From Warsaw to Mostar: The World Heritage Committee and Authenticity

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How authentic are reconstructed heritage sites reborn out of the ashes of war?

The Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, known as the World Heritage Convention, is perhaps the most widely recognized and effective international conservation instrument, mobilizing a global effort to protect the shared heritage of humanity. Since its adoption in 1972, this UNESCO international treaty has encouraged intercultural dialogue on heritage matters and brought about unprecedented levels of international co-operation. The 21-member World Heritage Committee, which makes decisions about listing and conservation matters, is elected from representatives of the now-185 countries that have ratified the treaty. The committee receives professional and technical advice from international advisory bodies, including the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). This article documents how the World Heritage Committee has defined and applied the concept of authenticity to the evaluation and inscription of two reconstructed European sites.

Inscription of a site on the World Heritage List requires that a property satisfy one or more of 10 criteria as well as other qualifying conditions, including authenticity for cultural sites. Between 1978, when the nomination of the historic city center of Warsaw, Poland, was first considered, and 2005, when the Old Bridge Area of Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, was listed, the committee's approach to authenticity has evolved. The committee itself has changed over this same period, moving from an initial composition of professionals and experts to having a strong diplomatic component. This paper follows the debates within the committee as its membership has expanded and become truly global.

Concept of Authenticity

The word authenticity is not found in the 1972 convention. Rather, it appears in the first version of the committee's main procedural document, known as the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (1977). It is important to note that these guidelines are adjusted periodically by the committee in response to evolving perceptions of heritage and other needs.

In the first version of the Operational Guidelines (1977), authenticity is one of the qualities a cultural property must have in order to qualify as a World Heritage Site. The so-called "test of authenticity" defines the concept as

Fig. 1. Reconstruction of the historic center of Warsaw. Photograph by Murat Ayranci, courtesy of Superstock.
“authenticity in design, materials, workmanship and setting; authenticity does not limit consideration to original form and structure, but includes all subsequent modifications and additions, over the course of time, which in themselves possess artistic or historical values.” In other words, authenticity refers to the truthfulness of a cultural place and is defined through physical attributes found in various historical layers.

The World Heritage Committee was immediately challenged by the proposed nomination of the historic center of Warsaw submitted by Poland in 1978. This site was essentially a reconstruction, since approximately 85 percent of the historic center had been destroyed during World War II (Fig. 1). Each committee meeting is preceded by a preparatory Bureau of the Committee, an executive group elected from its membership. Just before the first bureau meeting in June 1978, ICOMOS cautioned that “there is a question as to whether the Historic Centre of Warsaw meets the general rule of authenticity, and it is accordingly believed that further expert opinion is required on this nomination.” At the bureau meeting itself, ICOMOS stated that the Warsaw proposal “needed further expert study to see if it met the criterion of authenticity.”

A year later, at the second bureau meeting in May 1979, ICOMOS took a clear position, recommending inscription on the list because “the documentation is excellent and the centre of Warsaw is an exceptional example of reconstruction ... [and] has been made into a symbol by the patriotic feeling of the Polish people.” But bureau members were not so sure. “Opinion was divided in the Bureau, since the site did not meet the criteria of authenticity, and the Bureau deferred its decision so that the questions raised in this respect could be thoroughly studied.” The third bureau session, held in Egypt in October 1979, recommended deferral.

At that same meeting the third bureau examined general policy documents of exceptional importance to the future implementation of the World Heritage Convention. These came from two working groups (nature and culture) set up to propose amendments to the criteria and guidelines for the evaluation of nominations. The committee even at this early date was concerned about consistency and credibility of the World Heritage List, insisting that the overriding consideration be the threshold of outstanding universal value. Policies on inventories, typologies, comparative analysis, and transboundary nominations, still in effect today, originated in these reports.

