



# On Vitality and the Visibility of Time in Architecture

Ruurd Roorda & Bas Kegge

2

## time phasing

Since *instant patina*, a façade trend recently observed by Kirsten Hannema,<sup>1</sup> seems to form a viable design strategy today, leading to buildings that bear reference to some of the aspects quoted in our book *Vital Architecture*,<sup>2</sup> we felt tempted to contribute to this issue of *Archiprint*, which is dedicated to ‘patinated architecture’.

In this contribution we will try to dive deeper into the questions of the what, why, what for and when of *instant patina*. We will discuss some of the problems we see in the ‘instantness’ of the phenomenon. The suggestion that a building appears aged by showing this age in the façade may seem to be a solution in a historical context, but the idea denies the building structure and interiors behind it. Another aspect we think is unclear is the future value of such buildings.

Our basic question for this article is: Does *instant patina* lead to vitality?

First, it is important to note that the term *instant patina* is in itself contradictory: an oxymoron. ‘Instant’ seems to exclude time, whereas ‘patina’ can only develop over time. As you will find out on the Internet, the term *instant patina* already exists – though not immediately related to architectural design. It is a product: a liquid sold in cans that can make brass and copper look weathered, or steel look rusty – instantly.

This reminds us of ‘liquid smoke’, another product, sold in small bottles, by which you can add the taste of smoke to fresh salmon or chicken, thus avoiding the time-consuming and befouling action of smoking. Here we enter the world of faking, as in the product ‘anti-ageing cream’: a magic formula that is desired although everyone knows the message cannot be true.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, it must be said that *instant patina* as shown in the discussed projects<sup>4</sup> hardly deals with real patina (the appearance of weathering on a given surface, like in worn stone and oxidized metal), but rather puts forward the use of what we would call

1. K. Hannema, Instant Patina, in *ArchitectuurNL*, no. 2 (2016).

2. R. Roorda and B. Kegge, *Vital Architecture, Tools for Durability* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2016). In the book, architectural vitality is defined as the degree to which a building is equipped to support people's lives in the long run. Vitality leads to durability, to buildings that age without losing their usability.

3. As you may notice, the faking in our examples may just as well ‘accelerate’ time, ‘delay’ it or ‘stop’ time altogether.

4. Raakspoor Haarlem, arch. Bolles + Wilson, 2011; Grenswerk Venlo, arch. Van Dongen-Koschuch, 2014; Hotel Fouquet Barrière Paris, arch. Édouard François, 2006; Rijkspark Tilburg, arch. AWG, 2014; Station Breda, arch. Koen van Velsen, 2016.



‘fake time phasing’ (mimicry of a surface with interventions done at a later stage, to enhance the impression of age). *Fake time phasing* keeps up appearances, but is not the result of real time. To achieve true patina a building has to be patient. Real patina takes time.

## interior

To find an answer to our questions, we will first take a side-step into the world of the interior, or rather into the world of interior decoration. Since *instant patina* is put forward as a trend, we felt it wise to do this, since the interior, with its average seven-year replacement cycle, seems more closely related to trends and hypes than one can find in the slow nature of architecture. We believe the relationship of interior to exterior is crucial for its future, as we discussed in *Vital Architecture*.

Looking back, we noticed that the magazine *The World of Interiors*, since at least 1988 up until now, has put forward the imperfect, scarce and authentic as a distinctive wannahave interior surface for the rich. Worn paint on wood, walls with cracks and damaged stucco here add up to ownership value, provided that scarcity and cultural value are involved. Patina in this case still combines with the authentic.

But from the 1980s on, firms that offered ‘old’ looking furniture and accessories expanded enormously: *Rivière Maison*



(established in 1985), for instance. The firm's slogan: 'Perfectly Imperfect.' Here patina has nothing to do with authenticity. It is faked by mechanical production and it is an enormous success. On top of that: today these 'old' looking products are not officially disparaged like they were in the 1920s and 1950s.<sup>5</sup>

The other source we want to mention is the aesthetics of *wabi-sabi*, the Japanese tradition associated with Zen Buddhism. This tradition, embodied in flower composition, music, poetry, garden design and pottery, dates back to the fourteenth century and is based on a world view that accepts transience and imperfection. In short, *wabi* here means simplicity, *sabi* serenity that comes with age. Absorption – after 1994 – of this tradition in Western society – by offering it as a lifestyle for sale – was possibly facilitated by boredom with the smooth and perfect surfaces of modernism, but more likely by the alienation from the essence of life that comes from modern technology: digitization, automation and globalization.

