

JUDGEMENT AND VALIDATION IN THE BURRA CHARTER PROCESS: INTRODUCING FEEDBACK IN ASSESSING THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF HERITAGE SITES

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Abstract

The conservation of sites of cultural significance has been the main objective of management programs and projects in heritage areas for approximately the last 30 years. In the 1990s, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) started to require a Statement of Cultural Significance to be attached to applications for inclusion of sites in the World Heritage List. This fact confirmed the importance of the concept of 'cultural significance' which was introduced by Australia ICOMOS in the Burra Charter. The Charter also changed the way significance was understood, by enlarging the scope of its values and attributing their identification to the agents involved in the process of conserving the site: the stakeholders. This document is useful for its insights into the construct of significance, but the Burra Charter Process needs to be altered on account of the challenges of the plural, multivalent and contingent nature of values. This article puts forward a proposal on how the Burra Charter Process might be altered. Significance is defined as a set of values: the result of the judgment of past and present values and meanings, which are laid down and socially accepted through an intersubjective process of judgment and validation in the long term. The judgments are made in the present and draw on the values and meanings of the past. Moreover, significance is supported by instruments of memory recognized by plural societies. Therefore, cultural significance undergoes changes and should be reevaluated and reconstructed from time to time.

Key words: *cultural significance, conservation, The Burra Charter*

Introduction

In the last 30 years, the conservation of cultural significance has been the main objective of management plans and projects for and on urban heritage. The concept of

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'cultural significance' is central both to the practical activities needed to safeguard the historical heritage, as well as to the contemporary theory of conservation (Muñoz-Viñas 2005).

In the 1990s, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Heritage Center (WHC)¹ started to require a statement of cultural significance² for all sites proposed for inclusion in the World Heritage List³. In doing this, UNESCO confirmed the importance of the concept of cultural significance that had been put forward in the Burra Charter⁴ and which had been widely used in practical and academic conservation activities in Australia since 1980. However, it is not only the institutions and individuals that gravitate around the UNESCO conservation system that have systematically used the concept of cultural significance. The set of definitions and operational procedures given in the Burra Charter are regularly drawn on by the community of experts dedicated to conservation of the cultural heritage. It is therefore the most heavily used doctrinal document in conservation activities, especially in Western countries, where it has undergone adaptations in order to make adjustments to its recommendations so that they might reflect different cultural, political, economical and social contexts. Furthermore, the concept of cultural significance has a decisive role regarding conservation activities. It is used as an analytical instrument and as a guide to interventions on heritage objects, monuments and sites, especially for conservation policies, programs and projects.

In spite of the importance of the Burra Charter and the constant revisions to it⁵, some other of its concepts and procedures need to be revised, due to advances in conservation theory and the gains that come from practical experience.

This article puts forward a new definition of cultural significance that takes into account the philosophical debate on the objectivity of cultural values and proposes some changes in The Burra Charter Process so as to help to specify in more detail what the cultural significance of a given heritage site is.

1. Cultural significance in the Burra Charter

The term 'cultural significance' pre-dates the Burra Charter. It was first used, in 1964, in the Venice Charter, to explain the importance of types of historical heritage, other than sites and monuments: "The concept of a historic monument (...) applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time "(Venice Charter 1964, art.1). However, the Venice

¹ UNESCO is the primary institution that promotes the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage assets deemed valuable to humanity. For UNESCO, cultural heritage comprises monuments, groups of buildings or sites that have historical, aesthetic, archaeological, scientific, ethnological or anthropological value. As to natural heritage, this means exceptional physical, biological and geological formations, habitats of endangered animal and plant species and areas that have scientific, conservation or aesthetic value.

² There is no clear definition of what a Statement of Significance is. In the instructions for the Report of periodic monitoring of the assets listed, the most important operational document of the World Heritage Centre, it says only that it should reflect the criteria used by the Committee for entering an asset on the World Heritage List.

³ In September 2009, the World Heritage List contained 890 listed assets in 148 countries, of which 689 were cultural, 176 natural and 25 mixed. Source: <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list>> Accessed on 29/09/2009.

⁴ Burra Charter is shorthand for *The Australia ICOMOS International Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance*.

⁵ Between 1980 and 1999, the Burra Charter was revised three times.

Charter only uses the concept. There is no discussion of it. It was the Burra Charter that first defined it and made it operational. This charter states that conservation of heritage means all processes of caring for a site with a view to maintaining its cultural significance, and defines this concept as the "aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations." It also says that significance is "embodied in the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects" (Australia ICOMOS 1999, art.1).

