

The Significance of the Venice International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, with Special Reference to Eastern Countries*

Roland Silva
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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am indeed privileged to speak to an enlightened audience such as this, I am even more privileged to be associated with such eminent lecturers as those listed, to speak on a most important subject, and that at the first International get-together. I am deeply grateful to the organisers for the high honour they have placed on me in inviting me to this historic meeting.

Mini-Internationalism

We have for many years voiced our opinion, and indeed our sentiments, concerning International Institutions which have had an unparalleled impact on society at an extremely high and significant level, particularly in the post-second world war period. It was in the same period that the eyes of humanity were more widely opened to the hard fact of life that men must learn to live together. This lesson has been preached and practised with significant contributions to the welfare of man in the past 35 years. If we may have been critical to some extent of the limitations of such influence, and that this impact was confined only to the European community and the New World; if we blamed such organisations for considering that humanity belonged only to the Mediterranean frontiers, then this alarm campaign was launched with the important objective of focusing the attention of the International community on the inhabitants even of the distant isles of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. We would here pray that this audience will bear with us in our concern, and in some of our remarks that may further underline such a theme; for it is with a view to achieving this objective that we may occasionally overemphasise or at times underline certain shortcomings in the action of the International Institutions.

A Diplomatic Buffer

The UNESCO recommendation concerning the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, at the second International Congress of

Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, which record the decisions and the resolutions of the meeting held in Venice in 1964; and which agreement is popularly known today as the Venice Charter, is in our minds a Magna Carta for the safeguarding of the monumental heritage of mankind for the sake of the generations of the present and the future. It is also the ten commandments of conservation where it specifically says, thou shall not destroy. It also allows for nonaligned indifference towards the disintegration of monuments and of sites.

Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is and was the diplomatic charter specifically formulated to soothe the roused consciences of many sensitive conservators and those of the serious lovers of monuments. It has served its purpose, and will continue to serve the objectives of the present generation, if diplomacy is indeed the end product, and if one's conscience is sufficiently deadened to the prevailing practices of destruction and decay; or an idea more effectively presented in Buddhist philosophy as 'anicca' or the impermanence of all created things. We believe our get-together today is for a more positive purpose than to sing the swan song of romantic sentiment. We believe that we need to lay new foundations and not merely underpin the leaning towers of conservation conventions.

A Masterpiece in Theory

The Venice Charter spelt out in all seriousness the theoretical needs of the early 1960s. It was spelt out without bias, to cover the International needs of the north and the south, of the east and the west. It broadened the horizons of National and International legislation to cover the common cause of monuments. The 23 learned scholars from Denmark to Tunisia, from Peru to Poland, logically and pragmatically ensured that the Venice Charter was less idealistic, and more practical. It expanded the concepts of the preservation of monuments and widened the scope to include everyday edifices. The operational area of preservation went beyond the mere length and breadth of a monument to cover at least its immediate environment. It underlined the serious need to

involve science in the preservation effort. It spelt out the dual objectives of art and history as the criteria for selecting monuments for preservation. The hard facts of life concerning the maintenance of monuments were spelt out in no uncertain terms.

The Charter made significant headway in providing for edifices to be unwrapped from the traditional cotton wool; and to find their life span extended, with perhaps even a change of function. However, it draws the line where additions were to be permitted to the old structure; and only those that had a relationship of scale and conformity were authorised. Even the movement or migration of monuments as a commodity of cultural trade was anticipated; and the pillage of sculpture and paintings from their accepted environment was frowned upon. Attempts were made to draw the distinction between conservation and restoration and even the limits to the use of modern technology, where permissible, were defined. Although a unity of style was necessary, a differentiation between the added and the old was considered a critical mark of identity for specialists to understand. The extension of preservation to groups of buildings with significance, and to historic sites without many important buildings, was considered part and parcel of the historic heritage of man. The serious need for documentation and for making such scientific records readily available in print was stated sharply and clearly.

The question now is whether this is necessarily the end of the road, or whether there still is a path that remains to be uncovered, explored and cleared. Have nearly 20 years since the Venice Charter not provided us with sufficient know-how and experience to see beyond it?

