

Dag Myklebust:

PRESERVATION PHILOSOPHY -- THE BASIS FOR LEGITIMATING THE PRESERVATION OF THE REMAINS OF OLD CULTURES IN A MODERN WORLD WITH NEW VALUE SYSTEMS

Why do we take care of our cultural heritage?

Perhaps this question sounds unnecessary to those who have dedicated their lives to doing exactly this. If, however, you are willing to run the risk of becoming unpopular among your colleagues by asking them this question, at worst you are greeted with irritation, and at best, you might get the reply: "I happened to ask myself that very same question only the other day!" After a long pause, you might also get some hesitant attempt at an answer, which will doubtless fall into one of four main categories, to which I shall return in a moment.

But first, I should like to emphasise that I am not trying to mock hard-working colleagues who take their life's work very seriously. The point I am trying to make - equally seriously - is this: the fact that we cannot give a clear and simple answer to the question "Why do we take care of our cultural heritage?" is the major problem in conservation - not only nationally, but also internationally.

In some countries, it is simply taken for granted that the conservation of the cultural heritage is carried out in an organised manner on an official basis. In fact, it seems such an obvious thing to do that it is quite unnecessary to question the fact. This is generally the case among the cultural nations in the Old World, those colonial powers which have made Europe a major political force in the world.

In other countries, there hardly exists any form of organised or professional heritage conservation, because politicians are concentrating on other pressing social problems. Those who understand the importance of taking care of their country's cultural heritage, are often hindered by the fact that politicians do not even have a term for this in their vocabulary.

Many countries in the Third World are in the situation that they not only need and desire help to conserve their cultural heritage, but also receive that help in the form of visiting experts engaged in restoration schemes, or as assistance in administering projects, or in the form of financial contributions. But are they really receiving the help they actually need?

At meetings and conferences arranged through ICOMOS, one continually hears speakers referring enthusiastically to the Charter of Venice as the solid foundation for our work. But is not the value of this set of dogmas just like Venice itself - slowly subsiding, because they belong to a world where the circumstances surrounding the physical remains of our cultural heritage are changing, and therefore also the conditions for their continued existence or perhaps for their demise.

Can the fact that the Theory and Philosophy Committee of ICOMOS has not shown any kind of activity during the past few years - or indeed at any time - be an expression for the fact that we do not have any need for theory, nor have any problems of a philosophical nature? Or is it an expression of the fact that we are really in a deep philosophical crisis in our cultural heritage work, both at a national level and in terms of international co-operation?

It is these questions which I would like to stimulate a discussion about. My contention is that by neglecting to maintain the philosophical basis for our work as conservationists, we are in danger of entering into a situation where not only international co-operation is at risk, but also work involving the cultural heritage at a national level - even in the rich nations of the Western World - ceases to be taken seriously by the politicians. Preserving the cultural heritage ceases to be regarded as a common social duty, but becomes one of the many niches in the commercial world of property development and real estate.

My diagnosis is this: the cultural nations of the Ancient World which are also ancient nations in political terms were in possession of a national consciousness long before the preservation of the cultural heritage became a specific activity with a theoretical basis. This did not happen until the end of the eighteenth century, as a bi-product of the awareness of the existence of historic change and of the fact that also Volksggeist (the "spirit of the nation") and Zeitgeist (the "spirit of the age") could undergo changes in time and space. Only in times of political crisis was there any need to turn to the nation's cultural heritage and to become active in its conservation in order to propagate and strengthen the feeling of national identity. In those countries where it has been a long time since the existence of a critical situation which required the raising of the national consciousness - and particularly where there has been a strong economic development in more recent times - there has been little need to formulate the reasons for conserving the cultural heritage. No philosophical provision has been made to meet the conservation crisis.

Nations which are younger from a political point of view, but which nevertheless may be old culturally speaking, usually have a great need to strengthen their national identity in order to legitimate themselves politically. But in a country which has

formerly been a colony, where the people have lived with the norms and values of the governing colonial power for decades or perhaps even for centuries, and where the local culture has been consciously suppressed, it cannot be taken for granted that they will regard the physical remains of their own cultural heritage as the best medium for creating a national consciousness, especially when the colonial masters themselves have lost or maybe never had the ability to answer the question "Why do we take care of our cultural heritage?"

