

The contribution of theoretical thinking to defining the nature of Heritage: key factors fuelling conservation practice

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Unfolding Theories in Conservation History

The paper investigates the influence of the theories developed on the ground of philosophical disputes in Conservation. Such theoretical unfolding envisages the quest towards the definition of authenticity in terms of material originality and social identity, with the aim to achieve clarity when attributing universal values. The discourse has proved to be of heterogeneous nature, since not only standing between philosophy and legislation, research and practice, but also shared by different stakeholders. These operate in fact on the edge of multiple scales, dealing with sites of listed and non-listed, however local, status. The recognition of a scale-related concern in the field, both with traditional and modern Heritage, has also generated an enlargement of perspectives, therefore embracing concepts such as cultural landscape and environmental sustainability. Within the development of such discourse, cornerstone Charters and Conventions play a relevant role in influencing the academic and professional background, while reflecting significant aspects underlying the gradually developing philosophy of science. Bringing some additional examples from the UK contribution to the field, the research offers a critical overview: this spans from the earliest stages of the conservation discipline, as opposed to the practice of pure repair, through to the latest considerations of an integrated process, highlighting the key factors which have had particular influence on ontological and epistemological questions over Conservation. If the Amsterdam Declaration (Council of Europe 1975) has led the way to a more environmentally aware discipline, the Burra Charter (ICOMOS 1979) has brought attention to the intangible values, other than cultivating a coherent theoretical thinking with previous achievements in the field, and the ongoing revision of the Operational Guidelines. Based on a thorough review of the extant literature, the paper aims to investigate an environmentally aware discipline of Heritage protection, demonstrating its need to be of iterative and questioning nature; it also leads to consider compatible re-use as potential means of enhancing an economically viable and socially sustainable practice, for which tentative conclusions and recommendations are offered.

Keywords: Charters, Cultural Heritage, Conservation Philosophy, Context, UK.

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1. The substance of authenticity

1.1 Introduction

Although Heritage significance plays an important role in a balanced approach to Conservation, a need for more definition has arisen, together with the debate on authenticity. The importance of investigating a conceptual framework over theoretical boundaries has been recognised: this concept is culturally-embedded, yet withholds philosophical connotations informing epistemological and methodological justifications to Conservation.

Authenticity is the main qualifying condition for the inscription onto the World Heritage List, which includes today 962 natural, cultural and mixed properties, selected by the World Heritage Committee on the basis of a range of 10 Universal Criteria: to this regard, the character of universality dates back to UNESCO's foundation (1945) when the need for a common ground of dialogue was expressed out of major post-war concern. Despite being given more definite and up-to-date criteria in the *Operational guidelines* of the late 70s (UNESCO 1978), the original concept still lingers in World Heritage Selection Principles (Cameron 2009), posing the question of how to interpret its meaning, notwithstanding diversity. At the same time, the coeval Burra Charter (ICOMOS 1979), was paving the way for the recognition of tangible as well as intangible values (Pickard 2002): if historic, aesthetic and architectural characters are still being considered as subjective criteria, however at least capable of being formalised, the Outstanding Universal Value to be found in ideas and beliefs (criterion vi) has recently involved a bigger challenge (UNESCO 2012). A recent key date in the debate is also the Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS 1994), which has attempted to define such concept as well as encouraging the gradual introduction of "cultural landscape", as described by Hudson (2007). Authenticity has seen the extension of its influence onto a range of related disciplines, which have gradually attempted to re-consider their premises (Zancheti *et al.* 2009). On account of this, it may well represent a theoretical platform to overcome divergences in terminology, of historical and social character; however, it also requires further semantic investigation as much as *Conservation* and *Restoration*, with their meaning varying over temporal and spatial terms: "rehearsing the history of definitions" as the author points out in his essay "helps re-discover the origins of the differences between different authorities", thus facilitating their translation in practice (in Bellanca 2009, p.54).

