

The Actuality of the Venice Charter

Lausanne, 1990

As is traditional, an International Symposium was organised in conjunction with the 9th ICOMOS Assembly. The Swiss National Committee of ICOMOS was honoured to be host to this gathering. In agreement with the Bureau and the executive Committee, the Swiss National Committee chose the Symposium theme, 'ICOMOS, a Quarter of a Century, Achievements and Future Prospects'. The Venice Charter was one of the three sub-themes which were proposed for discussion.

The actuality of the Charter was the primary topic in this symposium. Many questions had been raised twenty-six years after its drawing up. A charter is not a dogmatic document! It is only the expression of a cultural attitude toward the values that are attached to the monumental heritage and therefore necessarily evolved with the culture in question. The value and actuality of this document has been discussed many times during a three-day meeting in Ditchley and on the occasion of the General Assembly in Moscow in 1978, and in Rome, in the same circumstances in 1981. The judgement was always in favour of the Charter. The reports on the theme that have been made at the General Assembly in Lausanne seem to suggest the same.

*Summary Report of the 9th General Assembly and, International Symposium at Lausanne, October 6-11, 1990
Sub-theme: The Venice Charter*

The sub-theme discussions were chaired by Mrs Gertrude Tripp (Austria). Mrs Ann Webster-Smith (USA) acted as rapporteur.

This sub-theme gave the opportunity to some 150 participants to discuss the Venice Charter and its philosophy.

The Venice Charter, which expresses the profound hopes and commitments of the founding fathers of the organisation has, for 25 years, been the basis of the thoughts and actions of ICOMOS members as well as of conservation professionals all over the world.

The reports and summaries of comments presented by National Committees served as a starting point for the symposium discussions.

Summary of Commentaries or Reports

Most of those who submitted reports prior to the Symposium or who took part in the debate over the Venice Charter found that the Charter is still applicable and that it validly serves the purposes for which it was designed. There were, however, others who noted shortcomings in the Charter and who suggested certain modifications in its language or focuses.

Emphasizing the shortcomings, some felt that the Charter should consider or address inter alia, urban conservation, vernacular or primitive buildings, industrial archaeological sites, 20th century architecture and its building materials, works of art that decorate the interior as well as the exterior of monuments, the setting of buildings and their physical context, and the problems of monuments and ensembles that have been destroyed or seriously damaged by earthquakes and other natural disasters.

Others called for greater precision in the language of the Venice Charter. Some suggested the need for regional or national commentaries or guidelines in order to make the principles of the Charter applicable in the different regions of the world. Representatives of ICOMOS International Committees voiced a need for commentaries or guidelines that would relate to the work of such committees. Others felt that there was a need for a better focus on the problems of sites and the problems of built ensembles.

In the commentaries and during the debate, note was taken of the problems that have emerged or become aggravated during the 25 years since the Charter's adoption including: the

increased mobility of society at large; mass tourism and its impact on historic monuments and sites; the large scale industrial development that has characterized recent decades in many countries; and, in some areas, an increase in political antagonism toward conservation, its issues and cost.

There was criticism that the Venice Charter is no longer valid because it had been 'simply an effort to address the concern about reconstruction of historic monuments in the wake of World War II'. There was another comment that the Charter and its concerns were a luxury item, one that could exist only under highly favourable economic circumstances.

On the positive side, however, many were highly favourable in their views about the Venice Charter. It was called 'valid and timely', 'basic to the national practice of conservation', 'an historic document', and "an historic monument in itself". In all, comments on the Charter were thoughtful and varied reflecting many cultures and regions of the world as well as a diversity of traditions; most were positive and almost all were creative in suggesting solutions to the problems that might exist.

For the most part, there was no suggestion that the Charter was not valid nor that there was a need for a new or different Charter. It became clear from the discussions, however, that there were problems that were specific to one country in one discipline or another, or with one material or another, that can or could be addressed through statements of standards that use the Charter as a starting point for addressing the needs of that country in particular, of that region, of that discipline, of that material, of that culture or that circumstance.

Structure of Discussions Concerning the Venice Charter

The following questions or issues were addressed:

- What is a Charter? Is it a fundamental text or is it a Constitution?
- What is the focus of the Venice Charter? Architectural heritage? Cultural heritage? Does it give sufficient attention to man-made landscapes where there is a combination of nature and design?
- Is there a need for other Charters? If so, what form should they take? Can the need for other Charters be equal or better served by commentaries or guidelines or by recommendations?
- What other Charters have already been developed that amplify the focus and impact of the Venice Charter? Participants were aware of the International Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns, the Charter for the Conservation of Historic Gardens or the Charter on the Management of the Archaeological Heritage and asked whether there were others.
- Is there a problem with the definitions, the 'notions' or meaning of the terms used in the Charter, such as 'conservation', 'restoration', 'reconstruction' and 'renovation' or others?
- What are the basic qualities of 'a monument', 'a monument of art', 'a monument of history', 'a monument of culture' or others?

