A CHARTER FOR EACH INTERVENTION: FROM GENERIC TO SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

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Abstract

There is a gap between the academic consensus, expressed in charters for architectural conservation, and the everyday practice of interventions in monuments and historic sites. Charters are important as a body of knowledge and reference for all professionals working in the field. They help to teach students of architecture or architectural history to be sensitive for existing qualities. Through the charters scholars can learn how to develop an approach of careful examination and the use of scientific research methods. But the charters do not provide a blueprint for planning and assessment of conservation proposals. Every case requires a specific consideration and tailor-made solutions.

Beware if architects state that they respect certain paragraphs of the Venice Charter on Conservation and Restoration (1964), the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) or the Burra Charter for Places of Cultural Significance (1979, revised in 1999)! There are so many charters on heritage conservation and heritage development, that almost every intervention can be justified by shopping quotes and articles¹. In the same way, most interventions can be criticized by pointing at different quotes from the same set of charters. The alternative option for legitimating and assessing interventions is to determine in an early stage what is essential to a monument or a project. That implies the production of a specific culture historic analysis, as reference tool to discuss and examine proposals for intervention.

Keywords: charters, heritage conservation

From Venice to Vienna

Charters are a product of the time in which they were published and the cultural background of the professionals that wrote them. Recommendations for future practice reflect to a certain extend experiences with previous interventions. After the Second World War, when many historic towns in Europe were in ruins, the free interpretation of historic artefacts became common practice, in the attempt to re-establish some sort of historic presence in the cities. The reaction to these ‘creative’ restorations was the Venice Charter, with a clear plea for a more restrictive and scientific approach.

¹ Charters have for instance been made by Unesco, ICOMOS, OAS and EU.
The sixties and seventies were the time of urban renewal in the European inner cities. The large-scale campaigns to re-conquer the old towns as living space and leisure area had an impact on restoration and refurbishment. Entire urban blocks were redeveloped. The responsible architects had to balance their good intentions with all the limitations and demands that came along with large scale construction, tight budgets and social housing objectives. The result was an almost integral renewal of the historic city. These campaigns have been crucial for the survival of the historical cities in Europe, but with qualifications of today many results could be described as Disneyfication (shift in use towards leisure and tourism), gentrification (economic, social and cultural upgrading, pushing out older use) and falsification (making old cities look older, more ‘authentic’ and beautiful than they ever were).

In the Dutch city of Deventer, just to give an example, hundreds of medieval houses that were due to be demolished could be ‘rescued’ in the 1970s and were transformed into state-of-the art housing (Meurs, 2007). Historic details and traces of previous construction elements (like old windows) were used as a sort of menu, for ‘à la carte’ construction of comfortable apartments. These interventions lacked a conservation concept other than to incorporate a random set of architectonic forms and fragments in a new setting. The historic layer was correct in its elements, but new in materialization and detailing. What kind of buildings and what kind of city were preserved in the end? Despite the social objectives, the interventions provoked a process of rapid gentrification, pushing the traditional residents and their small-scale economy out. Instead came higher income groups, tourism and events, like the Charles Dickens’ Christmas Festival and the largest antiquarian book fair of Europe. For Deventer this development has been very positive in many respects, so why moralizing the results?

Experiences similar to the Deventer case must have been in the minds of the specialists who wrote the Burra Declaration. This document ‘advocates a cautious approach to change: do as much as necessary to care for the place to make it useable, but otherwise change it as little as possible so that its cultural significance is retained’ (The Burra Charter, 1999). Subsequent issues were addressed in later charters, focussing on the essential features of monuments and sites (like material authenticity, intangible values, archaeological traces in buildings) and the question how these qualities can survive interventions.

Actual tendencies are (1) the construction of high-rise buildings close to historic cities (for instance Gazprom in Saint Petersburg, towers blocking the view on the Cathedral of Cologne and high-rise close to the Tower of London, the Taj Mahal in Agra and the downtown of Vienna) and (2) the creation of iconic architecture within the historical cities (like in Graz or the new Marinski Theatre in Saint Petersburg). The response was the Vienna Memorandum on World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture (2005) (Vienna Memorandum, 2005).

