

A VARIETY OF CONSERVATION PRINCIPLES AND METHODS – THE BASIS OF CONTEMPORARY HERITAGE PRESERVATION

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The requisite of each discipline is the definition of the subject of its interests. Moreover, this definition should be constantly updated.

The subject of heritage preservation and conservation is heritage. What is our modern understanding of heritage?

Heritage is not presently defined objectively. The notion of heritage is extremely wide; it may include almost all elements of culture and nature. A single object and a town, a wooden cottage and a palace complex, a pyramid built thousands years ago and a 30-year-old building- are all treated as the elements of cultural heritage. The elements of Japanese heritage are the actors of the traditional Kabuki theatre, in Australia, Ayers Rock, which aborigines believe to be a holy mountain, is preserved, in Africa, heritage includes tribe customs. Heritage may mean names of streets, systems of fields, recipes for alcohol production.

Such a variety cannot be defined as a whole and explicitly. A closed definition of heritage is not possible.

What is the reason of this variety and hence problems with its description which conservation is faced with?

The answer is simple; nowadays, heritage is subjective rather than objective. This means that heritage does not exist separately from a subject- a human being, social group, nation, country, culture. Depending on needs and possibilities, each of these subjects defines its heritage. The elements forming heritage are selected according to highly individual criteria. Therefore, their number is so high and their character so varied.

Furthermore, the subjective conception of heritage is superior to the discipline dealing with it- preservation and conservation of heritage, as the modern conception of heritage does not originate from the conservation theory but from social needs. The societies facing deep and rapid cultural, political, social, civilization and globalization changes widened the notion of heritage. It should be clearly stressed: conservators who only fulfill social needs in this field did not widen this notion.

Therefore, the conservation theory and practice should be adjusted to the subjective conception of heritage.

2. What conception of heritage is the conservation theory really based on?

In ICOMOS, there are several scientific committees, however no committee deals with the conservation theory or doctrine.

Therefore, the documents of the Charter accepted by ICOMOS may be treated as a means of interpretation of this theory. Their analysis clearly shows that they are based on the Venice Charter passed in 1964. This Charter is referred to by the Florence Charter (1981)- historical gardens, the Washington Charter (1987) – historical towns, the Lausanne Charter (1989) – archeological heritage, the Nara Declaration (1994). The Venice Charter still defines the conservation sphere of activity.

However, the Venice Charter is based on the traditional, European conception of heritage, which is limited to the idea of monument. In this conception, the monument is mostly a piece of art, a document, a single, material object. The monument defined in such a way may be objectively analysed; there are explicit criteria enabling us to evaluate and compare monuments. The traditional monument conception is objective and the conservation doctrine originates directly from this traditional conception. The value of the monument - a piece of art, a document - mainly consists in preserving the authentic form and substance of an object. Therefore, the basic criterion of appropriate conservation is the preservation of the monumental substance and form of a particular object. Such a criterion may be universal. The universal criteria may define conservation works concerning all the monuments. Therefore, the Venice Charter strictly determines the range of conservation activities. They are limited to conservation, restoration and anastilosis??

However, the current interpretations treat the Venice Charter selectively. The notion of a monument included in the Charter is not referred to, yet its conservation principles still hold.

The conservation principles are accepted as universal thus operative in each case. They have their own status, independent of the monument conception from which they should originate.

3. The modern heritage preservation and conservation have then two bases: modern subjective conceptions of heritage and old universality of conservation principles. Their combination leads to an inevitable conflict.

This conflict may be well illustrated by Polish examples. In many Polish towns, the historical old complexes destroyed during the II World War were reconstructed. The sociological

studies reveal that their inhabitants think highly of this reconstruction. They admit that the reconstructed historical centres are the basis of identity and cultural continuity of their towns. These centres are extremely important elements of heritage of local communities. This process is even observed in the towns whose populations have completely changed due to shifted borders between Poland and Germany (e.g. Gdansk, Szczecin). New inhabitants recognize the value of reconstructed old towns (heritage of the place). Therefore, in Poland- 60 years after the war- the reconstruction of old complexes is still carried out and this process is supervised by conservators.