It is not the End of the Road

Ours is the straight answer: yes there is more to do. While we congratulate the authors of the Venice Charter and hail their wisdom as senior prophets and enlightened teachers, we need now to widen the scope of our experience both in time and space.

We have to take stock of the situation before and after the Venice Charter. How much impact has the Venice Charter imposed on the grass-roots level of application? How many of the objectives of the Venice Charter have by now been incooperated into the daily workings of national legislation? Has the Venice Charter spelt out at any length the para-legislation needed for conventions in the day to day needs of historic monuments, in their surgery and repair? If not, can suitable para-legislation be formulated to provide for administrative implementation, operational technology and technical outlines to cover standard work on historic monuments, covering such items as brick, stone, timber etc.?

Has the Venice Charter looked adequately at the limitations of control covering a large percentage of monuments, that lie in the hands of ecclesiastical institutions? What compromise can the Venice Charter or its development mentality make available for the living monuments and living sites? Has the Venice Charter spelt out adequately the need for applied training beyond the realms of the philosophy of conservation; and have all grades of training been considered, be it with regard to Architects, Engineers, Town Planners and Scientists

in the different disciplines and specialities? Has professionalism, as we know it in medicine, been provided in the guilds of the lesser personnel or at craft and trade levels? Has sufficient headway been made to extend the dissemination of information and data pertaining to all professional and trade personnel needed in the conservation and restoration industry?

Has the Venice Charter considered the financial implications and the critical need for funds and fund-raising and means by which the monuments and sites could be aids towards sustaining their own life and avoid being a burden to society even in their old age? Has the experience of treating monuments of the north and the south, the east and the west, been brought together so that we enjoy the know-how of all countries, of all peoples, so that attempts are not made to segregate one region from another as is the case with professions like medicine where the Ayurvedic (sic) (Hindu?) system is frowned upon in preference to the universality of Western Medicine? The barefoot conservators of China and Japan, of India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka have looked after their precious monuments from periods before Christ, and this concept can add to the preservation principles of a new International Charter, perhaps here in Basle, if serious headway is made from this significant first meeting.

Lonesome Effort

Since the Venice Charter of 1964, UNESCO has not in any way slumbered, resting on the laurels of this significant achievement, but instead has moved forward to many fringe areas which it has seriously considered and has both tactfully and diplomatically arrested the deteriorating border questions of the Venice Charter. With regard to this, the most significant recommendation is related to Town Planning; although we would not like to raise too many queries about its effectiveness in application.

Here we refer to the recommendation concerning the safeguarding and the contemporary role of historic areas as adopted by the general conference at its 19th Session in Nairobi in 1976. We are deeply conscious that more than 75% of the built environment and the heritage of man lies in significant concentrations of human settlements, in cities and towns. It is with reference to such action that Eric Gill, a campaigner for the arts and crafts movement in England once said in vibrant terms:

*When nations grow old,
And Arts grow cold,
And Commerce settles on every tree...*

It is also with this situation in view that the Intergovernmental Conference of Ministers of Culture of Asia that met in Djakarta in 1973 resolved that UNESCO take the initiative to get the Town Planners of Asia together to work out a code of cultural ethics to preserve in a significant manner the ancient city centres of this region. We have not seen a major follow-up of action regarding this, perhaps the recommendations of Nairobi of 1976 may have sealed the contractual obligation of Unesco in this matter; and thereafter it may have relaxed on the basis that those pious hopes have now been fulfilled by codifying International thought.

In the same line of thought, we see UNESCO's efforts to encourage the documentation of monuments and sites, at least of Europe and the New World, in providing a forum for the meeting of experts on the improvement and possible harmonisation of systems of inventories and catalogues of monuments and sites used in these countries, at the Warsaw meeting of 1979. This example will, no doubt, have an effect on the other continents. The seriousness of UNESCO's intention to promote the preservation of the heritage of man is once again highlighted in its recommendation concerning the protection at national levels, of cultural and natural heritage as adopted by the General Conference at its 17th Session in Paris, 1972. The extension of the same idea at international levels was reached in a recommendation concerning the protection of World Cultural and National Heritage adopted by the same General Conference in Paris held in 1972.

