that follow a traumatic event, such as a conflict or a natural disaster (Boscarino 1992; Bevan 2006). As is well known, operative options are various, related to the specific level of destruction and damage and, above all, strictly connected to economic, cultural, social, political, and psychological issues. They include producing an exact replica of a damaged building, following the *com'era dov'era* (as it was, where it was) practice, or constructing a new building, either contemporary or ‘critical reconstruction’ based, or preserving the ‘scars’ of a traumatic event, letting the ruins or the void left by a collapse be shown as memorials in themselves. Although – in theory – the alternatives are various, we have to point out that – in practice – options such as repairing, restoring or reconstructing, are the most natural instinct after a violent event, while preserving the signs of a trauma is often an unpopular measure, as communities generally prefer to eliminate tangible traces of unpleasant events, repairing damage or reconstructing a vanished artefact (Sulfaro 2014).

However, while the processes that generally lead a community to choose to reconstruction or not its heritage have been widely investigated, also according to different scientific approaches (sociological, semiotic, archaeological, economic, etc.) (Huyssen 2003; Trigg 2009; Mazzucchelli 2010; Violi 2014), the consequences of that choice in terms of historical knowledge – to date – have not been examined enough.

The present paper proposes some short reflections, obviously not definitive and complete, on the two conflicting choices – the reconstruction of a vanished artefact or the preservation of the sign of its destruction – and the opportunity not to compromise the possibility of future generations to interpret history on the basis of a wide range of material and verifiable sources.

This aspect seems particularly relevant, especially in the light of the current ‘post-truth era’ problem, such as historical revisionism, manipulation of the recent and distant past and, more in general, a widespread relativism about knowledge (Keyes 2004).

Going back to the ‘temporal paradox’ in which Marty MacFly ended up, the issue pivots on if it is possible to alter history without provoking damage. Are there parts of the past destined to vanish, whether by circumstance or by choice?

Material evidence and ‘post-truth’ issues

On March 18th, 2015, a terrorist attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunisia left traces of the shooting on the building. The TV images of the bullet holes in the walls and exhibition cases went around the world, as an impressive witness to the reality of the event (fig. 2). The museum authorities have decided, for the moment, not to repair this damage: in some ways – they argued – they have become part of the museum’s history. The damage is not merely the tangible effect of a terrible event, but becomes a proof: a ‘trace’ of the past that is transmittable to the future.

The term ‘trace’ is full of meanings in architecture, but also in historiography: in fact, the figure of the historian as a direct or indirect witness has been gradually substituted by the figure of the historian as a narrator, who reconstructs history on the basis of documents, or rather on the basis of ‘traces’ of the past. In particular, in the last two centuries, the historian has assumed more and more the task of reconstructing the events of the past, through the identification of material traces of those events, verifying their authenticity, managing them in a coherent narrative and, above all, providing other scholars, and also the common man, with the possibility to check the sources (Bloch 1949).



Figure No. 2. Tunis (Tunisia). A wall of the Bardo National Museum sprayed with bullet holes;
https://si.wsj.net/public/resources/images/BN-IN038_italte_P_20150520070137.jpg ; Accessed 16.11.2017

Therefore, we can assert that historiography is an evidence-based discipline. But what happens if ‘post-truth’ puts the evidence itself in dispute?

The problem is strictly related to the notion of authenticity. As is well known, the Nara Document on Authenticity calls into question the Western-centric emphasis on material authenticity, stressing the variability of authenticity values between cultures. According to the Nara Document, authenticity «may include form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors» (Larsen, Jokhileto 1995). By delineating such a wide spectrum of values, this notion of authenticity permits the recognition of historic significance according to a range of factors beyond pure material authenticity, thus potentially validating actions such as reconstruction following a conflict episode. In the same perspective, the notion that emerges from the semiotic speculation on authenticity and falsehood, proposes authenticity as the result of a cultural assignment to an object, produced by a sort of ‘negotiation’ on the part of the users between truth and belief (Eco 1990 and 1997; Mazzucchelli 2011; Violi 2014).