From the point of view of universal conservation principles, however, reconstruction and rebuilding cannot be treated as the conservation activities. These principles do not permit to recognize the values of restored towns; this happened when international experts assessed the restored centre of Gdansk.

On the other hand, the rights of inhabitants to reconstruct the historical centre destroyed during the war, fire, earthquake, flood cannot be denied. The citizens have the right to reconstruct the buildings, which symbolize the history and achievements of previous generations. This kind of heritage cannot be replaced. It can only be re-created. Therefore, the re-creation of historical urban systems and reconstruction of historical forms of architecture is necessary and fully justifiable, especially that the authentic objects in these towns do not actually exist.

The example presented above shows the conflict between the subjective heritage conception and universal conservation principles. The conflict between obvious rights of all social groups to define their own heritage and rules created by conservators of monuments in the past.

4. The conflict between the modern conception of heritage and traditional principles of conservation may be illustrated by numerous examples. Its diversity and dependence on circumstances results from the subjective essence of heritage conception. Therefore, only in some cases the value of heritage means the authentic form and structure to which the traditional conservation principles are subordinated. This problem has already been addressed to so many times (e.g. the conference in Nara) that some generalizations can be made and the consequences resulting from connecting the modern conception of heritage with traditional conservation principles may be shown.

Firstly, the belief that there are universal conservation principles, constantly present in the consciousness of conservators, creates the condition of apparent order in this discipline. There is no need of developing the conservation theories since fixed conservation principles are available.

Obviously, the progress takes place but it is not sufficient. It should be accepted that there is no satisfactory terminology and methodology to describe heritage and the conservation works performed. In practice, the problems start already when

the identification of heritage within the area of cultural products is needed; when “ heritage” is to be differentiated from “non-heritage”. New terms are introduced – authenticity, identity, integrity, which are used as the criteria of identification and evaluation of heritage. The most recommended one is the criterion of “authenticity” used to assess the heritage entered for the List of World Heritage. “Authenticity” is defined in several aspects. However, determination of the kinds of authenticity does not mean that the methods of their analysis are known; e.g. there are no methods available to evaluate precisely the degree of authenticity or the changes of “authenticity” during conservation works. These issues are assessed and solved subjectively, without proper verification.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the conservation theory is not being developed sufficiently and it does not verify its paradigms.

Secondly, maintaining the universality of conservation principles favors the traditional monuments. The heritage from the central Europe mainstream is simply the most open to conservation works directed at preserving the historical form and substance. In this group of objects” the authenticity test” are the easiest to perform.

On the other hand, the heritage in preservation of which the traditional conservation principles cannot be used is depreciated. Moreover, in many cases the limit of acceptable actions is not known.

Thirdly, maintaining the universality of conservation principles is extremely dangerous for the practice of heritage preservation. Knowing that the use of conservation principles is limited, conservators become convinced that their actions cannot be normalized (standardized), thus cannot be evaluated objectively. This creates danger of voluntarism. The unreality of principles leads to the conviction of their lack. Unfortunately, the errors in this discipline are practically not discussed. The errors could be disclosed by conservation criticism, however this does not exist due to the lack of any theoretical support.

The danger is even greater as the preservation of heritage always created conflict situations. Preservation and conservation requires either stopping or directing the process of changes. Conservators work under pressure from investors. When conservators lack principles, the limits of heritage transformations are determined by investors’ needs.

This is particularly dangerous since the pressure to subordinate the forms of heritage preservation to the tastes of mass consumers, tourists becomes increasingly stronger.

5. Finally, the following conclusions may be drawn:

Firstly, it should be agreed that the subjective conception of heritage requires new adjusted methods of preservation and conservation. They cannot be defined in advance, yet we

know that they should be varied and cannot be universal. The variety of principles and methods of conservation creates the foundation of modern heritage preservation.

Secondly, rejection of universality does not mean . voluntarism. This great danger must be avoided at all costs.

Among other things, this means that some - traditional group of monuments will still be treated according to the Venice Charter. The Venice Charter holds but refers only to the defined group of objects.

Thirdly, we must admit that traditional qualifications of conservators are insufficient. According to modern understanding, heritage is so varied that a wider range of specialists should design the principles and methods of its preservation.

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