Before being formalised in the Venice Charter for the first time (ICOMOS 1964), authenticity had already been referred to as a valuable character to be preserved (Boni 1885); what was intended by the Italian architect was material legitimacy, his thought being in line with the then current movement against the treatment of monuments performed by most Victorian architects. With the assertion that "the last fifty years of knowledge and attention have done more for their destruction than all the foregoing centuries of revolution, violence and contempt" (Morris 1877), the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was born, urgently calling upon Protection in order for it to replace Restoration. The doctrine heralded by William Morris has not been altered over the last century, since no theory has ever opposed to the idea of Protection (Wells 2007). However, what changes today is the approach to cultural significance, hence to the multiple nature of authenticity, which allows

for openness to interpretation since it is encouraged by constant changes. On such basis, it is advisable to take into consideration an “unchanged” *principle*, as advocated in the Manifesto, as well as the *theories* it generates, subject to potential alteration. Today, the need to protect buildings, as opposed to restore them, stems from the fact that the idea of restoration represents an anachronistic attempt, only capable to reproduce artefacts which have neither temporal nor material relevance.

The idea of reproduction had been largely investigated since the early 30s: social critic Walter Benjamin had remarked the role of authenticity highlighting the concept of the “*hic et nunc*” of the original artefact, which could not be reproduced by any means of imitation or technique (1936). In line with such studies, Borges (on repetition and reversibility, 1949) and Barthes (on reproduction and interpretation, 1980) give theoretical demonstration that a reproducible history is likely to bring to the risk of its abolition. In the Conservation debate, this is relevant when considering new forms and uses, between the need to document the past on one side, and the recognition of material and philosophical difficulties on the other. Technological constraints are visible, especially when the cultural aspect of new technology becomes a value of its own, as it occurs, for instance, in the conversion of a modernist villa into a House-Museum: its avant-garde window frames struggle to be re-proposed as such, not only for authenticity purposes (hence a common issue in Heritage Conservation), but for the message of a brand- new, and at the same time transitory architecture, that they were once to convey. This opposes to the more traditional concept of a building which is still here to last, carried forward by the Conservation discipline until underlying paradoxes of authenticity (Sharp 1998) have questioned its epistemic ground. It is essential to highlight that through the retention of material character it is possible to preserve the asset’s significance, thanks to the communicative role intrinsic in the object (Muñoz 2005) and the interpretation of its signs: not only does this imply an inter-subjective process (the object and the observer); it also provides good basis for the justification of a bottom-up approach to Conservation, where the code comes from the social dimension (the relationship between the object and the observer, generating reproduction, hence memory), rather than from abstract criteria, as often recurring in current legislation.

2. Theoretical perspectives

2.1 From the sense of unity...

In the post-war era, the need for a unified approach to aspects regarding socio-cultural and political issues was perceived as the major tool to ensure long lasting peace and collaboration among Nations, thus influencing theories in Conservation. At that time, the principle of Heritage Protection had already been heralded, first with the institution of the SPAB, and then internationally formalised through the Athens Charter (ICOMOS 1931), adopted at the First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments. Being the first charter of its kind, it is discussed that its advent prompted an evident approach of indoctrination in the field, as opposed to previous preservation systems, “rhizomatic, sending flows of meaning” (Wells 2007, p.3) but not as structured and defined.

Drawn in occasion of the Second International Congress, the Venice Charter (ICOMOS 1964) has inherited the underlying meaning of its predecessor, although particular stress shifts from the notion of civilization to that one of culture, from the monument as expression of national character to the monument as witness of historic evidence; hence, an evident concern for philosophical implications arises, stating that restoration “must stop at the point where conjecture begins” (ICOMOS 1964, art.9). This line of thought can also be explained with the unsettling climate generated by epistemological uncertainties on the scientific method, whose ground of validity claimed for further exploration and assessment, therefore aiming, in the case of Conservation, at defining a degree of authenticity that could be as objective as possible: Heritage was being considered as a document, whose evidence only would be able to validate assumptions and models, while relying on observation. After this, theories start to diverge, with the Venice leading to the Burra Charter (ICOMOS 1979) fifteen years later; the shift of theories is subtle, however relevant in terms of methodology and clearly influenced by the Post-War controversial attitude towards the recent positivism proposed by Modernism. To this regard, Wells observes that the excess of positivism and reliance onto a deductive approach in the Venice Charter has led to establish an “hermeneutical truth” of authenticity (2007, p.7), then revisited in the light of relativism.

