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“Principles and practice”

Connecting principles with practice: from charters to guiding case studies

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Since the beginning of the Conservation movement, activists and professionals in this field have expressed their ideas through charters, which are in fact manifestos of sets of ethical principles, theoretical statements and operational indications, thus revealing the ‘utopian’ nature of the movement itself.

Charters are documents and monuments at the same time: they reflect the state of the art of methodological thinking in conservation at a given time and place, and represent useful elements for a critical look to the discipline. However, their use as reference texts in practice has not prevented very uneven results and heated debates on how principles have been and should be applied to real cases.

Diversity in heritage typology or cultural contexts are generally called for justification in contesting established principles; the inherent ambiguity of language is also a cause of confusion that the efforts of many charters to refine definitions do not eliminate; more often, the lack of awareness of the historic and philosophical issues at stake behind the debates that these documents hope to overcome is the cause of a blind application or rejection of charters.

Possible improvement of awareness of conservation cultural implications may be: 1) a more critical education of conservationists that improve the knowledge of the historical and cultural contexts that gave life to the conservation movement and consider charters as products of this process more than tools for training; 2) a honest and 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, possibly based on illustration and discussion of agreed and debated conservation works, explicating the reasons brought in favour or against, and the related sets of principles. First experiences have been initiated by ICOMOS Australia and the GCI, but it seems necessary to further explore the potentials of case studies critics, from the international to the local, and from the planning to the architectural level.

Heritage diversification and shifting of principles

Over time, the scope of charters has expanded and has been detailed: new documents have been developed to address conservation issues of specific typologies of heritage (historic gardens, historic towns, vernacular heritage, wooden structures, etc.).

Expansion of the notion of heritage has been accompanied by the progressive specification of theoretical and operational contents of charters. Since the Venice Charter, the production of new documents has been oriented to address specific conservation issues posed by particular typologies of

heritage, which, for their peculiarities (i.e. related to adopted building materials or technologies or use), seemed to pose fresh conservation problems in respect to 'traditional' stone- built monuments: how can we think to preserve a wooden/thatch temporary hayloft or, enlarging the scope, the terraced landscape of Cinque Terre, if the knowledge that produced those object, and above all the necessity of use of these properties has been lost? And how to establish which is the 'sustainable' balance between change of society and change of territory? Interrogatives opened by such questions may be addressed also when considering 'traditional' monuments' 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 shifted – and generally the first is the result of the second – consequently, also philosophies of intervention have been modified: monuments protected with the aim of symbolizing national values have been treated according to conservation criteria rather different from those underlying interventions based on reasons of sustainability or on the need to save non renewable resources. However, the reflection on the challenges posed by these new heritage typologies represents a chance for an overall reflection on conservation and on methodological criteria for intervention developed for monuments that has not been completely explored. The openings towards sustainable development and the management of change bring challenges still to be picked up in the field of architectural conservation.

In fact, the production of documents for specific types of heritage properties has generally implied, more or less consciously, the introduction of operational principles that refer to a different theoretical framework from the one underlying the Venice charter. One of the most evident examples in this sense is the Charter for historic gardens, elaborated in Florence in 1981. The charter 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”; art. 3 it says that, as a monument, the historic garden must be preserved in accordance with the spirit of the Venice Charter. However, since it is a living monument, its preservation must be governed by specific rules...” on this base, the charter establishes that, in certain cases, reconstruction may be recommended, while the Venice Charter explicitly has ruled out any reconstruction work, while admitting only anastylosis (with a certain amount of contradictoriness) which is rather difficult to be implemented 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?) According to the authors of the Charter of Florence, the vegetal, changeable and perishable nature of garden 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, just because gardens are designed architectural works, though built with different materials than architecture, would suggest interventions of integration that are “distinct from the architectural composition and ... bear a contemporary stamp” and not reconstruction “à l'identique”.

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. A number of 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 documents to attempt such a reflection, we find the Dechambault Charter, developed by ICOMOS Canada francophone chapter in 1983: in it the

specific traits and character of Quebec's cultural identity and heritage are outlined, as shaped by the interaction along history among the geographical and climatic conditions and the populations that have lived there.

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. The 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, or, better still, the most interesting aspect of these documents appears to be their preliminary reflection more than the indications 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 Burra Charter (ICMOS Australia), which however has outlined a methodological framework for decision-making, 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. Recent regional documents are the Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China, 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 concentrate 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 endeavour does not always contribute to clarify differences that, most of the times, depend only on the perspectives from which interventions are considered, and sometimes risk to oversimplify 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 addition of material: those used to frequent building sites know very well that this is a fictitious distinction, since both interventions imply removal, modification and addition; similarly, it is of no use defining adaptation as a separate form of intervention on built heritage, in that all restoration works generally contemplate also adaptation.

