CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN CONSERVATION:
CULTURALIZATION, SIGNIFICANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Honório Nicholls Pereira∗

Abstract
The aim of this paper is to analyze contemporary trends in the field of theory of conservation, with a special focus on urban conservation.

The Cultural Turn of the 60’s and the Communicative Turn of the 80’s led conservation professionals into a new conceptual framework. The theoretical debate has been dislocated from the aesthetic-historic to the anthropological-cultural axis, resulting in new proposals to the conservation practice. The most notable change is the inflection on the concept of heritage, which moved from the narrow “historic and artistic” to the broad “cultural” concept. Meanwhile, long established notions were relativized as the focus of conservation changed from the material to the so-called immaterial or intangible aspects of heritage.

The paper discusses the role and relevance of international charters while analyzes three aspects of the above mentioned inflection: Culturalization, Significance and Sustainability; and their possible effects on urban conservation.

The culturalization of heritage is analyzed through the changes brought to the categories of conservation objects, value operators, legal instruments, practical procedures, materiality and authority.

The paper also ponders the possibilities and conflicts that emerged from the adoption of cultural significance as a central concept in conservation, including its possibilities to be used in the measurement of impacts; in monitoring tasks during conservation planning and management; and as a helping tool in negotiation and decision-making processes. The changing role of conservators and the professional trends for the future are also discussed.

Finally, the notion of cultural sustainability is mentioned as an ethical parameter for conservation, while the middle path and the benefit of doubt are proposed as principles to avoid the lacks and excesses that conservation practice could lead to.

Key words: Urban Conservation, Significance, Cultural Sustainability.

1. Foreword
The aim of this paper is to analyze contemporary trends in the field of theory of conservation, with a special focus on urban conservation. The paper discusses the path followed by some important concepts in conservation as mentioned in international charters,
assuming a prospective bias and trying to establish trends for further development in theory and practice of conservation.

Referring to the issues to be discussed in the 5th International Seminar on Urban Conservation, the international charters are still relevant to the theory and practice of conservation in the strict sense that they consolidate the “state of the art”: they convey, at a given time and for a given group of professionals/institutions, the main questions, doubts and conflicts that emerge on conservation practice, while providing answers to emergent issues. However, the professionals/institutions behind conservation charters tend to consider their conclusions as guidelines for future practice. The crystallization of concepts in the charters produces a boomerang effect in the theory and practice of conservation, pervading prospective approaches.

Institutions and professionals tend to refer to the charters in official documents, reports and projects as to follow their recommendations, instead of having them as paradigms to be discussed and criticized. In a certain way, this diminishes the pace of change in theory and practice. International conservation charters should be understood as documents that summarize past and present contributions, bringing to light aspects that may have not been previously questioned and providing suggestions for future practice and theoretical thinking. They should not, however, be considered documents to be blindly followed.

It is indeed helpful to follow the changes in attitudes, procedures and paradigms towards conservation, in the last seventy five years, having the charters as guidelines.

In order to illustrate the above statement, the paper will follow the changes in key concepts, as to understand what may be called, as proposed in the title, contemporary trends in conservation. The initial question is: how have the categories of conservation objects, value operators, conservation instruments and procedures changed throughout time in the conservation charters?

2. Culturalization

The Cultural Turn of the 60’s and the Communicative Turn of the 80’s led conservation professionals into a new conceptual framework. The theoretical debate has been dislocated from the aesthetic-historic to the anthropological-cultural axis, resulting in new proposals for the conservation practice. The most notable change is the inflection on the concept of heritage, which has moved from the narrow “historic and artistic” to the broad “cultural” concept. Meanwhile, conservation concepts have been culturalized and relativized; and the focus of conservation has changed from the material to the so-called immaterial or intangible aspects of heritage.

In addition to the broadening in heritage concepts, the scientific models and procedures long established by philosophy and history – predominant in the field of human sciences – were gradually replaced by those of anthropology, so that a new set of concepts entered the conservation feuds and became popular with conservation professionals – concepts such as significance, meanings, language, diversity, collective memory and identities.

The growing and disturbing postmodern trend of museification and musealization, together with the explosion of cultural tourism, also generated inputs to the field of conservation, which incorporated notions as strategic management, interpretation and preventive and informational conservation.
Reactions against the cultural massification and standardization imposed by the globalization process led to the (re)valorization of regional or local aspects of culture and heritage. Economical interests and ideological aspects involving heritage protection were brought to the battlefront of conservation and conflicts among stakeholders have risen. Apart from the understanding that the conservation of cultural heritage is a universal issue (or, at least, an issue shared by the great majority of individuals, institutions, societies and nations), everything else in the field of conservation became a vehicle for the expression of conflicts and change. And “change” itself came to be understood as a part of the richness of heritage, something as important to understand as original intent (Bluestone, 2000).