The cultural-heritage report, entitled “A Comparative Study of Nominations and Criteria for World Cultural Heritage,” was prepared by Michel Parent, inspecteur general des monuments historiques in France and Rapporteur for the 1979 committee meeting. Faced with a flood of proposed nominations for cultural properties, he saw his report as the basis for committee discussion and fundamental choices about the future implementation of the World Heritage Convention. “Its purpose was to identify the dilemmas which face us today — today, while the weight of precedent is not too heavy to be overturned, forcing us into irremediable anomalies,” he wrote.

With regard to heritage policy, Michel Parent could draw on the Athens Charter (1931) and the Venice Charter (1964). The Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments focuses on tangible elements and respect for existing materials, calling for minimal intervention in the built fabric to prevent a “loss of character and historical values to the structures” and for the reburial of archaeological resources. It does not use the word authenticity, nor does it offer much guidance in cases of wholesale urban reconstruction. The International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, known as the Venice Charter, uses the word authenticity in the preamble, pointing to the duty to conserve historic monuments “in the full richness of their authenticity.” Like the Athens Charter, it generally focuses on the preservation of existing fabric and specifically rules out reconstruction work for archaeological sites, while remaining silent on the question of large urban reconstruction.

In his advice on authenticity, Parent began by noting that “the Committee having laid down that authenticity is a sine qua non, at first sight the WHList should not include a town or part of a town which has been entirely destroyed and reconstructed, whatever the quality of the reconstruction.” He then wondered whether Warsaw “could nevertheless be placed on the List because of the exceptional historical circumstances surrounding its resurrection.” Parent remarks that “authenticity is relative and depends on the nature of the property involved,” illustrating his argument with examples of wooden Japanese temples and European stained-glass windows. He noted that a situation can arise where a restoration, however well done, consists of a reconstruction of a property that has in fact completely disappeared, as is the case with Warsaw. While acknowledging the Venice Charter’s emphasis on historical fabric, Parent referred to the dilemma of Warsaw and asked the question, can “a systematic 20th century reconstruction be justified for inclusion on grounds, not of Art but of History?” Parent’s line of argument, suggesting inscription on associative values alone, implies the use of criterion (vi). This criterion, according to the guidelines in effect at that time, required that the property “be most importantly associated with ideas or beliefs, with events or with persons, of outstanding historical importance or significance.”

The committee’s response to the Parent report shows its reluctance to proceed with the inscription of sites on the basis of associative value alone. It began by affirming that “the authenticity of a cultural property remains an essential criterion.” It then pondered the pitfalls of using criterion (vi) alone: Particular attention should be given to cases which fall under criterion (vi) so that the net result would not be a reduction in the value of the List, due to the large potential number of nominations as well as to political difficulties. Nominations concerning, in particular, historical events or famous people could be strongly influenced by nationalism or other particularisms in contradiction with the objectives of the World Heritage Convention.

The following year, at the fourth bureau, in May 1980, ICOMOS repeated its positive advice on Warsaw. Calling it an exceptional example of a global reconstruction, ICOMOS stated that Warsaw “illustrates, in an exemplary fashion, the efficiency of the restoration techniques of the second half of the 20th century” and advised that “its
authenticity is associated with this unique realization of the years 1945 to 1966.17 The fourth bureau accepted this advice and recommended its inscription “as a symbol of the exceptionally successful and identical reconstruction of a cultural property which is associated with events of considerable historical significance.” That the bureau was concerned with setting an inappropriate precedent is evident from the next sentence, which reads, “There can be no question of inscribing in the future other cultural properties that have been reconstructed.”18 The committee accepted the bureau’s recommendation and inscribed the property on the World Heritage List without comment.19

Despite that decision, the committee clearly did not want to deal with a rash of reconstructions. They therefore tightened up their brand-new guidelines, in part as a result of the Warsaw decision. In the 1980 revision of the Operational Guidelines they directed that criterion (vi) should be used only in exceptional circumstances or in conjunction with other criteria. As to the definition of authenticity, the concept of layering over time was dropped and a new proviso added, echoing article nine of the Venice Charter, “that reconstruction is only acceptable if it is carried out on the basis of complete and detailed documentation on the original and to no extent on conjecture.”20 One might observe that, from a professional perspective, this condition is technically impossible to meet.