However, this notion of authenticity, wide, pluralist and continuously subjected to re-definition, implies the risk of generating distortions in history, and producing narratives which are not based on the objectiveness of facts. According to the now very popular definition of “post-truth” in the Oxford English dictionary, it is something «relating to or denoting circumstances in

which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief». The risk is to blend ‘memory’, naturally subjected to a negotiation between truth and belief, rationality and emotion, with ‘history’, based on scientific reconstruction of the facts through material evidence.

According to Marco Dezzi Bardeschi, at least in the field of the conservation of architecture, an artefact can be considered ‘authentic’ only when the material signs of its creation and the material traces of the process, more or less intense but inevitable, and which have occurred over time, are impressed upon it. Obviously, this process has transformed the artefact into something different and fleeting from what it was a moment before (Dezzi Bardeschi 1991). In this perspective, each intervention aimed at bringing back an artefact to a former stage, produces a temporal paradox, as the reconstructed artefact is identical to only one of the infinite versions of the former one.

In the light of this theory, authenticity cannot be unrelated to materiality, uniqueness of a single artefact, place in which it is located, flow of the time and, finally, to the acknowledgment of the progressive and incessant transformation process to which everything is subjected (Dezzi Bardeschi 1991).

On the other hand, material traces also have a main role in semiotic methodology, in which we must distinguish ‘traces’ as ‘things’, or ‘signs’: the former is material evidence that precedes recognition; the latter is identified and related to a meaning (Violi 2014). The identification and assignment of a meaning to a trace is always an interpretative practice, aimed at transforming the trace into a text (Eco 1990). Obviously, this procedure always has a margin of error as the relationship that it establishes between trace and meaning is based on a wide range of factors. However, what is relevant is that traces as material evidence are the basis of each interpretative practice.

In this sense, we have to point out how the relationship between intervention and history, in the field of restoration and conservation, has been always relevant and, in some cases, controversial. Amedeo Bellini observed that the “intervention can’t invent the history” and in the same way “history can’t define the intervention” (Bellini 1980 and 1985: 51).

Considering historiography as an apparatus aimed at criticizing the past is an outdated concept: any consequent evaluation used as a tool to guide the intervention is controversial. However, the historiography can offer knowledge, data, documents and narratives to the methodology of the intervention, which can be used as tools aimed at understanding the range of the potential meanings of an artefact or a site better. Moreover, new relationships between intervention on heritage and historiography should be established and, overturning their roles, putt the preservation of traces of the past at the service of historiography. The conservative approach – as in

the Bardo Museum case – guarantees that future generations may reinterpret the past, but they must have the necessary physical elements to ensure that each period or event, however, will have the same opportunity of being represented, studied, and disputed.

A deep void: preserving the absence

Preserving the traces of a traumatic event can mean also preserving the absence of something which has vanished forever. Often a violent event, such as a bombing, a terrorist attack or an ‘ideological demolition’, leaves a physical void in which the past is represented by its physical absence.

In this perspective, Salvatore Boscarino used the term «black hole» to indicate a «negative spatial memory of a trauma» (Boscarino 1992:14; see also Trigg 2009: 95-98).

The project “Reflecting absence”, the 9/11 Memorial by Micheal Arad in New York, is a clear example of using “absence” to satisfy a historic authenticity requirement. In what was the foundations of the majestic towers, Arad carved out what he calls “voids, a pair of black granite craters down in the footprints of the Twin Towers (fig. 3). Each of the cubic voids supports falling waters streaming into sunken reflective pools, and further into central, square drainage basins (Garland Thomson 2008).



Figure No.3. New York (USA). View of the north pole of 9/11 Memorial by Michael Arad.