It took us, conservation professionals, quite a long time to realize that cultural heritage is indeed “cultural” – a medium in which identities, power and society are continuously produced and reproduced. Heritage tends to be considered, nowadays, a fluid process with highly politicized and social issues, instead of a static and idealistic set of objects with fixed meanings. Contemporary contributors are coming to the conclusion that cultural heritage “should not hide behind its traditional matters of faith” (Avrami et alii, 2000). Thus, value operators related to materiality and truth, such as authenticity and integrity, are losing ground.

2.1 Broadening in the category of conservation objects

The category of conservation objects has dramatically changed since Athens Charter 1931, becoming more diverse and inclusive. Starting with the concepts of historic, artistic and archaeological monuments, the category expanded to include sites and surroundings; groups of buildings; movable heritage and collections; urban or rural settings and settlements; historic villages and their surroundings; underwater findings; historic towns and gardens; natural and man-made settings; whole urban or natural areas; and so forth, until achieving the concepts of cultural landscape, urban environmental structures and intangible heritage. Throughout this paper, conservation objects and cultural heritage are considered synonyms.

Diversification of values and operators

Following the broadening in the category of conservation objects, the values related to conservation became more complex and dynamic. Starting with historic and artistic, the category expanded to include cultural, social, economic, spiritual, sentimental and symbolic values, among others.

Value operators followed the move, including, at first, terms as character, style, originality, authenticity and integrity, referring mainly to material aspects of conservation and passing from common-sense to culturalized, rather elaborated meanings (as in Nara Conference 1994). The category of value operators expanded continuously to include aspects of significance, diversity, identity and memory (as in Charter of Krakow 2000). The change and expansion of value operators has followed, so far, the change of focus from material to immaterial or intangible aspects of heritage.

---

1 The Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments was adopted at the First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments in Athens, 1931.
2.2 Inclusivity of legal instruments, flexibility of practical procedures

Conservation instruments and procedures, throughout time, have also changed from strict legislative aspects with highly intervening approaches to general legislative aspects with more flexible intervening approaches. The general move has been from restoration, reintegration and anastylosis to maintenance, repair, preventive and informational conservation (less intervening); from restoration to reuse, renovation and revitalization (more flexible); from assessment and documentation through inventories and diagnosis to monitoring, controlling and integrated informational systems (more intensive and inclusive); from isolated protection acts to integrated conservation, urban and territorial planning (more inclusive and dynamic).

2.3 Relativization of materiality

The relativization of materiality is a contemporary trend that transfers importance from material to immaterial aspects of heritage. A clear example of this trend is the move from the concept of monuments to the concept of places. In practice, conservation professionals, nowadays, tend to prefer indirect to direct interventions; preventive conservation to restoration; informational to material conservation; and so forth. This relativization, however, does not simply mean that materiality has lost importance, but that other material aspects (that reflect immaterial issues) have emerged – such as traditional techniques, know-how and production rites.

Throughout time, the concepts of substance and materiality became less relevant to the theory of conservation, as new approaches changed their focus to the preservation of meanings and significance. The relativization of materiality represents an important aspect on recent developments in cultural heritage. It leads to the substitution of the binomial “materiality and truth” for “significance and communication” (Viñas, 2000). When conservation attempts to preserve meanings rather than materiality, the notion of truth tends to be replaced by efficiency in communication. As a consequence, established value operators such as authenticity and integrity lose ground.

There is a classical relation between materiality, authenticity and truth in the theory of conservation. The origin of this relation could be found in antique traditions, in the belief that power (natural, supernatural or symbolic) emanates from the matter (substance). The preservation of relics illustrates the manifestation of this belief.

The importance given to materiality has been relativized throughout history of conservation, to a point in which Cesare Brandi could state that matter is to be preserved as long as it is the vehicle for the manifestation of image (Brandi, 2004). At that point, matter was understood as a duality (in terms of aspect and structure) and the alteration of the non-figurative part (structure) was admitted, as to preserve the figurativity (aspect). This exemplifies the contemporary relativization of materiality, since the interest is moving towards the preservation of image and meanings.