The history of my own country provides me with a good point of departure for my interest in this question. From being an independent and at times powerful nation in the Middle Ages, Norway eventually declined into a province of its neighbour Denmark. Danish culture dominated and continued to play a significant role, even after 1814 when Norway was given the opportunity of drawing up its own radical constitution. This event was the result of an increasing desire for independence and a biproduct of the Napoleonic Wars. However, we were forced into a union with another of our neighbours, Sweden, and it was not until 1905 that this union was dissolved. At this time, Norway was one of the poorest countries in Europe; we have subsequently developed into an industrial and prosperous nation.

This provides us with a double point of departure for philosophising about the reasons for safeguarding the cultural heritage. We still clearly remember how this was a national and political necessity, intimately associated with our legitimacy as an independent nation. At the same time we are now living in a society characterised by several decades of solid growth and development, which has placed the physical remains of our cultural heritage under an enormous pressure and which has given people new values. The conservation of the heritage can no longer be seen as something necessarily positive, but often in fact as a hindrance to development.

And the conservation of the heritage is by no means an important political subject. Why is it that we cannot manage to make this something which politicians must take into account? Because we cannot give a simple and easily understandable answer to the question "Why do we take care of our cultural heritage?"

We cannot even give a simple definition of what constitutes a monument.

This does not mean, of course, that there exist any simple answers to our initial question, or indeed to the question "What is the cultural heritage?" Our relationship with the cultural heritage - and by that I mean also our professional relationship - is to a great extent coloured by the fact that for us it is often an affair of the heart rather than the brain. But in order for our message to reach out to others, to the decision-makers of every category, we must put our thoughts and actions into words. The application of all kinds of sophisticated technology or the

re-introduction of traditional craftman's techniques is of little use in conservation if we cannot first decide what we should preserve. And to do that, we need to make use of words: we must define, we must explain, we must persuade, we must convince.

Attempts to define the cultural heritage can be divided into three types:

1. Delimiting definitions
2. Inclusive definitions
3. Potential definitions.

The first type is what was attempted in the early forms of legislation dealing with the cultural heritage in previous centuries. It is based on general categories of objects. However, it was soon realised that it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to give definitions which could be used in practice for determining what was a part of the cultural heritage and what was not. The conclusion was that there had to be a specific institution capable of judging each individual issue. And this is in fact still the case in many countries today.

The second type, the all-inclusive definition, is based on a detailed list of the items which make up the general category of the cultural heritage. Its weakness is that while attempting to include, it is unconsciously excluding at the same time: what is not included is by definition not a monument. Then again, there are always things which no-one has thought of, not to mention attitudes which are always changing. This manner of defining the cultural heritage is too inflexible and vulnerable to changes in time.

The third type, the potential definition, comprises objects and sites which contain the potential for becoming part of the cultural heritage. Firstly, this is so general that it can be of little practical use; secondly, it presupposes the existence of a professional institution which can continually make the necessary evaluations.

And this fact - that not even with the help of our major apparatus, words, are we capable of defining our cultural heritage to the outside world and specifying what we should therefore be taking care of, but must rely on some evaluating body - tells us something essential about the peculiarity of the cultural heritage. It is not simply concerned with objects and artifacts, buildings and sites; their value lies in what they are or what they signify for people. It is only to the extent that they comply with a human need that they become a part of the cultural heritage and require protection. An object is not part of the cultural heritage until it is perceived and interpreted as such.

This for me is the key to understanding how we can justify conservation. It is about living people and their needs today and in the future. It is the perceiving and interpreting of an object as part of the cultural heritage which makes it so, and it is their compliance with people's needs which gives them values. And in the proving of these values lies the reason and the answer to the question "Why do we take care of our cultural heritage?"

Let me return to my opening remarks about plaguing one's colleagues with this unpleasant question, and compiling the answers one received. The reasons which are usually given fall, I think, into four categories:

1. The negative
2. The paradigmatic
3. The metaphorical
4. The utilitarian.

The negative reasons are based on the situation where the conservation of the cultural heritage does not happen. One paints a picture of how individuals cannot survive without being reminded who they are and where they belong, and how they would therefore be unable to cope with practical day-to-day events.