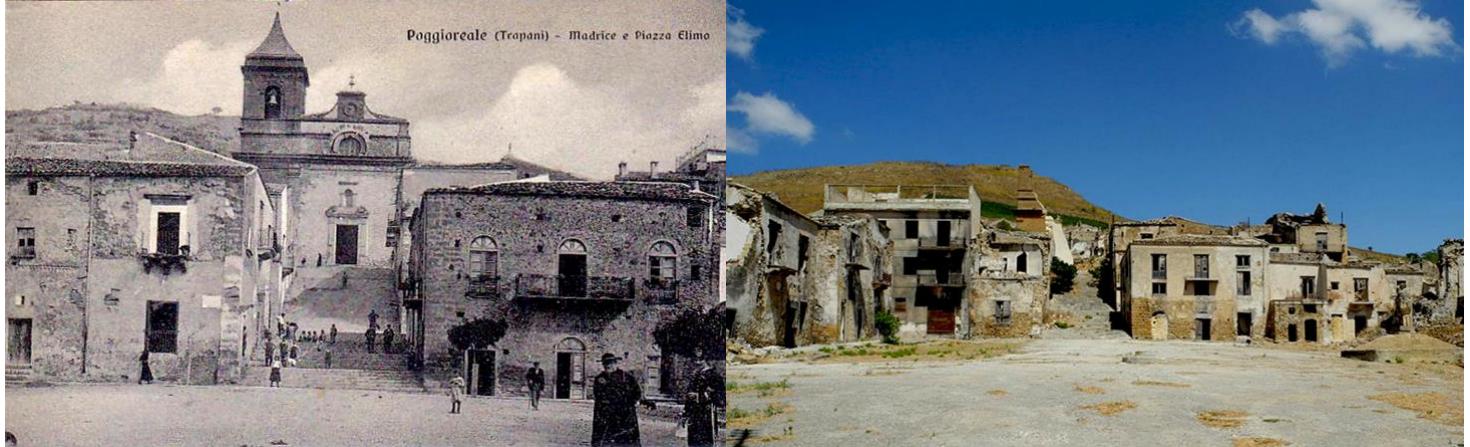
Absence can be also represented by the trace of a wide part of a vanished urban fabric: Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, before the new futuristic buildings were built (fig. 4). Core town before and during Nazism, the square was for decades a wide empty space that seemed to evoke all the tragedies of the German people, as a sort of “prairie of history” (Mazzucchelli 2010:79).



Figure No.4. Berlin (Germany). A frame of the movie *Wings of desire* (Wim Wenders, 1987) with a view of Potsdamer Platz before of its ‘re-filling’ with futuristic buildings.

The will to preserve the absence, in other cases, consists in simply underlining the absence of people in a site that was the scenario of a dramatic event. This is the well-known case of the French village of Oradour-sur-Glane, where everything has been intentionally maintained exactly in the “time after” the destruction and massacre of the population by the Nazis during the Second World War (Oteri 2009:44, Sulfaro 2014:160). Quite the same worrying sense of absence is perceptible walking through the ruins of Poggioreale, in Sicily. The town was founded in 1642 by the marquise Francisco Morso of Gibellina, who was authorized by Philip IV king of Spain to build in the area around one of his royal palaces. The history of the town is dramatically related to the earthquake that devastated the Belice valley on the 14th of January 1968. Poggioreale was seriously damaged along with other villages: the population was gradually transferred to a new town some kilometres away and the ruins left – more or less intentionally – to memorialize a sad page of Italian

history, created by delays in assistance and a lack of interest on the part of the government in the southern area of the country. Moreover, the solitary ruins of Poggiooreale testify the life of the population before the earthquake, characterized by underdevelopment and poverty (Cognardi 1981) (figg. 5-6).



Figures No. 5-6. Poggiooreale (Italy). The small town before the 1968 Belice earthquake (private collection) ; and the small town today (photo by the author).

A different destiny – at least in term of memorialisation process – was reserved for Gibellina, another town of the Belice Valley. It was totally destroyed by the same 1968 earthquake, and a new Gibellina was built 20 kilometres away, in a contemporary style. In 1985, the mayor decided to invite some leading artists and architects to beautify the new town, including – just to mention a few - Pietro Consagra, Arnaldo Pomodoro, Mario Schifano, Ludovico Quarini and Franco Purini (Oddo 2003). Unlike the other artists, Alberto Burri chose not to intervene in the new urban context but, truly struck by the ruins of the old town, decided to create his work of art from them. Thus, the ruins of the old buildings were further reduced to rubble, compacted into blocks held together by iron nets and then covered by a white concrete pouring; the blocks, about 1.70 m high, were arranged to recreate the pre-existing urban fabric which, with every landmark lost, became a silent labyrinth (Vitiello 2015). This formidable work of landscape art, the “Big Cretto”, represents – in the concept of Burri – an enormous white shroud lying over the body of the dead town (fig. 7). It is a memorial that, *de facto*, cancels the past, without preserving any traces of its pre-existence, if not the ancient paths, still walkable. However, this work exalts the absence of life and, although irreversibly covering the material traces with concrete, is successful in memorializing the dramatic event more than any other reconstruction or preservation of the ruins.