2.2 ...to one of diversity

The Burra Charter set the beginning of gnoseologic uncertainty: on the ground of the post-empiricist philosophy of science, the relativism advocated by Feyerabend (1975) finds its transposition on theoretical pluralism. In his view, only this approach is capable of allowing theoretical progression, although with the risk of falling into a dimension of questionable coherence and incommensurable ideologies (Halliday 1990, pp.63-65). While disseminating respect for cultural identities (UNESCO 1966), the Burra Charter represents the beginning of cultural relativism (Wells 2007), and recognises that the significance of a place is embodied in its fabric and setting; it also acknowledges the plurality of values, including aesthetic, historic, scientific and social characters (ICOMOS 1979, art.1), hence both tangible and intangible. Coeval to the growing concern for this plurality of Heritage types and historic townscapes, major attention was also given to the relatively recent Modern Heritage and its Post-War expression: international organisation Do.Co.Mo.Mo. was born in 1990, which marked the recognition of highly relevant Conservation principles and dilemmas regarding the acknowledgement of multifold values and formal interpretations. Some years later, on the basis of the growing perspective based on relativism, the Nara Document (ICOMOS 1994) sanctioned an important step in respect to cultural and Heritage diversity: as to this notion, the semantic boundaries currently steer towards the inclusion of multiple aspects, to be outlined through the definition of authenticity (Jokilehto 2005).

As Bardeschi has observed in the occasion of the ‘Values and Criteria in Heritage Preservation’ Conference (2007), “authenticity” derives from Greek, “autos”=from itself, hinting at the material identification of signs; yet, it represents a temporal variable altogether, and cannot be diminished to its mere state of origin, as it inevitably features a dynamic and modifiable nature. This is how the Italian critic, with the support of Benjamin’s theories (1936) demonstrates that it is an integrated concept of material and intangible evidence, which needs to be acknowledged on both levels in order to understand cultural significance.

The assessment criteria are not clearly defined: on one hand, there is need to explore the principles of authenticity, as gaps in its conceptualization are clearly visible, making their operational application difficult to appoint (Zancheti 2009); on the other, it is worth noting that the character of authenticity makes it a variable which cannot be underpinned through formal criteria. Whether it is possible to quantify such data has been investigated in the occasion of the Riga Charter (2000), which suggests authenticity can be described as a measurable concept (Stovel 2001), thus bringing new methodological questions.

2.3 Understanding the spatial and temporal dimension

When stating that the significance of a place is “embodied in its fabric, setting and context” (ICOMOS 1979, art.1), the Burra Charter sets the basis for a broader perspective, thus embracing not only a monument-focussed, but also an environment-aware approach to the subject, consistent with recent concerns for sustainability issues. One of the main factors underlying this shift is to be tracked back to the post-war effects on the global economy: following the widespread rise in the living standards in the 50s and 60s, which brought to land densification, urban sprawl, and necessity to revise the existing urban planning system, major concern for the resulting impact started to arise among the affected countries. As a consequence, the Amsterdam Congress is the first relevant attempt, within the Heritage Conservation field, to move towards what we would today define as sustainable development, hence embracing an environmentally oriented approach.

Not only does the shift towards a broader perspective represent a modification in the object, but also in the approach itself: Heritage Conservation contemplates material intervention on the artefact as a pure means to attain re-use and fruition (Carbonara 2002), and therefore Preservation in the broad sense. The understanding of an integrated approach also involves an awareness of the semantic implications of “Conservation”, “Preservation” and “Restoration”, which was object of theoretical misunderstanding in the post-war decades (Bellanca 2009). The definition of “Integrated Conservation” was internationally appointed by the Amsterdam Declaration, and later on re-adopted in article 10 of the Granada Convention (Council of Europe 1985): in the latter, the need for legislative implementation was also called upon, in the light of the emerging concept of sustainable development. To this regard, UNESCO has since long played an essential role in the definition of a landscape-based approach to Heritage Conservation, whose roots can be found in the treaty of the General Conference in 1972. However, the first edited document (UNESCO 1978) has been revised various times in the following decades, through the integration of up-to-date objectives and approaches which have better defined the spatial and temporal attributes of historic townscapes.