**Seven Sins of Conservation**

Over the cause of years, the subsequent charters reflect the gradual development of the ‘ethics’ of intervention in monuments and historic sites. If this process is matched with the practice of intervention, two observations can be made. First, the improvement of scientific techniques and the steady development towards ‘invisible’ interventions is obvious. This is the success of the charters. Second, many interventions remain completely opposed to the academic consensus on how to intervene – and in many cases with good reason. One can be careful, precise, scientific and aware – and at the same time falsificate, replace, dislocate, simulate or reinvent historic buildings. The gap between the
general, academic notions and specific cases has long been recognized, also in the charters themselves. The Nara Document on Authenticity defines authenticity for instance as a cultural concept, something ‘depending on the nature of the cultural heritage, its cultural context, and its evolution through time’ (UNESCO, 1994). As authenticity and cultural value thus become variable and depend on the social and cultural context, it will be difficult to reflect and discuss the impact of interventions – unless the values have been defined and ‘translated’ to the physical appearance of a given monument or site. Seven ‘sins’ can illustrate the tension between conservation charters and conservation practice.

The first sin is reconstruction. In my training as restoration architect, I learned that reconstruction was wrong, as it leads to unscientific interpretations, jeopardizes ‘real’ monuments, falsifies the course of history and costs money and expertise that could otherwise be designated to old monuments. But there are numerous examples of reconstruction, where there were good reasons to do so. Destruction through war or nature disasters can provide arguments for rebuilding. A famous example is the bridge over the river Neretva in Mostar, originally built in 1566. This World Heritage was bombed during the war in Bosnia Hercegovina (1993). The argument for reconstruction was not only to bring back the elegant shape, but also stress the symbolic meaning of the bridge as a historic connection between the Muslim and Croat parts of the segregated city. The Prince of Wales inaugurated the new bridge in 2004.

Other examples of reconstruction are the Duchess Anna Amalia Library in Weimar (Germany), destroyed by fire in 2004, dozens of burned windmills in the Netherlands and big monuments that were demolished under communist rule, such as the Stadtschloss Berlin (destroyed in 1950, reconstruction in process), the Frauenkirche in Dresden (bombed in 1945, reconstructed in 2005) and the Christ the Savior Church (Image1) in Moscow (demolished in 1933, reconstructed in 2000).

These examples deal with either symbolic meaning (religion) or a dominant motive in historic town- or landscapes. This value prevails over the lack of material authenticity. The reconstruction of landmarks can in a way be seen as the repair of the (urban or mental) landscape they are part of.
The second sin: substitution and renewal. The charter of Venice states that monuments should be safeguarded ‘no less as works of art than as historical evidence’ (article 3) and require ‘respect for the original material and authentic documents’ (article 9). Later charters elaborate on this. Particularly in the case of modern architecture these objectives are often not met. During the restoration of Sanatorium Zonnestraal (Image 2) in Hilversum, an object on the Dutch Tentative List to become World Heritage, 90% of its material substance was substituted.

![Image 2: Sanatorium Zonnestraal in Hilversum](image)

This was due to the bad state of repair, the fact that many experimental techniques had turned out not to be sustainable and the current building regulations, that require a different technical performance than in the 1920s (energy, safety). The main reason not to opt for conservation of the original materials was, however, the conviction that the essence of the monument is in its spatial layout, iconic image, the setting in the landscape and the utmost economy in materialization (Henket & de Jonge, 1990). This could only be preserved with an almost complete renewal of the building in an expensive and scientifically advanced manner.

The 3rd sin in conservation practice is to repair more than the minimum and make monuments and old cities look brand new. Botox for heritage is justified by owners, who want their buildings look good and see the result of all the money and effort they have put in the interventions. It can also help architects to solve other problems. The substitution of timber interiors can for instance give space for installations (tubes and pipes, computers), construction and isolation. The problem is the show ball effect: a small substitution or ‘correction’ in a monument can provoke an endless process of renewal. Sin number 4 is about the noble idea that the moving of monuments or parts of monuments cannot be allowed (Venice Charter, article 7). But what are these principles worth at locations of ever expanding airports, railway lines, motorways or industrial plants? An

2 The term ‘botoxization’ was used by Frank de Josselin de Jong to describe the process of revitalization of public space in historic downtowns, substituting all the cracks and historic particularities by smooth pavements, that are normally associated with airports and malls.
interesting example is the mobility of windmills in the Netherlands, caused by urban developments in their surroundings. The argument to move windmills is that an open landscape is considered to be a more natural context than an urbanized historic location, as a windmill can only work with wind in its sails.

The 5th sin of conservation is in line with the old dilemma whether to restore an authentic shape or to conserve the historic development of a monument. The Venice Charter stated that unity of style should not be the aim of restoration (article 11). But that argument does not always count. If the essence of a monument is in the original concept or in the spatial layout, as is the case with many modern buildings and sites, there is a lot to say in favour of the removal of later additions – as they jeopardize the authentic experience. Sanatorium Zonnestraal is an example of this. And what if the essence is not in the building material or in the space that it makes, but in the process of building itself? Mud architecture, as used in the city Djenné in Mali, cannot be dated. A mud building fragment might be 1,000 years old or perhaps only one year. The authenticity of Djenné is the ongoing renewal, with traditional craftsmanship. This old historic city is therefore not merely a product of history but of an ongoing present – which implies that the difference between conservation, restoration and construction disappears (Mass, 1994).

