

PROTECTING HERITAGE PLACES UNDER THE NEW HERITAGE PARADIGM & DEFINING ITS TOLERANCE FOR CHANGE

A LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE FOR ICOMOS

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Introduction

Over the past ten years the cultural heritage community has been repeatedly alarmed by an increasing number of interventions, projects and management approaches that challenge our established conservation approach and that at times even appear to erode the integrity and authenticity of heritage places. The evolution of the role that heritage plays in society, the appropriation of heritage by communities, and the growing acceptance of heritage as a public commodity with economic value from which profit can be derived have brought about deep changes in the way that the government and the public sector perceive and use their heritage resources. The nature and consequences of these changes have been enough to characterize the cumulative results as a paradigm shift for heritage places.

- The signs that a paradigm shift has occurred have come from many different sources, and are clear. They include:
- the official recognition as heritage of sites where there is little or no material fabric to preserve;
- the requirement to manage social processes that are deemed integral to the significance of the place;
- the characterization of heritage places as tools for poverty reduction by development agencies
- the growing acceptance of facsimile reconstructions as valid equivalents of originals long gone;
- the pandemic of façadism that continues to gut thousands of individual buildings in historic cities in both Europe and the Americas;
- the aggressive and excessive rejuvenation and adaptive use of historic buildings through excessive replacement-in-kind;
- the extreme anastylosis of archaeological ruins justified as interpretation to make archaeological sites more attractive and intellectually accessible;
- the burgeoning urbanization around cultural sites in Asia at the expense of traditional or vernacular neighborhoods;

- the race to capture tourism without proper preparation to receive them or the ever-expanding tourism infrastructure that erodes their setting.

In the World heritage context, high-rise buildings and aggressively discordant new constructions (such as in the vicinity of St Petersburg, Cologne, Vienna and Seville) are becoming a regular part of the World Heritage Committee's agenda. Earlier this year as recommended by ICOMOS, the Dresden Cultural Landscape was removed from the World Heritage List by the World Heritage Committee when construction of a bridge across the Elbe River was determined to have irreversibly undermined its outstanding universal value.

Everywhere the heritage conservation community is increasingly finding that that the professional toolkit and the doctrinal foundation on which it has relied for decades relies for an ethical practice are insufficient to effectively deal with these new demands which are often perceived as threats.

Well-intentioned efforts to understand the situation and to produce viable solutions have so far yielded disappointing results because they have been focused on one or another narrow aspect of the problem, both in terms of professional approach and cultural context. The integral and holistic approach that is needed can only be provided by ICOMOS because it is the only heritage institution in the world with a multi-disciplinary base that represents all regions and all cultures of the world. Once again, ICOMOS can prove its role as world leader in the understanding and protection of cultural heritage.

Background.

The growing understanding of the nature of cultural heritage and of the role it plays in society is largely due to years of advocacy work by ICOMOS and the international cultural community. As implied by the almost universal ratification of the World Heritage Convention, humanity has achieved universal awareness of the need to care for the cultural heritage of all cultures in all places.

The first subtle sign that the ground was shifting under the heritage community was the adoption by ICOMOS in 1987 of the Florence Charter for the Conservation of Historic Gardens. For the first time heritage conservation specialists were being guided not to preserve historic fabric, but to manage a process in a place whose character was defined by living organisms with a defined life and death cycles

Later in the mid-1990s, the traditional pre-eminent focus of the ICOMOS doctrinal foundation on the conservation of material fabric was one again modified by the ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Vernacular Heritage, which advanced the notion that effective protection of the vernacular heritage was dependent of protecting the inter-generational transmission of the traditional knowledge that enables its endurance. There was further recognition that vernacular architecture and settlements do change over time as the society that produces it also evolves and adapts to the needs of its time.

Other that shifts were occurring in what at the time was believed to be the heritage paradigm resulted from the confrontation, also in the mid-1990s, between Eurocentric and non-Western perceptions on the acceptability of conservation treatments and their effect on the authenticity of heritage places.

Asian traditions of replacement and renewal of historic fabric contradicted the overriding Western tenets that held form, materials, craftsmanship and setting to be sacrosanct. The Eurocentric doctrinal foundation that had been developed for over two centuries to sustain its focus on materiality was effectively challenged in the Nara Document, which recognized for the first time that authenticity is a relative concept that depends on its socio-historic context.

More recently, and without necessarily denying the aesthetic and historic values traditionally attributed to heritage, the concept of heritage places that is emerging characterizes heritage as a major anchor for cultural identity and positions it as an important element at the heart of community development. Under the new heritage paradigm, the range of values attributed to heritage places has expanded to reflect its new social role as well as the many ways in which it is appreciated by previously unrecognized stakeholding communities.

The advent and access of these previously unrecognized stakeholder communities to the cultural and political arenas was first recognized in ICOMOS by Australia ICOMOS in its Burra Charter. The opening of cultural forums to unspecialized professionals has enabled them to identify a broad range of heritage places that, while of great significance to smaller groups and minorities, previously had gone undetected by official policies and dominant societies. This phenomenon of universal social inclusion concerns both minority groups in fully industrialized and globalizing societies as well as traditional indigenous cultures living by choice or circumstance in greater isolation. The official recognition of the heritage of these groups had led not only to a numerical explosion in heritage inventories, it has also been accompanied by qualitative changes in the form of new categories of heritage places that reflect more universally the heterogeneous way in which places can link cultural groups to their ancestral past, to explanations of the present, and to their understanding of the cosmos.