The Charter uses cultural significance as a synonym for cultural heritage values, and affirms that it is embodied in such sites, in their fabric, uses, associations, meanings and memories. Therefore, the term refers to those qualities or attributes of heritage sites that are inherent or have been acquired over time. Moreover, the Charter states that all attributes related to a site should be respected by the conservator and that the coexistence of values is accepted even in situations where the actors involved with conserving a given site do not agree on its cultural significance, that is they perceive different values. The Charter recognizes that, in situations such as this, where there is a conflict between the stakeholders, it is difficult to establish an institutional form of significance and, consequently, to use it as a guide for conserving sites. This conflict over the meaning of significance is very different from that due to changes in values over time. The continuous transformation of sites, the stakeholders involved with them and the contexts in which they are set make cultural significance a concept that is potentially subject to a time limit, namely one that loses validity in the long term. The Burra Charter guarantees that it is healthy to have co-existing and changing values, even when the social actors disagree with each other. However, it does not indicate how this coexistence or how prioritizing values must be fashioned in the process of conserving heritage sites.

The Burra Charter Process, or simply Process, is divided into three stages: understanding the significance; developing policy; and administering the heritage asset in accordance with policy. It stresses that procedures should not be performed in isolation from each other but rather they must interact: some procedures must be conducted repeatedly, while consultations with stakeholders and further investigations are also necessary.

The stage of "understanding the significance" is the subject analyzed in this article. According to the Process, this stage must follow four steps: 1) identifying the site and its associations, securing it and making it safe; 2) gathering and recording sufficient information (whether in document form, physically or orally) so as to understand the significance of the site; 3) assessing the significance; and 4) preparing the statement of significance (See Figure 1).

The Process leaves open the questions of how to define the values included in the statement of significance when there is conflict between the stakeholders. Also, the sequence of the steps follows a linear procedure, without any form of feedback, and flows according to the deliberations of only one type of stakeholder: specialists. The next section of the article is specifically devoted to the questions of how to define the values and how to introduce forms of feed-back into the process.

2. Including judgment and social validation in the Burra Charter Process

The critique of the vision given in the Burra Charter Process is guided by two aspects: the concept of significance and the process for determining the statement of significance. It follows three lines of analysis: the epistemological, the socio-cultural and the planning of conservation.

From the epistemological point of view, prior to the Burra Charter, significance was treated basically from the perspective of empirical-positivist philosophy. In this approach, significance is objectively determined, because values are considered qualities inherent in a site. Therefore, identifying and interpreting values depend only on the state and advance of knowledge, and on the precision of the observation instruments. In spite of the great advances of the Burra Charter in relation to the positivistic view, it is still present in the Charter as article 1.2 states that “[C]ultural significance is embodied in the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects” (Australia ICOMOS 1999), especially considering that cultural significance is a quality that subjects associate with a cultural resource.

Tainter and Lucas (1983, 714) criticized the empirical-positivist approach of cultural significance because they understand that values (the substance of significance) are attributed to and not inherent in objects, and that identifying values is tied to the meanings individuals and social groups attribute to objects over time. When attributing values, people base their assessment on a conceptual structure which helps them to apprehend and interpret the objects. So it is the individual (the subject) who is the main element in adding to knowledge about objects. The relationship of object to subject is not unique but variable and dependant on (social, political and cultural) contexts, place and time.

Socio-cultural analysis supports the view that the subject is the active agent in the process of attributing meanings to objects, but it understands the subject is placed within a collective entity, and that he/she does not act, in isolation, as an individual. Howard Green (1998) supports this view and adds that significance should be determined by many social groups and not only by specialists. For him, significance is a concept socially built up from the interaction of many social groups, as it relates to meanings given by a plurality of actors, and throughout a long-term process (Green 1998, 92-94). Accordingly, significance is multiple and diverse in time and space, and is always assessed in the present. It is socially and historically determined in a continuous interactive movement among groups and individuals.

The significance of objects consists of values identified in the present and in the past. The values carried forward from the past are grasped by virtue of the memory of individuals, with the help of instruments that support social memory such as books, documents, photographs, and so forth (Von Simson, nd). From the sociocultural perspective, significance is derived from the assessments of many subjects who latch a multitude of values onto the cultural heritage; thus, significance depends on intersubjectivity, together with the items that support memory (Anderson 1998). Therefore, the supports to memory mediate the choices between the past and present meanings of the objects and pass judgment on the values used in determining the conservation action of the heritage. To be effective, the outcome of this judgment must be socially validated. If not, it is expected that conservation actions will be the source of conflict between the stakeholders.

