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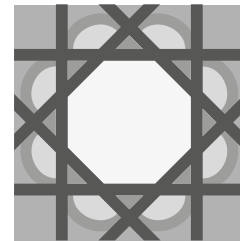
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Review by Ariane Varela Braga

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Mémoires fragiles. Conserving Orientalist Architecture in Switzerland and Beyond

**International Workshop, University of Zurich,
September 22, 2018**



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**Review by Ariane Varela Braga
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The international workshop “*Mémoires fragiles. Conserving Orientalist Architecture in Switzerland and Beyond*”, held at the University of Zurich on September 22, 2018, on occasion of the European Year of Cultural Heritage and its overarching topic “*Shared Heritage*”, addressed a specific aspect of the larger debate on heritage conservation, that is, the challenges related to the conservation of Orientalising architecture. For this purpose, Swiss and foreign experts discussed issues referring to the preservation of such architectures in Switzerland and Europe by using selected case studies. Organized by Francine Giese (University of Zurich), Leïla el-Wakil (University of Geneva) and Ariane Varela Braga (University of Zurich), the workshop additionally benefited from the collaboration of several institutional partners: the University of Zurich, the University of Geneva, the Swiss Society for the Middle East and Islamic Cultures, ICOMOS Suisse, and the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (SAGW). Following the organisers’ opening remarks, the workshop kicked off with some Switzerland-related examples from the Canton of Ticino and the city of Geneva. First, Maria D’Alessandro (Bern) debated the role the Fossati brothers Gaspare (1809-1883) and Giuseppe (1822-1896) played in the diffusion of Orientalising architectural styles in that region. David Ripoll (*Inventaire des monuments d’art et d’histoire du canton de Genève*) then analysed the problematic reception of this architecture in Geneva. He furthermore discussed how Orientalising monuments were ‘de-Orientalised’ during the first half of the 20th century, as well as aspects related to the conservation of these testimonies of local architectural heritage. The subsequent paper by Richard Buser (Baden) drew attention to the German-speaking part of Switzerland and more contemporary times by addressing a debate of the 1980s on the preservation of the neo-Moorish Malaga winery in Lenzburg, in the Aargau Canton. After this contribution, the workshop concentrated on European examples outside of Switzerland. Silke Kreibich (Berlin) presented the special case of an Orientalising room in Schloss Branitz and its historic transformations, followed by a broad examination of Orientalising architectures in France by Nabila Oulebsir (University of Poitiers). The workshop concluded with a keynote lecture by Amra Hadžimuhamedović (International University of Sarajevo), who addressed some issues regarding the designation, destruction and conservation of Orientalising architecture in Bosnia

by examining the case of Sarajevo's former City Hall.

Several contributions pointed out the many losses and mutilations the discussed monuments had suffered in several European countries during the 20th century. That this issue still bears relevance even today and not only in a historical perspective can be illustrated by the exemplary case of the villa-castle of Sammezzano (figs. 1-2). Situated some 40 km south of Florence, Tuscany, Sammezzano is one of the most important and largest Orientalising architectures in Europe. The structure has a long history, dating back to the Middle Age, for it is said that it had hosted Charlemagne (742-814) in 780, during his return from Rome. Documents further attest that Ferdinando I de Medici (1549-1609), the Grand Duke of Tuscany, had sold the property to Odoardo Ximenes d'Aragona (1500-?) at the end of the sixteenth century, who belonged to a family of Iberian origin that had translocated to Tuscany before. Yet it was not before the nineteenth century that the Orientalising palace of Sammezzano was created, thanks to the eccentric person of the Marquis Ferdinando Panciatichi Ximenes d'Aragona (1813-1897), who was responsible for the complete renovation of the building, beginning in the late 1840s. In fact, Sammezzano can be regarded as his life-long masterpiece, as the works continuously progressed until the end of his life and even beyond, thanks to his daughter Marianna Panciatichi Ximenes Paulucci (1835-1919), who supervised their completion. Combining architectural and ornamental inspirations from a vast repertoire of Islamic sources, including the Alhambra of Granada, the Alcazar of Seville, the Taj Mahal, Persians and Cairene models, Panciatichi created an enchanting architecture with only few international equivalents. Its singularity and almost magical appearance has not passed by unnoticed: Fashion designers and cinema directors from all over the world have used the location as set for their productions, with recent examples including the movie *Il racconto dei racconti* (*Tale of Tales*, 2015) by Matteo Garrone and an advertisement for Thierry Mugler's perfume *Alien*.

