
International Trends in Historic Preservation: From Ancient Monuments to Living Cultures

JUKKA JOKILEHTO

Since World War II, the policies, techniques, and science of the modern conservation movement have evolved in an international context, increasingly involving all sectors of society.

Introduction

Modern interest in the preservation of cultural heritage is indebted to certain key developments in the so-called Western culture, characterized by the relativity of values — rather than absolute values as in the traditional society — and the introduction of the modern concept of historicity as related to specific cultures. Since the two world wars, the modern conservation movement has touched practically all regions of the world, as shown by the success of the 1972 UNESCO *Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. At the same time, there has been a significant evolution in policies and practices, the degree of involvement of the society at large, a concern for the environment, an awareness of the limits of growth, and a consciousness of the need for sustainable management of resources. The establishment of UNESCO and ICOM at the end of World War II, ICCROM in 1956, and ICOMOS in 1965 have promoted international collaboration and policy guidelines applicable to different cultural and physical realities.

The Venice Charter

The Venice Charter, written in 1964, focused on current conservation concepts and attempted to correct recurrent mistakes in restoration practice. Due to the sheer number of historic properties damaged during World War II, decisions concerning restoration had not always been based on full understanding of their character. In fact, the main message of the charter was the development of a critical approach to conservative restoration of historic properties. A strict

distinction was made between what was historically true and genuine and what was modern addition or replica; therefore the plea for authenticity. In practice, the charter has been interpreted in different ways; an extreme example of distinguishing historic fragments is seen in the case of Old Buda in Hungary. Generally, emphasis was laid on the maintenance and care of existing original structures, and reconstructions were to be strictly limited to those that could be done using mainly original elements (anastylosis).

The priority given to the conservation of original material resulted in a new vigor given to the development of scientific tools for the survey and analysis of historic structures and materials, as well as the utilization of the possibilities of modern technology in their conservation, consolidation, and reinforcement. Such development was particularly marked in the 1970s and 1980s, coinciding with general trends in industrial production that brought advantages, as well as problems. The massive increase in the production of chemicals presented an opportunity for their use in conservation, but, at the same time, industrial production came to replace traditional crafts; this was particularly evident in countries like East Germany, where the lack of traditional building materials caused serious problems.

Development of Tourism

The Venice Charter was more relevant to monuments than to sites in a broader sense, but attention was given to historic urban areas, which had suffered first from war and then from demolition due to the rapid growth of business, administration and commerce. Smaller town-

ships and rural centers tended to remain isolated and were often abandoned. In some cases such areas could be “restored” for purposes of tourism and commercial activities. In fact, between the 1960s and the 1980s, tourism became a major source of income to many countries, particularly in the Mediterranean. In some countries, including Malaysia and Sri Lanka, conservation authorities have been able to channel tourism funds to benefit heritage sites. At the same time, tourism has too often gone out of control, as in many popular tourist areas in the Mediterranean. More recently, in countries like Greece and Italy, the introduction of small-scale rehabilitation schemes in traditional villages has allowed an additional income to rural populations and, if kept under control, a structured support to the maintenance and use of traditional settlements.

Living Cultures

International conferences have taken place at an increasing rate since the mid-1960s. Through such conferences and meetings of technicians and professionals the conservation movement gained worldwide attention. At the same time, the great variety of heritage conservation problems represented by different cultural regions became part of the global dialogue. In addition to historic monuments, which had been the main conservation focus, increasing concern was given to traditional habitat, the built environment as such, and what came to be defined as cultural landscape. Not surprisingly, the Burra Charter of 1981 coined the term “place” to indicate cultural heritage in the Australian context, where traditional values and non-physical aspects were given more importance than physical monuments.

The growing awareness of the need to safeguard cultural heritage has been confirmed by increasing membership in international organizations such as UNESCO and ICCROM, in the ratification of the World Heritage Convention (now with over 150 states parties), as well as by the great number of professional and grassroots associations, such as APT, ICOMOS, and DOCOMOMO.

Particularly in the 1990s, this worldwide interest in safeguarding heritage has challenged the interpretation of international documents, including the Venice Charter itself.

The Nara Document on authenticity (1994) expanded the Venice Charter and gave major attention to cultural diversity and cultural specificity. More than ever, heritage-conservation policies were seen in their cultural context; at the same time, emphasis was given to the credibility and truthfulness of related information sources and thus to authenticity.

