



JUKKA JOKILEHTO

Observations on Concepts in the Venice Charter

JUKKA JOKILEHTO

Abstract

The 1964 Venice Charter has become an important reference for most of the international charters and recommendations adopted in the second half of the 20th century even though it has not been without criticism. The scope of this paper is to examine some of the principal sources for the concepts expressed in the charter. These sources include the philosophical writings in the first part of the 20th century, ranging from Riegl and Bergson to Heidegger and Brandi. The principal international reference was seen in the 1931 Athens recommendations, as well as in the 1932 Italian Charter by Giovannoni. In 1957, there was an International Congress in Paris, anticipating the 1964 Venice Congress. The main difference in terminology is that the 1931 recommendation focuses on conservation and almost completely excludes the option of restoration. The 1932 charter instead was written in Italian, and mainly speaks of restoration highlighting the differences in languages, one of the problems in interpretation.

The main difference of the 1964 Venice Charter compared to the previous recommendations is in its Preface. This was drafted by Paul Philippot, at the time Deputy Director of ICCROM, and well informed about the policies of Cesare Brandi and the Italian Central Institute of Restoration (ICR). This is the section of the Venice Charter, where the English translation fails to represent the original concepts, that can be traced back to the 1930s, and to the Teoria del restauro by Brandi published in 1963. Even though there are issues that could be criticised, the charter has nevertheless well maintained its position. It has been a source of inspiration for international and national charters. It was adopted as the founding document of ICOMOS in 1965 and forty years later it was included in the World Heritage Operational Guidelines.

Keywords: concepts, translation, Venice Charter.

The context of the Venice Charter

The 1964 *Venice Charter* is a significant landmark in the modern recognition and safeguarding of the cultural heritage. The charter represents a condensation of the early modern conceptual developments from the 18th century onwards. Within this process, it forms a new paradigm for the development of international conservation policies as they evolved from the second half of the 20th century. While in the past, and still in the 19th century, creativity was often referred to the imitation of divine creations, it is basically the merit of Friedrich Nietzsche to have recognised the role of human creativity in the conception of “a work of art”, thus establishing a new foundation for the recognition of the diversity of human cultural expressions. In the early 20th century, particularly due to the contribution of various thinkers, including Henri Bergson, Alois Riegl, Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, this thinking started gradually changing the 19th century approaches to the definition of cultural heritage.

In 1931, the First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments was organised in Athens, sponsored by the International Museums Office that had been created in 1926. The conclusions regarding the safeguarding of ancient monuments included recommendations on administrative and legislative measures, aesthetic enhancement,



ATHENS. Image: Postcard, public domain.

restoration, measures to avoid deterioration, the techniques of conservation, as well as international collaboration and education in the respect of monuments. At the Athens Conference, Italy was represented by Gustavo Giovannoni (1873-1947), who on his return wrote his own version of recommendations, adopted by the High Council of Antiquities and Fine Arts of the Italian Ministry of Education (*Consiglio superiore delle antichità e belle arti*) in 1932. While the 1931 congress condemned "restoration", stressing the policy of conservation, Giovannoni referred restoration to:

the architectural concept that intends to bring the monument back to an art function and, when possible, to a unity of line (not to be confused with the unity of style); the criterion that derives from the feeling of the citizens themselves, from the spirit of the city, with its memories and nostalgia; and finally, the same indispensable that refers to the administrative needs relating to the necessary means and the practical use (Carta del Restauro, 1932).¹

The policies expressed by Giovannoni were taken over to the School of Architecture in Rome, where he taught restoration. The students included Roberto Pane (1897-1987), later professor at the school of architecture at Naples, who coined the term "restauro critico", i.e., restoration based on judicious/critical judgement. He stated that, while maintaining historical evidence, restoration could also free hidden aesthetic qualities. Another student and assistant of Giovannoni was Guglielmo De Angelis d'Ossat (1907-1992), Director General of Italian cultural heritage (1947-1960) and Dean of the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Rome. De Angelis established the first training programmes in the conservation of "monuments and sites" in the 1960s. He was also a close collaborator with ICCROM in the development of international training courses starting in 1966.

¹ Original quotation: "il concetto architettonico che intende riportare il monumento ad una funzione d'arte e, quando sia possibile, ad una unità di linea (da non confondersi con l'unità di stile); il criterio che deriva dal sentimento stesso dei cittadini, dallo spirito della città, con i suoi ricordi e le sue nostalgie; e infine, quello stesso indispensabile che fa capo alle necessità amministrative attinenti ai mezzi occorrenti e alla pratica utilizzazione...".

