

# THE PLURALITY OF TRUTH IN CULTURE, CONTEXT, AND HERITAGE: A (MOSTLY) POST-STRUCTURALIST ANALYSIS OF URBAN CONSERVATION CHARTERS

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes international heritage conservation charters through the post-structuralist lens of relative and perspective-driven “truths,” fragmentation, and dramatic settings. The “SPAB Manifesto,” the Athens Charter, the Venice Charter, the Burra Charter, and the Nara Document on Authenticity are evaluated within the framework of discursive theories established by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, and Gilles Deleuze in regard to cultural meanings and absolute and relative truths. Preservation doctrine through the Venice Charter engages in a positivist truth based on the substantiation of material fetishes. These early doctrines imbue the materiality of the object with truth as an absolute rather than relative truths existing in the realm of cultural meanings and values. In other words, the object communicates the one, single reality in which it should exist. Beginning with the Burra Charter in 1979, there was an unselfconscious shift toward post-modern relativism. The Nara Document built on the ideas of cultural relativism, expressing a strong desire to respect diversity as embodied in the discursive act of semiotic communication. It eschewed judging the authenticity of heritage as a fixed concept and instead encouraged an evaluative process within the context of individual cultures. The question of future interpretive acts within the dramatic scene of cultural heritage must reconcile the positivist past of pre-Burra Charter documents with the relativism of later documents. At some point the material fetish of the Venice Charter must give way to the pluralism of truth rooted in cultural and not material contexts.

**Key words:** Built heritage doctrines charters preservation philosophy

## 1. Introduction

For over a century, various doctrines have guided the practice of heritage conservation. This paper analyzes international heritage conservation charters through a post-structuralist lens of relative and perspective-driven “truths,” fragmentation, and dramatic settings. The word “doctrine” is infused with concepts of belief – often with religious overtones – and principles of policy. Its Latin word root refers to the process of teaching. Therefore, it is possible to conceptualize these charters and doctrines as a codification of the unified belief system of heritage conservation.

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Ultimately, the charter is a document that can be interpreted as a statement of not only what it contains, but what it does not contain. In this dialectic-driven episteme, the goal is to understand discursive rules, power lines, and the schisms and disjuncts that give rise to new ways of understanding and comprehending the meanings of heritage. This project gives substantial importance to the Manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the Athens Charter, the Venice Charter, the Burra Charter, and the Nara Document on Authenticity as evaluated within the framework of discursive theories established by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, and Gilles Deleuze. Particular attention is paid to semiotic and specific cultural meanings and their expression in these documents as absolute or relative truths as contingencies of their time.

One way to look at the meanings of preservation doctrines is through a dramatic device. In particular, what were the seminal themes that gave rise to these doctrines? I shall take the license to put Camillo Boito, the Italian architect credited for the ideas found in the 1931 Athens Charter, in a hypothetical conversation with Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, the well-known nineteenth-century architect who engaged in many restorations of Gothic buildings in France.

*Viollet-le-Duc:* The architect must have the creative freedom to make a building match a vision, to make a past better than the past.

*Boito:* Not so fast, *Monsieur Viollet-le-Duc*. We can't create a false sense of history, now can we? I don't like what you've done to those medieval Gothic masterpieces. You're corrupting them with your personal taste. Please be more objective and scientific about your work. We have a truth to preserve; don't taint it.

*Viollet-le-Duc:* Ah, but you advocate an artificial stasis. All I try to do is to recognize the brilliance of a building in any single moment. Buildings evolve and change. How do you propose to stop time?

*Boito:* *Madonn'!* You cannot be permitted to do these terrible acts to these buildings. [In the distance, John Ruskin and William Morris are cheering loudly.]

*Viollet-le-Duc:* And what do you propose to do?

*Boito:* My friends and I shall crush your ideas and render them unfit for consumption. We shall bury you.

*Viollet-le-Duc:* *Sacrebleu!* I do not believe you; how can my ideas be so dangerous? Your actions are denying the humanity of the building!

*Boito:* We shall freeze the debate on the conservation of buildings, and render your brand of "restoration" illicit and immoral. We shall create a doctrine to stop your kind from breeding such tainted ideas. We must protect the buildings! We must protect their truth!

