Ethics and Aesthetics in Conservation*

John Warren

John Warren is a consultant architect, town-planner and conservator, and Honor/ary Fellow of the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies at York.

John Warren in "Ethics and Aesthetics in Conservation" gets to the heart of the matter when he warns of the difficulties which lie in the temptation to pursue aesthetic objectives at the expense of integrity. Ethics involve responsible behaviour and a sense of responsibility in holding past creations in trust for future generations. One can have an ethical principle ameliorated by aesthetic considerations just as one can have an aesthetically driven conclusion taking an ethical overtone. In the end, for the conservator it is a matter of judgement, not only ethically and aesthetically, but practically in terms of what is achievable and socially right.

A paper based on lectures delivered at the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies in York and elsewhere.

Conservation is an art governed by philosophical principles which become fundamental criteria governing the activities of its practitioners. These criteria apply across a range of buildings and associated artefacts guiding interpretations and interventions. Efforts to make time stand still, or even to roll backwards, give rise to many actions based on judgement. Judgement in turn demands skill, knowledge, training and the ability to be dispassionate. Judgements are guided by certain principles and the activity of making judgements is undoubtedly an art, the art practised by the Conservator.

Where there are principles we conceive of ethics: where there is art we conceive of aesthetics. These intangible factors interact and by understanding their interaction we understand better the problem and ourselves as participants in it.

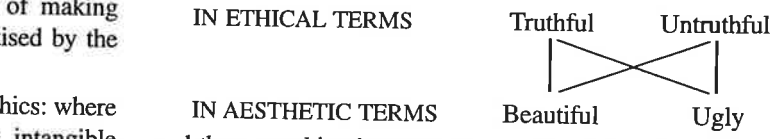
Initially definitions:

ETHICS, ETHICAL: principled; of integrity; uprightness; correctness; truthfulness. All these attributes of behaviour are matters of ethics. In short ethics are the principles which underwrite good behaviour. In the converse therefore, unethical becomes a term of censure.

AESTHETICS: the qualities of artistry; the underlying quality of a work of art which ties it to its source or school, period, place or creator. There is no converse, for the obvious reason that the qualities of an artefact are by definition its aesthetic.

It will immediately be apparent that these two qualities are entirely different, although they are indissolubly linked. In conservation neither can exist without the other. Any work of conservation will be judged by whether it is principled or unprincipled ethical or unethical, and its impact upon the user will be measured aesthetically according to the insight and predilections of the observer. Ethically it may be truthful or deceitful; aesthetically it may be satisfying or unsatisfactory.

It will be apparent immediately that four combinations are possible, thus:



and these combinations can be a matter of degree.

The several possible combinations of these attributes lead, among other conclusions, to the proposition that a work of conservation may be aesthetically pleasing but deceitful. To give the idea shape imagine a building or feature which has been conserved or restored in such a way that it has become pleasing but has been remade so extensively that it is a very long way from the original creative work. It may delight the eye by its success aesthetically but be valueless because it is untruthful. Conversely consider fragments which on their own are aesthetically unsatisfactory like shattered pieces of pottery. These set in a plaster shape may reproduce with total accuracy the form of the artefact but the result is not aesthetically meaningful because the pieces themselves are scattered so that only the most scholarly can visualise the aesthetic quality of the original. This is conservation where visual objectives have been sacrificed in favour of total

truthfulness. The result may not stir the heart but it stirs the mind.

These examples and any other combination will show one thing: that ethics are the dominant criterion in any serious intellectual evaluation. Where the ethics are wrong the result is intellectually unacceptable. Half cynically we might add that if ethics are the qualities that matter intellectually aesthetics are those of emotional appeal. Sometimes fate is kind and these attributes go hand in hand. Where they do the result is uncontroversial. If the pursuit of intellectual truth produces a handsome work of conservation all parties are pleased. Difficulties lie in the temptation to pursue aesthetic objectives at the expense of integrity.

We can understand the problem more thoroughly by breaking down each of these qualities to identify their key components and the methodology that goes with them. Let us pursue this quest for a moment, drawing from the general arguments key CONCLUSIONS to act as guiding principles.

Ethics

Initially consider conclusions which are essentially ethical. Conservators are not free agents but are controlled by the object of conservation. The imagination of the painter or sculptor may be unconfined-a composer's or poet's even more so — but by virtue of starting with an object of precise shape, the conservator is controlled. This control extends to the material itself and to the immaterial back ground of its history. The architectural conservator cannot make the right decisions unless he understands why the building is what it is. *In preparation, therefore, the conservator satisfies himself, before any action is taken, that he knows sufficient about the object to allow him to make his decisions correctly.*

The first conclusion therefore is that THE OBJECT OF CONSERVATION MUST BE THOROUGHLY RESEARCHED: it must be understood as an object created in space and in history. This in turn requires an understanding of its social background and status, the changes that have been imposed on it and the reasons why it has taken on its specific form. It becomes a matter of integrity with the conservator that no action is taken until the problem has been adequately researched.