In 1939, the Italian Government established the *Istituto Centrale del Restauro* (ICR) with Cesare Brandi (1906-1988) as its founding Director. In the 1940s, the institute started training art conservators. Brandi's lectures, published in 1963 as the *Teoria del restauro*, reflected the philosophical concepts of the previous decades and were taken as an important reference for the *Venice Charter*. In his theory, Brandi distinguishes two types of restoration, one in relation to manufactured artifacts, where the function is the main reference, and the other in relation to works of art:

[...] when works of art are concerned, even if there are some that, in their form, do have a functional purpose (such as architecture and, in general, objects of the so-called "applied arts"), the re-establishment of functional properties is, in the end, only a secondary or supplementary part of the restoration, and never the primary or fundamental aspect. That lies in respect for a work of art as a work of art (Brandi, 2005: 47).

Brandi defines restoration as: "the methodological moment in which the work of art is recognized in its physical being and in its dual aesthetic and historical nature, in view of its transmission to the future" (Brandi, 2005: 47-48). Brandi's theory can be seen to have had a fundamental impact on the conception of the *Venice Charter*.

The 1964 Venice Charter

In May 1957, UNESCO sponsored the International Congress of Architects and Technicians on Historical Monuments, organised in Paris. During the congress, De Angelis d'Ossat presented an invitation to continue the discussions in Italy. Seven years later, the 2nd International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments took place in Venice in May 1964. Before the Venice Conference, a preliminary meeting was organised at ICCROM in Rome together with Piero Gazzola, Guglielmo De Angelis d'Ossat, Raymond Lemaire, and Paul Philippot to discuss the possible outcome of the conference. It was here noted that, after the World War, the situation of cultural heritage had changed. Therefore, it would be necessary to update the principles recommended by the 1931 Athens Congress. Some ideas for the revision were then presented by Gazzola and Pane as an introduction to the Venice conference.



ISLAND OF SAN GIORGIO, VENUE OF THE CONFERENCE, VENICE. *Image: Valerie Magar, 2003.*

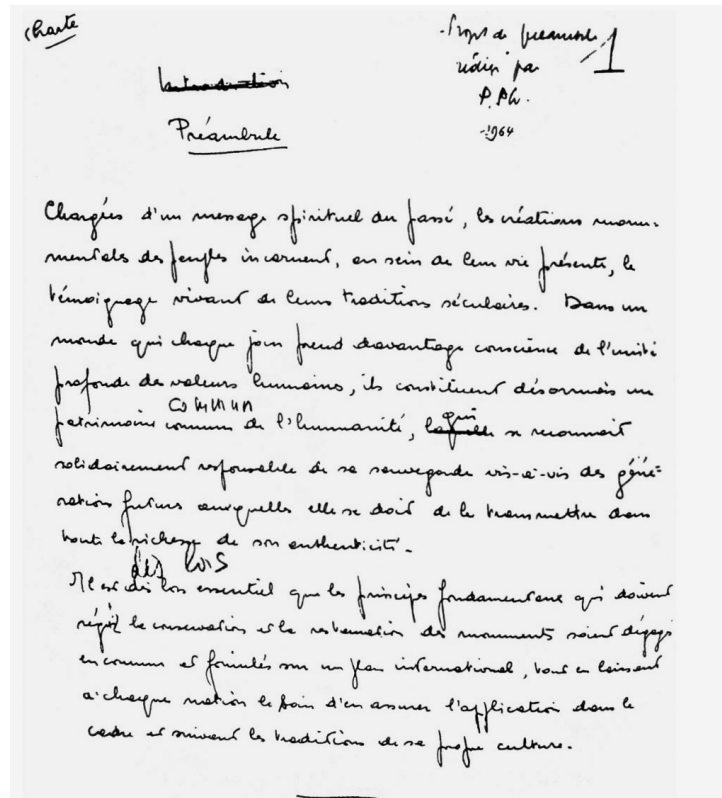
At the Venice Congress, the charter (the *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites*) was prepared by an international working group of 23 members. The group was chaired by Piero Gazzola with Raymond Lemaire as rapporteur and included representatives of UNESCO and ICCROM. The youngest member of the group was Carlos Flores Marini (Mexico). The original text of the charter was written in French on the basis of discussions in the Working Group. Raymond Lemaire was responsible for drafting the articles, while the Preface was written by Paul Philippot, at the time Deputy Director of ICCROM. The English version was prepared at UNESCO after the conference, and it seems to have been taken as reference for various translations (ICOMOS, 1994). The *Venice Charter* was adopted as the founding principles of ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) at its launch in the Krakow conference, in 1965. It was also integrated into the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (2005) as the founding principles of the emerging international doctrine in safeguarding the architectural heritage.



