

An alternative approach? An interview with Anne Raidl

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From her office on the twelfth floor of the Unesco building in rue Miollis, Anne Raidl enjoys a panoramic view of Paris in which some of the famous historical monuments still succeed (but often only just) in making their distinctive mark on the silhouette of the dense urban mass. Maybe there is a symbolic appropriateness in this, since from her position in the Division of Cultural Heritage Mme Raidl represents the interests of the World Heritage Convention and the struggle to safeguard representative elements of the cultural heritage of mankind from being overwhelmed, maybe destroyed, by current physical, economic and social threats.

We asked her if she finds any problems in the combination of cultural and natural heritage within one concern; and then we discussed the different criteria that might be applied to the two.

The main difficulty is the intrinsic difference between them. It is easier to make a comparative assessment when dealing with natural sites. But when it comes to comparing historic cities, each of them having specific traits, its own significance and beauty, comparisons and choices are extremely difficult. We could thus go on for ever considering and inscribing on the World Heritage List individual monuments, ancient sites and rural or urban ensembles. Quite a number of countries could, probably with good justification, propose so many cultural properties that the World Heritage List could ultimately contain thousands of individual inscriptions. However, this is not the purpose of the Convention and if the List is overloaded it loses its effectiveness. Unless the need for a very selective approach is recognized by all concerned, the process of inscription may well become self-defeating.

What does Mme Raidl think the Convention's aims are?

Ultimately there is one aim, namely to preserve the most significant cultural and natural areas of the world which together illustrate the evolution of nature and of human creativity throughout the ages and therefore constitute for all human beings an essential source of reference, of knowledge and of enjoyment. Inherent in this ultimate aim are three tasks. The first is to select those monuments, historic sites and natural areas which can be considered as being part of this universal heritage and I don't see this as an endless process.

The building up of the World Heritage List will of course take some more years. The task of evaluating, comparing and selecting the sites to be inscribed is a complex one. However, it must be terminated as soon as possible. At some time it will be necessary to close the door (not quite—it can be left slightly ajar) because then we can concentrate on the two other tasks which are permanent. One is to help in keeping the World Heritage properties in a good state, the other one is to make them known throughout the world. For this it will be necessary to diversify the education and information activities and to organize fund raising campaigns.

(facing page) La Plaza Vieja,
Havana, Cuba. (Unesco: J. L.
Rodriguez)

It is important that attention be centred as quickly as possible on these efforts which include a number of aspects for which the support of private associations is needed. Such associations should be set up in each country so that they can take on the education work about the world heritage in its widest sense and be responsible for fund-raising. Their role is essential.

From the Unesco Secretariat in Paris it is practically impossible to reach all the various groups who at the national and local levels should be well informed about the world heritage concept and its realization. This is why the creation of private associations or foundations is so important. They could also form a network of contacts between the municipal authorities for post-inscription activities.