The paradigmatic reasoning consists of describing how a group of people have a strong interest in their cultural heritage from their own particular need for preserving or strengthening their identity. This can often be an ethnic minority. In Norway, for example, the minority group of Saami have experienced a surge of national pride and self-respect during the 1970s and they have demanded a clearer acknowledgment by the State of their own particular culture, including the protection of the physical remains of their heritage in the landscape. This in its turn can be used as a proof of the need for conservation also for the dominant population.

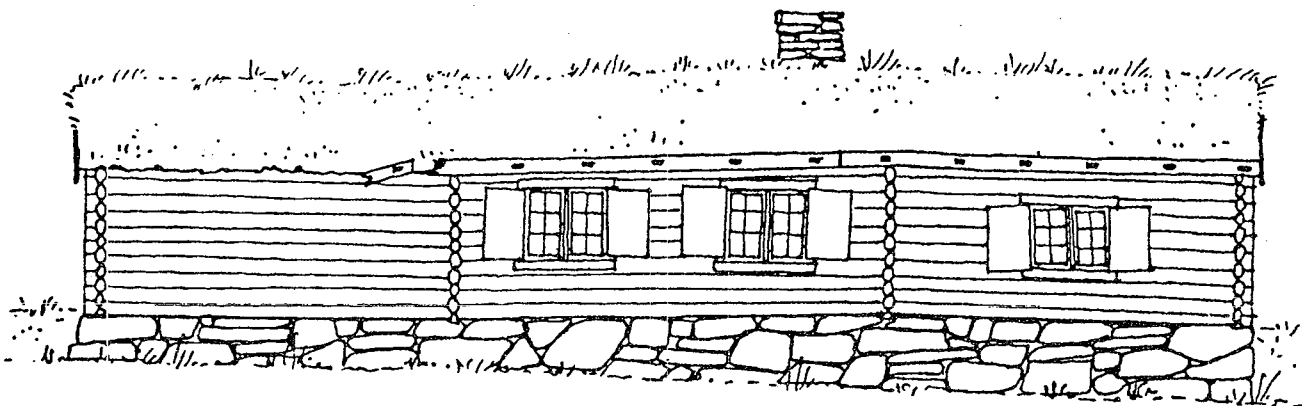
The metaphorical reasons rely on the use of parallels to describe what cannot be expressed in simple terms. To explain the importance of conserving the facade of a row of buildings, for example, the metaphor of dentistry is introduced, with its emphasis on not having gaps in the teeth, the importance of the pretty smile, the ghastly effect of replacing the canine with a fang, and so on.

The utilitarian reasons probably make up the largest group, yet the most difficult to use, ranging from emphasising the value of ancient buildings as an economic resource to the most subtle demonstrations of a monument's symbolic abstract values and the necessity for genius locii.

Is any one group of reasons more important or more correct than the others? Probably not. The physical aspects of our cultural heritage possess a complex of values which answer to our

various needs. These values cannot all be appraised simultaneously, as they are sometimes mutually opposed, but the important thing is that we acknowledge the necessity of being able to formulate our reasons. This is the only way of ensuring that people understand that conservation of the cultural heritage occupies a necessary place in society, whether it be rich or poor, recent or ancient.

I have been struggling to formulate my own reasons. I presented one major reason at the symposium held after the last General Assembly of ICOMOS three years ago, but I do not think that I can provide a final answer yet. This is the sort of work which requires discussion, collaboration, intellectual confrontation, and the comparison of different experiences. I shall therefore conclude with a heartfelt appeal to ICOMOS to revive its Theory and Philosophy Committee. I am convinced that we all need a more solid intellectual foundation for our work wherever we are. And I also believe that philosophical co-operation can help to reveal a communication gap which I fear is growing within our organisation. If there is anything we need in the world today, it is the need to speak to each other. Let us therefore start with a simple conversation about the topic "Why do we take care of our cultural heritage?" I can personally supply good reasons at any time for giving the answer: "So that people can live together in peace and harmony!"



Is this a monument?
Norwegian vernacular architecture. Drawing by Jon Haug 1986.

