



# Herb Stovel and authenticity in World Heritage conservation practice

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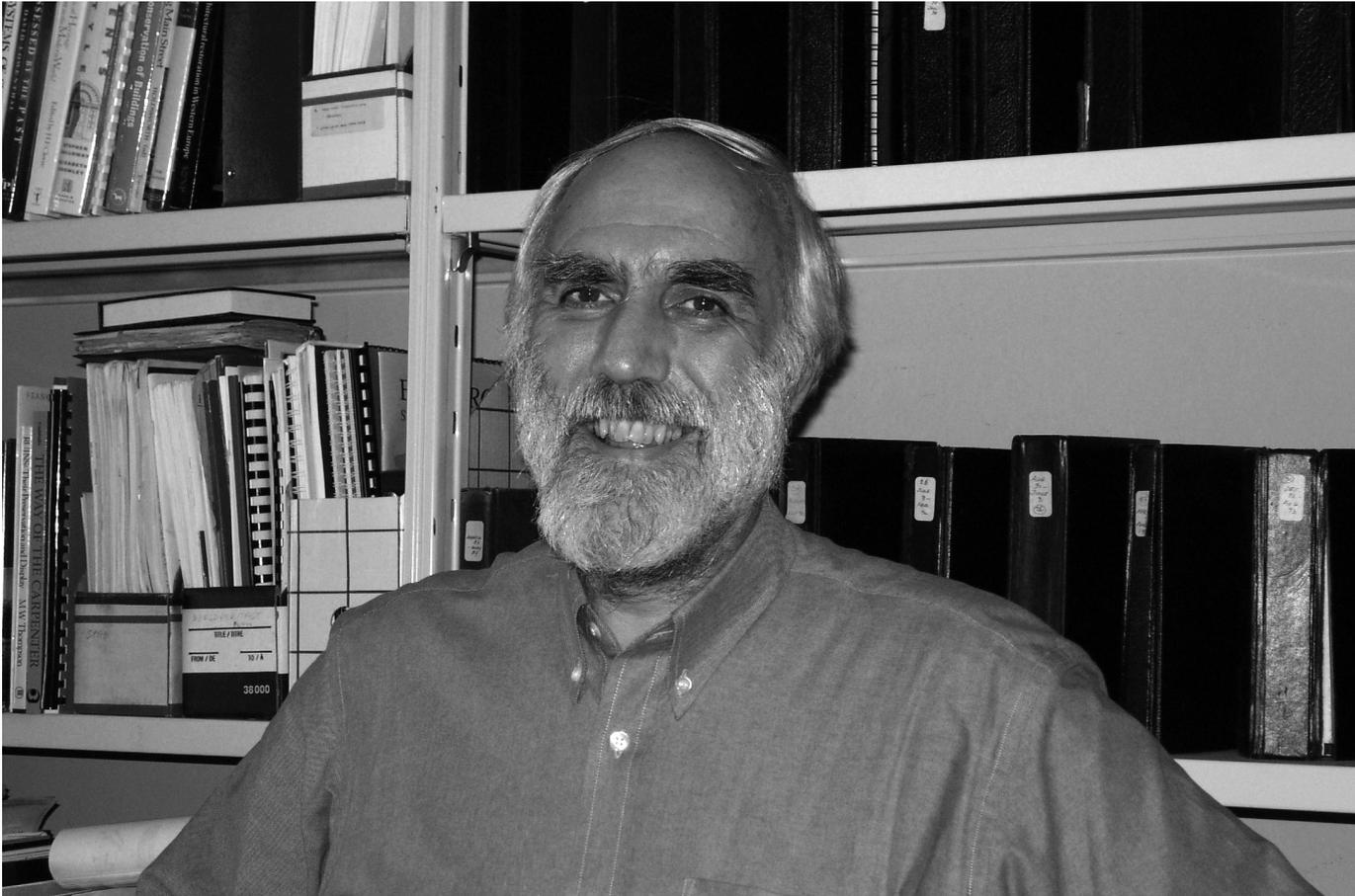
## *Abstract*