What we may learn from the abovementioned issues is that patina as an interior finish seems to work well for the Western world, but to imagine that it would suit the Third World is unthinkable. In this sense, like the wish to wear jeans with obvious holes, the 'need' for patina in the wealthy West reads like *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Nevertheless, patina seems to fulfill

a desire for imperfection – as an escape from a world in which progress is equated with perfection.

In our view, in the interior world the 'need' for patina seems to increase as faith in the future dissolves. It may act as a form of reassurance. And it seems to be in fashion and has been for 32 years. Nevertheless, in the interior it will probably not have eternal power, nor serve eternal desires.

## architecture

Unlike the interior, architecture always consists of several layers, each with a different replacement cycle.<sup>6</sup> For this reason,

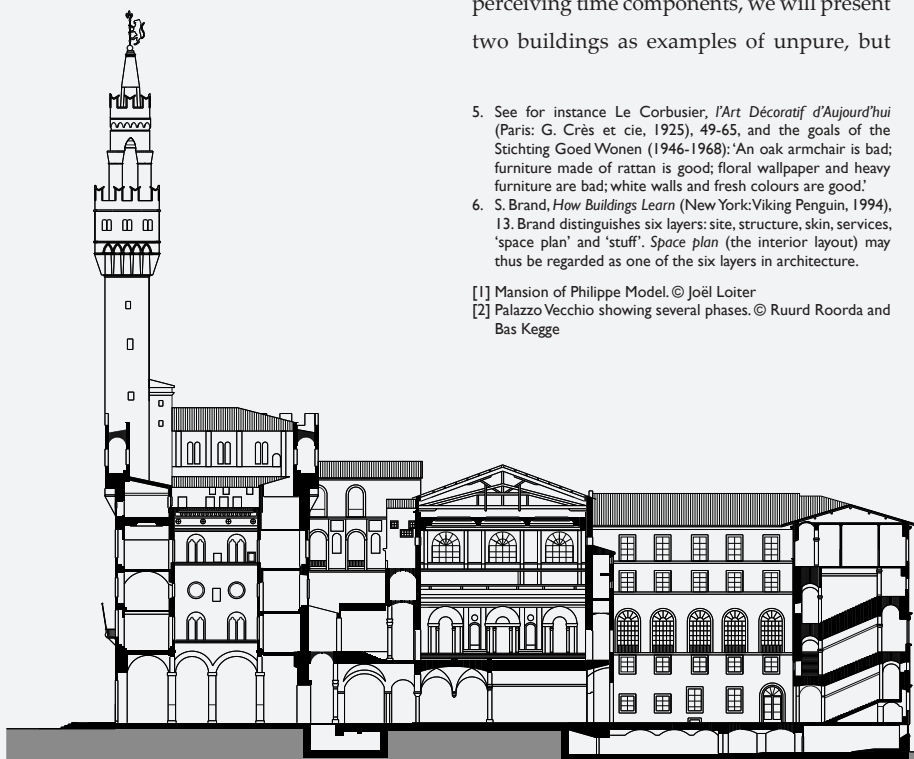
through time, architecture is in a process of continuous disintegration. As programmatic or site changes make transformations necessary, the original composition may be altered. In this way, time produces different phases in a building. These phases may be exposed and perceived as time 'components' in the façade and the interior. We should be aware of this omnipresent disintegration of architecture. After delivery, a pure (natal) state of any given building can not survive for more than an average of 20 years. After this, 'purity' comes from major maintenance or reconstruction – but usually stripped of its authenticity.