---

4 Pierre Nora proposes the concept of places of memory (lieux de mémoire) as the places which reestablish symbolic connections with the past. Being human, memories would be in permanent evolution, open to the dialectics of remembrance and forgetting (...), vulnerable to every use and manipulation, susceptible to long latencies and revitalizations. (Nora, 1984).
Professionals from specific fields such as wooden or earthen architecture obviously react to this trend, stressing the importance of preserving material evidence in their professional contexts.\(^5\)

**Authenticity** was first mentioned (but not defined) in Venice Charter 1964\(^6\), having the common-sense, usual meaning of “genuine” or “known to be true”. Herb Stovel referred to the employment of the term authenticity in Venice Charter 1964 in the following terms:

> The word is introduced without fanfare, without any sense of the debates that will swirl around its use and meaning in the conservation world (…) the concept invited little attention or debate at the time because most of those involved in writing the Charter shared similar backgrounds and therefore broad assumptions about the nature of appropriate response to conservation problems (Stovel, 1994).

Authenticity, in the context of Venice Charter 1964, was mostly thought to be applicable to materials, substance or physical evidence, as observed by Barry Rowney:

> The Venice Charter, having made reference to [the preservation of] authenticity in the preamble, no doubt expected that the following sixteen articles would achieve this objective. But given the few references to other than material factors, the means of achieving this authenticity must have been understood to be realized solely through the retention of original fabric (Rowney, 2004).

Object of inflamed discussions in Nara Conference 1994 and afterwards, authenticity has recently been defined as a qualifier for the attribution of values, sometimes as “an issue of the truthfulness of a particular source of information” that could be “referred to several attributes of the heritage resource” as “the creative process, the documentary evidence, and the social context” (Jokilehto, 2006); as the “ability of a property to convey its significance over time” (Stovel, 2007); and also as “the sum of substantial, historically ascertained characteristics; from the original up to the current state, as an outcome of the various transformations that have occurred over time” (Charter of Krakow, 2000).

**Integrity**, in Venice Charter 1964, was used in the usual meaning of “wholeness”, “soundness” or “completeness”; and also expressed a qualification of the material aspects of heritage. Most recently, integrity has been used referring to “the identification of the functional and historical condition of the site” (Jokilehto, 2006) or “the ability of a property to secure or sustain its significance over time” (Stovel, 2007).

Apart from the evolving meanings, it is important to stress that the notions of authenticity and integrity are especially relevant to the idealistic approaches to conservation, as Cesare Brandi’s *Teoría del Restauro*, Venice Charter 1964 and Charter of Krakow 2000, for they elect the purpose of conservation to be “preserving and revealing the aesthetic and historic value of the monument”.

Contemporary objections to idealism consider that authenticity and integrity are not universal operators, nor should be sought in the conservation objects as “true” or “natural” characteristics, but rather as meanings or characteristics given by people involved with conservation – the social agents responsible for the assessment and interpretation of these objects over time. Thus, authenticity, integrity and even originality should not be prevalent over other value operators, since all of them are relative and changeable.

---

\(^5\) As stated in the Principles for the preservation of historic timber structures, adopted by ICOMOS in the 12th General Assembly in Mexico, 1999.

In addition to that, a recent tautological argument against the truthfulness of heritage sustains that believing in the existence of an object’s true nature leads to the assumption that a state of falsehood could exist, but in practice objects do not exist in a state of falsehood nor can have a false nature. If they really exist, they are inherently real. (...) Conservation may change an object to a different, preferred or desired state, but even then it will not be more real than before (Viñas, 2000).

According to that argument, the only possible state or nature of a conservation object is the current; other states – such as the original, the integer or the authentic – are constructions based on research, choice or taste. The role of authenticity and integrity would therefore be fictional or ideological, since the authentic state is, in fact, the preferred or expected state.

2.4 Authority crisis

Traditional conservation approaches stress the value of the connoisseur or specialist opinion in detriment of non-specialists’ opinion. Conservation practice involves not only technical and scientific matters, but social and subjective ones such as interests, feelings, memories, preferences and even taste (Viñas, 2000). As a consequence, contemporary approaches on conservation stress the importance of negotiation and democratic participation on decision-making processes, as to define what should be conserved and how, why and whom the conservation is made for. The threats and issues derived from the relativization of the specialist’s authority became, of course, a major issue in the field of conservation.

3. Significance

Conservation objects – tangible or intangible; mobile or immobile; a monument, a city or a cultural landscape – they produce complex webs of meanings and their symbolic strength contributes to their recognition as relevant cultural properties. Contemporary approaches to conservation consider that cultural heritage is preserved not because of the values, functions or meanings they had in the past, but for the messages and symbolism they communicate in the present time and for the future generations (Viñas, 2000).

