

INTERNATIONAL CHARTERS ON CONSERVATION: THE LOST C(L)AUSES

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Abstract

One can find all kinds of concerns in the international recommendations on urban conservation. Perhaps nearly all social, economic, and broader cultural issues that arise in practice have been covered here or there once one looks at the vast wealth of various international documents. However, as we can see from the broader practice, these elements of the charters are often disregarded. The article looks at a variety of such concerns beyond conservation, exploring possible reasons for the lost causes and clauses, among other - in the papers submitted to the 5th International seminar on urban conservation, practice theme. Who is then the target audience of these recommendations? Are they understandable and compelling to this target audience? Are they based on sound experience of development practice? What are the reasons that the recommendations often do not reach the real life? No doubt there are successes that have become milestones in development of conservation thought and practice, but are people in charge of development aware of these recommendations, do they understand them and agree with them, i.e. how widely are they known and used in practice? What are the failures to reach the practice, and why do they happen? The paper suggests action to improve the situation.

Keywords: Urban conservation, international recommendations, conservation practice.

In many cases of urban development conservation loses to destruction. We lose buildings and urban patterns witnessing history of our development and anchoring our identity, we forsake trees planted by our forefathers; we disperse communities that have grown in and with the built and natural environment. We exhaust feeling and atmosphere, destroy way of life, we discard images, sounds, smells, and tastes. We also gain something: commodity, convenience, hygiene and profitability. Part of this loss is an inevitable consequence of development; sometimes it is driven by rebirth that builds on the notion of continuity, and retains multiple references to historic identity of the place. This part-loss is therefore constructive. Another part of this loss is rude and meaningless; it is caused by ignorance¹ and greed and results in disruption of continuity

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¹ By ignorance I define not just disregard of identity but also the shallow, formal, sectoral, compartmentalised approach to heritage, as resulting fake conservation is no more than a posthumous

and deformation of identity. This part-loss is therefore destructive. When the latter dominates the former, the cause of continuous development, retaining essential qualities of identity and developing it is lost.

One can find such kinds of concerns in the international recommendations and charters on urban conservation. These recommendations usually concern conservation, its importance and the means to enable its success. With a view to paving the way to successful conservation, many social, governance, economic, and broader cultural issues have all been covered here or there once one looks at the vast wealth of various international documents. Some of these documents provide great insights into value of heritage, and suggest appealing approaches. However, practice of urban development shows that elements of the charters that ground conservation approaches into a wider scope of concerns are commonly disregarded when action is taken. Rereading the Declaration of Amsterdam once in a while, and looking at the reality of development, I ask myself the ubiquitous question - why all these brilliant ideas have not been universally implemented in 32 years? Why, how, and where have we lost these clauses?

I would like to look at the reasons for the lost causes of continuous, responsible development, and try to establish whether these lost causes are related to "lost clauses" of the international charters, declarations and other recommendations on urban conservation.

Now that we are all certain that the charters are good and useful, let us look at some of the reasons why they might have failed, in some instances, to bring about the desired impact.

1. The charters are almost universally written from perspective of conservation, not that of responsible development. The issues transcending conservation often get lost in conservationist rhetoric. Therefore they only interest conservationists.

Ebony tower - one may think of urban conservation perspective as presented by the international documents. They speak of "historical, social and economic components", essentially assuming architecture to be the carrier of "historical" as if social and economic development had no history. They grant "public consultation" but never a direct democracy, naïvely assuming that "Economic aspects of urban development should be bound to the goals of long-term heritage preservation (Vienna Memorandum, 2005)." Yet some believe that "...efforts to ensure that attributed values are respected, and that their determination included efforts to build, as far as possible, a multidisciplinary and community consensus concerning these values (The Nara Document on Authenticity, 1994)."

People's involvement is always an instrument, and almost never a goal: "The participation and the involvement of the residents are essential for the success of the conservation program and should be encouraged. The conservation of historic towns and urban areas concerns their residents first of all (Washington Charter, 1987)."

makeup. Such approach often ruins more than development does: the former does not respect the essentials, just the historic shapes, whilst the latter may develop the shape and retain multiple tangible and intangible manifestations of the spirit.

Eleven years later in Stockholm this becomes a right, but does it lead to freedom of opinion or just to a possibly hypocritical abuse of public support: “The right to better understand one's heritage and that of others [i.e. understand through specialists’ eyes]; The right to wise and appropriate use of heritage [i.e. to use it as specialists decide]; The right to participate in decisions affecting heritage and the cultural values it embodies [i.e. to support decisions made by specialists]; The right to form associations for the protection and promotion of cultural heritage (The Stockholm Declaration, 1998). [i.e. to support the cause of specialists].”

One may say that I am speculating or exaggerating. Perhaps, but one may also ask why are the people and their importance always mentioned as a lip-service, assuming their participation only as long as they agree with the declared goals of conservation? Are we not entitled to a second opinion? Are the conservation specialists always right? Why is there no recommendation suggesting “People’s heritage is theirs alone, and they have an inalienable right to decide what to do with it, despite the views of the conservationists”, rather than “The conservation plan should be supported by the residents of the historic area (Washington Charter, 1987)”?