2ND INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF ARCHITECTS AND TECHNICIANS OF HISTORICAL MONUMENTS, VENICE, 1964. Image: Piero Gazzola's Archive.

The Preface of the 1964 *Venice Charter*

The *Venice Charter* can now be taken as the founding stone in the process of the gradually developing conservation policies, which together form the overall methodological framework applicable to different types of heritage, also considering the diversity of cultural and environmental contexts. The text was conceived in French, and it can be noted that the English version, resulting from a later translation, does not always reflect the original ideas. This is particularly the case at the beginning of the Preface, which proposes a fundamental principle for the definition of heritage. Paul Philippot, who wrote the Preface, was in close contact with Brandi and other colleagues at the ICR, and he was also well informed about the policies for practical implications by the conservators of ICR. In these years, ICCROM was preparing to undertake international training in the conservation of architecture, jointly with the University of Rome, as well as joining forces with ICR for the conservation of mural paintings. Therefore, it was important to clarify the concepts related to heritage conservation.



DRAFT OF THE PREAMBLE OF THE VENICE CHARTER HANDWRITTEN BY P. PHILIPPOT. Image: Lemaire papers, University Archives, Leuven, Belgium.

The French *Préface* starts:

Chargées d'un message spirituel du passé, les œuvres monumentales des peuples demeurent dans la vie présente le témoignage vivant de leurs traditions séculaires. L'humanité, qui prend chaque jour conscience de l'unité des valeurs humaines, les considère comme un patrimoine commun, et, vis-à-vis des générations futures, se reconnaît solidairement responsable de leur sauvegarde. Elle se doit de les leur transmettre dans toute la richesse de leur authenticité.

The official English translation reads:

Imbued with a message from the past, the historic monuments of generations of people remain to the present day as living witnesses of their age-old traditions. People are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage. The common responsibility to safeguard them for future generations is recognized. It is our duty to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity.

The notion “*les œuvres monumentales*”, in the Preface, was certainly conceived in reference to Brandi’s theory. As already indicated by various philosophers, a work of human creativity can be recognised in two aspects; one is the creative idea, i.e., the intangible representation of the significance of the work; the other refers to its material support that is subject to ageing and weathering over time. In this regard, Philippot notes that:

[...] from an historical point of view, that of the art historian, the work of art has a remarkable characteristic which gives an evident distinctiveness to the art history discourse within human sciences. Indeed, whatever period the work of art was created in, it gives itself to us hic et nunc, in the absolute present of perception. It lacks a reality of its own until it is recognised by a consciousness, and this recognition is not the result of a judgment arising from an analysis, but the identification of a specificity within the perception itself and the point of departure for the historian's study (Philippot, 2005: 28).

Speaking of monumental works of the past does not underline the size or the importance of the works, nor is it only limited to "historic buildings" as proposed in the English translation. Rather, this notion refers to even modest creative achievements of humanity in the past, associated with particular meanings as a living testimony of traditional life. Indeed, it is exactly in the "message spirituel du passé" that this significance can be recognised carrying a particular spiritual meaning associated with the creative process and meaning of heritage.

The French original notes that people "prend chaque jour conscience de l'unité des valeurs humaines, les considère comme un patrimoine commun." The English version also states that people are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values. However, different from the French text, the English version mentions: "ancient monuments as a common heritage." The French original actually does not specify "ancient monuments" but notes that it is the unity of human values that should be considered a common heritage. When the question is about human values, it should be taken to refer to a judgement that results from the process of recognition of the creative achievements (*les œuvres monumentales*) of humanity. These values then live on so long as they continue being recognised and regenerated by successive generations of people. Consequently, the values based on a judicious recognition of a heritage resource become an incentive for the people to recognise the significance of human creativity, and thus provide a reference to understanding such works in view of their maintenance and restoration.

The recognition of a work of human creativity is part of the traditional continuity of comprehending the intangible quality of the work of human creativity. It is a learning process, and humanity has always learnt from past achievements, then continuing to respond creatively to the emerging challenges, while through such development each phase achieves its identity and function contributing to the historical strata of the work. Considering that the charter was written in the aftermath of the World War, there was a strong feeling for solidarity amongst the different nations. ICCROM was also already contacting conservation professionals in the different countries in order to understand the requirements and to propose collaboration and training for safeguarding heritage.