In order to grasp the attraction of perceiving time components, we will present two buildings as examples of unpure, but

5. See for instance Le Corbusier, *l'Art Décoratif d'Aujourd'hui* (Paris: G. Crès et cie, 1925), 49-65, and the goals of the Stichting Goed Wonen (1946-1968): 'An oak armchair is bad; furniture made of rattan is good; floral wallpaper and heavy furniture are bad; white walls and fresh colours are good.'
6. S. Brand, *How Buildings Learn* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), 13. Brand distinguishes six layers: site, structure, skin, services, 'space plan' and 'stuff'. *Space plan* (the interior layout) may thus be regarded as one of the six layers in architecture.

[1] Mansion of Philippe Model. © Joël Loiter

[2] Palazzo Vecchio showing several phases. © Ruurd Roorda and Bas Kegge



authentic *time phasing*. Translated to the idea of *instant patina*: buildings with 'slow patina'.

In *Vital Architecture* we presented Palazzo Vecchio in Florence as a champion of expandability. It is made up of 13 phases of interventions that took place in a period of 600 years – with the majority of transformations taking place in the first three centuries. The *time phasing* is visible in different places on the outside – especially on the side façades – but the juxtaposition of the severeness of the first, medieval, construction phase and the elegance of the sixth, Renaissance, phase is even more striking in the interior. This experience of variety is not only visible in the way the surfaces have been handled. It is predominantly spatial. This effect is emphasized by the building materials used, the decoration and the integrated works of art. Our conclusion concerning buildings like this was that architectural expandability can be regarded as an art form in itself. Central to this art form is that the new interventions are self-confident and that they are not inferior or submissive to the original architecture, but improve on it by adding something significant, without overshadowing it.<sup>7</sup> Here,

confidence in the contemporary condition is crucial.

A vernacular variation of some of the previous aspects can be traced in the Nideröst House in Schwyz. This timber house consists of at least six construction phases in 800 years, of which some include expansion and some include internal changes. The striking thing here is that the building was relocated three times. Very different from the Palazzo Vecchio, endless changes in this Swiss house led to a state in which the original building seemed to have disappeared from sight under a patchwork of alterations. In the second to last phase, the building ended up in a state of dilapidation, due to lack of maintenance and inadequate repair of façade and roof finishings. The photographs of this phase show a house nearing ruin: worn and out of balance . . . yet intriguing. Here the aesthetic appearance is the result of a long process of change, weathering and deterioration. The last phase consisted of yet another relocation. This time the scarcity of a building type this old led to a meticulous reconstruction, unfortunately of only the initial construction phase. All later

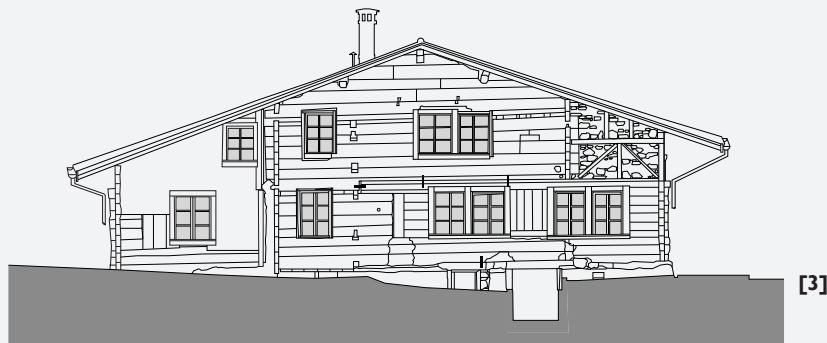
interventions had to go, implying the instant elimination of 'patina' (*time phasing*).

## life and death

Let us contemplate the idea of ruination. In our view all buildings that show time phases somehow relate to the ruin, since they are in some way or another removed from their freshly delivered origin, and show – by signs of new interventions – that life has continued since then, pointing towards an unknown future. In this future the ruin is a certainty when maintenance fails, and the broken-up image of *time phasing* foreshadows this ruination, as the Nideröst House's second to last phase clearly shows.