*The 2008 article in the APT Bulletin by Herb Stovel focuses on the impact of the authenticity debate on the conservation of built heritage, particularly on World Heritage sites. Stovel describes discussions leading up to the important international meeting in 1994 in Nara, Japan and assesses the impact of the Nara document on authenticity on conservation practice. This paper examines Stovel's article from four perspectives: the origins of the authenticity debate, theoretical advances made at Nara, conservation practice, and the incomplete theorization of integrity. It supplements Stovel's paper by deepening the pre-Nara context and by furthering consideration of the impacts of the Nara document on conservation practice. It explores unfinished business with regard to the application of integrity to cultural World Heritage sites. The paper also adds passages from Stovel's insightful 2011 interviews for the World Heritage Oral Archives program, thereby offering a glimpse of the evolution of his thinking on these issues after 2008.*

**Keywords:** *Authenticity, integrity, Nara document on authenticity, conservation doctrine.*

## **Origins of the authenticity debate**

In his 2008 article in the *APT Bulletin*, Herb Stovel presents a selective history of the authenticity debate. He connects the use of the word "authenticity" to the foundational conservation doctrine, the 1964 *International charter for the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites*, known as the *Venice Charter*, which uses the word in its preamble, pointing to the duty to conserve historic monuments "in the full richness of their authenticity" (Stovel, 2008: 12). In addition, Stovel emphasizes the link between the World Heritage test of authenticity and the American concept of integrity, based on personal communications from Ernest Allan Connally, who served as Secretary General of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) from 1975 to 1982 (Stovel, 2008: 10). At the first World Heritage session in 1977, the Committee approved its *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, relating the concept of authenticity to "design, materials, workmanship and setting" (UNESCO, 1977: 9). Stovel claims that the four original aspects of the World Heritage test of authenticity were adapted from the 1976 integrity requirements for nominating sites to the United States National Register of Historic Places (Stovel, 2008: 10).



HERB STOVEL. ICOMOS Secretary General, 1990-1993. Image: ©ICCROM.

In his historical overview, Stovel omits the late 1970s debate on authenticity engendered by the World Heritage nomination of the reconstructed historic center of Warsaw, Poland. This debate exposed a significant disagreement among conservation experts over whether or not “authentic” meant “original and tangible” as understood in Western conservation doctrine laid out in the *Venice Charter*. Warsaw was eventually listed as a World Heritage site in 1980 mainly for its intangible value as “a symbol of the exceptionally successful and identical reconstruction of a cultural property which is associated with events of considerable historical significance” (Cameron, 2008: 20-21).

Discussion about the meaning of authenticity lingered on. In his analysis, French architect and then ICOMOS President Michel Parent acknowledged the challenge of applying this concept to different regions of the world where impermanent materials like wood and earth were used, and where function and craftsmanship were more important than perishable materials. Fifteen years before the meeting in Nara, Parent foreshadowed the Nara results, writing that “authenticity is relative and depends on the nature of the property involved.” He understood that “the nature of a material, its finishing, its structural use, and its expressive use, the very nature of the civilization that built the building (...) are all different factors according to which the idea of authenticity can be variously understood” (Parent, 1979: 19).



WARSAW, POLAND. Reconstructed historic centre. *Image: ©Christina Cameron.*



MICHEL PARENT. French architect and president of ICOMOS in about 1980. *Image: ©ICOMOS.*

On the matter of reconstruction, Stovel reveals his ambivalence in a fascinating note that he drafted after participating in a mission to an endangered World Heritage site, Kizhi Pogost in the Russian Federation. He comments on the choice between minimal intervention in the wooden church or reconstruction of the whole building. In the first option, Stovel argues that “every effort must be made to retain the highest degree of original material in conservation efforts (...) [and that] tradition did not provide for rebuilding an entire church, but simply for ongoing replacement of decayed logs.” For the reconstruction option, he acknowledges that it goes against contemporary Western conservation practice but states that “in the historical context of the lesser importance of the complex’s 19<sup>th</sup> c. alterations & additions in this cultural context to efforts to strengthen the site’s symbolic importance for the Russian people, this approach seems perfectly reasonable” (Cameron and Inaba, 2015: 33).