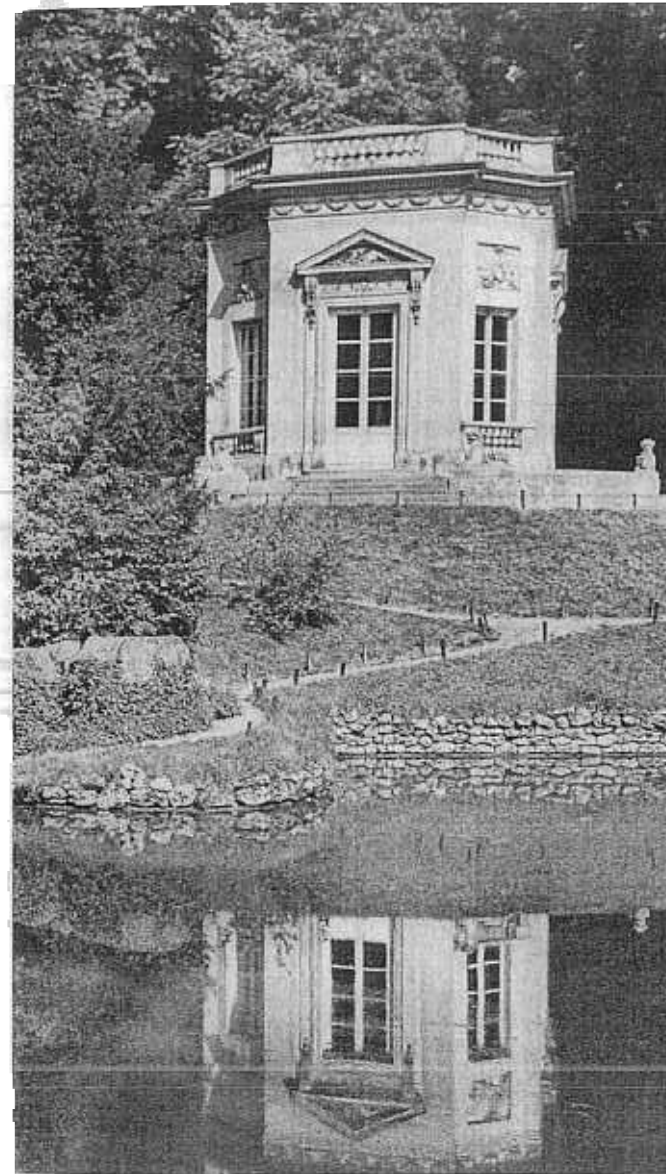
We both agreed that practical conservation generally has a better chance of success as one moves from national to more committed local levels and that such commitments represent a desirable element in a realistic assessment of the protection of cultural sites and monuments.

We also talked about the criticism sometimes heard that there is maybe too elitist a concept attached to the World Heritage List and that this might appear to be encouraging a feeling of national pride rather than the spirit of international cooperation. 'Perhaps that could happen' thought Mme Raidl;

but the basic approach to the Convention should nevertheless be non-national, non-political in recognition of the common trust concept on which it is founded, which transcends national interests and boundaries. Each nation thus is the guardian of those world heritage sites which are found on its territory so as to safeguard them for all mankind, and the international community has an obligation to help any nation in discharging this trust if its own resources are insufficient.

Does she think the present system of selection responds satisfactorily to these requirements?

As I mentioned earlier, the selection is becoming increasingly difficult. Each inscription has implications in terms of future proposals and evaluations. The List comprises already a number of famous sites and monuments but also others which were not among the most predictable candidates. For the time being the selection is limited necessarily by the system of nomination and the fact that not all countries have ratified the Convention. If we try to think in a supra-national way, and I believe we must do so, then it seems to me that some further guidelines are necessary so that the List may be seen ultimately to possess a logical and coherent structure in which links between many of the properties can be perceived. I am not pretending this is easy to formulate, but I have been considering if it might be possible to adopt a thematic approach. If we review world architectural history we can see how certain seminal institutions or buildings are linked to ones in other countries, sometimes other continents, through the inspiration they offered; or we can see how the mutual cultural influences among different parts of the world are reflected in the significant works of architecture that are not only single monuments of great value but a part of a wider cultural pattern. It seems to me that these patterns are worthy of careful consideration and discussion by knowledgeable experts to investigate if such thematic ideas might provide an alternative to the present practice in inscribing the properties one by one as if they were in isolation. The List is becoming a long enumeration of such diverse elements that it is difficult for the broader public to understand the rationale



Le Belvédère, Versailles, France.

behind it. And yet some of the properties already inscribed could well be situated within certain themes. A thematic presentation of the List would make it much more meaningful because it would show the links and broader context. For the beginning, I think, the thematic approach would probably not be the sole method of assessment; above all there is need for flexibility. But it could offer a more logical basis and contribute towards closer cooperation among all the countries concerned by the preservation of properties inscribed under one theme. The recognition of such cultural links could become a strong incentive for mutual help.