Evolution of the Concept of Authenticity

The definition of authenticity remained unchanged in the Operational Guidelines from 1980 until 1994. During that period the committee applied the term inconsistently, as documented by French archaeologist Léon Pressouyre, who presented the ICOMOS evaluations for most of that time.21 For the 1983 nomination of Rila Monastery, Bulgaria, the committee disregarded ICOMOS’s recommendation that the inscription be deferred because the property was nearly entirely reconstructed and “does not answer the criterion of authenticity.” Instead the committee inscribed Rila “not ... as a testimony of mediaeval civilisation but rather as a symbol of the 19th Century Bulgarian Renaissance which imparted slavic cultural values upon Rila in trying to re-establish an uninterrupted historical continuity.”22

In contrast the 1985 French proposal to inscribe the historic city of Carcassonne was deferred on the grounds that the ramparts had “undergone important modifications in the 19th century which impinge upon the authenticity of the site.”23 Yet in 1988 the medieval city of Rhodes was accepted, despite a negative evaluation from ICOMOS on the “pseudo-mediaeval monuments” and “grandiose pastiches ... devoid of archaeological rigor” that had been reconstructed in the first half of the twentieth century.24 In 1990 the proposed nomination of Dresden’s reconstructed historic center was not recommended by the bureau and was withdrawn at the committee meeting by the German Democratic Republic.25

In 1994 the Operational Guidelines were modified following the committee discussion on the definition and eligibility of cultural landscapes. The 1994 text required properties to “meet the test of authenticity in design, material, workmanship, or setting and in the case of cultural landscapes their distinctive character and components” (italics added for emphasis). The existing proviso concerning reconstruction was retained: “the Committee stressed that reconstruction is only acceptable if it is carried out on the basis of complete and detailed documentation on the original and to no extent on conjecture.”26

While ideas about the limitations of a materials-bound approach to authenticity were circulating among experts, the formal debate began in Norway and culminated in an expert meeting in Nara, Japan, in November 1994, with the preparation of the Nara Document on Authenticity.27 This document proposes a doctrinal shift towards a greater recognition of regional and cultural diversity, as well as of the associative values of heritage sites. The World Heritage Committee was slow to react, despite the fact that it had encouraged the debate among experts. In the years that followed, World Heritage Committee records reveal a schism between those who continued to support a materials-based approach rooted in the Venice Charter and those who promoted a vision of authenticity as more intangible, relative, and culturally diverse.

As sponsors of the conference, ICOMOS and the Japanese government worked hard to place the Nara Document on the agenda of the World Heritage Committee. A month after Nara the Japanese delegate obtained committee support to study modifications that could be made to the Operational Guidelines to take into account the conclusions of the Nara meeting.28 Two years later the committee was still discussing what to do, suggesting that the Nara Document could be annexed to the nomination form as explanatory notes.29 Once again the delegate of Japan asked that a document be prepared for discussion at the 1997 committee meeting “on how the principles of the Nara Document could be applied in the implementation of the World Heritage Convention.”30

The 1997 committee debate on authenticity was sparked by the renomination and inscription of the fortified city of Carcassonne. Having been deferred in 1985 on the question of authenticity, Carcassonne was inscribed in 1997 in recognition of its medieval fortifications, as well as for its “exceptional importance by virtue of the restoration work carried out in the second half of the 19th century by Viollet-le-Duc, which had a profound influence on subsequent developments in conservation principles and practice.”31 Concerns were raised by the Greek delegate and others on the implications of the Nara approach to conservation. These delegations spoke to “the validity of the principles contained in the Venice Charter of 1964, in particular on authenticity which presently serves as a reference text for all heritage specialists.” Following debate the committee adopted a resolution asking ICOMOS to reexamine the approach to authenticity in light of the “differentiated cultural approach” of Nara.32