And thus the heritage conservation doctrine was born.

## **2. The nature of heritage conservation doctrines**

In their purest sense, heritage conservation doctrines delimit the sacred boundaries of specific places and the death of objects. Foucault explains that "contemporary space is perhaps not entirely desanctified ... [it] is still nurtured by the hidden presence of the sacred" (1986, p. 23). Underlying the words of heritage doctrines is the veneration of the

historical object—a religious zeal for the patina of time imprinted on place. Our worship of the authentic, sacred qualities of old buildings is related to their death as modern objects. Heidegger writes about an “authentic being toward death” and its relationship to anticipation and the interpretation of time in relation to the existence of the self (1962/1927, pp. 349, 350). This same concept can be applied to buildings and landscapes and the powerlessness in which we face in the inevitable death of the object: No matter how intense or mild the intervention, eventually time will erase all vestiges of the past, and death will be complete. Western culture’s reverence for historic buildings—a “cult of the dead,” to borrow a concept which Foucault applies to cemeteries (1986, p. 25)—is related to post-Enlightenment thought that engendered both an appreciation for age and a romanticism for the past. Preservation seeks to control death through a temporal relationship with authenticity. An historic site is “a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages ... a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place” (p. 26).

Who are the authors of the majority of conservation charters and doctrines? This question is important as it delimits the perspective of the writers. The concepts of objectivity and rationalism have been historically defined through the male perspective to the exclusion of the female; there is a male bias to knowledge. “[T]he norm has always been constructed in terms of male experiences and perspectives and, indeed, as it has always been constructed through depicting women as the Other, women are ... disqualified from the status of neutral and objective knowers” (Nicolson, 2000, p. 23). Therefore, it is important to note that preservation doctrine has been written predominantly by men to codify (or control) meaning and foster good cultural behavior through definitions of acceptable and unacceptable practices. The male perspective has been used to create hierarchies of knowledge that exclude others (p. 24). These charters are abstract machines in the Deleuzian sense that serve to construct a new interpretive reality that stops the evolution of thought. The creation of a charter interrupts the natural flow of ideas by defining concepts and giving names to them; the act of severing names from evolving meaning is the “originary violence of language” as described by Derrida (1976, p. 112). Until the advent of the Athens Charter in 1931, preservation philosophy was rhizomatic, sending flows of meaning to areas needing the greatest nourishment. The rise of heritage conservation charters starved conservation philosophy and engendered the relatively impoverished system of preservation doctrines that exist today.

The supposed objectivity of preservation doctrines should be questioned—especially considering their male-dominated genesis. Some critics have argued that “objectivity is a mistaken ideal reflecting masculinist preoccupations. In these polemics, objectivity itself remains insufficiently examined, a closed box hurled back and forth between rhetorical contestants” (Longino, 2002, p. 97). Objectivity also implies that there is the possibility of finding truth—ideally one truth—that can be broadly applied across domains. The ordinary language used in preservation doctrines is “not innocent or neutral” (Derrida, 1982, p. 19) and embodies the philosophical tradition of logocentrism which seeks truth as embodied in the word as an idealistic pursuit (p. 51). These doctrines of preservation were created from the limited, masculine perspective of a few individuals representing the multiplicity of thoughts, ideas, and motivations of thousands of others. The perspectives of women or minority groups were not included in conservation doctrine until the creation of the Burra Charter in 1979. Even today, the evolution of conservation doctrine is still a gender-biased endeavor.

The masculine perspective of these doctrines is incongruous with the roots of preservation in the United States. Until the twentieth century, the practice and promotion

of historic preservation was frequently a female-dominated endeavor. For instance, Pamela Ann Cunningham is an important founder of historic preservation because of her seminal efforts to save Mount Vernon (the home of George Washington) from demolition in the middle of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century marked the ascension of men in “professionalizing” the practice of historic preservation by redefining the role of women. This marginalization of women, and the attendant change in discourse, is remarkably congruent with the creation of heritage doctrines. Shifts in discourses produce “new kinds of knowledge, along with the new objects to know and new modalities of power” (Foucault, 1980, p. 22). This new “object” is the preservation doctrine and its modality is male.