KIZHI POGOST, RUSSIAN FEDERATION. *Image: Herb Stovel, ©ICCROM.*

In considering the origins of the authenticity debate, Stovel also does not mention his strong disagreement with influential French archaeologist, Léon Pressouyre, ICOMOS advisor to the World Heritage Committee in the 1980s. At a meeting of experts in 1992, held in Washington to prepare for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Heritage Convention, Pressouyre objected to the use of the term “authenticity,” criticizing the World Heritage Committee’s inconsistent interpretation of what he called a “European criterion of authenticity” (Pressouyre, 1996: 11-13). At that time, Stovel was Secretary General of ICOMOS and had positioned himself squarely against Pressouyre, defending authenticity as a key factor for the successful implementation of the World Heritage Convention.



LÉON PRESSOUYRE. ICOMOS advisor to the World Heritage Committee, 1980-1990. Image: ©Katérina Stenou.

In a subsequent letter, Stovel explains his determination to “do my utmost to defend and strengthen the place of authenticity in the conservation discussion”:

*Léon Pressouyre criticized the use of the “test of authenticity” in evaluations by ICOMOS. His point was quite legitimate (though he was mostly criticizing himself); he argued that if we were to use the test of authenticity as criteria [sic], we should use it meaningfully. (...) I found his suggestion that if we were not to examine the concept meaningfully, we should drop it entirely as unacceptable to the conservation movement. Authenticity is an essential element of conservation analysis (Cameron and Inaba, 2015: 32).*

In response to the report on 20 years of World Heritage in 1992, the Committee decided to undertake a “critical evaluation (...) of the criteria governing authenticity and integrity, with a view to their possible revision” (UNESCO, 1992: 9, Annex II.19), a decision that prepared the ground for the Nara meeting.

### Theoretical advances made by Nara

Herb Stovel claimed in an earlier article that the *Nara document* was both “the first international conservation doctrinal text since the *Venice Charter* to attempt to define universal principles applicable to conservation practice (...) and equally a challenge to the Venice charter’s approach to universality as seen from outside Europe” (Stovel, 2000: 244). Yet his 2008 article does not refer to Parent’s prescient observation in 1979 that the concept of authenticity is relative,

dependent on a range of factors including the nature of the civilization that created the building. Nor does Stovel discuss the 1992 rehabilitation project by Japanese experts in Kathmandu, Nepal, that caused the Committee to yet again question whether reconstruction projects meet the test of authenticity as set forth in the *Operational Guidelines*. This issue is pivotal to the theoretical debate on the meaning of authenticity and to the involvement of Japan as host country to the international meeting in Nara (Cameron and Inaba, 2015: 33).

The 1994 Nara Conference on Authenticity brought together conservation experts from over forty countries. Stovel shared the role of Rapporteur with Belgian architect and conservation theorist Raymond Lemaire. He participated actively at the Nara Conference, organizing sessions and guiding the discussion. One can argue that the Nara Conference on Authenticity built the foundation for a new vision of conservation doctrine (Cameron and Rössler, 2013: 85-90).



PARTICIPANTS IN THE NARA CONFERENCE ON AUTHENTICITY IN NOVEMBER 1994, NARA, JAPAN.  
Image: ©Bernd von Droste.



RAYMOND LEMAIRE. *Image: ©International Centre for Conservation, Leuven.*



HERB STOVEL, JEAN-LOUIS LUXEN AND CHRISTINA CAMERON AT NARA CONFERENCE ON AUTHENTICITY. *Image: ©muse.jhu.edu.*

A key outcome of the Nara deliberations is a new understanding that authenticity judgements are relative, not universal. Article 11 of the *Nara document on authenticity* expresses this idea clearly:

*All judgements about values attributed to cultural properties as well as the credibility of related information sources may differ from culture to culture, and even within the same culture. It is thus not possible to base judgements of values and authenticity within fixed criteria. On the contrary, the respect due to all cultures requires that heritage properties must be considered and judged within the cultural contexts to which they belong* (ICOMOS, 1994: 11).

The *Nara document* also states that an understanding of heritage values is fundamental to conservation decision-making. For this reason, it expands the range of information sources used to construct heritage values beyond those included in the original test of authenticity:

*Aspects of the sources may include form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors. The use of these sources permits elaboration of the specific artistic, historic, social, and scientific dimensions of the cultural heritage being examined* (ICOMOS, 1994: 13).