While these efforts of UNESCO need to be taken note of, and the institutions congratulated, they also underline the awareness of UNESCO to these problems and its serious concern, and therefore, it is but right that International Congresses such as this held in Basle be made use of as platforms to air the views and wants to the nations through the length and breadth of the world. The representatives of UNESCO present here, will, no doubt, take cognizance of these serious remarks and battle on to codify and formalise suitable international recommendations considered necessary for the preservation of the monumental heritage of Mankind.

Voices in the Asian Wilderness

As the subject of my paper underlines its special reference to eastern countries, it is but right that I draw my examples and illustrations from this region; and the few that I have selected to illustrate the yearnings of scholars, institutions, national and international bodies, stress the crying need for reform and change in our everyday attitude towards the conservation and preservation of monuments.

As an individual scholar, Dr. Raymond Allchin, a reader in Indian Art and Archaeology at the University of Cambridge (which is the only such teaching post in Britain) stresses the need for change. He highlights the Indian example in his paper entitled 'Monument Conservation and Policy in India'. He shows very clearly that the last piece of important Indian legislation concerning monuments is as old as 1904, and no subsequent legislative thinking on the preservation of monuments has been considered after this period, except for confirming the old legislation after Indian Independence. It is hardly likely that the 1904 legislators would have had all the foresight and forethought to meet the intricate questions of commerce and city growth and to have provided all the answers to unscrupulous actions of financiers in the guise of development. Surely nearly 80 years is sufficient time to look back at the question and restructure the laws of a country concerning preservation and conservation of monuments. We, in Asia, treat India as the mother country for guidance, direction and leadership. As such the actions and reactions of this large state will have an impact towards reasoned conservation, or otherwise. It is with such giants of influence that International Institutions should apply their propaganda

machine, by stressing the importance of such problems.

The Asian effort to unify itself under a type of common market was seen in the ASEAN amalgamation where the countries of South-East Asia joined hands for economic, social and cultural unity. Under this programme covering culture, the first meeting was held between the Ministers of Education of these countries in Bangkok in 1974 with a view to formulating and guiding policy towards an active association, to cover the cultural aspects of this region. This meeting reviewed a draft development plan which included subjects such as a Sites and Monuments Unit. It had a detailed programme for training personnel involved in the restoration of cultural properties. This organization, entitled 'ARCAFA' (Applied Research Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts) has continued its collective work through the years and we were ourselves fortunate to be invited as a consultant during their deliberations in 1982 to review and revise where necessary the legislation and paralegislation concerning monuments and sites. The strength of this organisation was that a collective decision arrived at on such occasions was soon incorporated at semi-official level to the practice of the conservation of monuments in these countries. The participants were people who were technicians on the sites, and the discussions and deliberations were serious and pragmatic. In fact the three-week get-together of this group moved headquarters from site to site in the Island of Java, from stone monuments to brick and to the lovely timber and straw structures of the Isle of Bali. Although these efforts were serious and conclusive, the impact of such actions on the enemies of conservation, or the commercial world, is another question.

The architects of Asia meeting held annually in different countries under the patronage of its mother body 'Asian Regional Conference of the Commonwealth Association of Architects' agreed to meet on a common theme, the 'Conservation of Historic and Ancient Buildings' in Colombo in 1975. The outcome of this valuable seminar of professionals, concerning ancient monuments and modern construction, was only the formulation of resolutions for implementation, action and influence. These winds have blown over many a nation and the resolutions have been confined to books and files preserved carefully in exclusive libraries.

Sri Lankans collectivised their effort to contend with the enormous economic boom of 1977 and after, where the investment thermometers recorded feverish heights. Massive structures of the modern phase were being designed and the sites of the older monuments inevitably had to make way for the new. The heritage-conscious leaders of the country were taken on a sightseeing tour and the outcome of this visit was spontaneous. The authorities unanimously agreed that the architectural treasures of Colombo and, for that matter, those of the urban centres, should be carefully studied and the vital sectors preserved for the generations to come. A major gap in the legislation was to be corrected wherein the Antiquities Ordinance that provided for the preservation of monuments prior to 1815 was to be changed, and new legislation was formulated to cover the modern period from 1815. The good intentions soon found resistance from the business community of entrepreneurs, a key group that can be considered as enemy number one of monuments in all countries. The question here

is not to dispense with such entrepreneurs but rather to find their weaknesses and their strengths and work towards attracting their interest towards investing in cultural preservation and in the mixture of buildings in this wealthy, wicked world.

