

## CONNECTING PRINCIPLES WITH PRACTICE: FROM CHARTERS TO GUIDING CASE STUDIES<sup>♦</sup>

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### Abstract

Conservationists have always expressed through written declarations principles and norms that they deemed to orient their 'discipline'. These documents therefore reflect the debate and the modifications of perspective within conservation. Over time, however, their usefulness in practice has been questioned from various sides and today many think that they have exhausted their validity as guiding instruments for conservation practice. Critics have called for many reasons for this situation, namely ambiguity of language; inconsistencies; only apparent strictness and univocity; gap with real practice and failure to address new theoretical questions and related technical responses. Consciousness of the present situation among some professionals has triggered the exploration of more effective alternative means to orient conservation practice: the best known examples are the Illustrated Burra Charter (ICOMOS Australia) and the GCI. This paper explores the recurrent weaknesses of charter through some examples and, on the base of existing experiences, offers some proposals that may contribute to enhance future professionals' awareness about the historical context and theoretical, methodological and practical issues of conservation.

**Key words:** *conservation, charters, practice*

### 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the Conservation movement, activists and professionals in this field have expressed their ideas through written declarations, documents or charters. They are in fact manifestos of sets of theoretical principles, methodological statements and operational indications that reveal the ethical and somehow 'utopian' aspirations of the movement. Charters, therefore, are documents and monuments at the same time, in that they reflect the state of the art of thinking in conservation at a given time and place and represent useful elements for a critical look to the 'discipline'. Though, their use as reference texts has not avoided contradictory results and heated debates on how

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principles have been and should be applied in practice up to the point that many question their usefulness.

Examining the whole body of these documents, we realize that they bear several weaknesses that may justify the widespread perplexity about their utility.

Charters are often inconsistent one with the other and even within themselves. Strict statements are denied or weakened in subsequent clauses and theoretical 'pure' principles eventually come to terms with the innumerable exceptions to their dictate that are offered by real practice. Besides, the inherent ambiguity of language causes further confusion that the efforts of many charters to refine definitions do not eliminate. On the contrary, in many cases, those charters that aspire to have a pragmatic approach end up dealing in a simplistic manner with the complex pattern of actions of conservation practice.

Charters, perhaps by their very nature, aspire to be normative texts and therefore do not contribute and register only in an implicit way the advancement of the discussion. Rather, they prefer to concentrate on levels and methodologies of intervention. They assume as unquestionable the answers to questions such as 'why to conserve?' and 'what to conserve?', without declaring explicitly the theoretical framework they refer to, but concentrate their attention on refining the answers to the question 'how to conserve?' Yet, the shifting of the reasons sustaining conservation, attested to by the enlargement and diversification of cultural heritage, would involve modifying 'objects' and objectives of conservation and even the notion of conservation itself and not only its practice.

The dictates of many of these documents, and in particular of the Venice charter, have been contested, arguing that they were developed within the European cultural framework and for stone buildings while different contexts and heritage 'typologies' would require 'ad hoc' principles. Certainly, it cannot be denied that many existing charters epitomize the legacy of the European thought but it is worth observing that also the core of conservation thinking is one of the products of European culture. Any advancement and revision of this discipline/movement/ cultural attitude has to come to terms with its origins and with the social, historical reasons that caused its birth.

Unfortunately the lack of awareness of the historic and philosophical issues at stake behind the debates that these documents hope to overcome have caused the blind application or the radical rejection of their dictates, thus doing, in both cases, a bad turn to cultural heritage and to the aims of conservation.

Improvement in the awareness of conservation cultural implications may be achieved through: 1) a more critical education of conservationists that improve the knowledge of the historical and socio- cultural contexts that gave life to the conservation movement and consider charters as products of this process more than tools for practice and training; 2) a consistent reflection on existing documents and their theoretical perspectives that recognise inadequacies, ambiguities and contradictory elements where present but also underline their limits of validity; and 3) the search for different guiding tools. First experiences have been already initiated, by exploring the potential of case studies, but it seems necessary to further explore the potentials of case studies critics, from the international to the local, from the planning - including socio- economic concerns - to the architectural level.