These theoretical advances had a significant impact on conservation practice. Stovel focuses on the post-Nara era, highlighting the dissemination of these ideas through meetings and discussions among experts, government officials and other organizations in different regions of the world (Stovel, 2008: 13-15). Reflecting on the impact of authenticity in a 2011 interview, he expresses his amazement at how this seemingly simple word stimulated serious conservation debates around the world:

*If you want to talk about authenticity, I mean that is just a word. It's a word which doesn't seem to have a translation in a third of the languages of the countries on the face of the earth. But why is it important? Why has it proven important to talk about what authenticity means, not just in the context of World Heritage but beyond? The authenticity discussion opened up the possibility for the world as a whole, the conservation field as a whole, to say you must judge conservation decision-making in its cultural context. So beginning with that simple little word authenticity, the ripples in the water expanded to bring in this much larger idea, which is still with us* (University of Montreal, 2011).

The shift from universality to relativity as well as the expansion of the attributes of authenticity mark significant changes from earlier conservation doctrine found in the *Venice Charter* and make the *Nara document on authenticity* a rallying point for a renewal of conservation practice.

### Conservation practice

Even though the expanded list of attributes of authenticity in the *Nara document* was meant to improve the inscription process, Stovel was more interested in exploring the consequences of the expanded definition of authenticity for conservation and management of World Heritage sites after their listing. In his 2011 interview, Stovel expresses his disappointment that sites get little attention after their inscription:

*I think (...) that the State Party should immediately after inscription ask itself what it is going to do to enhance the conditions for survival, for protection within those sites. Those conditions should be adequate because that is one*

*of the questions. What is asked “is this site well managed? Is this site already protected?” And if the site is not protected or well managed, it should not be on the List in the first place. So there should be a standard already in place. But I think they should ask “what more can we do?” (University of Montreal, 2011).*

The Nara expansion of the attributes of authenticity led to a broadened understanding of the ways in which the authenticity of a World Heritage site could be considered. Stovel encouraged the analysis of the site as a whole, not just its fragments, with a view to linking this holistic assessment with site conservation strategies. In his 2008 article, he uses an analytical chart that he created for the management of the Rideau Canal World Heritage site to demonstrate his thorough consideration of both the material and functional authenticity of an operating 19<sup>th</sup> century canal (Stovel, 2008: 13).

Spurred on by an interest in an integrated conservation system that would deal with all values holistically, Stovel embraced the consideration of sites on a landscape scale. He was influenced by his monitoring mission to Urnes Stave Church in Norway where he witnessed a growing understanding among the community of broad heritage values and their impact on conservation approaches:

*By the time that monitoring mission was over, we were doing everything from looking at the re-nomination of the Church, because all that was on the List was the Church and five feet around it. The Norwegians said “Okay. We are going to re-nominate the Church as a cultural landscape.” Because during the week it was realized that the Church (...) was built by the economic benefits that came from the community, the farming community around it. The farming community was still in place. There was a lot of integrity to the field patterns that were still there. All of this was connected to the fjord and the commerce in the fjord. To manage this properly, you should not have one management framework for the church and another management framework for the fields, and another management framework for the town and the village and the fjord. There should be a common management framework. That is why they wanted to think of the church as a cultural landscape (University of Montreal, 2011).*



URNES STAVE CHURCH, NORWAY. Image: Herb Stovel, ©ICCROM.

The expanded attributes of authenticity brought about by the *Nara document* led to a holistic landscape-scale approach to site management. As a result, when Stovel worked at the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) from 1998 to 2004, he supported and enhanced a program for Integrated Territorial and Urban Conservation (ITUC) that Jukka Jokilehto had presented to the World Heritage Committee in 1996. When Stovel joined ICCROM, he developed this program to link it more closely to World Heritage sites. ITUC “was a vessel, which we had invented in ICCROM to think about the management of historic cities (...) to think of things we can do to strengthen management capacity for historic cities” (University of Montreal, 2011).