A largely unexplored question of preservation doctrines is to what extent they marginalized the ideas and theories of others. The predominant view, espoused recently in the *ICOMOS Scientific Journal*, is that these documents are the product of a few individuals with “brilliant minds” (1999, p. i). This description negates the contributions of many others that helped in defining preservation theory. “The postulate that the history of great men contains, a fortiori, the history of lesser men, or that the history of the strong is also the history of the weak, is replaced by a principle of heterogeneity: The history of some is not the history of others” (Foucault, 2003, p. 69). The history of preservation theory is not homogenous, nor does it contain the types of singularities of thought espoused in preservation doctrines. It is important to keep in mind that these works are the products of a dominant discourse that marginalized the ideas of others. While it is reasonable that some of these abandoned ideas are of dubious quality, undoubtedly a few worthy concepts were inadvertently discarded in the homogenous path of doctrine creation.

It is worth spending some time on the character and quality of the theory contained in the doctrinal texts of heritage conservation. Generally speaking, these works explain theory as a means to an end; in other words, phenomena are explained for their practical contributions instead of as explanations of causality. For instance, the Athens Charter takes a theoretical and teleological position against the restoration of buildings. A causal relationship between the phenomena – restoration – and the affected object – the building – is not established. As such, heritage conservation theory can be represented as a telic system which prescribes goals as a means to attain a certain, predefined end.

Heritage conservation concerns itself with the existential state of buildings and landscapes. If the Heideggerian nature of “being” (1962/1927) is shifted from the human body to an inanimate body – that is, a building or landscape – then this characterization has important ontological implications. A telic system, as Jürgen Habermas (1987) says, “presupposes belief in a sphere of ultimate reality” (p. 251) and like religious belief “is always the belief of a collectivity; it proceeds from a practice that it at the same time interprets” (p. 51). This parallel between heritage conservation theory and religious belief is not necessarily accidental. The widely-acknowledged nineteenth-century godfather of historic preservation, John Ruskin, who was a staunch evangelical in his earlier years, advocated for the preservation of buildings with a reverent fervor few authors have matched. In addition, the history of preservation rhetoric is littered with religious terms such as “revere,” “sacred,” “desecrate,” “consecrate,” “venerate,” and “spirit.” Applying Carl Jung’s theory (1972/1952) of a coincident occurrence of events, there is a synchronicity between heritage conservation theory and theology.

In sum, a doctrine territorializes the language of heritage conservation through a process of standardizing concepts and meanings and marginalizing those individuals whose works did not fit certain precepts. Preservation doctrines freeze theory at certain

temporal points through a codification process, which serves to fixate the meaning of the *word*. The nineteenth century contains the works of many authors arguing for and against certain preservation positions – chiefly along the lines of restoration (embodied by Viollet-le-Duc) and preservation (embodied by Ruskin). This minor literature is characterized by a process of reterritorialization – a concept espoused by Guattari and Delueze (1986, p. 16) that is defined by overturning conventions and fostering new belief systems.<sup>1</sup> Today this minor literature is largely absent, destroyed by preservation doctrine. Few have stopped to mourn its death.

As one can see, heritage doctrine is a telic system consisting of a complex mix of beliefs, biases, and excluded meanings. It has close parallels with religious belief and existentialism. Armed with a better understanding of the quality and character of the preservation doctrine, the specific doctrinal texts will now be explored.

### 3. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (1877)

The first preservation doctrine was arguably produced by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in 1877. The co-founder of SPAB, William Morris, a friend and collaborator of John Ruskin, created a manifesto which denounced the “strange idea of the Restoration of ancient buildings.”<sup>2</sup> This document was largely derivative of John Ruskin’s writing in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) praising the Gothic and decrying the horrible things done to these buildings, which was in turn derivative of Victor Hugo’s rant in the third chapter of *Nôtre Dame* (1831) against the horrible things done to the cathedral of Nôtre Dame. What made the SPAB document unique was its form: as a manifesto, its intent was to affect and change policy and to right the “wrongs” that were perpetrated against monumental buildings by the scandals of architects and the general public. It was, in fact, a minority point of view and remains so today in a public mind that is fascinated with the time-machine effect of restorations and their hyperreality. Only among building conservators and historic preservationists does the SPAB manifesto resonate truth.