## **2. Contradictions in charters and application to practice**

The texts of these documents result from compromises among some general principles assumed as given, the personal convictions of their major promoters and the

consciousness that many interventions reputed as valid, in fact, did not respect the dictates of charters. So these texts contain very rigorous statements of principle and methodological indications, weakened by subsequent exceptions, inserted for various reasons, i.e. the stability of the existing fabric, not clarified needs for the 'unity' of the monument, or the awareness of the difficulty to derive practical rules from theoretical principle that may apply once for ever.

For instance, the Venice charter, at art. 11, establishes that «the valid contributions of all periods to the building of a monument must be respected, since unity of style is not the aim of restoration. When a building includes the superimposed work of different periods, the revealing of the underlying state can only be justified ... when what is removed is of little interest and the material which is brought to light is of great historical, archaeological or aesthetic value and its state of preservation good enough to justify the action». Here, the introduction of the adjective 'valid' and the attribution 'of little interest' open to uncontrollable drifts. Any choice will depend on the personal judgement of the professional in charge, which, in absence of explicit justification, may exceed into opinable preference. At article 15, the charter peremptorily affirms that «all reconstruction work should be ruled out a priori», but it contradicts itself in the immediate following lines by admitting that «only anastylosis ... can be permitted». Further conditions are provided with the intent of reducing arbitrary recourse to this practice; therefore, «the material used for integration should always be recognisable, and its use should be the least that will ensure the conservation of a monument and the reinstatement of its form». Nevertheless, a space has been open to reconstructions, which, in fact, have gained more and more legitimacy up to the point that today more than one charter openly speaks of reconstruction as one of the possible level of intervention.

The inherent ambiguity and imprecision of language cause, too, further confusion, that the efforts of many charters to refine definitions do not eliminate. On the contrary, ambiguity and imprecision often hide and allow rather different interpretations of the provisions of the charters. Art. 6 of the Venice Charter recommends that «no new construction, demolition or modification which would alter the relations of mass and colour must be allowed», where, on the base of the meaning attributed to the words 'mass' and 'colour', we might have very different and uneven results, though nominally respectful of the dictate of the charter. Article 7 states «a monument is inseparable from the history to which it bears witness and from the setting in which it occurs». According to the underlying notion of history that has been selected as implicit reference (history based on events, social history, 'narrative' history or 'problem-setting history'), also the understanding of this statement may change and influence conservation attitudes. Translations from one language to another also imply the loss and shifting of meaning, due to both the variations of the meaning of words and the alteration of phrases.

### **3. Heritage diversification and shifting of principles**

Expansion of the notion of heritage has been accompanied by the progressive specification of theoretical and operational contents of charters, declarations and guiding documents. Since the Venice Charter, the production of new written documents has been oriented to address specific conservation issues posed by particular typologies of heritage, which, for their peculiarities (i.e. in relation to the tangible and intangible features that sustain their cultural interest, to their scale or to the modalities of their production), seemed to open fresh theoretical questions. Therefore, charters for the conservation of historic centres, urban areas, small towns, gardens and parks or for vernacular structures, wooden buildings, mural paintings, ... have been issued whenever the 'conservation

community', or more often, just some of its members, felt the need to consolidate a new set of operational recommendations. But these documents have failed not only to try an answer to, but even to explicitly address, questions like: how can we think to preserve a wooden/thatch temporary hayloft or, enlarging the scope, the terraced landscape of Cinque Terre, if the knowledge and technical skills that produced those objects, and above all the necessity of their use have been lost? How to establish which is the 'sustainable' balance between the change of the society and the change of the territory? No charter supplies recommendation that help answer these crucial questions. Interrogatives opened by such questions may be addressed also when considering 'traditional' monuments', i.e., churches, castles, palaces, etc., and seem to suggest the opportunity of a radical shifting of perspective and not only the modification and adaptation of existing operational methodologies to peculiar situations.