The definition of cultural landscapes, as “combined works of nature and of men” was first formalised in 1994 and then given additional specifications (in Jokilehto 2005, pp.22-23, art.35-42): this proved how the World Heritage Convention has gradually integrated Heritage valorisation with an environmentally sustainable practice. Against this changing background, also the Burra Charter was revised in the late 90s, and articles concerning the definitions of key elements rewritten. The combined notion of “cultural landscape” points at the dynamism of the “interaction between humankind and its natural environment” (in Jokilehto 2005, p.22,

art.37): hence, what we may define as a large-scale perspective is an attempt to understand matters within their own changing circumstances, rather than a lack of attention for localism. As this suggests, the main concern nowadays is carried on into two directions: one is the scale of action that the legislative system needs to focus on, in order to achieve a collective yet local-oriented action; the other one is about the nature of Conservation itself, lacking objectivity since it is affected by cultural changes, which generate bias in perspectives.

3. The UK Approach

In 1987, the UK was one of the first countries (Pickard 2002, tab.1) to ratify the Granada Convention (Council of Europe 1985), which marked the acceptance of an integrated approach to the discipline. In the following decade, English Heritage contributed to the publication of other documents, with the aim to raise awareness of the surrounding environment and its relationship with the social aspect in Planning initiatives (English Heritage 2000). On these premises, the definition cited in the internationally revised Burra Charter is also shared a few years later in the ICOMOS UK Cultural Landscapes Paper (2004), describing value as what “people give, either individually or collectively, and at local, national or international level” (in Jokilehto 2005, p.45 art.2). After this declaration, in 2006 the UK signed the EU Landscape Convention (Council of Europe 2000), reformulating an integrated approach to landscape protection (Hudson 2007), while anticipating the sustainable development brought up by the Faro Convention (Council of Europe 2005).

While the concern for cultural landscape has brought to an enlargement of perspectives, recently developed in the system of Heritage Landscape Characterization (English Heritage 2011a, p.4), at a more local level it has generated an attempt to enhance local awareness: this has translated in the recognition of Conservation Areas, first with the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act (1990) and then with the gradual achievements of the Heritage Protection Reform (Historic Environment Conservation 2006). The aim of this initiative, still ongoing, has been to facilitate an integrated approach while modifying the statutory character of criteria into a more inclusive practice, contemplating social, cultural and environmental needs. Such factors need to be translated into values: those related to architectural history, for example, currently the cornerstone of the UK legislation; and those expressed by the community itself, to be incorporated into the existing legislative so as to avoid the loss of a single system (Hudson 2007), however with careful consideration that they are not demoted to secondary consideration. The NPPF, published in March 2012 (Communities and Local Government 2012) and temporarily superseding the PPS5 (Communities and Local Government 2010), has intended to set particular focus on the management of change, with specific regard to the issue of sustainable development (par.6). This refers to seeking improvement in the quality of the historic environment (par.9) within three broad roles (economic, social and environmental), which should never be taken in isolation because of their mutual dependence (par.8).