At a general level, these documents, while recalling the Venice Charter and reaffirming every time its validity, intend to distinguish themselves, on the base of heritage technical and constructive differences or of its cultural meanings. Often, however, the introduction of operational indications different from, or opposite to, the Venice Charter are not rooted in a real and logical justification in these differences, but 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.

Contradictions in charters and application to practice

The use of charters as reference texts in practice has not prevented very uneven results and heated debates on how principles have been and should be applied to real cases. On the other hand, these documents, “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).

In fact, charters are the result of compromises among some reference principles, the concrete outcomes of intervention choices, not always consistent with those principles, and the ideas of the major promoters of these documents. Often, these texts contain very rigorous statements of principle and methodological indications, weakened by subsequent exceptions, inserted for reasons of stability of the existing fabric, for not clarified needs for monument unity, to justify conservation works already carried out and, perhaps, also due to the awareness of the difficulty to establish practical rules once for ever.

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». Where the introduction of the adjective 'valid' and the attribution 'of little interest' open to drifts that are difficult to be controlled. At art. 15, it peremptorily affirms that «all reconstruction work should be ruled out a priori», but contradicting itself immediately after by admitting that «only anastylosis ... can be permitted» and adding «the material used for integration should always be recognisable, and its use should be the least that will censure the conservation of a monument and the reinstatement of its form», thus leaving space to reconstruction practices, which in fact, have been reintroduced in most of the following charters.

The inherent ambiguity of language is also a cause of confusion that the efforts of many charters to refine definitions do not eliminate and that may imply 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 way in which the concept of history is understood, 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.

Proposals for improvements

Most of the problems quoted above would not have particular relevance if they were made explicit and if there were more awareness among conservation professionals of the historic and philosophical issues at stake behind the debates that these documents hope to overcome: as it has been recently reaffirmed at a conference on Cesare Brandi's influence on conservation theory and practice, 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 derive by adopting a different perspective, that gives charters their proper place in conservation debate and by focussing on the study of the history of conservation in relation to its broad historic context, to the philosophical issues that lie behind, and to the concrete conservation problems that are posed by the monuments.

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

Education and Training

Graduate and post-graduate education and professional training in the field of conservation 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 historic contexts in which charters have been developed, the relation with the debate in the field of architectural design, or the new frontiers reached by philosophy or other field of knowledge may help a better understanding of their overall meaning and of the 'eternal' questions that conservation also attempts to answer. Educational programmes would do a better service to future professionals to start from objects and their problems, instead of principles as expressed in charters; while principles should be studied and analysed with reference to the theoretical thinking of those who have contributed to develop charters, in order to achieve a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of why and how certain axioms have been elaborated.

Education of the public is also important and should aim to enable it to understand the issues and dilemmas that conservationists face when dealing with heritage management. It seems therefore 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 different possible solutions she may opt for, according to the methodological framework she refers to. 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.

A critical look to the adopted charters

The observations on texts and documents expressed in the lines above underline that inconsistencies among charters, 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 only afterwards proposed to the consideration of a more or less open scientific community for their final revision. This often implies insertions, local alterations of the texts which may influence the overall meaning of the document also beyond intentions.

In this sense, 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 that have influenced the drafting of the text may contribute to reinforce their credibility. Such an analysis should 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 stimulated 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 should consider: 1) the situation before the intervention through available documentation (not only the one that has been produced for the project); 2) the conservation problems and adaptation needs for the object; 3) the objectives pursued through the intervention both at 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 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.

Some well known examples, more or less recent, of restoration and reconstruction works that have been largely debated are the intervention on the Place Royale in Quebec City in Canada, the cleaning of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, the recent reconstruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar, or of the Frauenkirche in Dresden, the latter especially because has opened the doors to the reconstruction of the whole square around the church, initiated by private developers, according to standards that nothing have to do with those used for the monument. 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 that underlie different approaches to conservation, and their possible pros and cons, starting from the outcomes of these approaches. Choices in concrete examples 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, in order to limit unwanted consequences, such as the technical skills of workers or restorers.

Guiding case-studies

The search for different guiding tools, 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 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, whose common element 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, as most of the collection of best practices that have been developed in the recent years, privilege the policy and management level of conservation over the architectural level and concentrate their attention on process and the correct functioning of its phases as a warranty for positive results. However, the application of correct evaluation criteria and management benchmarks only partially may ensure a good result at the architectural or urban/landscape quality level: making efforts to consider as many values of a site as possible in planning its conservation or ensuring public participation in decision-making lie at a different level in respect of the one of technical or aesthetical quality of an intervention of conservation. While for long the latter has been considered the only objective of conservation project, though very rarely achieved in practice, today we risk to 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 the social, economical, urban and above all architectural level.

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 influence the final quality of the conservation work, often much more 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. 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 instrument as internal aids to professionals that need to be interpreted in new projects.

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