It has been observed that the early modern policies were mostly drafted within a European context. Since the 1990s, this gradually changed as reflected in the recommendations of the 1994 Nara Conference on Authenticity, in Japan: "Cultural heritage diversity exists in time and space and demands respect for other cultures and all aspects of their belief systems." While recognising that guidelines for safeguarding heritage should be agreed and laid down on an international basis, the diversity of cultures and heritage resources requires that each country has to be responsible for "applying the plan within the framework of its own culture and traditions," as also noted in the Venice *Charter*. Therefore, while the essence of heritage conservation needs to be clarified in the international principles, it is necessary to recognise the specificity and significance of each place as a reference for their application.

Restoration and reconstruction

Restoration is discussed in the articles from 9 to 13 of the *Venice Charter*, and is considered to have an exceptional character. Article 9 stresses that it is a highly specialised operation, and its aim is to preserve and reveal the aesthetic and historic value of the monuments, while respecting their original material and authentic documentary evidence. “La restauration est une opération qui doit garder un caractère exceptionnel. Elle a pour but de conserver et de révéler les valeurs esthétiques et historiques du monument et se fonde sur le respect de la substance ancienne et de documents authentiques” (article 9). While keeping the main scope of restoration clearly in mind, the charter notes that when traditional techniques are not adequate, one can also use modern techniques, guaranteeing that their efficacy has been tested.

The question of reconstruction is discussed in article 15 specifically in reference to excavated sites or ruins. Here, it is specified that any reconstruction should be excluded a priori.

Tout travail de reconstruction devra cependant être exclu à priori, seule l’anastylose peut être envisagée, c’est-à-dire la reconstitution des parties existantes mais démembrées. Les éléments d’intégration seront toujours reconnaissables et représenteront le minimum nécessaire pour assurer les conditions de conservation du monument et rétablir la continuité de ses formes.

Indeed, in the section concerning restoration, there are various indications that can be understood as a partial remake or reconstruction of lost elements. The critical issue is to understand where restoration changes into reconstruction and what this implies regarding policy.

In article 12, it is noted that replacements of lost parts “must integrate harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.” In principle, all periods need to be respected. However, revealing of hidden forms can be justified in exceptional circumstances and “when what is removed is of little interest and the material which is brought to light is of great historical, archaeological or aesthetic value, and its state of preservation good enough to justify the action” (article 11). The judgement about the limits of restoration and the justification of showing significant underlying layers in an historic monument is a delicate issue requiring judicious judgement. In such cases, the decisions should not be taken alone by an individual conservationist but in consultation with other competent persons or bodies.

Historic Monuments and Sites

The article 1 of the Charter proposes the definition of “historic monument.” The English text notes that an “historic monument” can embrace a single architectural work, as well as its setting. The French original, instead, states:

La notion de monument historique comprend la création architecturale isolée aussi bien que le site urbain ou rural qui porte témoignage d’une civilisation particulière, d’une évolution significative ou d’un événement historique. Elle s’étend non seulement aux grandes créations mais aussi aux œuvres modestes qui ont acquis avec le temps une signification culturelle.

In fact, the French text does not mention ‘setting’,² but states that the notion of the historic monument would not only refer to an isolated architectural creation, but also to an urban or rural site that carries testimony to a particular civilisation. Furthermore, it is noted that the notion of historic monument does not only refer to great creations but also to modest works

² The question of “setting” is discussed in detail in articles 6 and 7 of the charter.

that have acquired cultural significance over time. Therefore, the charter also recognises the importance of historic urban and rural areas. In article 14, the charter refers to safeguarding 'Monumental Sites' (*Sites Monumentaux*):

Les sites monumentaux doivent faire l'objet de soins spéciaux afin de sauvegarder leur intégrité et d'assurer leur assainissement, leur aménagement et leur mise en valeur. Les travaux de conservation et de restauration qui y sont exécutés doivent s'inspirer des principes énoncés aux articles précédents.

So, what are the "*Sites Monumentaux*"? The article 1 already observes that the notion of "monument" can refer to urban or rural sites and even to modest works that have acquired cultural significance over time, i.e., have been recognised for their historicity within their context. Consequently, we can interpret the 'monumental sites' as a reference to urban or rural areas that have been recognised for their cultural significance in their integrity.

The modern movement in art and architecture was contemplated in a series of conferences by CIAM (*Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne*), initiated in 1928, one of which took place in Athens in 1933. The Athens recommendations were later published with comments by le Corbusier, also including remarks on protection of historic urban areas. Urban conservation became particularly important in the aftermath of the World War. In Italy, based on the early urban conservation experience by Giovanni Astengo in Assisi, in the 1950s, the conference in Gubbio in 1960 referred specifically to the conservation and rehabilitation of historic urban centres (*centri storici*), taken as a municipal responsibility. In 1962, France passed the André Malraux Law on "*Secteurs sauvegardés*" for the protection of historic urban areas recognised for their architectural qualities. In the UK, at the same time, studies were initiated on historic urban areas resulting in the definition and legal recognition of conservation areas, which could include listed buildings as well as buildings of 'group value'. During the Venice conference, there was also a motion that specifically concerned the protection and rehabilitation of historic centres (document 8). In the 1970s, these initiatives result in the recognition of the methodology of integrated urban conservation as indicated in the Council of Europe documents in 1975, as well as in the UNESCO recommendations of 1972 and 1976, which give particular attention to the safeguarding of historic areas with their surroundings.