What makes a ruin so intriguing? According to Walter Benjamin, the ruin can be regarded as an expression of the transience and frailty of human life, and the decay may be seen as violence through which the present can be revealed to itself.<sup>8</sup> In opposition to this, Albert Speer's *Theory of Ruin Value* ignores the individual, and defines the ruin as an emblem of heroic civilizations. This theory leaves no room for interpretations of the present, but only offers atemporality.<sup>9</sup>

Two hundred years earlier, the ruin reached its romantic apotheosis in the aesthetics of the picturesque. Opposing the Enlightenment, this ideal defined aesthetic experiences as non-rational. The picturesque was considered to act as a mediator between



the beautiful and the sublime. Terror and death were the focal points of the latter, as these directly moved man's desire for self-preservation – or his fear of death. Out of this ideal, the 'ruin' (a brand new, fake ruin) became a desired type of building for the rich, as a folly on their estates or in their parks. Moreover, follies are considered a predecessor to *instant patina*, as Kirsten Hannema already stated.

What can we possibly conclude from the above? First of all, *time phasing* is an unavoidable thing in the 'life' of an architectural object, since it is trapped in a process of continuous disintegration. Mending the gaps caused by this disintegration eventually leads to patches.

In some cases, *time phasing* stretches further in the building and is visible not only in façades but also in the interior, like in the Palazzo Vecchio. Related to this, architectural expandability can be an art form in itself, leading to a higher cultural value, and thus to a higher vitality.

Reading the 'patches' on the original is like reading the 'life' a building has lived. The building thus becomes a mirror of the lives lived in it. Viewed like this, the incredible appeal of *time phasing* may stem from its closeness to the image of ruination. The aesthetics of the ruin confront man with his certainty of death – either by facing his fear of it, or by experiencing his own fragility or futility.

As the example of the Nideröst House shows, *time phasing* doesn't necessarily imply duration: four of the six phases were erased in its last intervention.

So, *time phasing* may – or may not – add up to vitality. But what about *instant patina*?

## Castelvechio

Before we try to make up our minds, let us take a short look at Castelvechio in Verona, a building that served as a reference project in one of the *instant patina* projects.<sup>10</sup>

To us, it seems quite ambitious to mention Scarpa's design for the Castelvechio Museum as a reference to a contemporary project, knowing that the architect's ongoing personal meddling with Castelvechio took him nearly two decades.

Only after his death in 1978 did Italian architect Carlo Scarpa gradually grow into an icon. His oeuvre is relatively small. His designs for museums and exhibitions form the main part of the work.

The circumstances of the Castelvechio Museum commission were completely different from the way an architect works today: at the time a programme, a budget, a contract, planners and crisp working drawings were absent. Scarpa had no office. When the project ran out of money the work stopped temporarily.<sup>11</sup> From 1956, it took him 17 years to complete the job, in several stages.

The Castelvechio Museum stands out

as a textbook example of combining the existing with the new. Scarpa wanted to place the museum object and the viewer in a direct dialogue. The means with which he did this included an individual design for almost every object, 'creative' demolishing, the change of the exhibition 'journey', the addition of spaces, the juxtaposition of old and new elements, and the application of an endless variety of materials, textures and finishings: everything made by manual labour. The way he did it was completely at odds with the beliefs of his time.<sup>12</sup>

Castelvechio was constructed in five phases, across 800 years, of which the third, in 1806, was an insertion of barracks that Scarpa struggled with during the job. Scarpa's intuition was to keep the structure of the barracks, together with the symmetrical, 1926 'Gothic' courtyard façade he hated, but to set back their roof – to separate it from two of the towers of the medieval castle. By doing so he could keep the outline of the medieval castle unspoilt, as seen from the river.

The *pièce de résistance* of the museum is the placement of the equestrian statue

7. Roorda and Kegge, *Vital Architecture*, op. cit. (note 2), 41.

8. W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: New Left Books, 1977), 166-180.

9. N. Stead, 'The Value of Ruins: Allegories and Destruction in Benjamin and Speer', *Form/Work: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the Built Environment*, no. 6 (October 2003), 51-64.

10. Raakspoort Haarlem, arch. Bolles + Wilson, 2011.

11. See: R. Murphy, lecture about the work of Carlo Scarpa. Available online at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v\\_78\\_KQZiP8&app=desktop](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_78_KQZiP8&app=desktop).