The fact that we cannot give a clear and simple answer to the question "Why do we take care of our cultural heritage?" is a major problem in our conservation work on both a national and an international level. By neglecting to maintain the philosophical basis for our work as conservationists, we not only place international co-operation at risk, but also our work involving the cultural heritage on a national level may cease to be taken seriously by politicians - even in the rich nations of the Western World.

The application of all kinds of sophisticated technology or the re-introduction of traditional craftsmen's techniques are of little use in conservation if we cannot first decide what we should preserve. And to do that, we need to make use of words: we must define, we must explain, we must persuade, we must convince. An object is not part of the cultural heritage until it is perceived and interpreted as such.

Attempts to define the cultural heritage fall into three categories:

1. Delimiting definitions based on specific categories of objects and involving an institution able to judge each case.
2. All-inclusive definitions, which fail in that what is not included at the time can easily be regarded as excluded.
3. Potential definitions, again presupposing the existence of a professional institution to make the necessary evaluations.

There are various reasons for our dilemma, all equally important. Our cultural heritage possesses a complex of values, all answering our various needs, yet incapable of being appraised simultaneously, as they are sometimes in mutual opposition. But the important thing is that we acknowledge the necessity of being able to formulate our reasons. These fall into four categories:

1. Negative reasons based on the situation where the conservation of the cultural heritage does not happen.
2. Paradigmatic reasons involving specific groups in the population with a strong interest in preserving or strengthening their own identity.
3. Metaphorical reasons relying on the use of parallels to describe what cannot be expressed in simple terms.
4. Utilitarian reasons (the largest and most difficult group) ranging from regarding ancient buildings as an economic resource to symbolic and abstract values.

Reviving the Theory and Philosophy Committee of ICOMOS may not only reveal the communication gap which I fear is growing within our organisation, but will hopefully provide a more solid intellectual foundation for our work and develop the ideological basis which we need.

Le fait que nous ne puissions pas donner une réponse simple à la question "pourquoi protéger notre Patrimoine?" pose un important problème autant d'un point de vue national qu'international. En négligeant d'approfondir le fondement philosophique de notre tâche nous mettons en danger non seulement la coopération internationale, mais aussi notre travail de sauvegarde sur le plan national risque de ne plus être pris au sérieux par les politiciens - même dans les pays prospères du monde occidental.

L'utilisation de technologie avancée ou la renaissance de techniques traditionnelles ne servent pas à grand chose aussi longtemps que l'objectif de notre travail de conservation n'est pas clairement défini. Pour ce faire il nous faut utiliser le langage: nous devons définir, expliquer, persuader, convaincre. Un objet ne fait partie du patrimoine culturel qu'à partir du moment où il est perçu et défini comme tel.

Il y a trois manières de définir le patrimoine culturel:

1. en se limitant à certaines catégories spécifiques d'objets à sauvegarder, ce qui implique une instance de jugement préalable.
2. en ne mettant pas de limites aux objets à sauvegarder à l'intérieur de certaines catégories définies ce qui peut d'autre part en exclure d'autres.
3. en définissant un potentiel à venir, ce qui suppose à nouveau l'existence d'une institution procédant à l'évaluation.

Il y a diverses raisons à notre dilemme, elles sont aussi bonnes les unes que les autres. Notre patrimoine culturel reflète une échelle de valeurs répondant à des besoins variés qu'il est impossible de concilier, étant donné qu'ils sont souvent en contradiction. L'important reste cependant d'admettre la nécessité de formuler ces raisons. Celles ci sont de quatre catégories:

1. de nature négative, se basant sur l'effet négatif de la non-existence du patrimoine.
2. de nature paradigmatique, consistant à définir pourquoi tel groupe doit préserver son patrimoine pour conserver son identité.
3. de nature métaphorique, c'est à dire en utilisant des parallèles pour décrire ce qui ne peut s'exprimer en termes simples.
4. de nature utilitaire (le plus courant mais aussi le plus difficile à définir) invoquant tout aussi bien la valeur économique que symbolique des monuments.

Un renouveau d'activité du Comité sur la Doctrine et la Philosophie au sein de l'ICOMOS est souhaitable. Tout en révélant les difficultés de communication existant dans l'organisation, cela fournirait le fondement idéologique dont nous avons besoin dans notre travail.