

ICOMOS - THE 8TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND APT

By Francois Leblanc

Very few APT members seem to know that the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) met in Washington D.C. this year; indeed, very few APT members participated in this international meeting. Why aren't the best North American specialists in the field of conservation of historic buildings not participating more actively in international affairs? Why aren't they present and competing for their just share of an interesting professional services market? Is it because they are not interested or because they are being kept away from this activity?

I would like to say a few words about this international organization, what it did in Washington and what opportunities it offers APT in the immediate future.

The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) is the international organization created in 1965 under the impetus of UNESCO to advise it on matters concerning the conservation and "mise en valeur" of historic buildings and sites. It essentially gathers together specialists in the conservation of monuments and sites from various countries. It includes some 3,000 members from 50 different countries.

ICOMOS meets every three years in a General Assembly. This year it met for the 8th time since 1965 in Washington D.C. It was the first time that ICOMOS gathered outside Europe. Having served on the staff side, as the Director of this organization for four years and having been on its elected Executive for three years, I know how reluctant the organization was to meet outside of Europe. It is said to be very expensive for the Europeans and the rest of the world to meet in the U.S. though in fact it is no less expensive for Americans and the rest of the world to meet in Europe for these international meetings.

During this meeting, for the first time in their history, ICOMOS members confronted a leadership choice: between Jacques Dalibard of Canada, one of APT's founders, espousing an open ICOMOS, focussed on stimulating an active process of debate and discussion to improve our collective conservation practice, and Prof. Roberto di Stefano, promoting the pursuit of lofty and permanent doctrine by a small elite. The vote, though it was very close, went to the Italian. This choice has profound implications for ICOMOS members and for the organization's immediate future.

What lessons can we as APT members draw from the ICOMOS meeting in Washington and the choices confronted? A few lessons may be drawn.

Based on the report presented by the Secretary General, it appears that the international organization is

losing membership at a time when APT membership grew to record levels both in North America and internationally. APT must be doing something well.

Amongst other things, APT has stabilized its publications, insuring that they appear regularly and are highly focused, one on technical experiences and the other on news. ICOMOS' publications have adopted a more philosophical and quasi political slant, and have amalgamated news and technical information. Probably something that we should avoid.

Secondly, ICOMOS, by its choice in the leadership vote, re-affirmed itself as an elitist and centralized organization. On the other hand, we feel the wind of openness and participation in today's APT. The leaders of ICOMOS are stating openly that they only want the "best" from every country to sit at the international table. APT places great hopes in the activities of the craftsmen who want to re-integrate within the ranks of APT as full participants and are organizing an important international meeting in New York next February, and the efforts of several Board members to open up the organization to younger members and students through our training programs.

Thirdly, ICOMOS has consistently made it difficult for those speaking English to play an active role and be served with the same level of quality as French-speakers in the organization, while APT certainly does not have this problem. In fact, APT could easily take advantage of the fact that the anglophone community is very much upset with ICOMOS and actively solicit within this potential market to strengthen its international base. With a little bit of effort, APT could become the most important international platform of exchange for anglophone specialists in the field of preservation.

Fourthly, ICOMOS is becoming stagnant: most of the presentations made in Washington D.C. were *deja vu*. In the track that I followed at the General Assembly, only two speakers out of twenty-four had anything a little bit out of the ordinary to offer, and one of them was American. All the others were presenting papers that discussed a traditional way of studying and preserving monuments and sites. In particular, three Europeans followed each other presenting a conservation study on a medieval church, the same sort of study that we have been exposed to for the last fifteen years. Nothing much of what was presented could be of use to developing countries. On this point, I cannot say that APT has yet made important strides, but at the last meeting of our Publications Committee it was agreed that low cost, low tech solutions were going to be one of our priorities in the next few years. Furthermore, the fact that a Main Street tour was organized in Austin, Texas, and a Main Street track well attended in Victoria B.C. is an encouraging sign that APT is opening up to new approaches which offer new ways to look at the preservation of our heritage.

Fifthly, ICOMOS is unable to demonstrate the kind of

leadership in the doctrine area that it proclaimed for itself. The Washington assembly adopted an international charter for the conservation of historic towns that was immediately challenged by some of its own members in the first technical sessions that followed, as being a set of principles that could hardly be used by anyone as an effective tool. Indeed, the charter is almost useless for us in North America as our notion of "historic town" goes much further than the traditional historical or archaeological values to encompass people and economic principles in a way and to a degree which would probably shock many of the authors of this charter.

Finally, many of my North American colleagues were shocked by the attitude of the Europeans towards our heritage. Lack of respect for our heritage was very evident; some went so far as to say openly that they thought the only thing really worth saving in the U.S. was Coca Cola. The "simple" North American heritage or the explanations of American colleagues about the difficulties of raising funds to save a "little brick building" were of no interest to

them. How can we talk seriously about heritage preservation if we do not respect each other's heritage? I believe that this is the first step to a real and profitable exchange: respect. Respect each other as professionals and respect each other's heritage. Even in North America, we are frequently guilty of this sin: how often have you seen "East Coast" specialists look with derision or arrogance at more recent examples of central or western provinces?

ICOMOS is presently a weakened organization with diminished staff, resources and facilities at its central secretariat in Paris, and a financial situation which is alarming. On the other hand, many of the young specialists who came to Washington discovered new horizons, made new friends and shared some of their concerns with other preservation specialists. They really got a "boost" of energy out of this meeting and interaction.

ICOMOS must react quickly and assume fully its international role or international organizations such as APT (which is almost as old) may take over a portion of its field.