At an international level, UNESCO has made serious attempts from many different angles towards winning the public ear, in image building and in widening its campaign to include the preservation of important monuments of each nation. Our congratulations should go out to such enterprises as the successful completion of the massive achievement of the conservation of Borobudur in Indonesia; the timely action taken in preserving the Katmandu Valley; the sympathetic approach towards the worn out ramparts and brick-built city of early Mohenjodaro has certainly set the pace for many an Asian city. Now the campaigns have moved to other sites: Paharpur in Bangladesh, with a monastery of nearly a thousand cells; Pagan in Burma with a thousand or more stupas is awaiting registration for such international interest; and Sri Lanka has its own UNESCO Project in the 'Cultural Triangle'. These bold efforts of UNESCO in agreeing to campaign on behalf of the heritage of mankind among its Member States, International Organisations and Fund Raising Foundations, are an example of grit and sympathy towards a cause despite the hard fact that UNESCO's own pockets are seriously depleted, if not empty. We hope that this situation will not deter International Organizations from campaigning for the cause of yet other sites in Asia such as Angkor Wat, Agra, the paintings of Ajanta and Elora, the South Indian Temples, the medieval city of Manila, the Great Wall of China and the treasures of Nara.

The efforts of UNESCO to encourage collective collaboration among high level specialists was once more reflected in encouraging and inviting the participation of such specialists in a collective programme to study the historic cities of Asia, such as that held in Pitsanuloke, Thailand in 1979. This meeting concluded with an agreement to study at least one city in each of the twenty odd countries of Asia. Whether this programme is in progress or whether the resolutions agreed upon achieved their objective is a matter of administrative interest, but a conscious focusing of attention towards the subject of ancient cities and their preservation was certainly made apparent to the decision makers involved in cultural preservation in the Asian countries.

The capstan to these individual, institutional, national and international efforts at raising their voices, and in fact their heads, out of the wilderness was when the Ministers of Culture of Asia assembled in Djakarta in 1973 and resolved that UNESCO be empowered with the responsibility of inviting the important town and country planners of Asia together, and in common forum, evolved a code of cultural ethics for the better preservation of the ancient city centres of the region. This resolution of 1973 may still await implementation; or should we presume that the many other peripheral efforts of UNESCO and member organisations in the preservation of cultural property were an outcome of this and other similar resolutions?

The Need to Lock the Stable Doors in Time

We have focused the attention of this audience, and through such learned specialists much of the profession covering the length and breadth of the world, and have highlighted the urgency with which we have to revise national legislation regularly and consistently. If it is possible, there needs to be a built-in clause in the legislation that will require such laws to be revised at least every tenth year. The test of effectiveness of legislation is indeed the visual evidence of the preservation of protected monuments and areas. Their poor maintenance, neglect, collapse or destruction are the signs of whether the law is ineffective or defective. It is also suggested that International Bodies conscientiously forming collective thermostats of human sensitivity take heed to prepare necessary legislation on lines similar to the conventions covering human rights etc., which form of general legislation could be conveniently built into any piece of national legislation.

Alongside the major clauses of the national statutes, there needs to be para-legislation covering the simple but necessary guidelines codified into professional procedures. The high test of efficiency and the application of the rules of preservation lie in the refinements of such para-legislation. We consider such subtleties as the finer overtones of the score of preservation that will provide class and classicism. Such para-legislation needs to be spelt out as a legal note but rather as conventions among professionals who will recognise these under such terminology as the 'done thing' or 'not done'. In so much as the flexibility of such functions should be left to the professional bodies and to the individuals practising them, it should have the moral-bearing that would lie heavy on their consciences, so that they would be mindful of the obligation to conform.

The world still suffers from private ownership of the cultural heritage of mankind. Is the risk worth it? Is the single minded decision of a single owner permitted to dictate the fate of a French Chateau or a Norman Tower, a German Castle, a Dutch Dwelling Facade, an Italian Palace, a Gothic Cathedral, a Sri Lankan stupa, a Chinese Pagoda, a Khmer Shrine or a Japanese Monastery? Most of these are privately owned and the decisions which lead to neglect and destruction hang on the thin thread of a single owner. The same rule can at a professional level, apply to consultants of such owners who in their eccentricity may perhaps favour one period of construction in preference to another, and thereby, not really destroy a monument but historically distort the edifice, eliminating perhaps the entire growth of the Gothic period in order to highlight the previous Romanesque phase. Therefore, both owner and specialists as individuals and decision makers can make or mar the monuments of man for ever.