- Is there a need to look at the Venice Charter's concept of 'site' or its definition?
- 25 years after the adoption of the Venice Charter are there other topics that it should address in order to continue to be timely and valid? For example, is there a need to look at legal issues or contexts that relate to conservation, education or training, public participation and advocacy, archaeology (beyond questions relating to its management), vernacular architecture or the vernacular heritage, architecture of the 20th century and its building materials, the industrial heritage?
- What about the need for diffusion and promotion of the Venice Charter and other Charters?

The Debate on the Venice Charter

The Venice Charter group was fortunate in having a large and interested group of thoughtful and creative participants. However, the absence of representatives from less developed countries of the world was felt since they might have contributed significantly to the discussions and might have helped to overcome the impression of some that the Charter and possibly ICOMOS itself are reflections of 'European thinking'.

The Need for a Parallel Text or Commentary

Some who took part in the discussions suggested that it would be very useful to have a commentary, a general text, to parallel the Venice Charter that would address the particular problems which have been set forth above, for example: the need to recognize and to protect vernacular architecture in almost every part of the world; the particular needs and problems of archaeology; questions relating to sites and differing views of sites by definition and sites as a concept; questions relating to the protection of monuments of the 20th century and their building materials.

Such a commentary might also refer to those social values that relate to the protection of monuments (some of which were touched upon by the Historic Towns Charter) and might address some of the changes growing out of the economic and social pressures that were not anticipated at the time that the Venice Charter articles 5,6 and 11, for example, were drafted. Also, such a commentary could correct what some perceived as the Venice Charter's failure to give directions or 'recipes' for action.

A possible formula for the suggested commentary might include:

- first, the Venice Charter setting forth as it does the basic philosophical and ethical thoughts on conservation.
- next, an international commentary or text such as that suggested above.
- then, the reflection of a regional perspective and
- finally, specific guidelines for those who are doing practical work in a particular field.

As an illustration of the role of regional commentaries,

Australia's Burra Charter was cited and was described as a document that is 'not designed to replace or overthrow the Venice Charter' but to address its voids insofar as the particular problems of Australia are concerned. Regional documents such as this, it was felt, might also serve to address specific terms or 'notions' or even concepts that might have slight differences in meaning in different parts of the world.

Diffusion of the Venice Charter

The communication of the Venice Charter was proposed as a priority for action. In one country where the Venice Charter has been described as 'an important tool', every effort has been made to explain the Charter in a very simple way and to distribute it widely. In other areas, where diffusion of the Venice Charter has been limited to conservation professionals, it has failed to reach town planners, government officials and others who might be in a position to use the Charter as a set of principles.

A useful proposal was made concerning the development of a study or a series of studies of cases where the Venice Charter had been applied in order to show how successful that application has been.

The Need to Reflect Changes Affecting Conservation during 25 Years

In addressing changes that have occurred during the 25 years since the Charter's adoption, participants noted the comment which was made that today's architects are not always trained in the principles involved in restoration and conservation and not always equipped to understand what they are or might be doing that could affect the nature of the monument itself.

In this respect, one participant referred to the 'rights of the monument' or the 'rights of the heritage' and the duties or obligations of specialists as professionals vis-a-vis monuments and the architectural heritage. Also mentioned were the particular problems involved in handling them.

Special problems linked with the treatment of badly damaged or destroyed monuments, particularly those linked

to national or cultural identity, were also brought up. Any project aimed at the reconstruction of such buildings poses grave philosophical problems. One must only envisage reconstruction in exceptional cases, after meticulous research, one must follow the strictest principles while realizing that the operation will be very long and costly.

Proposed resolutions

General and specific comments led to affirming the necessity to create a working group on the Charter of Venice doctrine, theory and commentaries (especially those mentioned by the international special committees) were formulated and proposed in a resolution adopted during the General Assembly of 1981 at Rome. These proposals and resolutions were submitted for study to the Resolutions Committee.

Summary and conclusions

We thank the Swiss National Committee and the 'ICOMOS, quarter of a century' conference which gave members of ICOMOS the chance of examining and reflecting on the Charter of Venice. The majority of the participants were of the opinion that the Charter had stood up to the test of time and experience and that it had perfectly achieved its objectives. The general opinion was that the Charter is a living and dynamic document which for more than a quarter of a century has served and guided the actions of those responsible for the preservation of monuments and sites throughout the world.

To sum up the deliberation of the working group, we can affirm that the Charter of Venice is a historical monument which should be protected and preserved. It needs neither restoration, renewal, nor reconstruction.

As for the future, it has been suggested that a commentary or a parallel text should be drawn up to present interdisciplinary regional and national perspectives, with the object of finding a better solution to the needs of the new generations and the coming century. The Charter should be considered in a philosophical and open perspective rather than in a narrow and technical one.