

Alain Rideaud

## ARCHITECTURE - A LIVING FABRIC

**A**rchitecture is a living thing. As the habitat of a community it must protect that community and satisfy the various needs of its occupants. To that end it is the object of two kinds of measures. Some are designed to strengthen buildings vis à vis their environment. These include structural reinforcement and earthquake resistance work, weather-proofing or routine maintenance. Others are a response to the needs of their occupants, such as improvements to amenities, extensions, new doors and windows or interior refurbishment.

And whilst the traditional rules for protecting historic buildings evolve slowly, with certain types of knowledge being lost over the years, the demands of their occupants vary unceasingly and follow the rhythm of technical, economic and social progress.

Changes to old buildings over the years reflect this duality between reinforcement on the one hand and adaptation and improvement on the other hand. Measures taken as a result should be complementary and not contradictory.

It is clear that in San Lorenzello improvement work (enlargement of doors and windows or addition of extra floors, for example) has been carried out without regard for the earthquake hazard which was nevertheless present in the culture of earlier times. It is essential for measures to complement each other, because some of them reinforce the old structures whilst others enable their occupants to live in them with the desired degree of comfort.

### **Behaviour, regulations and grants**

The further the date of a major event recedes in time, the more likely it is that architectural conversion work will be done without any relevance to reinforcement. The community gradually forgets the risk to which its buildings are potentially exposed and regards as essential only that work which is designed to adapt buildings to its own needs. But by rehabilitating architecture in earthquake zones one also gives it the power to resist.

This prompts us to look at a whole range of rules designed to reduce the vulnerability of buildings to the risks they may have to withstand, and it is essential to enrich our body of knowledge by comparing analyses conducted in all the countries concerned.

Our current experience leads us to reflect on two factors: the way in which these rules are used by the community and the scrutiny to which building work is subjected.

As far as use is concerned, the rules are nearly always rigid and self-contained, for everyone including the technical specialists involved. They are, however, based on the most commonly found types and models. Consequently they are standard rules which apply nationwide. It is thus not surprising that rather than being an integral part of the community's culture, they are perceived as constraints imposed by a remote authority.

It would be preferable for these rules to be flexible and simple in their application, because they need both to reduce vulnerability and to allow occupants to adapt their buildings in line with their own desired lifestyles. Surely any changes to old buildings should be based on a collective understanding of the dangers?

Grants given to private individuals are manifestly an important factor in the planning of any work proposed and any checks on it subsequently. These provide a framework for dialogue between occupants and officialdom (property owners, government departments, communes, engineers, architects, etc.) aimed at deciding which types of work should be done to reduce the vulnerability of buildings whilst at the same time satisfying the aspirations of their occupants. Not only will the project be better adapted to the local "system" (community + architecture); scrutiny of the building work done will be easier as well.

These grants are important, then, but they are usually given only after a relatively serious event. Preventive maintenance is the best form of reinforcement. Today we can compute the cost of preventive reinforcement work on buildings, and it may seem frightening. But we know full well that doing nothing is not the best way of saving money. Imagine the long-term cost, both financially and socially, of failing to carry out regular and appropriate maintenance on these buildings!