Contemporary conservation does not intend to target the objects themselves but, through their meanings, the individuals and groups for whom those objects are relevant: “The ultimate aim of conservation is not to conserve material for its own sake but, rather, to maintain (and shape) the values embodied by the heritage” (Avrami et alli, 2000).

Cultural significance is now considered a central concept in conservation. The term is being used in the sense of “multiple values ascribed to cultural heritage”, as in Burra Charter,7 which defines cultural significance as the “aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value for past, present or future generations”, aiming to be used in the estimation of values that “help an understanding of the past or enrich the present, and which will be of value to future generations”. According to Burra Charter, the estimation of values is to be made through assessment, recording and publication of a statement of cultural significance.

The first issue here is that the values – the immaterial counterpart of heritage – are dynamic and, therefore, it is of little use to assess or state them only once. To guarantee the

preservation of the immaterial aspects of heritage, cultural significance ought to be monitored throughout time. How to monitor cultural significance and its multiple values?

The question leads to the second issue, which is: the mere process of protecting and safeguarding introduces changes into the material and immaterial aspects of heritage. As pointed by David Lowenthal, in the process of “heritage fabrication”, the heritage is never merely conserved or protected, but modified – enhanced or degraded – by every new generation (Lowenthal, 1998; 2000). The situation gets more complicated when it comes to urban conservation, as the economical and social impacts of “listing” start to affect the elected areas shortly after a protection act becomes valid. Impacts are perceived mainly through the economic valorization; the implementation of cultural tourism; the real estate pressures to change physical characteristics, use and occupation; and the consequent gentrification processes. How to prevent or mitigate the negative impacts of conservation?

Significance, as shown above, is continuously changing and cultural heritage tends to be understood as a “medium for the ever-evolving values of social groups (...) as well as individuals” (Avrami et al., 2000). Therefore, the assessment of cultural significance cannot be a purely academic construction but, rather, an issue to be constructed by stakeholders – professionals, academics, economic agents, representatives and community members for whom a certain cultural property is relevant.

When it comes to urban conservation, decisions are to be made collectively; that is, their reliability depend on the implementation of negotiation processes and also on the consideration of ethical, social, economical, political and social needs. As a consequence, new conservation approaches tend to transfer part of the conservation responsibility to the agents directly and indirectly involved in the conservation process.

When conservation practice gets to this point, some questions emerge:

- In negotiation and decision-making processes, if conflicts rise among stakeholders, which interests and opinions (as what, why and how to conserve) should prevail and which should not?
- In the case of conflicts between values (e.g. economic and use against artistic and symbolic values), how to decide which should prevail in each case?

4. Cultural Sustainability

Recent theoretical contributions have experimented with the concept of sustainability as to provide answers to the previously mentioned issues.

The concept of sustainability has been used by economic-driven approaches in the field of conservation and mentioned in recent charters as Vantaa Meeting 20008 and Charter of Krakow 2000. Using the economic-ecologic metaphor, conservation objects are understood as finite resources to be wisely used, while (p)reserved for future appreciation, utilization and modification. The criticized issue here is that the economic-driven approaches, when it comes to urban conservation, can only guarantee success in the cases in which economic feedback or profit is guaranteed – thus privileging a priori the economic value of heritage.

Adapting the notion of sustainability, contemporary contributors are now experimenting with the notion of cultural sustainability, which is the sustainability of meanings and significance. Cultural sustainability directly reflects on the objectives of

---

conservation, which turns to be: to use for present needs and to transmit the maximum of significance for the future generations. As summarized by Sarah Staniforth:

One of the keys to the future, and not just for conservation, is sustainability. The Brundtland definition of sustainable development, which is ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’, is reflected in the aim of the conservation of cultural heritage, which is to pass on maximum significance to future generations (Staniforth, 2000).

The principle of cultural sustainability imposes that the present generation may use and adapt the cultural properties only to the point in which future generations will not be harmed in their capacity of understanding and living their multiple meanings and values. This conceptual arrangement provides a long term purpose for conservation, avoiding the excesses that negotiation and current interests could lead to, as they only take present users’ needs into consideration.

In this framework, it is suggested that conservation professionals and managers should assume, in the negotiation processes, the responsibility of being the spokespersons for the future generations (Viñas, 2000). If this exceptional task turns out to be a guideline, then the conservators’ role will become immense and will depend on a complexity of abilities and knowledge which are far beyond our present capacities.