Remarkably, not only is the SPAB organization still in existence, but its manifesto also survives largely unchanged. That this doctrine is still widely read, understood, and accepted today speaks loudly to how little preservation doctrine has changed in the past 130 years. All such doctrines have a thread that can be traced to the preservation of the *status quo* and the deprecation of restoration found in the SPAB manifesto. There has never arisen a counter-doctrine that tackles the precepts of the SPAB manifesto and later preservation doctrines that arose in the twentieth century. In essence, the decision on acceptable and unacceptable interventions in building fabric was codified in 1877. The preservation documents that followed are expansions on the original themes of the SPAB manifesto, which are in turn derivative of the ideas of Hugo, Ruskin, and Morris. Poor Viollet-le-Duc – the French restoration architect of the nineteenth century – was left alone

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<sup>1</sup> Guattari and Delueze define three kinds of “territorialization”: The process of standardizing and codifying meaning is the territorialization of language. The process of deterritorialization weakens the links between language and specific meanings to revert what has been done. Reterritorialization occurs when dissenting points of view become the dominant discourse. Minor literature, by definition, contains perspectives that differ from the hegemonic discourse of the major or accepted doctrines and is attempting to reterritorialize meaning.

<sup>2</sup> The SPAB manifesto survives largely unchanged to this day and can be found on the SPAB web site: <http://www.spab.org.uk/>

and in the cold. His ideas largely died in the twentieth century, but have been kept alive in the popular mind.

#### 4. The Athens Charter (1931)

The Athens Charter is a product of the early 1930s, an era in which the cinema, scientism, and politics collided with the professionalization of heritage conservation.

The impact of cinema on preservation is largely unexplored, but has significant potential to explain our understanding of the genesis of the Athens Charter. The 1920s marks the ascendancy of the cinema as popular culture; largely silent, it gained a voice at approximately the same time the Athens Charter was written. The public images promulgated by Hollywood during this era were foreign, exotic, and eclectic. The architecture of the 1920s reflects a hodge podge of anachronisms; it is the Hollywood film of the 1920s transposed as static architecture. The exotic places and ancient monuments on the screen inculcated the public into a greater awareness of the objects of the past. In essence, it popularized a desire for the past by juxtaposing it against the rapid modernization of the world:

[E]arly cinema ... contributed to the construction of strong nationalistic discourses of modernity. ... A mechanism for accessible globality, the cinema captured and accompanied the vertiginous modernization of urban sectors, as well as the simultaneous inertia of other zones and territories: in the discursive struggle between the urban and the rural as icons of nationalisms, the cinema – the urban instrument par excellence – actively contributed to the postulation of the nonurban as a folkloric past or an anachronistic vestige. (Lopez, 2003, p. 124)

Cinema revealed the potential for how time could be controlled and it was evinced on a daily basis by the “suspension of the world” on the movie screen (Deleuze, 1989, p. 168). This disturbance of time and motion became cinematic fantasies (p. 169) that fostered the popular romanticization of the monumental past. Therefore, cinema became the desiring machine for heritage in reaction to modernism.

The Athens Charter is the discursive formation, or groups of statements explained by the limits of discourse relations as described by Foucault (1972), that created a regime of “truth” that absorbed the ejected matter of modernism. It is no coincidence that the popularization and professionalization of historic preservation and heritage conservation coincides with the rise of modernism in the 1930s. This decade gave birth to Colonial Williamsburg, the Historic American Buildings Survey, and the preservation works of the National Park Service. In Europe, the preservation tenets of William Morris as embodied in the SPAB doctrine finally gained “undenied superiority” (Huth, 1940, p. 11). This later situation is worth explaining in more detail. The nineteenth century was a battle of “restoration” in the Viollet-le-Duc sense of establishing an “improved” past which never existed and the Ruskin/Morris ideals of the preservation of the *status quo*. The Ruskinian method resulted in a greater retention of the original fabric of a building and in this sense is more conservative. In an era where the buildings and landscapes of the past were described by modernists as “gangrenous” and “poisonous” (Marinetti, 1998/1909, p. 252), the more conservative approach to building interventions was, in fact, the most anti-modern.