The living monuments require the forbearance of both devotee and specialist. Either extreme can produce distortion and eccentricity. On the one hand the restoration or rebuilding concept of pilgrims and peasants can move monuments out of their own balance and replace such sites of hallowed dignity with monstrosities of a previous generation. On the other hand the pure policy maker may be unmindful of the necessary balance and harmony that should exist between science and religion, and thereby make living and religious monuments no more than specimens of scientific interest.

Barefoot conservation or Ayurvedic restoration has gone on ever since man was born; and both archaeologists and

conservators of the present day have found no difficulty in identifying one phase of construction from another. So, why should we try or attempt today to distort this continuing convention of natural repair and restoration with ultra sophisticated identification marks indicating the new from the old? In fact, the sophistication and the ingenious concealment of data may sometimes distract or misguide the very author and specialists. As such, in our acceptance or rejection of conventional conservation practice we need not overstress as a nonscientific system the barefoot conservation or ayurvedic restoration principles, which have a clear line of sincerity to time and construction techniques.

The training of architects, engineers, archaeologists, and town planners on the correct disciplines of conservation needs to be heightened and viewed with a sense of professionalism. The archaeological conservators need to form themselves into professional groups or institutions wherein the three important objectives of training, professional conduct and standards, and financial benefit through collective professionalism, are achieved. In providing for the higher echelons of conservators one also needs to look after the middle grades of supervisors and technicians with their own counterpart professional organisations. Also one needs to consider the man on the job, and the trades at the level of mason, carpenter, blacksmith and painter must have their professional organisation to achieve the three objectives spelt out above.

The interchange of research and information and the dissemination of such knowledge without unreasonable delay is a critical component of good professional practice. Our former suggestion about professional groups implies that they may treat this as an important facet in their own make-up; but this attempt at dissemination has to be considered, thought out and provided for. The information concerning conservation may cover a range of activities from legal to professional practice, from building materials to construction techniques, from aesthetic balance to distinct layout planning. It may fluctuate between living things of men, animals, and plants to the immovable monuments of stone, brick and timber. It could cover aspects of professionalism covering contracts and competitions. In fact, a vast variety of men,

materials and things constitute the ageless needs of man the conservator in organising his own environment.

No conservation programme can be confined to the laboratory of experience, to research and to castle-building in the air. Money and fund-raising are necessary evils in the whole exercise. Here, the oft considered concept of culture being a bottomless pit has to be ruthlessly and radically eradicated from the minds of men of influence. Development is a word now popularly used in conservation areas, and should be soon re-written as development for profit, if economists, entrepreneurs and conservators are to work together in a combined effort. Here, one needs to question and re-question the areas of cultural interest that have traditionally survived on the resources of visitors and also examine the potential of economic expansion and employment which cities like Venice, Florence, Agra, Nara, Pagan, Katmandu, Istanbul, and Mexico can provide.

After all the conservation of man and his environment lay much in the ancient city centres of a time past. These selected monuments must reflect an ageless history and the story of man in community. It is such a thrust towards city preservation that we need to promote as our campaign for the 1980s, for if we strive to conserve the town centres at least their historic buildings will be spared the axe of unscrupulousness.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have touched critically on the effects and ill-effects of internationalism. We have turned a cynical eye towards the diplomacy of the Venice Charter and called it a masterpiece of theory. We have cautioned the listener that the Venice Charter by itself is not necessarily the end of the road. We have shown the scope of such a Charter and the limitations which we have either to correct or to combat. We have sounded the Asian conscience and the many alarms that the East has raised. Finally, we warned against the age old situation of locking the stable after the horses have left. Yes, these are but flashes of thought which could soon be translated into deeds if we could only heed even to voices from an Asian wilderness.

** Speech delivered by the President ICOMOS at the First International Congress on Architectural Conservation, University of Basle, March 1983.*