Figure No. 7. Gibellina (Italy). The “Big Cretto” by Alberto Burri (1985) (photo by the author).

Reconstruction: spoliation of evidence

The two caves left empty by the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in March 2001 by the Taliban is a very recent and impressive example of an ‘absence’. The physical absence of the Buddhas, in itself, is material evidence of intentionally ideological violence: ‘re-filling’ the caves with two giant reconstructed statues could question the truth of that event, in the future.

In the outlined scenario, reconstruction can be seen, *de facto*, as a destructive activity in itself, since it erases memories of an event and removes physical evidence (Kalman 2017:538): to use a legal terminology, it is a sort of ‘spoliation of evidence’.

In this perspective, an irreconcilable distance emerges between reconstruction and conservation, which ‘democratically’ guarantees the option to document each phase of history without prejudice (Sulfaro 2014:160-169). This does not mean that reconstruction is anti-democratic: the 20th century – widely regarded as the most productive and most destructive period of human history thus far – offers innumerable examples of community response to injuries inflicted upon the built environment. In nearly all cases, post-war recovery involves extensive reconstruction, either out of pragmatic necessity, defiance against aggressors, or maintenance of continuity with a pre-conflict time. For this reason, the possibility given to a community to choose among several options – including the reconstruction *a l'identique* – represents without doubt, at

least in theory, a democratic and participative process. However, we should consider how various options and points of view of all those involved might change over time. There are many cases in which an initial intent to preserve traces of a disaster as a memorial has had to surrender to the will to eradicate a traumatic past through restoration or, in extreme cases, through reconstruction.

Just to mention a recent example, we can refer to the Sarajevo National Library, scenario of two relevant historical events. Built in 1896 as the Sarajevo City Hall, it was the scene of the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Gavrilo Princip in 1914. During the Yugoslavian Wars, on the night of August 25th 1992, the Library was bombed and burned by Serbian forces besieging the city. The building was practically destroyed and, unfortunately, 90% of books could not be saved from the flames (Tumarkin 2005:88-91). Initially it was left in ruins, and a plaque reading ‘Don’t forget: remember and warn!’ was mounted. However, some years later, a reconstruction *a l’identique* was started and the building was reopened in May 2014 (Sulfaro 2014:152). Only the plaque remains, under the entrance portico, to testify that episode: certainly, it would be very difficult for a few words to represent so much violence (fig. 8).