Delving into the words of the Athens Charter, one finds some of the first instances of scientism as applied to monument conservation. It emphasizes “scrupulous” conservation and “thorough analyses” to arrest decay in order to save as much original

fabric as possible through the practice of science. A little discussed contemporary doctrine to the Athens Charter, the 1932 Italian Norms for the Restoration of Monuments, takes the scientific rhetoric to an extreme in stating that all interventions should be based on “strict scientifically proven” solutions, and that only completely reliable data should be used. It also states clearly what is somewhat veiled in the Athens Charter: that this doctrine is to establish the “conservation or rehabilitation of a monument in a correct way” by eviscerating “personal decisions of the author” in an intervention; thus all decisions must be made in a scientific way that reifies a singular truth – the “correct” way. In comparison, the doctrine of the 1904 Preservation and Restoration of Architectural Monuments, established by the Sixth International Congress of Architects in Madrid, makes no mention of accuracy, and in its brevity accepts far greater possibilities for interventions. Truth is an important factor in the Athens Charter, as its goal is to “prevent mistakes” – especially those errors that were due to “restoration in toto” – a treatment the 1904 charter found acceptable. As such, the Athens Charter is heavily influenced by the tenets of SPAB that abhorred the “scraping” of any building fabric which resulted in the destruction of the patina of age. Truth is evinced in another manner in the Athens Charter; it clearly outlines that it is the object that contains the truth of ages – a series of “concrete testimonies” that can be read hermeneutically in order to determine the course of action in which an intervention should take form.

The reading of building fabric for truth is a twentieth-century phenomenon, catalyzed by the tide of scientism of the early twentieth century. The architect Joseph Chandler undertook one of the earliest examples of a hermeneutic reading of a building to discover its truth in restoring the Paul Revere House in Boston in the first decade of the twentieth century. The architects restoring the Colonial-era buildings in Philadelphia undertook similar approaches. Certainly Colonial Williamsburg, which is often credited with moving building preservation and restoration into the realm of science – driven by archaeological methods – sought the truth of the building in order to inform all manner of interventions from preservation to reconstruction. This emphasis on the truth as an innate characteristic of building fabric has been called the “material fetish” by Muñoz Viñas (2005), although other authors, such as David Lowenthal, have touched on some of its characteristics.

The material fetish desires the “true nature” of an object through a “truth enforcement operation” (Muñoz Viñas, 2005, pp. 90, 91) that emphasizes the singularity in which the object should be presented. This message is epitomized by the idea that a building’s fabric can be read like a book – a concept reified by the National Park Service, among other organizations – which will direct us to a proper building intervention. The problem with this concept is that it presumes the hermeneutic operation of truth finding; like a religious book, the building will “reveal” itself and tell us how it wants to exist. As post-structuralist philosophers have demonstrated, such as Derrida with his deconstructive methods (1973), a book can often be read differently with each new reading. Authors contradict themselves; buildings can also contradict themselves and confound attempts at synchronous readings.

As a positivist document, the Athens Charter represents what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) would call “thin” as opposed to “thick” meaning. The scientific method reduces the possibilities of different ways of viewing reality; in particular it destroys the richness of cultural significance by discarding the modes of rhetoric, fiction, and subjectivity (Clifford, 1986, p. 5). These are the foundational elements of literature – the domain of the ethnographic text – and do not necessarily connote falsehood; rather, these expressive modes are “the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they

are systematic and exclusive" (p. 6). In some sense, all "truth," such as the ideas presented in the Athens Charter, is constructed from "powerful 'lies' of exclusion and rhetoric" (p. 7). The Athens Charter, because of its positivist stance, is a highly exclusionary document; at a minimum it excludes the possibility of restoration as an acceptable intervention, constructing a singular truth around the preservation of the *status quo*. This character is the reason why – as with many doctrines – the words of the Athens Charter were not always followed, especially in the hyper-restorative climate of the United States before the 1980s.

