

**A PRESERVATION CHARTER  
FOR THE  
HISTORIC TOWNS AND AREAS  
OF THE  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**



**COMMITTEE ON HISTORIC TOWNS  
US/ICOMOS**

**FREDERICKSBURG, VIRGINIA, USA  
14 MARCH 1992**

Since the 1960s both the national and international preservation movements have stressed the importance of writing down the principles and practices of preservation. This began in the United States with the regulations that support the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation Projects, based on the international Venice Charter of 1964. These documents were amplified in the following decades by such detailed conference reports as the National Trust's "Preservation: Toward an Ethic in the 1980s" and "A Vision for America: An Agenda for the Future", which came out of a 1986 conference at Mary Washington College. The practice of formalization has continued most recently with the National Trust's 1990 Charleston Principles; the 1992 New Orleans Charter for the Joint Preservation of Historic Structures and Artifacts, which was sponsored by the Association for Preservation Technology and the American Institute of Conservation; and the 1987 ICOMOS Historic Towns Charter, which is the basis for the United States version of the charter published here.

The 1987 ICOMOS Charter, which set forth preservation principles recognized as applicable throughout the civilized world, was adapted in 1992 by the US/ICOMOS Committee on Historic Towns to suit the specific nature of local government in the United States. It sets forth a comprehensive statement about the importance of historic towns, neighborhoods, and places and states what must be done by communities in the United States that wish to tackle their preservation problems in a coherent, comprehensive way.

## **PREAMBLE**

US/ICOMOS believes that the Washington Charter (the common name for the ICOMOS Charter on the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas [1987]), with some changes in language that make it more understandable to a United States audience of preservationists and public officials, will fill very well the need for a comprehensive, coherent statement of American preservation philosophy.

The Washington Charter was the result of twelve years of work and study by international specialists in various aspects of the ICOMOS General Assembly in Washington, D.C. The terms of the Charter are intentionally broad and recognize that when viewed from an international perspective, there are many approaches to the planning and protection of historic urban areas. The Charter recognizes this diversity. That the document had its origins in, and original application to, the more ancient cities of Europe does not diminish its potential usefulness or importance for application to the cities and historic areas of the United States of America, since the principles it espouses have been generally recognized as valid throughout the United States professional preservation community for many years.

What follows immediately below is a new version of this Charter, developed specifically for use in the United States of America. The full title of the new document is A Preservation Charter for the Historic Towns and Areas of the United States of America. The document may be cited by the short title, A Preservation Charter for the United States of America.

## A PRESERVATION CHARTER FOR THE HISTORIC TOWNS AND AREAS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

### FOUR BASIC OBJECTIVES

The basic objectives of the preservation of historic towns and historic areas in the United States of America are:

1. The preservation of historic towns and historic districts or areas must be an integral part of every community's comprehensive planning process. All planning efforts-- plans for land use, economic development, housing, public utilities and facilities, transportation, recreation, housing and social services, open space, and urban design -- must incorporate historic preservation goals if they are to serve the needs of local inhabitants. This is also true of national, state, and regional planning efforts having a direct effect on local areas.
2. The significant features of a historic town or district include all of the physical and intangible or spiritual elements that go to make up its character. These elements include five special attributes:
  - a. The historic development patterns of the place, as these have emerged over time.
  - b. The special relationships between the buildings of the town or district, and its surrounding streetscape and landscape.
  - c. The physical attributes of the inside and outside of the buildings themselves. These include not only the main facade of a building, but its construction features, proportions, and interior spaces. The major characteristics of an individual building to be preserved include its scale, materials, construction features, size, style, and ornamentation.
  - d. The unique relationship between the historic town or district and its larger surrounding area, whether the surrounding area is urban or rural.
  - e. The various functions that the historic district or neighborhood have acquired over time. These functions give it an overall ambience that along with other intangible elements combine to create or define its special character.
3. Any threat to any of these qualities compromises the authenticity of a historic town or district and is to be avoided absolutely, whether as a matter of public policy, private investment, or both.
4. Property owners and residents are central to the process of protection and must have every opportunity to become democratically and actively involved in decisions affecting each historic town or district. Special attention must be given to basic human needs, which include affordable housing, personal safety and security, access to public services, and political participation as part of the overall historic preservation planning process. Historic towns and districts are of primary importance for those who live and work in them. This consideration must not be overlooked in preservation programs.
5. Historic preservation efforts in historic towns or districts must reflect a comprehensive and consistent set of standards and policies, adopted as consistent regulatory, investment, and operating policies by the local governing board. While these should follow generally accepted guidelines for professional practice, they must also be specially responsive to the particular needs or priorities of individual communities and their assets and their inhabitants. They must also be sufficiently flexible to meet the special needs of unusual or unique cultural resources and populations.