The view of a conservation practitioner is often characterized by seeing the world and people surrounding him as a threat: “they may suffer from a lack of economic activity leading to the emigration of their populations to larger centers and the resultant abandonment and decay; even when the population is numerically stable, there may still be a tendency, due to traffic and other inconveniences, for the inhabitants, to move to modern quarters on the fringes of the town, leading to dereliction of the historic town centre; on the other hand, too much economic activity may cause disruption of the old structure and the insertion of new elements which upset the harmony of the urban environment (ICOMOS, 1975).” While this is perhaps true, you see the implied attitude that there world must tick as we, conservation gurus, need and decide: not too much, not too little. Among the papers selected for inclusion in the proceedings of this seminar we shall be looking at how prospective use of the retail business influences objectives of conservation of São Jose historical site here in Recife.

Such attitude scares decision makers and investors away from the whole thing. Any sane minister or mayor, when confronted with conservation (and expenditure) vs. new development (and tax revenue), culture (and expenditure) vs. business (increase of tax revenue) and job creation (decrease of public expenditure and increase of tax revenue), will seldom opt for the first – unless there is a significant pressure from the community (significant enough in numbers to cost votes). To break this spell, one needs to stop confronting conservation to development, and to work together with, not against new development, helping channel it into continuous and responsible development instead of attempting to hinder the change.

We know that “The expanding notion of cultural heritage in particular over the last decade, which includes a broader interpretation leading to recognition of human coexistence with the land and human beings in society, requires new approaches to and methodologies for urban conservation and development in a territorial context. The international charters and recommendations have not yet fully integrated this evolution (Vienna Memorandum, 2005).” Yet we will not share with the others. Who do we invite

to author and discuss this Memorandum? Jack Welch? Norman Foster? Paul Allen? Edward De Bono?

Other stakeholders, such as local residents and businesses, have also grown wiser. They often view the conservation specialists with suspicion of being manipulated. At the same time, some smart cookies have figured out how to abuse public participation, and lobby for narrow group interests as if on behalf of the whole community.

Multi-disciplinary approaches work in practice. We will hear about the experience born in Sweden, how multi-problem orientation helped tackle things in Halland region in Sweden, “organized so that specific meanings and needs were prioritized – of cultural and local identity, cultural history, employment, training needs and the overall importance of sustainable development (Gustafsson C., Rosvall J.,2007)”

2. These documents sound manifesto-like, moralizing and always oblige the others, not the signatories, to do something. They are dry and pretend to be ethical, scientific and political. Life, art and culture are not present in those documents. Some of these documents are written responding to an ambition to resolve a problem, and containing valuable insights and ideas, but they are littered with legalistic references and placed in isolationist contexts, hence hardly producing a significant impact on reality. They speak about values, laws, institutions, but omit will, passion, admiration and experience.

We will hear in this seminar about Baku. In Baku, one resident who migrated out of the Walled City, accounted: “I moved because earlier everyone had their door open, I could go to my neighbors for a cup of tea and they would come to me. Then all these new neighbors that replaced the old ones locked their armored doors, and they would not talk to me. I could afford to stay, but what for?” The life, as this man lives it, is gone from the place, World Heritage, or not.

We learn in the documents that “it is fundamental to guarantee an urban environmental quality of living to contribute to the economic success of a city and to its social and cultural vitality (Ibidem)”, and that “Every historic area and its surroundings should be considered in their totality as a coherent whole whose balance and specific nature depend on the fusion of the parts of which it is composed and which include human activities as much as the buildings, the spatial organization and the surroundings. All valid elements, including human activities, however modest, thus have a significance in relation to the whole which must not be disregarded (UNESCO, 1976)” but never get an idea how to achieve it beyond vague formulae such as “special emphasis is to be placed on the contextualization of contemporary architecture in the historic urban landscape and Cultural or Visual Impact Assessment studies should accompany proposals for contemporary interventions (Vienna Memorandum, 2005).”

While authorities contextualize and assess impacts, living communities disperse. Looking back at Rio’s Cultural Corridor, one contributor to this seminar reflects, that the factors of success were: “(i) political will of the City Hall; (ii) social actor’s synergy; (iii) strong collaboration of the media; (iv) exemption from urban and territorial taxes (Lima, 2007)”. Do we find references to these factors in the charters?

We read that "Qualities to be preserved include the historic character of the town or urban area and all those material and spiritual elements that express this character, especially: a) urban patterns as defined by lots and streets; b) relationships between buildings and green and open spaces; c) the formal appearance, interior and exterior, of buildings as defined by scale, size, style, construction, materials, color and decoration; d) the relationship between the town or urban area and its surrounding setting, both natural and man-made; and e) the various functions that the town or urban area has acquired over time. Any threat to these qualities would compromise the authenticity of the historic town or urban area (Washington Charter, 1987)." Note that spiritual elements are mentioned in the opening of the clause but not included in the list; the concepts of "community", "tradition", "ambience" - just to name a few - are so conspicuously absent from the list of qualities to be preserved; they are only present as instruments, on objectives of conservation.