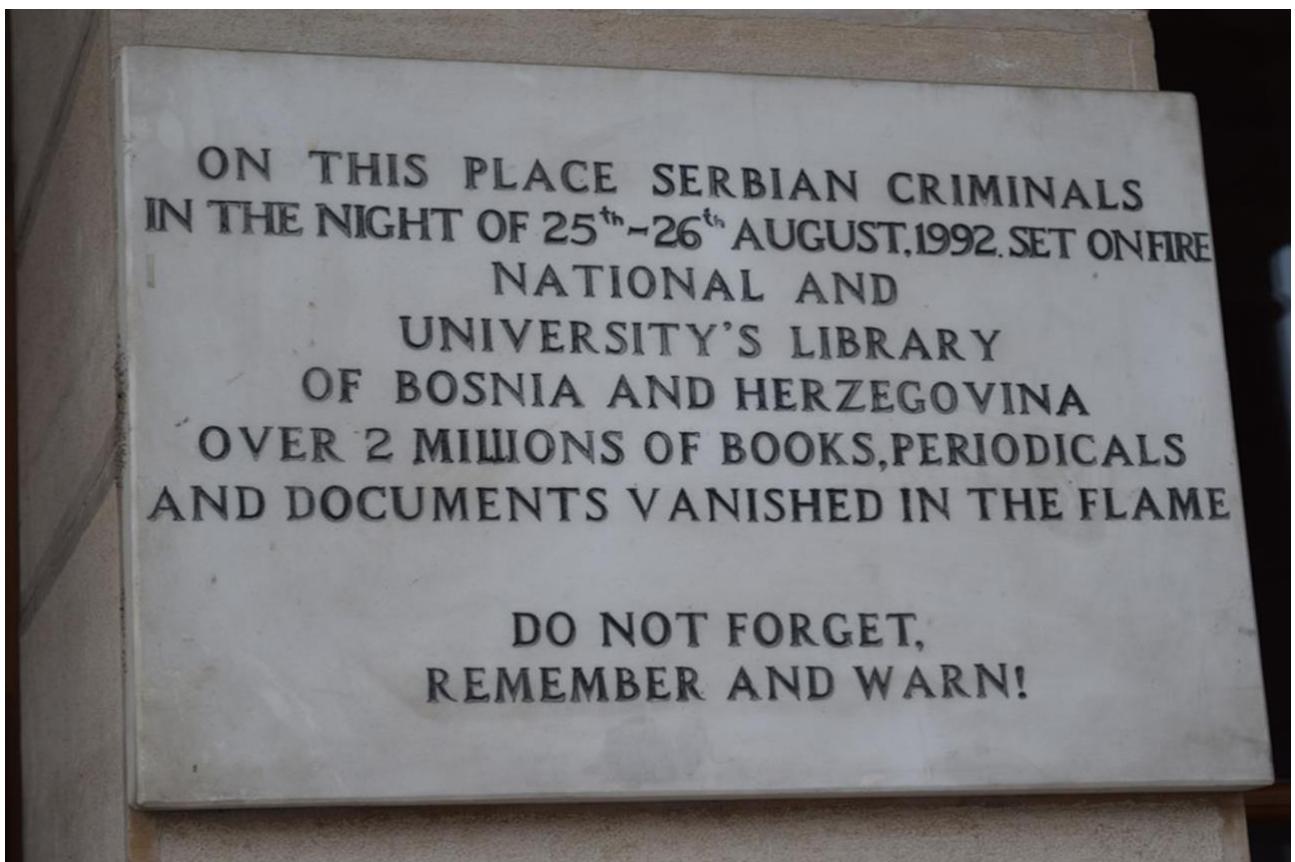


Figure No. 8. Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina). Only a plaque near the entrance of the Sarajevo National Library remembers the bombing of the building in 1992 (photo by the author).

In case of reconstruction, the challenge should be to contemporarily preserve the traces of the destruction. But how?

Similar to the Sarajevo National Library, the Frauenkirche in Dresden, which collapsed after a fire during the Second World war, was left in ruins for decades, as a pile of rubble, to remember the insanity of the Nazi era. Only after the German reunification of 1990, was the idea of reconstructing the Frauenkirche born. It was opposed by many, including several in the German historical preservation community. Framed as a new nationalist effort for the newly united country, the idea surpassed its critics and in 2006 the new church was reopened. Thanks to 3D computer simulations, eight thousand original stones, still distinguishable due to their consumption and smoke, have been replaced in their former positions (fig. 9). This is sufficient – at least to an expert eye – to, in some ways, evidence the past of the church (Garland Thomson 2008).



Figure No. 9. Dresden (Germany). The reconstructed facade of *Frauenkirche* with the darkened original blocks (photo by the author).

On the other hand, examples where reconstruction is declared through displaying explicative panels or plaque are quite infrequent. From the reconstruction of St Mark's bell tower in Venice in 1912, to the old town of Warsaw in 1950, people are free to imagine that the destruction of certain structures and their consequent rebuilding never happened.

Coming back to the notion of ‘post-truth’, the meaning assigned to this term by Ralph Keyes, for the first time in 2004, seems particularly worrying. Keyes used the formula “post-truth era” to describe the dangerous tendency of western democracies to believe in well-narrated lies instead of believing in facts (Keyes 2004). In this sense, maybe reconstruction is a ‘well-narrated lie’?

Conclusion

In the light of the reflections and the examples presented, we can say that an approach aimed at preserving the traces of the past can be used as a tool for historiography, as this material evidence can be used as an essential source to reconstruct history, in the future. Reconstruction, although being considered a legitimate action, cancels part of history and, as in the movie “Back to the future”, changes the course of the events, which can be very dangerous. In any case, if we do live in a “post-truth” age, historians of the future will truly have their work cut out for them.

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