Analysis from the perspective of planning conservation underlines that a set of values, forming a statement of significance, ‘fixed’ in time, may lead to the perpetuation of some values because of the conservation procedures themselves. Successive restoration and preservation actions, using the same statement of significance, tend to reinforce values from the past and set up barriers that prevent the appearance and identification of new values. For Mason (2004), institutionalizing the statement of significance as a guiding element in the process of conservation tends to see to it that the values present in the statement are continually perpetuated, which prevents, therefore, other meanings and

values from emerging or fading away. This is due to conservation emphasizing the physical and material aspects, thus forgetting the "natural essence of significance", which is an expression of cultural meaning. Mason concludes by adding that significance should "change, and involve multivalency and dispute and be contingent on time, place and other factors" (Mason 2004, 65). Another aspect to be considered in a critique of the statement of significance is the non-inclusion of values from the past since they are no longer recognized in objects or sites by the present generation, but that there are records of their existence in the instruments of memory. If the statement ignores them, conservation work may erase or conceal the attributes of the objects and sites that convey those values, thus denying future generations the possibility of understanding the site more fully.

Based on the conclusion of the analysis above, this article puts forward a new definition of cultural significance and sets out a proposal for reformatting the procedures of the Burra Charter Process.

Cultural significance is redefined as the set of all identifiable values resulting from continuous (past and present) judgment and the social validation of meanings of objects. From this definition, it must be observed that significance includes present and past values, those that are in dispute between the stakeholders, and those with no more meaning in the present, but that are still in the collective memory, or recorded in memory instruments.

When this definition is used, it is possible to include some feedback actions in the procedures for 'assessing the significance' and 'preparing a statement of significance' of the Burra Charter Process (Figure 1). It is understood that instead of "assessing", one should *identify* meanings and proceed to a *judgment* of the values, according to the new definition of cultural significance proposed above. The next step is to *validate* among stakeholders the values included in the statement of significance. If not validated, one returns to the previous step (F3), or even to the step of gathering information (F2) on the site (Figure 1).

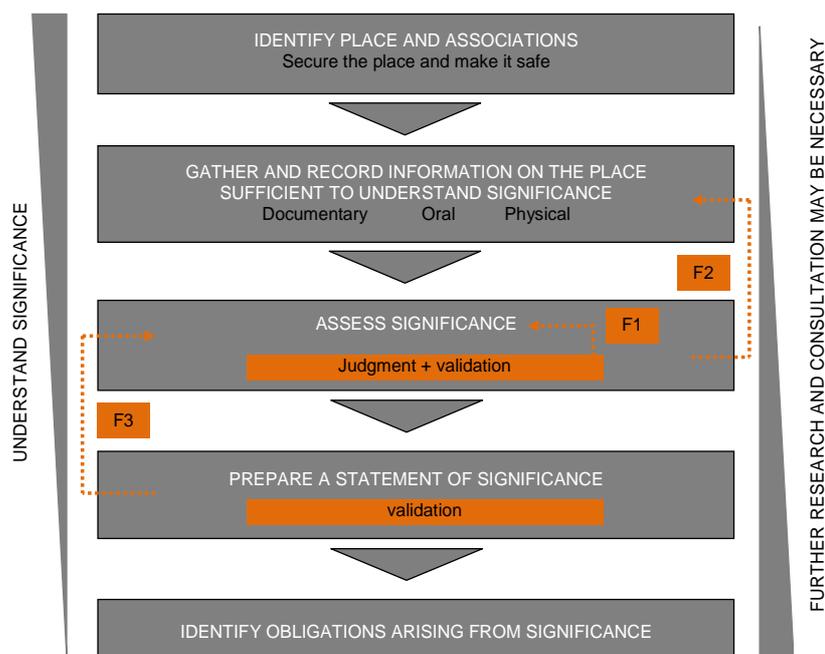


Figure 1 - Proposal for introducing feedback in the Burra Charter Process

In addition to the procedures, changes are proposed to the structure of the statement of significance, which should contain both the validated and non-validated present values, and all recorded values of the past, thus presenting a document which will serve not only for present but also for future use. This alteration is fundamental if conserving heritage sites is to be more effective, because judgment and social validation refer to values and meanings, that is, to the human aspects of the heritage, so transparency, participation and the provision of information are essential for good conservation. The conservator Muños-Viñas (2005, 212) shows he understood this aspect when he says that the “[C]ontemporary theory of conservation calls for ‘common sense’, for gentle decisions, for sensible actions. What determines this? Not truth or science, but rather the uses, values and meanings that an object has for people. This is determined by the people”.

Conclusions

The Burra Charter Process is a powerful instrument for helping to determine the cultural significance of sites, but it must be revised on account of the challenges of the plural, multivalent and contingent nature of values in society today.

Cultural significance plays a decisive role in protecting and maintaining heritage sites, since it conditions the management decisions and procedures for conserving them. Using the statement of significance, without taking the care to acknowledge its contentious origin and contingent result, generally compromises the emergence of new meanings in the process of conservation. Therefore, the statement of significance of a site will always be a snapshot of a point in time, for its cultural significance cannot be grasped in its totality since it is not possible to identify and represent all the meanings that heritage has for the individuals and social groups involved with conservation. Cultural significance undergoes changes and should be reevaluated and reconstructed from time to time.

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