3. There's a plethora of such charters and other documents. Almost every meeting has an ambition to produce a document named after the place of the meeting. Being so many, they became repetitive and inconsecutive, even inconsistent. In result of it, even an experienced urban conservation practitioner quickly gets lost in sheer volume of the recommendations, and the decision makers and initiative takers of development might simply disregard them.

How does each new document help us to achieve better quality of development in practice in any other way that the previous documents have or have indeed not? I have already mentioned the still relevant "Declaration of Amsterdam". But let us also look Pecs Declaration on the Venice Charter of 2004: "It is the right and duty of each and every new generation of conservation and restoration professionals in different cultural regions to examine understand and interpret the guidelines contained in the Charter of Venice over and over again. This should be done without restrictions or preconceptions, taking into account new challenges appearing in the field of restoring and conserving historic monuments. An important task should be to clarify subsequent interpretations of the Charter." Well, I wonder, are we raising the Venice Charter to the level of doctrine, which will be examined, understood, interpreted and then clarified without preconceptions, if anyone can explain to me what that means?

Allan Kenneth Birabi who will speak here has made a good job showing the history of the rise of the international instruments of heritage protection. His chart shows that in the last decade of the XX century alone, 35 such documents saw the light. Quite frankly, I do not know all of them. Is there anyone here who does?

4. The global recommendations do not refer to the differences of cultural contexts that sometimes cannot be compared and hence render many propositions meaningless in a given context. Are these recommendations pick-and-choose, then?

It may be that its particularity to Europe made The Declaration of Amsterdam to remain relevant for all these years. We will also hear how it is relevant to the practice in Brazil.

However, to many countries with different cultures, a good deal of the recommendations is simply irrelevant when confronted with cultural and socio-economic realities.

African experts among us note that “[...] international charters or local conservation statutes alone cannot ensure conservation. Rather, it is the local political will. This deficiency is driven by spontaneous political, socio-cultural and economic changes, particularly changing State responsibilities and fluid patronage of cultural and urban heritage resources. Since LDCs often pursue developmental objectives attractive to industrialization, cultural matters rarely cross their minds. They attend to culture only when external monies are included and so they view international urban conservation charters as ‘dry bones with without meat’ (Birabi, 2007).” Perhaps so, but is the root of the problem not elsewhere, i.e. in fundamental difference of what heritage is to different cultures?

Earlier this year, I worked in one of the East African countries. At that moment, a highly educated gentleman, a prominent politician and diplomat, was appointed a minister at the ministry which I was advising, incidentally, also responsible for urban development. After the formal procedure of inauguration, he went to his tribe for a party to dance traditional dances. The last thing I would think about this gentleman would be insensitivity to his cultural heritage. Yet when his urban heritage is a tukul², how are these charters relevant to him? In many discussions with urban planners there, the way settlement sites were traditionally arranged was considered very difficult to change, as people had their life organized in this way for ages. Yet a concrete block house with tin roof, electricity, and piped water is a dream of many. How can I tell them that “Historic areas and their surroundings should be protected from the disfigurement caused by the erection of poles, pylons and electricity or telephone cables and the placing of television aerials and large-scale advertising signs. Where these already exist appropriate measures should be taken for their removal (UNESCO, 1976)”?

5. Finally, application of all these documents by the bodies that have endorsed them is discretionary, political and inconsistent. This, for many, has ruined credibility of the principles and recommendations in these documents.

UNESCO found it necessary to note that “Public authorities as well as individuals must be obliged to comply with the measures for safeguarding (UNESCO, 1976)”.

In an article sent to this seminar, “Excuses To Destroy Heritage: Urban Interventions For The Pan American Games In Rio De Janeiro”, we can see how all wows to safeguard were disregarded by the authorities, renovating *Lagoa do Remo* Stadium. We will hear more such examples during our deliberations.

In Vilnius, my home town, the heart of the town, at the foot at Castle Hill and adjacent to the Arch-Cathedral, has been atrociously raped by “rebuilding” a Renaissance palace of which only subterranean part remained, and absolutely no credible iconography bar one or two drawings. It violates each and every clause of all

² A round, cylindrical structure erected of bush poles, plastered with clay and covered with conical thatched roof; usually a household consists of several tukuls.

possible charters. In 2006, as the palace is rapidly coming to completion, World Heritage Committee meets in Vilnius. Does anyone say anything? Not a squeak. The country gets a pat on the shoulder for commitment to UNESCO's goals. Need we say more? How can we expect the society to comply with principles that the authorities are not following?

What to do?

Alternative One

1. Analyse what's there in all these documents.
2. Do reality check.
3. Do philosophy check.
4. Produce clear, consistent, straightforward summary as basis for discussion.
5. Have discussions in different regions and cultures, determining what is universal, and what culture specific.
6. Produce a new charter, perhaps several of them.

Alternative Two

Stop producing charters and "re-interpreting" old ones. Start practicing what is has been preached. Think inclusively; embrace other disciplines in the debate and work responsibly. Let people have the informed choice.

"Particularly important are efforts to ensure that attributed values are respected, and that their determination included efforts to build, ad far as possible, a multidisciplinary and community consensus concerning these values (The Nara Document on Authenticity, 1994)."

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