The Role of the Craftsman in Cultural Heritage Restoration

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The loss of cultural heritage sites is a natural and continual process. As craftsmen our task is to evaluate, prioritize and then prevent or delay this process through a range of actions. This paper is based on the situation concerning the restoration of wooden buildings in Norway, but I believe my recommendations, both philosophic and practical, are universally applicable. Successful cultural heritage preservation is dependent on knowledge – at all levels in the process, from planning to physical implementation.

There are a lot of factors to be taken into consideration, and the craftsman should be involved right from the very beginning of a restoration project. A good craftsman has knowledge which is rarely found in the cultural heritage management authorities various sections and departments. Unfortunately, the initial premises are often already decided
upon before the craftsman is directly involved. **As craftsmen we are continually renewing our skills.** Formal education and courses help us to develop our practical and theoretical skills. But our most important arenas for learning are the real thing, - when we work on historical buildings. Every time one of these buildings disappears we lose a source of knowledge and an arena for learning.

As craftsmen with considerable skills, both practical and theoretical, we often wonder why we are often not involved in the initial planning phases in cultural heritage restoration projects. We don't want to become bureaucrats, but we know we can make a valuable contribution.

All too often the planning groups that are established for restoration projects consist of theoreticians who lack practical skills. They decide the premises for the restoration that is to be carried out by the craftsman.

We would like craftsmen to be participants in project planning before they begin the practical work. And when the restoration is completed, let us write a report on what has been done. I am convinced that we will get much better results if craftsmen are involved in this initial planning. All too often preliminary projects involve a lot of unnecessary work because the craftsman does not get the opportunity to give advice. So our advice to those who are responsible for cultural heritage preservation is - make use of our skills, right from the beginning, it is too late when the initial phase is over. Our advice can ensure that the prerequisites for authentic process restoration are part of the final project plan.

**Restoration and authenticity**
Authenticity is something that should not disappear with restoration.

One wishes to intervene as little as possible, and leave as few traces of the restoration work on the building as possible.
In many cases it can be difficult to decide how much should be replaced when encountering rot damage. Several things should be taken into consideration, such as load-bearing walls, traces of tools and valuable paint. The question is whether to replace bits of the damaged building part, or all of it.

It is important that the practising craftsman is included in the discussions early on in the process. He will be able to analyse the damage, and after hearing what the authorities want, say what can or should be done in each case. When the initial decisions have been made, the craftsman can start, using his experience and skills to make the new building part as authentic as possible. To be able to do this one has to remember that the building serves as the document he uses as point of departure. It is crucial that the builder has a substantial knowledge of wood, tools and techniques from the period when the building originates. He also has to know how to find and interpret tools marks. This is the craftsman’s task, and only he will have the knowledge to perform this work.

First the builder has to get hold of wood. To identify what wood was originally used and then go out into the forests to find corresponding quality is a skill that only a craftsman possesses. This can prove quite a challenge, since the quality of our forests has changed a lot since the time when the building was built. It can be an important job for our authorities to record where one can find old forests and buy some of them for the future restoration of special buildings. Skilful craftsmen will be constantly on the alert to learn more about wood, tools and techniques from the building they are working on. Such analysis will be of importance for the rest of the work with the building.
Don't misunderstand me. I don't mean that we craftsmen feel that everything would be better if we were allowed to do everything alone! What I am saying is that restoration is a team activity, and we are a vital part of it. We supplement the skills of the other participants, and the interchange of the various skills and experiences is positive both for us and cultural heritage restoration.