New use is a successful pretext to make architects and preservationalist sin against academic concepts of conservation. The charters urge for balance, for the prevalence of the monument and the respect for its details. The Venice Charter even states that ‘use must not change the layout or decoration of a building’ (article 4). But who pays for all this? What is the benefit if the whole world slowly turns into a museum? Can intangible qualities survive and develop, if the historical form is frozen? How do historic cities relate to the modern cities they are part of? The Dutch government considers good use to be vital for monuments. Continuous change is seen as something positive, as long as the old qualities are taken care of. The slogan ‘conservation through development’ counts for many new categories of monuments, sites and landscapes. The only realistic answer to heritage sprawl (the tendency to list the entire cultural landscape as a monument) is a shift in the paradigm on conservation as it was expressed in the Venice Charter (Meurs, 2007).

Eventually, the 7th sin against academic doctrines on conservation is the rigorous use of these doctrines them selves. Dogmatic conservation might kill intangible heritage, can isolate preservation zones physically and mentally from their (urban) landscape or turn respected and proud monuments into mediocre leftovers in the cities. What to think of Paramaribo Cathedral (Image 3) in Suriname?

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3 This slogan is used in the Belvedere memorandum, which was produced in 1999 by the Ministries of Education, Science & Culture, Traffic and Waterworks, Agriculture, Nature & Fishing and Spatial Design and Environment. The joined attempt is to integrate culture-history into spatial planning.
It is the largest wooden church in South-America and part of the World Heritage site. The wood construction has twisted dangerously over the last 200 years, making a drastic intervention in the construction inevitable. This can be done in an architectural way, by enhancing the construction in an almost invisible way. With money of the European Commission, a solution was developed for ‘conservation in line with internationally adopted standards’, in an archaeological way. The church seizes to be a building and becomes a dead piece of wood hanging in washing lines in a large modern construction – changing the view both inside and outside.4

**Value assessment**

The debate on the opportunities and risks of reconstruction, replacement, removal or renewal of monuments, is often disturbed by prejudice and moralistic rejection of specialists. The academic notions become opposed to the popular desire for image, experience, representation and contemporary use. The gap between academic consensus and the ‘sins’ of practice can be bridged in each individual case by specific culture historic analysis. It creates a language to communicate about values, transformation and priorities. Specific guidelines thus replace generic principals for intervention. If there is consensus about the (positive and negative) qualities that make up the monument value, a more transparent and objective discussion on intervention proposals can be made.

A culture historic analysis contains all or some of the following ingredients: historic research (on concepts, developments, events), spatial research (normally on different scales, from the landscape to the building detail), social research (occupation history and present) and a value assessment. The latter translates (tangible and intangible) values into spatial terms, on different scales. Only by doing so, the impact of interventions can be studied and related to the monument values. The assessment can indicate space for

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4 This conservation job is done by A.R.S. Progetti SRL from Rome and financed by the 9th EDF European Commission.
conservation and space for transformation, depending on historic features, the actual condition and future needs (Image 4).

An urban and architectonic atlas, with drawings that analyse and synthesize the monumental value, is indispensable for the communication of results towards professionals, stakeholders and the general public (Image 5). Culture historic analysis can be made either for objects or for cities. The process of research, documentation, analyses and assessment is similar - although the production, scope and product differ.
By its nature, scale and extent the potential heritage of the 21st century demands new interpretations of authenticity, conservation and determination of cultural historic value. The translation from knowledge to subject, from facts to images and from ideas to maps is necessary if something more than personal and superficial insights are to be introduced into the interventions. Culture historic analysis can generate a language to discuss intervention options, free from the potential dogmas of conservation charters. But a quality standard for this type of research lacks, at least in the Netherlands. Architects offer the culture historic analysis as by-product of their intervention schemes. Their studies often lack a thorough historic survey and tend to anticipate on their proposals. It makes it hard to use the report as ‘neutral’ reference for the approval of their plans. Historians tend in many cases to make the culture historic analysis too descriptive. They stick to the reproduction of facts, hesitate to make hierarchies in their appreciation and show (often) difficulties in the spatial translation of historic data. The cooperation between historians and architects is the key to success.

References


UNESCO / ICCROM / ICOMOS, Nara Document on Authenticity, 1994, article 13