The most debated question in relation to the restoration of historic monuments is about reconstruction. There is a long list of doubts: Are we allowed at all to reconstruct a destroyed monument or part of it? To what extent? Should the reconstructed part be just like the original was? If no, then what should it be like? If we reconstruct, can the end result be regarded as a monument? If not, then what is it? All this has been closely connected to the question of authenticity, especially since UNESCO made it one of the cornerstones of declaring that something is part of the World Heritage.

It would be banal to claim at this forum that statutes of monument restoration in the form of the Venice Charter have existed since 1964. Indeed, the Charter provides reliable guidelines for restorers about restorations and conservations. This document has almost become a classic, it sets an example because - amongst many other things - it does not contain dogmatic, rigid rules. Instead, it offers an opportunity for the expert to analyse and review the situation. Every monument is different, and each should be treated differently - this is what the Venice Charter suggests.

However, when it comes to reconstruction, we look for the same flexibility in vain. “All reconstruction work should… be ruled out ‘a priori’” – states the Charter. It is striking, though, that this can be found under Article 15., which describes excavations. The sentence quoted continues: “…and only anastylosis can potentially be permitted.” From this, many conclude that Piero Gazzola and his colleagues were this strict only in the case of ruins, not other reconstructions, for example the re-construction of buildings. Others who are against the Venice Charter or who demand its revision argue that this is exactly why the Charter is out of date and does not hold for our time.

Being a person who knew Gazzola and had the opportunity to speak to him, I think that the categorical statement made by this Charter does not only refer to ruins but is universal. We know that the Charter was drawn up by its authors at the congress in Venice during one night, which -alongside its splendour- can be clearly seen. This work that included improvisation, too, could result in the fact that a principle so important in restoration was put into a less significant place instead of being hightlit as a separate chapter or article at least. If this is so, then we can accept my previous statement, which says the Venice Charter was against any reconstruction in general.

Having said all this, I partially contradict myself at once. It is well known that the congress in Venice in 1964 decided to set up ICOMOS, but officially it was only founded in the following year, in Poland, at the first congress held in Cracow and Warsaw. Yes, Warsaw, the city where people armed themselves twice to heroically fight Nazi occupation and which, after this, had been systematically destroyed, vandalized. And again the Warsaw, which was restored by its inhabitants by reconstructing the old town. There is no doubt that with the congress in Venice deciding to hold the first congress in Poland, ICOMOS expressed its great admiration for heroism in the face of fascism, and also for the Varsovians’ decision not to let the history of their capital and their own past perish, as for them, national identity and the declaration that their will to live is stronger than fascism comes first. Strictly in terms of a monument protection language, the reconstruction of the old town in Warsaw could not prevent ICOMOS from holding part of its first statutory meeting there.

I have also personal experience about Piero Gazzola – and I do not mention him by chance, as primarily, he was the author of the Venice Charter - never rigidly insisted on ruling out reconstruction in the case of destruction by war. I participated at a conference organised by the Soviet ICOMOS committee in Leningrad in 1969. It was a memorable occasion for me because that was the time of my debut in ICOMOS. We were taken on visits to famous palaces near the city. It is well known that the war seriously damaged these buildings, too, and they were being restored at the time. We could see some rooms in ruins and others that had already been restored. Reconstructed, that is. As a result of excellent and painstaking work, they were just like before the war, which was proven by large photographs. These also showed the condition they were in after the destruction, before restoration. I witnessed a conversation between Gazzola and a well-known Hungarian monuments expert, who seriously condemned the reconstruction. Gazolla listened for a while then politely interrupted and assured him he agreed with what could be seen.

I think we need to be less strict about objecting against reconstruction in the case of destruction by war. There are probably a lot of restorations where pre-war were reconstructed. The Germans in retreat in World War II blew up every bridge in my country, Budapest was no exception. These bridges were restored to their original state, that is, they were reconstructed. I do not think there is any expert in the field who would have objected to this. Probably the same