At the 1998 committee session the Japanese chairman, Ambassador Kōichiro Matsuura, opened the meeting by emphasizing the importance of understanding authenticity and pointing out regional differences, saying, “The question of authenticity for cultural heritage is very important. The challenge
lies in finding a balance between ‘a culture of stone,’ which is easier to transmit to future generations, with ‘a culture of wood,’ which requires restoration for its conservation.” The Greek delegation expressed concern, arguing that no ancient monument is absolutely authentic, given alterations over time, and that the current ambiguity in the use of the word authenticity could have negative impacts on proper conservation policy. The Australian delegation, reporting on the Amsterdam expert meeting of 1998, “stressed the need for more rigour to deter over-restoration” and “the need to understand the link between authenticity and cultural value ... in geo-cultural contexts.”

It was only in 1999 that the committee formally endorsed the Nara Document on Authenticity. ICOMOS, having long held the view that such a formal adoption was necessary, informed the committee that the ICOMOS 1999 General Assembly had approved the Nara Document as an official doctrinal text. ICOMOS emphasized its important features, including the acknowledgment of different regional contexts, cultural diversity, and the spiritual aspects of heritage. The committee referred the Nara Document to the experts working on the revision of the Operational Guidelines.

In 2003 the committee held an extraordinary session to resolve any outstanding policy issues, in order to finalize the revision of the Operational Guidelines. A proposal to include the Nara Document as an annex was discussed briefly and approved, with recommendations to add references to the Nara preparatory meetings and a bibliography. These changes appeared in the 2005 Operational Guidelines, including a revised list of attributes for authenticity: form, substance, use, function, traditions, techniques, management systems, location, language, forms of intangible heritage, spirit, feeling, and other factors. These revisions indicate a shift towards a greater recognition of intangible values as part of a property’s authenticity.

The 2003 policy session also approved new wording for the text on reconstructions. The drafting group proposed adding a sentence to the existing text stating that reconstruction is acceptable only on the basis of complete documentation and to no extent on conjecture. The additional text, stating that reconstruction “is justifiable only in exceptional circumstances,” might be understood as encouraging the committee to look more favorably on such properties.

Old Bridge Area of Mostar

As a measure of these policy changes, it is illuminating to follow the discussion at the 2005 committee during the inscription of the Old Bridge Area of the Old City of Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This was the first session to use the revised Operational Guidelines (2005). Mostar had been heavily impacted by the 1990s war, which destroyed its celebrated bridge and inflicted severe damage on the historic center, with its pre-Ottoman, eastern-Ottoman, Mediterranean, and western-European architectural features. The property had previously been deferred by the committee in 1999, 2000, and 2003, due to lack of clarity about boundaries, management, and criteria. In its 2003 evaluation ICOMOS expressed doubts about the quality of the reconstruction work at Mostar and also recalled the 1980 committee directive that the listing of reconstructed Warsaw was not to be taken as a precedent. The committee deferred the proposal to allow completion of the reconstruction work, redefinition of significance using relevant criteria, and clarification of the boundaries.

In 2005 the revised proposal for the Bridge Area of Mostar had significantly reduced boundaries and contained many reconstructed buildings, including the medieval bridge, which was rebuilt through the efforts of an international team of experts under the auspices of UNESCO and the World Bank. Debate focused on two intertwined issues — authenticity and appropriate criteria.

In its written evaluation ICOMOS attempted to balance the committee’s policy on reconstruction with the new attributes of authenticity. On the one hand, ICOMOS had “considerable reservations about the authenticity of Mostar. Much of the urban fabric was destroyed in 1992–1995, and has been
the subject of major reconstruction activity or is still under reconstruction … The proportion of reconstructed buildings is very high, and much new material has also been used.44 On the other hand, ICOMOS recognized that the attributes of authenticity had changed, advising that, in light of the changes in Operational Guidelines (2005) the result of a test of authenticity is rather more positive. Looking as an example at the reconstruction of the Old Bridge, this is based on in-depth and detailed, multi-faceted analyses, relying on high quality documentation, and almost every required condition has been fulfilled. The authenticity of form, use of authentic materials and techniques are fully recognizable. The result is not a kind of invented or manipulated presentation of an architectural feature which never before existed in that form, rather the reconstructed bridge has a kind of truthfulness, even though in strictly material terms a considerable portion is not of identical or original pieces.45