The scientism of the Athens Charter is a product of a discursive junction that occurred in the early twentieth century: the acculturation of science into the mass psyche. "Scientism" – blind faith in the ability of science to solve all problems – reigned supreme in the first decades of the twentieth century. ... [C]onfidence in the beneficence of modern science was almost limitless" (Conner, 2005, pp. 449, 450). It was toward the end of this era that the now colloquial phrase "better living through science" was coined by the DuPont Company. This blind faith – to the exclusion of other ways of knowing – is not to be underestimated. It was in the '20s and '30s that eugenics rose to prominence in the United States – better living through science, indeed. It was a "scientific" way to solve the perceived problem of "defective" people by erasing their genetic potential (Nazi Germany would take this idea several steps further and erase the entire human being). While it would be disingenuous to directly equate preservation doctrines with eugenics, there are parallels. Thus, to bring the argument back to the Athens Charter, this document also engages in an erasure: the deletion of restoration as an acceptable intervention method.

Taylorism – also known as the "Scientific Management movement" – rose to prominence in the early decades of the twentieth century. Workers were subjected to time and measurement studies in an effort to increase productivity through the elimination of wasted movement or the combination of tasks (Conner, 2005, pp. 456, 457). Taylorism, however, neglected to measure the impact of worker morale on productivity. Human beings do not take kindly to being viewed as the machines of capitalism, to be used to their fullest extent, without regard to mental or physical health. These studies were "thin" to an extreme and failed to capture the "thick" meaning of the complete (or more complete) system in which people play a part. Taylorism constructed a reality from a narrow perspective and labeled it as truth, even though it missed the larger picture. In a similar sense, the Athens Charter also constructed a narrow reality, labeled it as truth, and also missed the larger picture of other ways of intervening in the lives of historical objects and the attendant potential to positively and negatively affect human beings.

Lastly, the Athens Charter is an example of power being defined by passing through a point as Deleuze discusses in his analysis of Foucault (1988, p. 25); this charter represents a point of focus, and what comes into view is the antagonism between the West and the Soviet Union. Although often forgotten, the Athens Charter is in part a product of the League of Nations, and as such advocates cooperative efforts among member states to the exclusion of others. From its founding at the end of World War I, an important goal of the League of Nations was to present "an alternative to Bolshevism," as David Lloyd George, England's Prime Minister, wrote in 1919 (Prince, 1942, p. 427). Until the mid 1930s, the Soviets viewed the League "chiefly as an anti-Soviet coalition, a cohesion of their enemies, who were actively engaged in an attempting to destroy the Soviet Republic" (p. 428). The political nature of these doctrines becomes quite apparent in the 1932 Italian Norms for the Restoration of Monuments, which takes on fascist overtones when describing Italy's "need to maintain and continuously improve the undoubted



supremacy that our country has achieved in this field of scientific, artistic, and technical activity.”

## 5. The Venice Charter (1964)

Between 1931 and 1964, there appears to have been few additions or modifications to existing heritage doctrines. Certainly there were no documents of the international magnitude of the Athens Charter written in this time. This stasis is remarkable considering the changes that occurred in the thirty some years between the Athens and Venice charters which include World War II, the popular rise of modernism, and the Cold War. The salient characteristic of the Venice Charter is its highly derivative nature; this doctrine is far more evolutionary than revolutionary, and in some ways represents anachronistic themes. The 1960s were a time of growing distrust in science as a blind faith paradigm. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* woke up Americans, if not the world, to the negative consequences of indiscriminate use of pesticides in the environment. “Better living through science” was on the decline. This era also marked the rise of post-modern thought that questioned the possibility of singular truths and hegemonic discourses. Yet again, the Venice Charter appears to resist these cultural disjuncts.

If the Athens Charter was positivist in nature, the Venice Charter can be described as hyper-positivist. For instance, Article 2 directs: “The conservation and restoration of monuments *must* have recourse to all sciences and techniques which can contribute to the study and safeguarding of the architectural heritage” (my emphasis). The wording of this statement is rather peculiar, and worth further elucidation. “Architectural heritage” does not exist as a generic concept to be applied to an object of study, but rather is a singular concept: There is only one architectural heritage, *the* architectural heritage. While this wording may be a typo that has survived for forty years, or perhaps an error of translation (the original was in Italian), it seems more likely to represent the state of mind of this document’s creators.