Finally, Mme Raidl left us with a sylvan analogy, linking her concept of the World Heritage List to a tree in which the main branches are the broad themes growing out of our common culture, the secondary branches are the sub-themes and the individual sites are the leaves or fruit. As on a tree, occasionally a leaf grows directly from the trunk, and exceptional sites that do not fit under a theme could still be placed on the List. Leaving the Unesco building, it seemed to us that already the trees in the forecourt were beginning to acquire a new look.

The Monastery of Santa Clara,
Antigua Guatemala.



Résumé

Dans cet interview, Mme Anne Raidl, de la Division du Patrimoine de l'Unesco, parle des difficultés inhérentes à la diversité des critères applicables au patrimoine culturel et naturel qui présente des différences intrinsèques. Or, à moins d'une grande précision quant aux critères utilisés pour l'inscription d'un bien sur la Liste, nous pourrions réduire à néant son utilité. En effet certains pays pourraient inscrire des biens nationaux en trop grand nombre sur la Liste, qui en comprendrait bientôt des dizaines de milliers. Mais la Convention ne fut pas adoptée pour cela. Son objectif, selon Anne Raidl, est double: d'abord faire un choix puis aider, guider, éduquer afin que les biens sélectionnés soient entretenus.

Les accusations d'élitisme sont examinées ainsi que le rôle de la nation et de la participation au niveau local. Mais Mme Raidl souligne surtout le caractère apolitique non-national, flexible, positif que devrait garder la Convention de façon à encourager la compréhension et la collaboration entre les pays.

Elle suggère comme alternative qu'une sélection thématique soit envisagée. En effet certaines institutions ou certains bâtiments sont liés à ceux d'autres pays par l'influence qu'ils exercèrent ou par l'inspiration qu'ils donnèrent. D'autre part l'expansion d'une culture à d'autres partis du monde fut reflétée par la construction de monuments architecturaux importants qui ne sont pas seulement d'une grande valeur en eux-mêmes mais qui font partie d'un large tissu culturel. Un choix thématique pourrait donc bien être une alternative aux choix actuels de certains monuments isolés. Ce ne serait d'ailleurs probablement pas la seule méthode d'évaluation car, avant tout, il nous faut garder une grande flexibilité. Mais cette idée pourrait offrir une base logique à un choix supranational.

Resumen

En esta entrevista, Mme Anne Raidl, División del Legado Cultural de la Unesco, comenta las dificultades ocasionadas por los distintos criterios que puedan aplicarse al legado cultural y natural, así como sus diferencias intrínsecas. A menos que no haya la menor duda respecto a los criterios empleados para inscribir cualquier cosa en la Lista, podríamos terminar por destruir nuestro propio empeño. Algunos países podrían sobrecargar la Lista, que podría llegar a incluir decenas de miles de inscripciones; pero no es esa la razón de que se iniciara la Convención. Considera que la Convención tiene dos responsabilidades: seleccionar la propiedad y después guiar, educar y colaborar en el mantenimiento de la misma. Comenta también el tema del elitismo, así como la cuestión de la participación a nivel nacional y a nivel local; pero, por encima de todo, Mme Raidl subraya que el tema básico de la Convención debe ser no político, no nacionalista, flexible, positivo y calculado para fomentar el entendimiento y la cooperación internacional. Sugiere que un enfoque posible para la inclusión en la Lista podría ser el de tipo temático. Ciertas instituciones o ciertas construcciones se hallan vinculadas a otras en distintos países, a veces a causa de la influencia que ejercieron o la inspiración que ofrecieron; o la expansión de una cultura a otros lugares del mundo se refleja en la inauguración de obras arquitectónicas significativas que son, no sólo objetos únicos de gran valor, sino parte de un complejo cultural más amplio. Estas ideas temáticas pudieran proporcionar una alternativa a la consideración actual de sólo monumentos aislados. Probablemente no sería el único método de evaluación; sobre todo, hay que tener flexibilidad. Pero podría ofrecer una base lógica a nivel supranacional.