4. Operational and methodological perspectives

4.1 Integrating theory into practice

It has been recognised that thinking in Conservation Planning and Management has developed extensively in the last two decades (Hudson 2007): this is evident in the national commitment to open boundaries to a more Integrated Practice, as initiatives within the Heritage Protection Reform have shown (English Heritage 2011b). However, both in the UK and abroad, what is hard to achieve is putting the notion of inclusivity into practice, not only understanding the definition of values and their interaction with the intangible aspects of Heritage assets, but also devising operative means to make this relationship effective. As Turnpenny reports (2004), the acknowledgement of such forms of cultural Heritage has been one of the main achievements by UNESCO, who also recognises the inseparability of tangible and intangible elements in assessing Outstanding Universal Value; on the other, such identification needs to overcome this specificity and identify how the constantly updated devised criteria (UNESCO 2011) can be translated into roles, guidelines and frameworks, in particular with regard to the much discussed criterion vi (UNESCO 2012). Appointed in 1972, it has been at the core of the debate thereafter, since it recognises associative and intangible values of properties (Cameron 2009, p.130), which are at the same time not directly verifiable and subject to dynamism when integrated in operational terms. Determining the status of Outstanding Universal Value for inclusion in the World Heritage List has inevitably different legislative and provisional implications to those arising at national level; this notwithstanding, it is important to carry the research while considering both dimensions. Since the theoretical assumptions on the spirit of a place are not meant to vary according to the extent and geographical scale of the enquiry, it is on this basis that it should be possible to point at solutions tackling methodological issues first, hence viable and contextual specifications towards the best set of strategies to apply.

4.2 A shift in the driving question

It has been argued that, from Morris' Manifesto (1877) no other theory has ever been as innovative as to change the standpoint of Conservation (Wells 2007). However, later social changes contributed to further theoretical concern, since at the turn of the XX century the architectural panorama initiated the alteration of what until then had been regarded to as a "style". The modernist movement, strengthened by the innovations in technologies of the Industrial Revolution, brought a completely new perspective in architecture: often mistakenly referred to as a style, "perceived in a skin-deep point of view and superficially adopted as simple form" (Tostões 2011), it goes in fact beyond that. In some way anticipating the coeval doctrine of the "hic et nunc" advocated by Benjamin (1936), it suggests that any material or technique is being materialised into an object only once, hence it needs to be investigated in its specific time and space. Tournikiotis (1999) suggests that we should eventually transcend visual features so as to consider a conceptual understanding of modernity and focus on Modern architecture in terms of interrelating ideas to challenge the future.

As to the supposed eternity of long-lasting new materials, the literature reckons this is in dichotomy with the intrinsic "ideas of flexibility, functionality and transitoriness" (Canziani

2009, p.39). Benjamin's notion of "hic et nunc" hints in fact at the substantial matter of the Built Heritage, which raises attention when translated in terms of international agreements: first, with the objective assumptions of the Athens Charter (ICOMOS 1931), still featuring a nationally-based approach to Conservation in contrast to the international one of the modernist movement; then, with the Venice Charter (ICOMOS 1964), claiming for Heritage assets to be treated as documents, on the basis of an international common ground. After the II World War, the much advocated sense of unanimity was still in place, however gradually questioned by an evident increase in the acknowledgement of diversities within unity: the conflict had in fact led to widespread destruction and a shared feeling of fear towards potential threats, not to mention the political and cultural difficulties brought by the Cold War. At first, this situation generated an automatic response of cohesion, the foundation of UNESCO (1945); then, uncertainties were gradually raised as to how post-war positivism could co-exist with multiculturalism (Inglis 1995) while an economic upturn and an extensive consumeristic attitude were putting the risk of loss of national identity.

After the Venice Charter (ICOMOS 1964), the sense of diversity translated into the crossing of boundaries in Heritage Conservation: in the beginning, this shift took place in terms of disciplines, being open to architectural, but also urban, territorial, environmental and economic aspects, as described in the notion of Integrated Conservation in the Amsterdam Charter and Declaration (Jokilehto 2005, pp.23-25); then, consistent with this perspective, since 1972 the World Heritage Convention has also aimed to reveal and sustain the great diversity and varying interaction between the communities and their environment, while also stressing onto the importance of living traditional cultures within a multicultural and pluricentric approach. It is reckoned that the definition of environmental sustainability, as pioneered by UNESCO in 2005 (Bandarin *et al.* 2011, p.21), has arisen mainly out of the need to tackle change in time and space, while attempting to achieve a balanced approach and long-lasting results (UNESCO 2005); moreover, with the Nara Document (ICOMOS 1994), the acknowledgement of the temporal dimension alongside that one of cultural diversity has fully taken place, and been identified in the notions of stratification and history.