12. To name a few: the beliefs in radical 'newness', in systems, in prefabrication and in transparency.

[3] Haus Nideröst, elevation situation before 2001. © Ruurd Roorda and Bas Kegge



of Cangrande, an Italian nobleman, under the western set-back of the roof, in the new outdoor space where all the time phases meet. This resulted in its elevated position, putting the statue occasionally in the sun, visible to the public from several levels, during different breaks in their journey around the museum. The symmetrical outline of the 'Gothic' courtyard façade is carefully met with an asymmetrically positioned entrance wall, a protruding top-lit chapel and recessed, irregularly spaced wood and steel window frames.

In the project, Scarpa continuously displays the thickness of the material he finds and adds, by changing shapes, by 'delaminating' and by cutting holes.

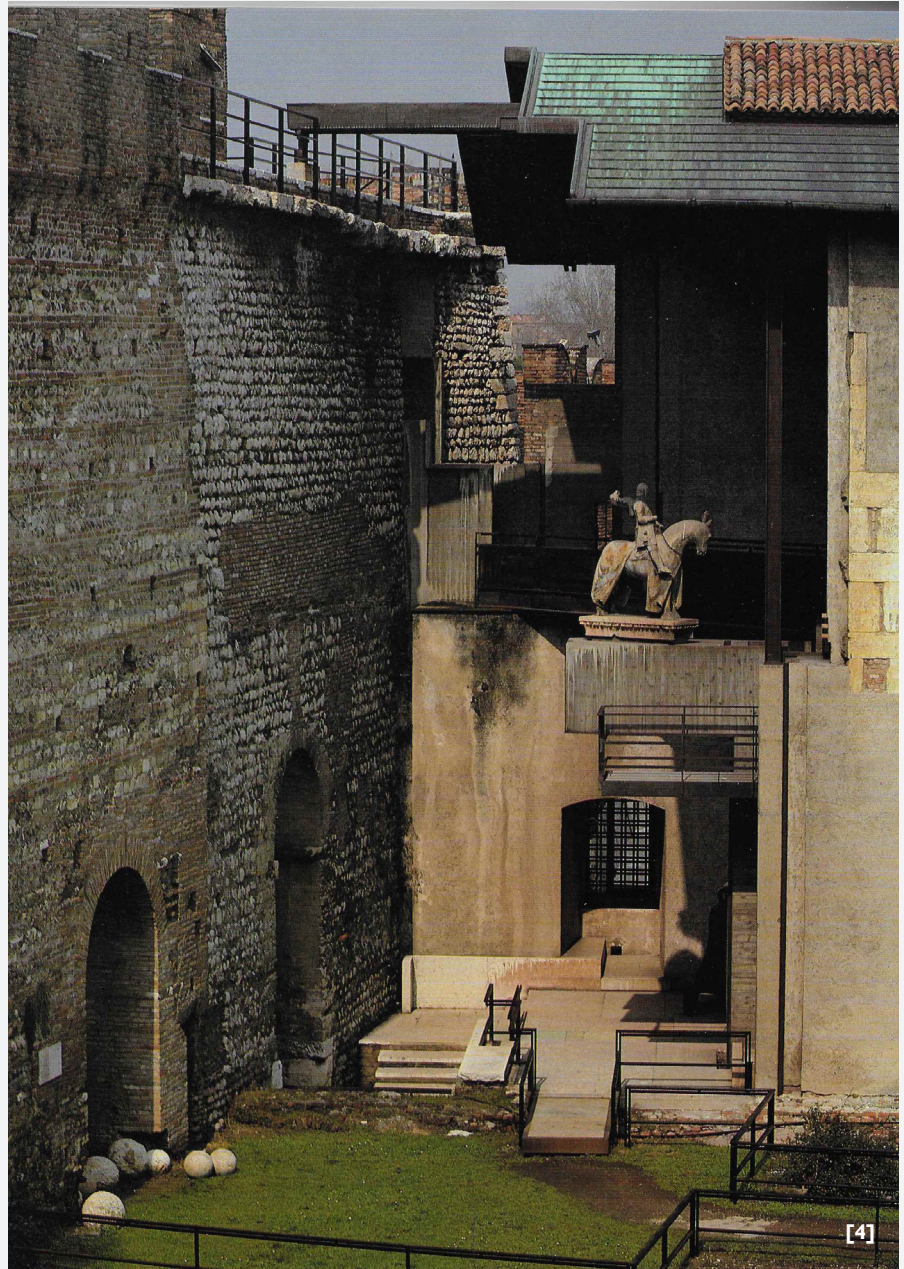
Most connections between old and new are articulated spatially, so as to hide the joint – by using shadow.<sup>13</sup>

In doing all this, the *time phasing* becomes quite expressive, adding to the mystery of the project and to the intensity of perceiving the exhibited art.