Generally the action required is benign that is to say non-damaging, though sometimes it may extend to destructive research such as excavation or dismantling. This problem leads directly to a second principle relating to intervention.

Conservation almost inevitably leads to intervention i.e. the addition of further, usually new material or removal of an element which almost inevitably is part of its history. Before making any intervention it is essential to record all available evidence. Even evidence which may seem unimportant ultimately may prove to be significant. If an object is worthy of our attention as conservators it is so because of its history or contextual merit. If it has such merit this, of itself demands being put on record.

The second conclusion, therefore is that PRIOR TO ANY INTERVENTION OR CHANGE A SCRUPULOUS RECORD MUST BE MADE OF STATE AND CONDITION.

As it is an essential prerequisite that work is executed to a sufficient standard we can add that INTERVENTION SHALL BE UNDERTAKEN ONLY BY THOSE WITH APPROPRIATE SKILLS AND EQUIPMENT.

If the concept of ethics contains an essential element of truthfulness we may well ask how truthfulness applies to conservation and how it fits into our pattern. The answer lies both in the handling of the old fabric and the introduction of new. The essence lies in the avoidance of deceit and pretence. It is untruthful to pretend that something is old when it is not. It is untruthful to put something in a context where, although new, it appears to be original. It is not necessary or truthful to proclaim the newness of an intervention by making it aggressively self-evident. A non-statement may be as honest as a violent statement. In this range of opportunities the quality of sympathy arises and to this we will turn again when looking at aesthetics.

There is an ethical element also in other factors such as utilisation. Almost no building or object has been created without reason or purpose. Often — too often — the purpose evaporates leaving the object stranded on the shores of history purposeless but still historically important. No one, so far as I know foresees a widespread return of the cult of Mithras but every Mithraic temple uncovered is a powerful candidate for conservation in situ, to be retained as found. Sometimes the purpose of the object can be redeemed and it can be reused in its original context. This ultimately is the most ethical of all solutions. Better to restore a mosque for use as a mosque, even if that does involve physical alterations, rather than turn it into a jam factory unaltered. Provided that the alterations are not excessive the ethic of retaining the religious use dominates the ethic of integrity of unaltered structure: but the decision will be one of degree, demanding a balanced judgement.

The third conclusion must be that IN ANY INTERVENTION OR RE-USE TRUTHFULNESS IS A PARAMOUNT VIRTUE. This truthfulness will extend beyond stating which part is old and which part is new to fundamental honesty in handling the restored structure itself. A building may require strengthening. This might be achieved by visible insertions which could be disguised, but the disguise may of itself be a dishonest statement. The alternative of hidden reinforcement avoids the need to resort to disguise. The ethical implication is that where exposed reinforcement is required, it should be handled honestly and with minimal visual impact.

Ethics involve, in essence, responsible behaviour: and the principles so far enunciated derive from a sense of responsibility in holding past creations in trust for future generations. There follows then a further principle which applies in conservation as in other aspects of life — reversibility. Just as one fundamental objection to capital punishment is that the penalty is beyond recall, so the application of irreversible solutions in conservation is unsatisfactory. An original component, once destroyed can never be called into evidence. The material it contains can never be analysed by techniques yet to be invented. There is no opportunity for better techniques to be applied in the

future. A further conclusion therefore is that EVERY INTERVENTION SHALL, WHEREVER POSSIBLE, BE REVERSIBLE.

Aesthetics

We now have four conclusions governing ethics in conservation. Let us look at aesthetics which are driven by the emotive reaction which is a part of the response to all forms of art. No aesthetic value exists without a preconditioning of the mind by comparisons and by an understanding of social and visual values. All aesthetic values derive from conditioned response; that is to say from the reaction of the mind trained to what it sees, hears or senses. These reactions run the gamut from repugnance, horror and fear to adulation, joy and pleasure. These emotive reactions are a critical part of our understanding. If our object of conservation has an aesthetic quality then our intervention should run in parallel with that quality, neither in conflict to diminish it nor exaggerating to enhance it. Aesthetically a first conclusion can be that THE IMPACT OF AN INTERVENTION SHOULD BE SYMPATHETIC OR NEUTRAL.

On this basis and by this means we can ensure that the quality of the original object is seen for what it is. But there is a debatable aspect to this conclusion. In cases where the original quality of the building has been wholly or largely destroyed in the process of historical change, there is a strong and sometimes irresistible argument for restoring the aesthetic quality it once had even though the structure used in the restoration is entirely new and the material that demonstrates the aesthetic may therefore, be described as false. Replacement of a finial may pose such a problem if the shape of the original is not known. Better to have a finial than none at all, so runs the argument, leaving us with the choice of a modern design or a traditional form. We might then derive a second conclusion: that AN INTERVENTION SHOULD MOVE TOWARDS A FULL APPRECIATION OF THE BUILDING.