## A PRESERVATION CHARTER FOR THE HISTORIC TOWNS AND AREAS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

### EIGHTEEN BASIC PRINCIPLES

A local preservation program must be based on the following measures:

1. Successful and realistic planning for the preservation of a historic town or district must be preceded by appropriate studies of the place itself. Typically these studies will include United States history and culture, architectural and landscape history, prehistory, and related fields. These studies establish the historic contexts of the place and insure that future public and private investment will be based on knowledge and reason rather than emotion. A well-conceived preservation plan must also address the future of the area. Such a plan must be based on appropriate economic, demographic, and land-use studies and projections.
2. The principal objectives of the preservation plan should be clearly stated in both verbal and graphic form, as should the legal, administrative, and financial measures needed to carry them out.
3. The preservation plan should aim to create and maintain a harmonious relationship between the historic area and its setting in the larger town, city, or region.
4. The preservation plan should determine which buildings, groups of buildings, sites and landscapes must be preserved, recognizing that what is worthy of preservation is an evolving concept.
5. Before any changes, including restoration, preservation, adaptive use, and/or conservation are made to individual structures or their settings, existing conditions must be thoroughly documented.
6. The current residents of the historic area should be actively and continuously involved in the planning process. They should have access to all necessary information. Their reactions and comments to all public and private proposals for the area should be actively sought.
7. Until a preservation plan has been adopted, and as an interim measure, any necessary preservation work should be carried out in accordance with the objectives and principles outlined here. Such work should also be in conformity with the Venice Charter and other relevant ICOMOS and UNESCO recommendations and charters.
8. Local, state, and national governments must recognize that the continuing maintenance of both public and private property and the economic well-being of the inhabitants are essential to the effective preservation of any historic place.
9. New functions and activities proposed to take place within the historic town or district should be compatible with the overall character of the place. When historic places and buildings are adapted for contemporary use, it is essential that the design, installation, and maintenance of supporting public utilities and facilities be sensitive to the special character of the place.
10. The improvement of housing, the retention of affordable housing, and the avoidance of wholesale displacement of existing residents should be among the basis policy objectives of a preservation plan.
11. When it is necessary to construct new buildings or to adapt existing ones, the existing scale and spatial structure of the place must be respected, as well as the relationship of each building or place to its larger setting. The introduction of appropriate contemporary design, in harmony with its surroundings, should not be discouraged. Such contemporary additions, when appropriately designed, enrich and enliven a historic area and provide as well a measure of cultural continuity.

## A PRESERVATION CHARTER FOR THE HISTORIC TOWNS AND AREAS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

12. When appropriate, knowledge of the history of a given area should be expanded through continuing programs of archaeological investigation, and through the presentation and preservation of archaeological findings and artifacts.
13. Traffic and transportation inside a historic area must be controlled and must respect the historic environment. It is essential that parking areas be designed in ways that do not cause aesthetic or functional damage to any historic structure, group of buildings, sites, landscapes, or the general environment.
14. When major roads and transit systems are planned or built, they must not penetrate or divide a historic area, but should improve access to it. Transportation and utility corridors and other public works within the historic area must be designed and constructed to cause the least possible damage to historic structures, groups, sites, or landscapes or to the setting of the whole area.
15. To maintain both the physical heritage and the security and well-being of residents, historic areas should be protected insofar as possible against natural disasters, pollution, nuisances, and other harmful intrusions. Whether in laying plans for the protection of a historic area from disaster or in its aftermath, preventive and repair measures must be adapted to the specific character of the area and its component parts.
16. In order to encourage residents to participate in preservation activities and to enhance the local climate for preservation, continuing general information and educational programs should be established. This effort must begin with heritage education programs for children of school age. Specialized training should be provided for all those professions actively involved with preservation, as well as for public officials, volunteers, and volunteer organizations.
17. The creation and support of appropriate preservation organizations should be encouraged.
18. An appropriate variety of preservation-related financial incentives should be identified. Their development should be encouraged by governments, private businesses, and individuals.

*The members of the US/ICOMOS Committee on Historic Towns are: \*John N. Pearce, Chairman, 1991-present; \*Robert E. Stipe, Chairman, 1989-1991; \*Gustavo Araoz; \*Ellen Beasley; \*Rachel Belsky; Richard Bierce AIA; Elliott Carroll, FAIA; \*William R. Chapman; \*François-Auguste de Montequin; \*Stephen Dennis, Esq.; Hiroshi Daifuku; \*Mary Dierickx; Carl Feiss, FAIA, AICP; \*Elizabeth E. Fischer; \*Ronald Lee Fleming; \*John M. Fowler; James A. Glass; \*Eric Hertfelder; \*Carter L. Hudgins; Jo Ramsay Leimenstoll, AIA; \*Bruce M. Kriviskey, AIA, AICP; Weiming Lu, Hon. AIA; M. Hamilton Morton, Jr., AIA; \*Terry B. Morton, Hon. AIA; Phyllis Myers; Sally G. Oldham; \*Katherine Wentworth Rinne; \*Brian Schmuecker, AIA; \*Ann Webster Smith; Stuart Stein; \*Catherine Wilson-Martin.*

*The names of members at the time of adoption of the charter are marked with an asterisk. The charter was adopted by the Historic Towns Committee on March 14, 1992, in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and by the US/ICOMOS Board of Trustees on May 11, 1992, in Washington, D.C.*

Converted from HTML (13 January 1996 version) on 18 November 2013.