A well-grounded methodological approach to Conservation has not only shown to be relevant to understand the historical background (cultural benefit), but also to acknowledge how this is able to inform potential frameworks of action for the future (operational benefit). As to the history of a place, the recent acknowledgement of ageing, bringing to stratification and the consequent problem of continuity, has been extensively informed by the philosophical panorama throughout the last couple of centuries: first, with the concept of Entropia in thermodynamic, coined in 1865, then with the gradual recognition of Indeterminacy, best represented by the theorisation in quantum mechanics made by Heisenberg in 1927 (Ugo 2008, p.22). Against this background stands the post-structuralist approach of the 1960s, with the discussion of temporal notions such as tradition, influence, development (Foucault 1969), whose epistemological and phenomenological acknowledgement brings to newly revised concepts of past, present and life-cycle. On such basis, the International Seminar in Lisbon (2006) has attempted to re-establish the transmission of Heritage (Bellanca 2009, p.51) as inheritance for the future, as well as suggesting the dynamism of re-use to ensure longer life-cycles.

5. Conclusions

The paper provides an overview of long-term trends, useful to understand potential future developments. In XIX century the principle of Conservation was first laid out on account of the coeval tendency towards the organisation of knowledge; after being later re-defined with specific focus on the object, which needs to be attributed documental and cultural value, the spatial and temporal dimension took over, which is evident by the gradual shift of attention from monuments to places (Marquis-Kyle and Walker 1992), and from places to landscape. The report has also highlighted two main categories of problems intrinsic in Conservation: one, dealing with the ontological argument of authenticity, thus providing coordinates on which theoretical thinking has been grounded. Not necessarily opposed, yet different, is the latter category, where it is possible to identify problems showing an operational rather than ontological nature: as this seems to be the most prominent direction of research nowadays, methodological and technical issues arise, pointing at the importance of putting theoretical thinking into dynamic practice. It is hence suggested that the focus on fruition, which has been claimed to secure longer life-cycles (Carbonara 2002), is able to overcome the ontological issues, provided the suggested re-use is compatible with current cultural aspects; it also offers an interesting relation between the means (*how*) and the epistemic foundations of the aim (*why*), which may potentially be investigated through community involvement and a deeper understanding of the social changes that have taken place so far. The Nara Document has marked a turning point in the debate on authenticity, still ongoing (Stanley-Price and King 2009); however, it is with the later definition given by Jokilehto in 2000, as of an intrinsic quality in its recognition (in Bellanca 2009), that an hermeneutical character is given. Although dealing with the interpretation of intangible values, this is able to inform an effective practice, provided it allows open debate on operational outcomes.

The consideration of re-use offers a viable response to social, cultural and environmental needs: it attempts to turn the aim from one that is only embedded in the theoretical principles to one concerning a more practical, tangible approach. When dealing with regeneration and reconversion, the discourse of musealization is highly relevant to the much-debated meaning of authenticity: in this case, topical features often tend to be re-proposed regardless of their original nature and risk altering the inner nature of the cultural legacy, while conveying anachronism and historicism. Hence, Conservation needs to be ontologically and operationally driven: methodological tools are claimed to overcome the gap between theory and practice, local authorities and users, while conveying actual meaning to nominal and expressive authenticity.

Continuity is found throughout the succession of theories and its identification is highly important in today's approach. The need for unity is no longer expressed in the object, diversified in their forms, but in the strategy, claiming for integration of the disciplines, hence accounting for a unified and aware approach. What we expect is an ideal coincidence of operational boundaries with an integrated concept of landscape. Such identification, although challenged by gaps between quantifiable strategies and qualitative interpretations, enables ground for multidisciplinary research, fostering an iterative process of assessment: Conservation needs to act as the aim as opposed to the tool, creating methodological premises to bridge intangible cultural significance and material fabric to be retained.

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