Here the *time phasing* stretches not only over the façade, but over all of the layers of the building: the 'stuff' (the art), the 'space plan' (the interior elements), the skin (the façade), the structure and the site.

The project clearly shows 'patina', but not instantaneously: the *time phasing* is not fake.

Although Scarpa may have been considered anachronistic for his way of



working, today the Castelvechio Museum with its delicate, asymmetrical compositions is regarded as a twentieth-century masterpiece. The work seems to stem from a belief in the expression of its own time. This iconic museum is a vital building, for as long as the art work remains intact and valuable for display and as long as it is possible to maintain the architecture for this use.

## change and solidification

What does this leave *instant patina* with? Does *instant patina* lead to vitality, too? Vitality comes from a building's ability to change and/or the ability to produce a wish for solidification.

*Instant patina* is the fake image of change and does not tell if the building may or may not change due to societal, economical or technological developments. With *instant patina* being defined as a façade trend, we find it important to stress that none of the related projects seems to give account to changeability or replaceability of its façade components. The ambiguity of the examples complicates later transformations. Which of the involved styles or 'interventions' is worth keeping or worth relating to? More importantly, to offer possibilities for change, ideally all architectural layers – and not just the façade – could act as layers of change, like the Palazzo Vecchio and the Castelvechio Museum show us.

Maybe even more interesting is the question to what extent *instant patina* may lead to a wish for solidification. To our knowledge, history has produced no evidence that an expression of impermanence (or *time phasing*) produces a more deliberate wish for preserving a building than an expression of permanence would.

The text *Nine Points on Monumentality*, as put forward by Sert, Léger and Giedion,<sup>14</sup> further enhances this idea. Point three states: 'Every bygone period which shaped a real cultural life had the power and the capacity to create these symbols [of the people's collective force]. Monuments are, therefore, only possible in periods in which a unifying consciousness and unifying culture exists.' Together with the abovementioned, this leads to our conviction that *instant patina* cannot be called vital.

To this we want to add that in the past the artistic preference for either sincerity or irony, perfection or imperfection, cultivation or smoothness seems to have swung continuously. The abstract white plane of modernism has served its purpose from the 1920s until recently. Today it may seem that *instant patina* fills a major 'history' shortage.

The enormous architectural production of today and the scarcity of 'historical' value bring about a lack of confidence in the contemporary condition. Exactly this confidence is what we feel is the precondition for future value •

Ruurd Roorda (1959) is an architect and co-founder of the office ROORDAENDB in Schiedam. Previously, Roorda worked at OMA, contributing to projects like the Parc de la Vilette competition entry. In 1989, he co-founded the office Kingma Roorda architecten. Roorda furthermore has researched the continuity and influence of history, the life span of buildings and vitality in architecture by means of publications such as the essay 'Great Spaces' (2008) and the BNA-funded book 'Vital Architecture' (2016). Since 2009 Roorda has been teaching at the TU Eindhoven and has since 2013 been doing research at the affiliated research group Bauhütte.

Bas Kegge (1973) is an architect and projectmanager currently working at JSA Architects and has previously worked at several Dutch architects offices among others Geurst & Schulze architecten and Kingma Roorda architecten. In addition, Kegge regularly publishes articles on architecture in (online) magazines as ArchiNed.nl and de Architect and does research. The latter is reflected in publications as the essay 'Great Spaces' (2008) and the book 'Vital Architecture' (2016).

13. See: R. Murphy, *Carlo Scarpa and the Castelvechio* (New York: Architectural Press, 1991).

14. J.L. Sert, F. Léger and S. Giedion, *Nine Points on Monumentality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1943), as published in S. Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me: The Diary of a Development* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1958).

[4] Castelvechio by Carlo Scarpa, showing meeting of all phases. © A+U, 1985