ICOMOS went on to propose the idea of an overall authenticity with strong intangible dimensions. “Evaluating this reconstruction on a larger scale, namely as a key element of urban and natural landscape there is no doubt of a special kind of ‘overall’ authenticity… this reconstruction of fabric should be seen as being in the background compared with restoration of the intangible dimensions of this property, which are certainly the main issue concerning the Outstanding Universal Value of this site.”46

The committee was divided on the question of authenticity. While certain delegations believed that the exceptional quality of the reconstruction complied with policy, the delegate of St. Lucia expressed doubts about the site’s overall authenticity following her review of the nomination files. While acknowledging the scientific reconstruction of the bridge, which had been the focus of the ICOMOS evaluation, the delegate stated that the rest of the site had been inappropriately rebuilt without reference to historical documentation.47 It is noteworthy that an independent external evaluation supports St. Lucia’s point, contrasting the high quality of the bridge reconstruction with the less successful, ad hoc development of the surrounding area which “does not complement the completed bridge” (Figs. 2 and 3).45

ICOMOS had argued in favor of using criterion (iv) because the methods and material used in the reconstruction had been thoroughly researched and that research had been applied. Criterion (iv) requires the property to “be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.”48 Some committee members supported this argument, in particular the Leb nese delegate, who insisted that using criterion (iv) would effectively recognize the quality of the reconstruction work by those architects, historians, and archaeologists involved in the project. The United Kingdom disagreed on the grounds that the bridge and buildings were replicas dating from 2003–2004 and hence not historical.49

ICOMOS had also recommended the use of criterion (vi) on the grounds that the Mostar site is principally “a place of memory, in the same manner as the Historic Centre of Warsaw.”50 In 2005 criterion (vi) required a property to “be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.”51 Various delegations spoke to the value of the bridge as a symbol of hope and reconciliation among different cultural groups. In the end the site was listed under criterion (vi) alone. The inscription citation underlines its intangible values:

With the “renaissance” of the Old Bridge and its surroundings, the symbolic power and meaning of the City of Mostar — as an exceptional and universal symbol of coexistence of communities from diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds — has been reinforced and strengthened, underlining the unlimited efforts of human solidarity for peace and powerful cooperation in the face of overwhelming catastrophes.52

Conclusion

From 1978 to 2005, the period spanning the nominations of Warsaw and Mostar, the World Heritage Committee modified its policy stance on reconstructions and their authenticity. This change reflects a tendency in the international heritage field to place greater emphasis on associative and intangible values. This new perspective was explored in the expert meetings leading up to the Nara Conference and enshrined in the Nara Document on Authenticity. It took the World Heritage Committee more than a decade to debate the implications of Nara and to integrate these ideas into its Operational Guidelines. Further evidence of a shift towards associative values may be found in the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, where cultural practices are of prime importance, secondarily supported by the physical cultural spaces they inhabit.53

For professionals trained in the conservation disciplines, this evolution, along with the current emphasis on values-based management of historic places, raises questions about what priority to place on conserving existing fabric. Is meticulous conservation necessary, or are reconstructions acceptable, sometimes or in all circumstances? Should these two examples of Warsaw and Mostar be considered as special cases, given the deliberate destruction of cultural resources through war and the deep-seated desire to resurrect identity? What does this mean for the practice of conservation and preservation technology? Does this give a blank check for reconstruction? At this time, one could argue that the question remains open.

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Notes

1. In 1978 there were 40 countries that had joined the World Heritage Convention; in 2005 there were 180 countries.


6. Ibid.


10. Ibid., 26.


16. Ibid.


20. Ibid., 8.


30. Ibid., 13, para. VII.12.


32. Ibid., 49-50, para. VIII.11.


34. Ibid., Annex VIII.

35. Ibid., 32, para. IX.8.


42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.


48. Ibid.