The expansion of the universe of potentially protected properties has implied that reasons for heritage safeguard have changed – and generally the first is the result of the second – consequently, also philosophies of intervention have been modified. Monuments that have been protected and restored to promote national values have been obviously treated according to conservation criteria rather different from those underlying interventions based on sustainability concerns. However, interrogatives posed by these new heritage typologies represent a chance for an overall reflection on conservation and related methodological criteria for intervention developed for monuments, which has not been completely explored. The openings towards sustainable development and the management of change also bring challenges that are still to be picked up in the field of architectural conservation.

In fact, the production of documents for specific types of heritage properties have, more or less consciously, introduced operational principles that refer to different theoretical frameworks from the one underlying the Venice charter, and this has happened not only within different cultural contexts but has begun in Europe.

For instance, the Charter for historic gardens, developed in Florence in 1981, affirms that "the historic garden is an architectural composition whose constituents are primarily vegetal and therefore living, which means that they are perishable and renewable". Article 3 states that, as a monument, the historic garden must be preserved in accordance with the spirit of the Venice Charter, but, since it is a "living monument, its preservation must be governed by specific rules...". On this base, in certain cases, it recommends reconstruction, while the Venice Charter explicitly has ruled out any reconstruction work, only admitting anastylosis (with some contradictoriness). But anastylosis cannot be applied in the case of gardens - where are supposed to be found the dismembered parts of the garden to be reassembled, when this is made with perishable materials? Therefore, according to the authors of the Charter of Florence, the vegetal, changeable and perishable nature of gardens would justify reconstructions, not admissible for built heritage. In fact, the (relative) perishability of the materials used to create gardens does not seem to imply as a logical consequence the possibility of reconstruction; if anything, the fact that gardens are designed architectural works, though built with different materials than buildings, would suggest integrations that are "distinct from the architectural composition and ... bear a contemporary stamp" and not reconstructions "à l'identique", at least if the charter aims, as it states, to be in line with the dictate of the Venice charter.

#### 4. Cultural diversity and the reasons for conservation

The meaning that cultural heritage has assumed over time in different cultures or countries has a relevant influence on methodology and practice of conservation. Several documents have tried to explore the link between geographical and cultural specificity and the nature of cultural heritage, protection and conservation approaches. Among the first attempts we find the Dechambault Charter, developed by ICOMOS Canada francophone chapter in 1983. The charter outlines the specific traits and character of Quebec's cultural identity and heritage, as shaped by the interaction over time among the geographical and climatic conditions the populations that have lived there and the historic occurrences that accompanied the settlement of newcomers.

The Nara Document on authenticity represents a milestone for the reflection on the interrelation among cultural specificities, heritage meanings and the determination of criteria to define heritage authenticity. This 'charter' has also acted as a reference text for further reflections on cultural identity and heritage values. The Declaration of San Antonio is one of the most promising results among these attempts, even beyond the immediate spin-offs on practice. It worth observing, in fact, that the most interesting aspect of these documents appears to be their preliminary reflection more than their provisions for conservation practice.

In other cases, the regional documents produced have focussed on the elaboration and adaptation of methodological and practical tools, without giving detailed account of the preliminary reflection that made possible those documents. Examples are; the Charter for the Conservation of Places of Heritage Value (ICOMOS- New Zealand), in which indications for the protection and management of aboriginal heritage are expressed, the Appleton Charter (ICOMOS Canada - anglophone chapter), essentially a document that synthesizes and refines definitions of the possible levels of intervention on built heritage. Among the 'regional' charters of this period, the Burra Charter (ICOMOS Australia) stands as an interesting exception, in that it has included a short paragraph titled 'why to conserve?' and has outlined a methodological framework for decision-making. Recent regional documents are the Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China, which have been elaborated with the support of the Getty Conservation Institute, the Indonesia Charter for Heritage Conservation, issued in 2003, and the INTACH charter for the Conservation of Unprotected Architectural Heritage and Sites in India. Most of these documents concentrates on the detailed definition of the possible levels of intervention, in the attempt to distinguishing one from the other, on the base of different criteria; actions implied, progressive invasiveness, pursued objectives, etc. Such a defining try does not always contribute to clarify differences that mainly depend on the perspectives from which interventions are considered and sometimes risk over-simplify the actual conservation work. For instance, some charters distinguish restoration from reconstruction, considering that restoration would not imply addition of new material, but only removal, while reconstruction would foresee also addition of material. Professionals used to frequent building sites know very well that this is a fictitious, when not misleading, distinction, since both interventions imply removal, modification and addition. This definition of restoration appears to refer to its ideal goal - that is, revealing the heritage value of the object - but fails to consider the implications of the real work. Similarly, there is no utility in defining adaptation as a separate form of intervention on built heritage, in that all restoration/conservation works generally contemplate also adaptation.