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Figure 1
Regello, Villa of Sammezzano, exterior view (Ferdinando Panciatichi Ximenes d'Aragone, 1840s-1910s). © Bildarchiv Foto Marburg / Rabatti & Domingie Photography.



2

Yet in spite of its exceptionality and relevance for the history of the reception of Islamic art and of Orientalising architecture in 19th-century Italy, and even though it is enlisted in the Italian Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscapes (*Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio*), the villa of Sammezzano is at the risk of disappearing. After serving as a luxury hotel for many years in the late 20th century, it came into possession of an international holding that did not survive the financial crisis of the early 2000s. In a country with such a vast cultural and artistic heritage, the Italian government did not regard the preservation of 19th-century architecture as a priority task, which is why Sammezzano has not been granted governmental protection. This lack of action by officials is contrasted by a strong public interest. In 2012, a local committee called the ‘FPXA

Figure 2
Regello, Villa of Sammezzano, view of the White Hall (Ferdinando Panciaticchi Ximenes d’Aragone, 1860s). © Bildarchiv Foto Marburg / Rabatti & Domingie Photography.

Comitato' (10 marzo 1813-2013 – Comitato per I duecento anni dalla nascita del Marchese Ferdinando Ximenes d'Aragona/March 10, 1813-2013 – Committee for the Two-Hundredth Birthday of Marquis Ferdinando Ximenes d'Aragona), dedicated to the preservation of the palace, had its first constitutive meeting. Thanks to its efforts, it was possible to organize a conference on the building, followed by a publication that helped raise awareness on the historical significance of this forgotten heritage. A few years later, in 2015, the movement "Save Sammezzano" came into being, which has promoted the protection of the monument ever since, by setting up numerous initiatives on local, national and international level, including a restoration campaign and approaches for making the building accessible to the general public. A great success was that in 2017 the villa of Sammezzano was enlisted in the FAI (*Fondo per l'ambiente italiano*), Italy's equivalent to the National Trust, as one of its most endangered monuments. In a cooperation with the Italian Touring Club, Sammezzano was also included to *Europa Nostra's* list of the "Seven Most Endangered" European cultural sites, where it ranked among the twelve finalists. The same year, the FAI selected the building as the "Monument of the Heart", an award based on a popular vote and connected to a prize money of 54.000 euros reserved for its restoration. However, this money could not be used due to legal difficulties: after several unsuccessful auctions, Sammezzano remains without an official owner, which is why the initiative "Save Sammezzano" has taken legal action, in the hope that this magnificent example of Orientalising architecture will finally receive the attention it deserves from local and national authorities.

The contribution delivered in Zurich underlines that cases like Sammezzano are not unique and that the preservation of Orientalising architecture, which often involve relevant issues of self-representation and identity, is linked to many cultural, economic and political problems whose solutions require negotiations on the level of local communities. It is to be hoped that initiatives like the ones promoted in the workshop at the University of Zurich may not only contribute to academic debates but also help to broaden the awareness of the importance of monuments from the cultural heritage of the last two centuries that are neglected too often.

Ariane Varela Braga is SNF Assistant and post-doc researcher at the University of Zürich, working in the project Mudejarismo and Moorish Revival in Europe. She has studied at the Universities of Geneva and Neuchâtel (PhD, 2013). She has been a Lecturer in art history at John Cabot University in Rome and is a former member of the Swiss Institute in Rome. Research fields: theory of ornament and decorative arts, Orientalism and reception of extra-European art.