These can be seen in reference to the methodological initiatives undertaken on the analysis of historic territories, such as those by M.R.G. Conzen (1907-2000) in the UK, Saverio Muratori (1910-1973) and Gianfranco Caniggia (1933-1986) in Italy (Whitehand, 1981; Cataldi *et al.*, 2002; Caniggia, 1976). Rather than looking at the architectural value of individual buildings, the scope was now to understand the traditionally established urban form of an historic area, characterised by the integrity of gradually formed typologies of buildings and spaces. The integrity of an urban area would thus need to be recognised in the identification and analysis of the typological characteristics of the buildings and spaces, and how these have gradually evolved over time forming the overall urban form within its environmental surroundings. It is these typological characteristics of buildings and spaces that represent the human creativity in reference to the urban morphology. The typology is not only based on the skilful utilisation of available resources and materials to provide a shelter for the community. It also relates to a sustainable response to the needs of the society within its traditional economics and household management.

Conclusive remarks

Gertrude Tripp, former Director at Bundesdenkmalamt, Austria, and a founding member of ICCROM Council, was the only woman in the Working Group drafting the *Venice Charter*. In 2001, considering the charter, she recalled that even though the working group was truly

international, there was at that time still not enough understanding of the conditions and requirements of heritage in the different parts of the world.³ In 1977, Cevat Erder, later elected Director of ICCROM, noted that the *Venice Charter* had faced much criticism after its conception. He remarked, however, that it would not be easy and perhaps not even possible to write a new concise statement of the conservation principles. The charter was an historic document in the development of international conservation policies and thus needed to be treated as “an historic monument” (Erder, 1994).

Being drafted in French, some of the concepts of the original text reflect the terms in use in Latin countries. The principal difference of the charter compared to previous recommendations is certainly in the Preface. It has a strongly philosophical spirit, which may not have always been properly interpreted in the translations. Considering that the charter has been translated into dozens of languages and it has also been a policy reference for some of the principal heritage organisations, it can well be imagined that there can have been problems in its interpretation in the different cultural contexts. This difficulty in properly interpreting the original text may well be one of the reasons for criticism.



VENICE. *Image: Valerie Magar, 2008.*

³ Interview with Jukka Jokilehto, in Vienna (2001).

While the *Venice Charter* certainly represents an innovation in the recognition of heritage, it is not the final word of conservation policies. The policies have continued advancing in response to the evolving situations and an enriched understanding of heritage significance. One of the issues that needs attention is the interpretation of the concepts of monuments and sites, which can have different meanings in various languages. It is however often too easy to take a sentence of the *Venice Charter* out of the context as a principle to be followed without properly defining the specificity of each case. The same is the case with other international documents as well.

In the 1960s, there was still much attention to the protection of individual buildings or sites that contained buildings appreciated for architectural values. This is seen in the definition of heritage in the 1972 *World Heritage Convention*, and it was reflected in the early nominations to the List. It is mainly since the 1975 European Architectural Heritage Year that there has been a broader approach, starting with the recognition of historic urban areas as heritage. This time, the question is no more only of architectural or historical values, but rather the significance of urban morphology and spatial characteristics. In the 1990s, to this is added the recognition of cultural landscapes, which has led to the broader appreciation not only of cultural but also environmental values. Increasing attention is also given to the management of the settings of properties. At the beginning of the 21st century, a distinction is made between the tangible heritage and the intangible heritage. While recognising that there may be reasons for such distinction, it may not always be helpful from the point of view of heritage conservation, considering that it is the tangible and intangible aspects together that form our heritage. In fact, the 2005 UNESCO Convention has introduced the unifying concept of “cultural expression”, which can cover all aspects when recognising heritage resources.

In this evolving context, the *Venice Charter* should not be taken as a stand-alone international recommendation. Rather, it should be seen as the historical foundation and a fundamental reference for understanding the evolution of international conservation policies in response to evolving challenges. It is indeed this whole process that together represents the recognition of heritage. It endures within the modern cultural approaches to safeguarding heritage, and it can itself be considered part of our intangible cultural heritage.

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