In general, many of these documents, while recalling the Venice Charter and reaffirming every time its validity, intend, in fact, to distinguish themselves, on the base of heritage technical and constructive differences or of its cultural meanings. However, the introduction of operational indications different from, or opposite to, the ones contained in the Venice Charter is not rooted in a real and logical justification of these differences. They, in fact, depend on the will to give voice to theoretical assumptions divergent from those underlying the Venice Charter, divergences that have always existed in the heritage conservation field since its beginnings.

Eventually, it appears evident that charters, “more than a coherent and complete definition of what can be intended as conservation, reflect the coeval cultural debate, with its contradictions and supposed certainties, reduced to the form but not to the substance of a norm capable of effective spin-offs.” (Musso, 2004).

## **5. Proposals for improvement**

Most of the problems quoted above would not have particular relevance if they were made explicit conservation professionals were more aware of the historic and philosophical issues at stake. As it has been recently reaffirmed at a conference held in Rome on Cesare Brandi’s influence on conservation theory and practice (Toscano, 2006), principles that have not been digested may sometimes cause more problems to conservation than ignoring them.

Possible improvement in the awareness of the cultural implications of conservation process may be achieved by focussing on the study of the history of conservation in relation to its broad historic context, to the theoretical and philosophical questions lying behind, and to the actual conservation problems that are posed by the monuments.

Below some proposals, that may contribute to the improvement of the current situation at different levels, are outlined.

### **5.1 Education and Training**

Graduate and post-graduate education and professional training in the field should try to contextualise charters within the debate that produced them, to understand where they come from, which difficulties they tried to overcome and which uncertainties they hide. Studies on the historic contexts in which charters have been developed, the connections with the debate within architectural design, or the new frontiers reached by philosophy or by other fields of knowledge may help better understand the overall meaning of these documents and of the ‘fundamental’ questions that conservation also attempts to answer. Educational programmes would do a better service to future professionals if they began from the objects and their problems, instead from principles as expressed in charters. On the other hand, principles may be more usefully studied and analysed with reference to the theoretical thinking of those who have contributed to develop charters, thus achieving a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of why and how certain axioms have been elaborated.

Education of the public is important as well and should aim to enable it to understand the issues and dilemmas that conservationists face when dealing with heritage management. Therefore, it seems important to go beyond the supply of historic information about sites or heritage property, by explaining the sources of intervention guidelines and criteria, the problems the conservationist has to face and the possible alternatives, according to the adopted methodological framework. Public should be aware

that conservation theory and methodology is a work in progress with much more questions to be answered than readily available responses and recipes, and that “cultural diversity” is reflected also by different positions towards conservation, as in other fields of knowledge, even within the same cultural framework.

## **5.2 A critical look to the adopted charters**

The observations on texts and documents expressed in the lines above underline that inconsistencies among charters, and differences among theoretical and methodological perspectives exist, in spite of the yearning for methodological unity. The assumed monolithic nature of charters may be easily disproved, and it could not be otherwise, considering the ways in which these documents are produced, often elaborated by few individuals and proposed only afterwards to the consideration of a more or less open scientific community for their final revision. This often implies new insertions and local alterations of the texts which may influence the overall meaning of the document even beyond intentions.