Managers and conservators should then prepare for being capable of understanding the needs and feelings of present-day societies; pondering their expectations and needs; and acting as to prevent future generations from being harmed in their capacity of using and understanding the cultural legacy.

Again, more issues emerge:

• How to guarantee that negotiation for present use will not harm future generations’ capacity of living cultural heritage in its full significance, since significance and values are in a flux of perpetual change?

• How should conservators/managers know what, how and why future generations will valorize in cultural heritage?

The expectation of future users’ needs and values is always a prospective exercise and represents, in a certain sense, an inversion of expectations. As a matter of fact, we tend to project our own needs and values into others and into the future.

Recent discussions on these issues are appealing to conservation professionals. The neo-ruskinian trend of “pure conservation”, for instance, tries to provide an answer to the above mentioned questions, accepting only strict and preventive conservation approaches, thus reducing present usage possibilities in respect for future users’ needs.

On the other hand, adepts of the “creative approach” defend the idea that future users’ needs and values are, by all means, out of reach; and that only present users’ needs should be taken into consideration. This trend sustains that it is not possible to predict how the present procedures towards conservation will be received and perceived in the future; and that it is not possible to predict if a particular procedure will provide, in the future, more or less significance than in the present. This posture ends up reinforcing creative, flexible and more relaxed attitudes towards conservation.

“Pure conservation” and “creative approach” are certainly radical attitudes. To most conservation professionals, however, a moderate attitude may sound more realistic. In this
case, the middle path would take into consideration the benefit of doubt: to avoid all the procedures that might reduce significance and represent a risk for future generations; and to accept only the procedures that certainly add or at least keep significance (such as improvements in accessibility and in risk reduction systems).

Although it has not been completely developed, the principle of cultural sustainability introduces responsible and acceptable limits to conservation in a time of changes and doubts, when concepts and paradigms become relative and restrictions to the conservation activity tend to vanish away.

5. Conclusions

The international charters are still relevant to the theory and practice of conservation as they consolidate, at a given time and for a given group of professionals and institutions, the main questions, doubts and conflicts that came into the field of conservation, while providing temporary answers to emergent questions. International charters are useful, at least, as historic documents that summarize past and present contributions. However, their conclusions should not be considered as guidelines for future practice, but paradigms to be discussed and criticized.

This article considered three relevant aspects of the current discussions in theory and practice of conservation: culturalization, significance and sustainability; and their possible effects on urban conservation.

The culturalization of heritage resulted in the broadening in the category of conservation objects; in the use of more complex and dynamic value operators; in the preference for more flexible and inclusive conservation instruments and procedures; in the relativization of materiality; in the oblivion of value operators like authenticity and integrity and the rise of the concepts of significance and communication; and finally, in the relativization of the specialist’s authority and the consequent reinforcement of negotiation in decision-making processes.

Cultural significance is now accepted as a central concept in conservation and it ought to be monitored over time as to guarantee the preservation of its multiple values. Impacts on the values – and not only on the objects themselves – should be measured, monitored and controlled. Conservation planners and managers should seek for impact indicators applicable to every single stated value (not only to economic value), thus guaranteeing the preservation and improvement of significance throughout time. The possibility to refer to such objective indicators may help solving conflicts during negotiation and decision-making processes.

Cultural sustainability is being experimented as a conceptual substitute for economic-ecologic sustainability so that conservation objectives turned to be: to use the cultural resources for present needs and to transmit the maximum of significance for the future generations. This conceptual arrangement provides a long term purpose for conservation, avoiding the excesses that negotiation and present interests could lead to. Managers and conservators may assume, in this context, the responsibility to be spokespersons for the future generations.

The expectation of future users’ needs and values is always a prospective exercise and represents, in a certain sense, an inversion of expectations. As a matter of fact, we tend to project our needs and values into others and into the future.
To avoid excessive or lacking attitudes towards heritage conservation, professionals should use the middle path and the benefit of doubt: to avoid procedures which might reduce significance; and to accept procedures which certainly add (or at least keep) significance for future generations.

Although it has not been completely developed, the principle of cultural sustainability introduces responsible and acceptable limits to conservation, as the practice becomes more complex, social agents more demanding, economic issues more challenging, concepts and paradigms become more flexible and restrictions to the conservation activity tend to vanish away.

References
Stovel, Herb. 2007. Effective use of authenticity and integrity as World Heritage qualifying conditions. City & Time. v. 2, n. 3. (www.ct.ceci-br.org)