The Nara Document was an indication of the general trend toward broadening the concept of heritage resources. The 1976 UNESCO recommendation stated that every historic area and its surroundings be considered as a coherent whole, but it also recognized relevant human activities, however modest. This emphasis on community marked the evolution of conservation policies from a static approach into a dynamic policy of safeguarding human activities and regenerating relevant values, i.e., sustainable human development.

Change in Conservation Policy

The aim of the Venice Charter to preserve authentic testimonies of age-old traditions certainly remains valid; yet, attention to cultural traditions as living heritage has since enlarged the scene. Consequently, the question is not just of preservation but also of continuation and change. It may be simplistic to define conservation purely as management of change; actions need to be related to what is being conserved or preserved, how this is best done, and why. It is not enough to preserve physical structures in historic urban or rural areas. It is also necessary to recognize that such areas need to evolve to keep their cultural identity. Any change, nevertheless, needs to be gradual. The identification of the limits of change and what should be preserved are problems that have involved conservationists in the planning process; at the same time, planning itself has changed, taking into account environmentally sustainable development.

While many cities may still be struggling with the preparation of their first

urban master plans, the idea of a conventional, static master plan is being superseded by the introduction of a dynamic planning process, capable of taking into account ever more rapid changes in society. The process means a new definition of the roles of the public authority versus the private sector. Partly due to the broader definition of heritage, partly due to privatization of many functions that had been the responsibility of the public sector, conservation and management of historic areas and properties have increasingly become a shared field. This has included new forms of financing and the need of public authorities to justify expenditures—which tend to be more limited. Similarly, there is a need to develop legislation and reformulate administrative procedures in order to meet the challenges in the new relationship between the public and private sectors.

Such social and political changes may have been initiated in North America and Western Europe, but since 1989 several other regions have been forced into the same process, including the former socialist countries of central and eastern Europe. Administrators who used to decide what and how to restore now have to negotiate with private-property owners. In fact, governments are increasingly becoming consultants or advisors rather than sole protagonists. This change is fundamental, and appropriate tools and policies still need to be developed for all partners. Likewise, intergovernmental organizations are in the process of redefining their mandates in relation to all sectors of society.

Conservation as a Profession

Different terminology can cause confusion; e.g., speaking of a conservator or restorer has different connotations in France and in England. The title of conservator-restorer seems to have emerged as a synthesis and a compromise. At the same time, efforts have been made to officially recognize conservation as a profession and to encourage public authorities to utilize properly trained, qualified professionals, especially for important conservation-restoration projects, as is the case in

Italy and in France.

A key question in the past three decades has been the development of training and education. At the end of World War II the urgent need was to train specialists to deal with damaged heritage landscapes. From a few avant-garde training programs (in France, Italy, Denmark, United Kingdom, Turkey, U.S.A.) in existence or established soon after the war, the number has increased substantially, reaching several hundred in the 1990s. At the same time most specialized training programs are still concentrated in Europe (57%) and North America (25%), with some courses in Latin-American (9%) and Asian countries (8%), while Africa (2%) has very few. The percentages are based on the ICCROM database of 1994, and although there have been some new training programs in Africa, the overall relationship remains the same. ICCROM, with the support of UNESCO, has trained some three thousand professionals from over a hundred countries, who have since become key protagonists in national undertakings and in the international scene.

A fundamental component in the training and preparation of professionals and technicians for safeguarding historic structures should certainly be a critical approach that takes into account different aspects and values. In recent decades the greatest attention has been given to science and technology, while the cultural dimension of heritage has been ignored. Many restoration schools offer little in the way of conservation theory and principles and avoid a systematic treatment of the subject that includes values assessment and the significance of a site or object. Discussions of authenticity seem to have helped to raise the issue anew, and one can hope that the questions related to heritage values will be integrated properly into the conservation debate in the future.

Conclusion

Conservation of cultural heritage remains a cultural problem, not only for experts but for all communities. It is encouraging that the importance of sensitizing communities at the grassroots

level is gradually being recognized locally and internationally. It is essential to define the roles and responsibilities of the different protagonists and to establish communication. The future demands clarification of the relationship between the policies of sustainable management of resources and the objectives of conservation of cultural heritage — particularly when dealing with urban and rural settlements and landscapes. The present concern for cultural diversity and living traditions is more than justified, but it should not divert from the need to continue protecting physical heritage, including ancient monuments, works of art, and significant historic buildings and to hand them on to future generations “in the full richness of their authenticity,” as urged by the Venice Charter.

JUKKA JOKILEHTO, PH.D. (York, U.K.), architect (Helsinki), has worked for over 25 years at ICCROM and is responsible for train-

ing, technical cooperation, and policy development in the conservation of historic buildings and urban areas.

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