An important theme that the Venice Charter discusses in detail, and which complements the Athens Charter, is “authenticity.” Authenticity is framed as a transcendental connection from the past to the present. An object can only “bear witness” to the true nature of the past if its physical fabric remains unchanged. Put in a dramatic sense, it is like a kiss from the past whose lips remain invisibly imprinted on the fabric of the monument. If one changes the fabric so as to remove the “evidence” of this kiss, then the monument is no longer authentic. The problem is that we can not see the actual kiss and therefore must engage in a relative degree of supposition to establish its existence. There is no “proof” that the kiss of the past is ingrained on a particular piece of historical fabric. In order to see if a monument has this kind of evidence, the Venice Charter advocates reading the monument as a document to establish its hermeneutical truth and deduce its authenticity.

The concern for the authenticity of fabric has a long Western tradition. The Christian reverence for religious relics – the bones of saints, for instance – is an example of this predilection. The New Testament explains how God imbues fabric – in this case literally – with an authentic power to heal: “...God worked extraordinary miracles at the hands of Paul. When handkerchiefs or cloths which had touched his skin were applied to the sick, their diseases were cured and evil spirits departed from them” (Acts 19:11-12). The “fabric” does not have an innate quality that speaks of its authenticity; rather authenticity is related to the power of an object to hold truth. In the case of the passage above, truth is related to the power to heal. As the Venice Charter explains in Article 6, “A monument is inseparable from the history to which it bears witness and from the setting

in which it occurs." Truth in this instance lies in the ability of the monument to bear witness to the past.

The Venice Charter also makes a sweeping statement in its preamble that "people are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage." As will be explained through the Burra and later charters, this assumption does not necessarily hold true across different cultures. To assume that heritage takes form in such a unity is antithetical to our current understanding of the plurality of values and truth in a post-modern world.

## **6. The Burra Charter (1979-88)**

Until the Australian Burra Charter, preservation doctrine assumed that heritage was univocal; all of humankind valued and thus had responsibility for the care of the world's monuments. An important consideration was that these doctrines were entirely Western-centric in their recommendations. Beginning the late 1970s, there was a growing recognition of non-Western values in the conservation of heritage. In the United States, the federal government protected the sacred sites of Native Americans with the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 and in Australia the federal Aboriginal Land Rights Act of 1976 established three councils to claim land for Aboriginal peoples. The first heritage doctrine to recognize this shift in values to non-Western ideas was the Burra Charter which Australia ICOMOS adopted in 1979 and revised in 1981 and 1988.

The Burra Charter introduced the concept of *cultural significance* and its associated subjectivity. Rather than searching for a univocal truth as previous doctrines had done, the Burra Charter considered the values of non-dominant groups. While not abandoning a "scientific" approach, this document for the first time speaks of social value, which as Article 2.5 explains "embraces the qualities for which a place has become a focus of spiritual, political, national or other cultural sentiment to a major or *minority* group" (my emphasis). Perhaps the most enlightening statement in this charter is found in Article 2.6: "The categorization into aesthetic, historic, scientific and social values is one approach to understanding the concept of cultural significance. However, more precise categories may be developed as understanding of a particular place increases." By leaving the door open to different ways of understanding, the Burra Charter denies the singularity of truth that previous doctrines sought to reify.

That the Burra Charter arose in the late 1970s and was refined in the early 1980s is not surprising given the immense activity of ethnographers and feminists in redefining the nature of culture. During this time, anthropology quickly absorbed the post-structuralist writings of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and Baudrillard and abandoned the structuralism of Levi-Strauss (Barfield, 1997, p. 91). The ideas of these authors can be summed as representing the impossibility of finding hermeneutic truths. Thus, the Burra Charter, as a product of its time, reflects the beginning of cultural relativism as espoused by contemporary ethnographers and recognizes that historical significance is a cultural construction and not a truth that is an inherent characteristic of an object. This expansion of cultural relativism will become more apparent in later heritage doctrines.