He used the site of Buddha’s birthplace in Nepal as a testing ground for ITUC. When Lumbini, the Birthplace of the Lord Buddha, Nepal became a World Heritage site in 1997, it was located in a rural zone. In the context of ITUC, Stovel cites its evolution to demonstrate the need for integrated site management post-inscription. He explains the situation in his 2011 interview:

*In the short period of its existence on the List, things have changed locally. (...) new pressures, touristic pilgrimage pressures, basic tourism pressures, industrial development, because they built an airport and because they built the airport they built a road (...). All kinds of new pressures require the government to stand firm around its early commitments. Governments are often unequal to that task, or waver in front of that. They seem to think “well it’s on the List and it has a management plan and we’ve got some good people on site, that’s enough.” It is not enough when the pressures increase to dramatic levels (University of Montreal, 2011).*



LUMBINI, THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE LORD BUDDHA, NEPAL. *Image: Public domain.*

An important contribution to conservation practice comes from Stovel's insistence on linking authenticity considerations to integrated, territorial-scale conservation strategies.

### Integrity

In a World Heritage context, authenticity and integrity are closely linked. Nonetheless, the early implementation of the World Heritage Convention made a distinction between authenticity and integrity, requiring the former for cultural properties and the latter for natural properties. When considering the authenticity question in 1992, the World Heritage Committee decided to also undertake a critical evaluation of the concept of integrity for cultural sites. Twenty-seven years later, the notion of integrity as applied to cultural sites has not yet been adequately theorized. It remained an outstanding concern for Stovel until he passed away in 2012.

The integrity requirement for nominations of cultural sites first appeared in the 2005 version of the *Operational Guidelines*. Lacking specific explanation, the guidance for determining the integrity of cultural properties simply requires that the physical fabric be in good condition and the property include "a significant proportion of the elements necessary to convey the totality of the value." The guidelines also acknowledge the need for further work, stating that "examples of the application of the conditions of integrity are under development" (UNESCO, 2005: 88-89). To this day, these examples are still "under development" (UNESCO, 2017: 89).

In his 2011 interview, Stovel expressed frustration about the poor quality of statements of integrity for cultural sites and the fact that they usually treated integrity and authenticity as synonymous:

*There is a lag between the time you say that and the ability of States Parties to pick up what that means. I think integrity is still floating out there because every year nominations come in where the State Party may not have read the Operational Guidelines or may have read them and misunderstood them. But there is still that concept called authenticity-slash-integrity as if it were one (University of Montreal, 2011).*

He looked forward to a proposed meeting on integrity to improve guidance so that States Parties "actually understand what integrity is when they should make their nominations." He remained pessimistic about the process for integrity that he characterizes as the "polar opposite of what happened for authenticity":

*Authenticity happened in a way outside the administrative structures of the World Heritage Centre and UNESCO, even though it involved UNESCO. It happened because ICOMOS and one State Party, Japan, got into a discussion, which expanded and brought in other people. It was the right subject for Japan and for many others when it happened. I say it was the right subject because it inspired so many other parallel meetings. As soon as Japan had its meeting, people didn't say "Finished." They said "Oh, well, what does it mean for us?" (...) It was the right word and it really got people going (University of Montreal, 2011).*

With regard to integrity, Stovel notes that the Committee included it in the *Operational Guidelines* before they had any idea what it referred to. The Committee's 2009 request to have an "integrity" meeting to clarify the language was doomed to failure in his view because "even if it does get picked up, it will be one meeting of experts, a report, finished. It is not going to be picked up in the same way that authenticity inspired kind of a global discussion" (University of Montreal, 2011).

## Conclusion

Herb Stovel's 2008 article in the *APT Bulletin* stresses the importance of World Heritage authenticity discussions on the theory and practice of heritage conservation. While he emphasizes the importance of the *Venice Charter* and doctrinal work coming from the United States National Park Service, he does not discuss Michel Parent's early realization that authenticity judgements are relative, not universal, nor his own determination to defend the importance of authenticity in the face of Léon Pressouyre's negative stance. Stovel's special contribution to conservation practice stems from his insistence that the expanded attributes of authenticity be connected to management activities of the sites post-inscription. The theorization of the notion of integrity remained incomplete at the time of his death.

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