A close analysis of the main reference texts that systematically compares contents and methodological indications for practice and clarifies the different and sometimes divergent theoretical references which have influenced the drafting of the text may contribute to reinforce their credibility. Such an analysis could also highlight the elements of validity of the various documents, especially those which may be acknowledged by different theoretical perspectives (i.e. the importance of maintaining heritage on a permanent basis as the first act to ensure conservation, the necessity of an accurate preliminary documentation of the object before any intervention, and the continuous documentation of the ongoing works, etc.). Similarly, the collection of cases of conservation interventions that have provoked polemics among experts and the society at large may help understand the issues at stake when passing from theory to practice. The analysis of these examples may consider: 1) the situation before the intervention through the available documentation (not only the one that has been elaborated for the project); 2) the conservation problems and adaptation needs of the object; 3) the objectives pursued through the intervention at both the cultural and technical level; 4) the documentation produced during the intervention; 5) the critics to the cultural and technical choices as found in newspapers, specialised magazines, proceedings of conferences, or collected through focussed interviews, in order to build a frame of the reasons (methodological, technical, financial,...) in respect of which the project has been appreciated or criticized. If selected examples are not too recent, it will be possible to verify also their ‘validity’ over time, on the technical (i.e. durability, maintainability, etc.); scientific (i.e. production of new knowledge) and social (integration in the local social life, retention or reestablishment of attachment and association, etc.) level.

This kind of analysis has not the objective to distinguish the ‘correct’ intervention from the one which is not; rather, its aim would be to highlight the reasons underlying different approaches to conservation, and their possible pros and cons, by focussing on the outcomes of these approaches. Choices in real works are subjected to external circumstances which might be out of the control of the conservationist in charge of the project, but that might be foreseen in the project phase, i.e., the technical skills of workers or restorers, in order to limit unwanted consequences.

### 5.3 Guiding case-studies

The search for different guiding instruments possibly based on illustration and discussion of conservation works, that might be considered positive from a number of points of view, may also improve the quality of the concrete results of conservation works beyond the mere implementation of principles.

The volume "The illustrated Burra charter" shows how this document has been used as a decision-making tool at different levels, through several examples of intervention already carried out. Their illustration contributes to describe the range of interpretations that the prescriptions and definitions of the Burra Charter have undergone in practice. The research on the values of cultural heritage undertaken by the GCI has been completed with the analysis of four case studies concerning the elaboration of management instruments for four complex historic sites in different countries. The common element of these cases was the reference to values-based approaches in decision-making. The study has considered the history and values of the sites, the problems posed by their conservation and management, the concerned and involved stakeholders, the ways in which decisions were taken, the final strategies developed for the sites. Each case study has focussed on one or more issues arisen for their management and on how solutions have been achieved.

Both above mentioned examples privilege the policy and management level of conservation over the architectural level and concentrate their attention on the process and the correct functioning of its phases as a warranty for positive results. However, the application of correct evaluation criteria and management benchmarks may only partially ensure a good result at the level of architectural or urban/landscape quality. Making efforts to consider as many values of a site as possible in planning its conservation or ensuring public participation in decision-making lies at a different level than the one at which lies the technical or aesthetical quality of a of conservation intervention. While for long the latter has been considered the only objective of conservation project, though very rarely achieved in practice, today we risk overlook this dimension by focussing only on social, environmental or economical sustainability.

Beyond the necessary development of virtuous processes that ensure a good platform for correct action of heritage safeguard, it seems opportune to examine and to evaluate the achieved or achievable results of conservation actions and strategies at all relevant levels (social, economical, urban and architectural).

A collection of examples on conservation, rehabilitation, adaptation interventions that have been respectful of existing fabric and also manifest an architectural or constructive quality may stimulate the search for design solutions attentive to the cultural dimensions of the property but also to the technical and executive aspects which often influence much more the final quality of the conservation work than methodological indications.

Case studies might be usefully organised according to problems (developing an appropriate preliminary documentation; maintaining building components, upgrading technological and sanitary services, rehabilitating carrying structures, adding new elements or volumes, ...), while the analysis of each case should describe the technical problems that were to be solved, the physical conditions of the considered property, its cultural significance, the specificity of its building conformation, technologies and materials, the available temporal, human and financial resources to implement the intervention, etc. The wider the collection of case studies, the more effective the role of stimulus of this kind of tool, since the numerous examples would avoid the risk of

adopting them as ready solutions to be applied, particularly when these instruments were associated to guidelines the compliance to which would influence the approval or the funding of conservation projects. On the other hand, professional or non governmental organisations may more easily propose these instruments as internal aids to professionals that need to be interpreted in new projects.

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