

CONSERVATION AND PLANNING CULTURE

Robert Adam

We take for granted the need to conserve buildings and places. From time to time we need to examine the assumptions that underly the culture of conservation and planning.

International charters summarise prevailing attitudes to conservation. Most important of these is the Venice Charter of 1964. More than any other, this Charter defines the culture of conservation. Subsequent charters acknowledge their debt to the Venice Charter and ICOMOS was set up to promulgate its principles.

The Venice Charter states that, "The common responsibility to safeguard [historic monuments] for future generations is recognized. It is our duty to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity."

It was not always so. Conservation has its own heritage. In the UK, its legislative history begins in 1882 but it was not until the post-war period that the conservation movement became significant. Listing began in 1947, Conservation Areas were created in 1967 and English Heritage was created in 1984.

Once a legal and administrative apparatus was created, it rapidly extended its powers. Listed buildings grew from 120,000 to 500,000 in 30 years. The proportion of listed buildings to all buildings has increased from 1 in 140 to 1 in 40. Recent buildings by living architects are now listed. Conservation areas have expanded from 4 to more than 8,000 in 30 years. In excess of 1.5 million buildings are now under the control of heritage law and the number grows arithmetically every year.

This has created a new breed of administrators. From a single post-graduate conservation course in 1970 there are now 26 conservation courses turning out over 300 graduates and post-graduates every year. The dominant culture has changed from architect conservation officers to specialists from an archaeological and historical culture.

The central role of archaeology and history in the administration of conservation has led to an overriding concern with historical authenticity. New work to historic buildings is increasingly discouraged (unless it too is historically "authentic", that is quite different from the original). Curiously, all aspects of the history of a building are now authentic up to the moment it is identified as being of worth. Anything that happens after that is not authentic.

This expansion of archaeological and historical methodology to living buildings and places is like the study of wildlife through taxidermy. And it has a real effect on the ground. In own practice in recent years we have experienced: the obstruction of the conversion and restoration of a medieval house for the sake of a pre-war partition (leading to abandonment of the project and increased decay); an owner forced to preserve and expose low quality 1920s reproduction pine panelling in his living room; a business unable to expand to the smallest degree from a building it had

earlier rescued from dereliction; a major patron of the arts prevented from converting part of a spoiled and redundant stable interior to a gallery; the preservation of illiterate 20th century additions rather than the restoration of the original 18th century composition. There were all on Grade II listed buildings – the lowest grade. Many architects to my knowledge have similar lists.

Conservation has come to have a deadening effect on the historical environment with often bizarre consequences for the continuing life of buildings. Conservation as a part of a living, developing and changing culture has been more imaginatively addressed in the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage's Charter for Conservation of 2004. Authenticity is discussed in quite different terms: "The traditional knowledge systems and the cultural landscape in which it exists, particularly if these are 'living', should define the authenticity of the heritage value to be conserved. An exact replacement, restoration or rebuilding must be valued when it ensures continuity of traditional building practices."

Archaeology and history and the concern with evidence and authenticity are based on a concept of the past as forever past. This separates us from heritage as a living and developing part of our cultural life. Our *living* connection with our past is through our traditions. Traditions use past practices, narratives and ideas in the present with the aim of passing on them on to the future. Traditions create continuity in change and, while they are our direct connection with our past, are little concerned with absolute accuracy and historical authenticity.

Most significantly, traditions are one of the principal means by which we identify ourselves as a community and are part of, what sociologists call, Collective Memory. "Collective Memory is defined as the representation of the past, both that shared by a group and that which is actively commemorated, that enacts and gives substance to the group's identity, its present conditions and its vision of the future". [Professor Barbara Misztal]

A re-examination of the core principles of the culture of conservation in planning is overdue. In a few decades it has developed its own life, culture and self-defining objectives. It has a growing legal bureaucracy that seeks to extend its influence and power. Conservation needs to be freed from the sterility of authenticity and the isolation of history. It must be re-connected with the life, memory, traditions and identity of the community.