Many buildings have been altered at different phases in their history. Intervention can heighten or diminish any one phase. The process can go so far that the conservator may eliminate one phase entirely in favour of another. He can cut out later development to expose only the original state or in the converse he can cover the original by heightening the later work. He is entitled to make a judgement; he may be forced to do so!, and that judgement must be based on knowledge which derives from comparative values, assessments of rarity of significance or social importance and of historical value. Many subtle questions can arise. What for instance does he do with the humble but very rare building which cannot be restored or exposed without destroying a much grander but relatively common structure totally obscuring it? Does he remove the modern but historic parts to reveal the first and most venerable foundation? From such dilemmas we can draw the conclusion that THE SCALE AND NATURE OF THE INTERVENTION MUST RESPECT THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BUILDING AND ITS PHASES OF CONSTRUCTION.

Finally let us turn to the nature of the aesthetic. It is the fingerprint, the distinctive mark of the creator. It is the quality apparent to the skilled observer, which tells when and by whom the building was designed, perhaps by whom it was built. It is most meaningful to those with most experience; to the newcomer it may hardly be apparent at all. It consists of nuances, inflexions and accents which betray the source and quality of the creative effort. In simple analogy it may be compared to the dialect of a language. To someone who cannot speak a language dialect is meaningless; to those well versed in the language dialect is immensely rewarding, carrying the flavour of the country, telling something of the origin of the speaker and much about his place in society. It can be ugly or beautiful; it can betray place and time.

So we have an aesthetic characteristic which may perhaps be encapsulated in a conclusion to the effect that THE INTRINSIC QUALITY OF THE BUILDING MUST BE RESPECTED, ANY INTERVENTION BEING NEUTRAL OR SYMPATHETIC TO THE ORIGINAL. This might be coupled with a further conclusion to the effect that THE BUILDING SHOULD BE PLACED IN A SETTING WHICH IS CONTEXTUALLY RIGHT AND MEANINGFUL. For reasons of history or limitations of brief this may be beyond the powers of the conservator but aesthetically it is not to be ignored.

These conclusions will suffice to allow us to discuss their rationale and to relate ethics to aesthetics.

Conclusions

The first conclusion was that THE OBJECT OF CONSERVATION MUST BE THOROUGHLY RESEARCHED. There are several generalities to be borne in mind. Research is likely to involve a range of special skills beyond those of the conservator and, therefore in pursuit of high ethical standards the conservator will have a humility which allows him to seek out and sit at the feet of others who have greater and more specialised knowledge. Part of the conservation ethic is fulfilled when the conservator deploys at the outset the whole range of available skills to define the qualities of the building he is dealing with and this of course will draw in aesthetic judgements which may be made by others of greater competence — art historians or architectural historians — whose views must then be accommodated in the work that follows. Archaeologists, structural specialists and archivists in their libraries may all contribute and the conservator may take an active part in one or all of these activities. His integrity is shown in the way in which he combines all the resulting information before making decisions as to interventions in the building itself. The skills available include many forms of physical survey, laboratory analyses of material and documentary evidence. Contextual evidence can be important and the research must extend to knowledge of the materials applicable in any intervention.

The second conclusion was that PRIOR TO ANY INTERVENTION A SCRUPULOUS RECORD MUST BE MADE OF STATE AND CONDITION. This aspect of the work is sometimes very difficult to fund for the simple reason that most building owners see such work as relatively unimportant since no results are visible on the building itself.

With recording goes research. Physical surveys will include many aspects of measurement. Environmental conditions must be analysed while physical, planning and human circumstances are crucial to an understanding of potential and requirements and themselves may be the subject of record. This process of recording is of course of small importance while the object stands unaltered but when the conservation process has gone forward a record of its earlier condition becomes increasingly significant and at that point there is no going back to make it.

Recording is doubly important where a whole phase of a building will disappear in the work of conservation. Sometimes this is unavoidable, at other times it is simply desirable. It is part of the integrity of the conservator that information is not allowed to slip away since it can be an important resource for the future.

An objective of recording and research will be to define the aesthetic value and context of the building in its original state. An object once pristine and colourful may have acquired subsequently the mellow qualities of 'pleasing decay'. Are these to be sacrificed to return to the original condition, and is this condition relevant in present circumstances? By intervening shall we have eliminated forever a special quality even though this might be an accident of history and of aesthetic value alone?

With this thought we leap forward to our final principle of ethics that EVERY INTERVENTION SHALL WHEREVER POSSIBLE BE REVERSIBLE. Reversibility is simply the ability to remove the intervention restoring the earlier condition. Aesthetically this allows room for the argument that an attractive time-worn aspect may be retained with advantage rather than destroyed.