The repositioning of heritage as part of community development has also brought changes to the way that the more traditional categories of heritage places, such as individual buildings, historic towns and archaeological sites, are perceived, valued and treated. By becoming integrated in the development process, heritage has been subsumed into a process that is inherently dynamic by responding directly and constantly to the evolving needs of society at any given time. In other words, even in the Western world, the values of traditional heritage no longer reside exclusively on its physical fabric and form, but on intangible concepts that by their very nature and in constant flux. The dispersal of values between material and intangible vessels increasingly comes at the expense of the historic fabric of the place. Common examples of this are the thousands of buildings that are subjected to façadism. A building's economic and use values may override its historic and documentary values, and used to justify a complete interior gutting in order to make it functional and competitive in the real estate market. A far more intriguing example is the World Heritage site of the Sydney Opera House, where local authorities insist that its values reside equally in the material aesthetic forms and the use of the place as a major performing arts center. What this means is that the building's interiors may be altered and changed without any alteration to its overall significance as long as those changes respond to the demands imposed by the constantly evolving technology of musical and performing arts presentations.

Perhaps more complex is the situation with historic urban areas, where values have also expanded from being assumed to rest entirely in its urban fabric and its building morphologies towards the dynamic nature of the city and its need to provide a vibrant setting for communal life. In other words, an important cultural value of the historic city rests precisely upon its inherent evolving forms to replace obsolescence with functionality.

The Challenge

It is commonly accepted now that the values attributed to a heritage place are not an immutable constant, but rather that they evolve in respect to time and space. A specific stakeholder group may attribute different values to a place as the group's needs evolve. Likewise, one generation may attribute values to a place that are different from previous generations. Adding to this complexity is the fact that different stakeholder groups may attribute entirely different sets of values to the same place, and those values may be in direct conflict to each other.

Given the constantly shifting nature of values, how can then speak of Statements of values or even of a Statement of Outstanding Universal Value in the context of the World Heritage Convention? The truth is that values can be neither protected nor preserved. Values simply emerge from and exist in the ether of the communal public consciousness. Any attempt to institutionalize or freeze them permanently would be tantamount to social engineering or even ideological propaganda. This is not to say that values are unimportant. Understanding values will always be central to the proper protection of heritage, but what really is crucial for conservation is to understand clearly where those values lie, that is, the vessels of value and of significance.

In fact, what the heritage conservation community has never really protected or preserved values; the task has always been protecting and preserving the material vessels where values have been determined to reside. In the now obsolete words of an earlier version of the World heritage Operational Guidelines, for the old heritage paradigm the nature of those material vessels of value resided in the form, materials, craftsmanship and setting of the place.

Over the past 200 years, the modern heritage conservation movement developed under the assumption that values rested mostly, if not entirely on this material form. The philosophy of conservation and its resulting doctrinal foundation, the protective legislation, the identification and official registration processes, and the methodological framework and professional protocols for intervening in heritage places are all fixated on the protection of the material vessels that carry the value.

The new heritage site paradigm whose values reside on intangible concepts, leads us to the need to seek answers to a series of questions which can be summarized as follows:

- When the value of a place rest on an assortment of intangible concepts and tangible elements, which takes precedence? The conservation of the tangible or of the intangible vessels of value?

- If values in a place rest on intangible concepts and not on its material evidence do we have the right tools to protect those intangible vessels that carry its significance?

This is a call to the more than 9,000 members of ICOMOS to join and participate in a truly global, multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary exercise. Members of ICOMSO are urged to mobilize their intellectual and professional resources and work in unison to come up with an effective structure that will define the tolerance for change in the new heritage paradigm. All National Committees and International Scientific Committees are urged to join in this endeavor, and to recruit partner organizations that will support our work.

The Process

The work will proceed in sequential phases that in total will last two years, so that our first set of recommendations may be ready for the 17th General Assembly in 2011. The project will be guided and moderated by a steering committee consisting of Michael Turner, *****

Stage 1: October –November 2009. Preparatory Stage.

The Preparatory Stage will allow for the drafting of background papers commissioned from recognized practitioners from various regions and backgrounds in order to describe the situation from various angles. Each paper will also recommend a field of inquiry to pursue. The papers will be posted in the ICOMOS website so that all participating members may read them.

Stage 2: December 2009 – April 2010. Reaching Consensus on Understanding and Defining the Issues

For each of the recommended fields of inquiry in the background papers, a moderated Forum in the ICOMOS webpage will be established for an open discussion. The Forum will proceed according to a sequence of questions that will open for comments for a specific amount of time, which will be announced when the question is posed. At the end of each discussion period, the moderator will issue a summary of the discussion, along with conclusions. All members of ICOMOS will have access to all of the forums by using their membership number as a passkey. To contribute to the work, National and International Scientific Committees will be encouraged to hold meetings on topics related to the ongoing discussion.

Stage 3: April – June 2010 – Analysis and Consolidation of Stage 2 Results

The Steering Committee, working with the Stage 2 Forum Moderators will analyze the totality of all Forum results and consolidate them into a single document. Based on this information, a new set of Forum topics for discussion during Stage 4 will be adopted. These topics will deal, inter alia, with the expansion of the doctrinal foundation, the development of new protective tools and the adoption of new policies.

Stage 4: July-October 2010. The Reinforced Heritage Toolkit

As with Stage 2, topics for various electronic moderated forums will be set up (based on previous results, as of now unpredictable in nature), and discussion will be guided according to a series of questions that will be open for discussion for specific periods of time. Summaries will be provided by the moderator at the end of each question.

Stage 5. October 2010. Defining the Completion of the Work

At the 2010 meeting of the Advisory Committee, discussions will be held on the results of the work with the purpose of defining what additional effort needs to be completed over the following year in order to take a clear set of proposals to the 2011 General Assembly