## **7. The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994)**

If the Burra Charter opened the door to cultural relativism, the Nara Document on Authenticity blew the door off its hinges. Item six in the preamble goes to the heart of the matter: "Cultural heritage diversity exists in time and space, and demands respect for other cultures and all aspects of their belief systems. In cases where cultural values appear

to be in conflict, respect for cultural diversity demands acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the cultural values of all parties.” This statement, in large part, invalidates the supremacy of the Venice Charter. As Seung-Jin Chung observes, “the Venice Charter is based on Western attitudes to architecture and conservation. ... [I]t is becoming clear that it is unreasonable to treat sites of East Asian significance according to conservation ideas that are strongly based on a Western architectural background; East Asian architecture is conceived in a different spirit from Western architecture” (2005, p. 56). For East Asian architecture, authenticity – in the Western sense of the preservation of fabric – is not important; rather the goal is to preserve the “spiritual messages embodied in the architecture” (p. 62). Thus, East Asian conservation values are evident in the frequent renewal and replacement of building fabric while retaining the semiotic or communicative meanings of the object. The Nara Document on Authenticity is important because it is the first conservation doctrine where an upsetting of previous conservation doctrine is sanctified as an acceptable practice.

## **8. The contemporary state of preservation doctrine**

In the twenty-first century, traditional preservation doctrine – as embodied in the Venice Charter and the National Park Service’s Secretary of the Interior’s Standards – has come under attack for its hyper-positivist messages and lack of cultural relativism. In important ways, the theoretical underpinnings of heritage conservation are moving to an East Asian model that emphasizes the communicative role of the object. For instance, Muñoz Viñas (2005) in his recent work on conservation theory explains that interventions should focus on what we want the historic object to communicate to us based on our culturally-embedded definitions of significance and meaning. “Truth” that exists as an innate meaning in an object which can then be hermeneutically read – i.e., the material fetish – impoverishes the potential contribution that heritage conservation can make to human flourishing. With the exception of the Burra Charter and the Nara Document, preservation doctrine since the Athens Charter has ignored “integral aspects of human existence [such] as values, purposes, and existential meaning, the very qualities that are basic to significance in preservation” (Elliot, 2002, p. 52). While the appearance of these later charters may be encouraging, their content is still largely ignored by the practitioners of heritage conservation. As a recent article in *Future Anterior* relates, “it is striking to note that although historic preservation practice has expanded extraordinarily in recent decades, nineteenth-century theories continue to be invoked in interpreting our professional endeavors” (Williams, 2005, p. vii).

Recent work by the Getty Institute has examined the increasing importance of cultural values and their associated relativism in defining significance. Heritage conservation has focused too much on the physical artifact to the impoverishment of cultural meaning: “It is important to consider the contexts of a heritage conservation project – social, cultural, economic, geographical, administrative – as seriously and as deeply as the artifact/site itself is considered” (Mason, 2002, p. 5). While this is an admirable goal, we are still embroiled in the “nihilist wake” (Elliot, 2004, p. 112) of the material fetish which over-emphasizes the “informational” and “material aspects” of the historical object in our day-to-day practice of conducting interventions on historic buildings and landscapes.

## **9. Summary**

The question of future interpretive acts within the dramatic scene of cultural heritage must reconcile the positivist past of pre-Burra Charter documents with the

relativism of later documents. At some point the material fetish of the Venice Charter must give way to the pluralism of truth rooted in cultural rather than material contexts. The historical object or landscape is not an unbiased representation of the past; it must be interpreted through a cultural lens. Thus the past is always a fragment of reality; it is never whole, nor is it entirely accurate. The reasons for engaging in the conservation of heritage are bound in a kind of dramatic act of reviving the past through an occulted lens. This act always has a sense of fiction/friction in it similar to a play. By recognizing the discursive acts of semiotic communication through many perspectives, truth may be acquired as a kind of triangulation of interpretations. The construction of significance, therefore, must be based on complex and interrelated meanings bound into a cultural milieu. It is only through this richness of meaning that heritage conservation can contribute to human flourishing.

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