Our third conclusion was that IN ANY INTERVENTION OR RE-USE TRUTHFULNESS IS A PARAMOUNT VIRTUE.

Truth demands that a present intervention is not to be mistaken for old material and with care this can be achieved. Modern materials can always be identified or marked without damage to the aesthetic qualities of the work. Truthfulness carried to the extreme, however, can conflict violently with aesthetic objectives. It may be argued that because the form of a particular ancient window is unknown a modern, metal window, painted bright blue, should be inserted to make a positive statement of lack of knowledge. This argument, of course is countered by the principle of sympathy and the need for a neutral quality in any intervention. An ethical principle is thus ameliorated by aesthetic considerations.

This takes us to our essentially aesthetic conclusion: THAT THE IMPACT OF ANY INTERVENTION SHOULD BE SYMPATHETIC OR NEUTRAL.

Here a conclusion driven aesthetically takes on an ethical overtone. It is hardly possible to be sympathetic to something which you do not understand but we have already established that the conservator will make it his first duty to understand the object he is conserving. His opportunity for choice may lie in several directions and his decision may depend considerably upon integrity and balance of judgement, but other pressures may enter the equation which have nothing to do with aesthetics: money, religion, ethnic loyalties and politics among them.

The conclusion that AN INTERVENTION SHOULD MOVE TOWARDS A FULL APPRECIATION OF THE BUILDING is essentially aesthetic. The fullest understanding of a building is gained from an appreciation of its original state. An intervention should therefore enhance rather than diminish this understanding. Application of this idea tends towards the predominance of a wider characteristic over the lesser. A surface given a colour, texture or pattern on the basis of informed speculation may contribute more to understanding than one left blank for lack of detailed knowledge.

The ethic of truthfulness in an overall context may dominate that of truthfulness in minutiae. Aesthetic advantage may then become an important factor. However aesthetic advantage is not on its own decisive and the rightness of the greater truth over the lesser becomes the determinant.

Aesthetics and ethics bear equally upon the conclusion that THE SCALE AND NATURE OF THE INTERVENTION SHOULD RESPECT THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BUILDING AND ITS PHASES OF CONSTRUCTION. It is both responsible and visually desirable to limit the impact of the intervention upon an historic monument.

The final conclusion was that THE INTRINSIC QUALITY OF THE OBJECT MUST BE RESPECTED, ANY INTERVENTION BEING IN SYMPATHY WITH THE ORIGINAL. This is not to say that a building of one type can only be restored using materials identical to the original. That, in itself, might sometimes confound the ethic of truthfulness. What it does mean is that the conservation should not be obtrusive. Ideally the observer should come to the object and be unaware of the detailed nature of the conservation. He should merely be aware that the object has been venerated and dealt with carefully and with skill.

He should not be deceived and he should not be offended. He should not be repulsed nor should he be led to believe that the original object was finer, nobler, more important or more beautiful than in truth it really was. This in part depends on the surroundings and adjacent structures. For this reason it is important that THE BUILDING SHOULD BE PLACED IN A SETTING WHICH IS CONTEXTUALLY RIGHT AND MEANINGFUL. This objective is often made more difficult to achieve by sequential historical events, the insertion or removal of other buildings, changes in street pattern or other circumstances outside the conservator's control, but here ethical judgements will dominate over considerations of beauty. A correct setting is to be preferred to one which is made handsome irrespective of contextual proof.

But beyond these balances and checks of values there is a consideration of present and future time. The question must be asked of every act of conservation: how is this work meaningful and right for this and future generations? The conservator must weigh his judgements not only ethically and aesthetically, but practically in terms of what is achievable and socially right for his generation. It is also fair, that where appropriate, the conserving generation makes its own creative statements.

There is obviously a limit but more may be achievable than is imagined at the outset. The art of conservation is one of compromise. Essentially the skill of the conservator is to be self-effacing. He will never be the brightest star in the architectural firmament. The quality of his work will be not to shine large and bright, but to glow quietly.

To conclude with a further thought of astronomic dimensions, one which can affect the judgement of the conservator in choice and method, materials and objectives. We protect our buildings by law apparently indefinitely. How long will this be? How far can our minds be stretched? Our planet will survive as we know it for perhaps 1.5 million years. Do we as conservators conceive of our work as extending for a thousand, fifty thousand or a thousand thousand years? Do we imagine that our principles measure up to the aeons of this vast future? Are we repairing venerable stones shaped only a thousand years ago for a future of a million years? The thought, to the mind prepared to grasp it, is awesome.

* *This paper was first published in Transactions Volume 17 1992 of the Association for Studies in the Conservation of Historic Buildings.*