

## Conservation Techniques: Buildings\*

*Herb Stovel*

*Herb Stovel is a restoration architect and educator, directing Canada's oldest and largest postgraduate conservation programme and its 35 students at the Institute of Heritage Education, University of Montreal. Having served as ICOMOS Secretary General, 1990-1993, he remains active in the international conservation scene, directing ICOMOS involvement in the Conservation of Kizhi Pogost, in Russia, in Nepal's Katmandu Valley and on behalf of three world heritage sites in Sri Lanka.*

*Herb Stovel in "Conservation Techniques: Buildings" begins by stating that no technical conservation decision exists outside a philosophical context. Conservation is more an art than a science, technical measures being the means of prolonging the life of a site with important "messages" reflecting its values. The degree to which conservation action enhances these values is the real measure of success and not the ingenuity of the technical solutions. The author looks at ICOMOS as the custodian of conservation on doctrine, accepting criticism of the Venice Charter and encouraging the establishment of other charters like the Burra Charter of Australia or, more recently, the New Zealand Charter, which adapt the principles of the Venice Charter to local conditions. The New Zealand Charter, which is included immediately following this paper, advances conservation thinking by accepting the inevitability of decay in dealing with the heritage of indigenous peoples. Like John Warren, the author pleads, in matters of conservation, for modesty and minimum intervention, the key concept being caution.*

Though my topic 'Conservation Techniques: Buildings' suggests a focus on conservation, I would prefer to make a plea that our greatest technical need is to give the technical a context, a perspective. No technical conservation decision exists outside a philosophical context. This philosophical basis is too often implicit, based on unspoken assumptions; it needs to be discussed widely in advance, and based on shared views.

This may sound so self-evident that you might see no reason to discuss or debate the point. But the reality is that too often, in my experience, technical decisions are made without a philosophical context of any kind. Many of my students (and I have 35 postgraduate students at home at the University of Montreal studying conservation) arrive in my programme expecting to become technical experts. I have considerable difficulty in trying to explain that while they may learn how to manage a process, to ask good questions, and to become expert in dealing with the "why" of conservation they will not become proficient in the "how".

Conservation activity must have a clear purpose, both in general, and as applied to specific projects, and it is important that we not lose sight of this. There are many definitions of conservation around, but the best that I have found is Sir Bernard Feilden's: "Conservation seeks to prolong the life of cultural property and if possible to clarify the historic and artistic messages without loss of authenticity".

There are many significant implications in this definition. Perhaps the most important (and this links to the application of technology to solve problems) is the realisation that conservation is more an art than it is a science — perhaps an art in need of scientific method in order to improve the effectiveness of its decisions — but nevertheless an art. Feilden's definition of conservation focuses on technical measures to 'prolong the life', but its primary concern is with 'messages' reflective of the values that give a site meaning. The success of conservation intervention can only be judged by the degree to which actions support or enhance these values, not the technical ingenuity of the solutions.

Perhaps at this point it would be useful to look at the role of ICOMOS, the organization I represent, in dealing with these issues. At the international level, ICOMOS looks

at itself as the custodian of conservation doctrine. ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites) did not exist when the Venice Charter was written, but came into being six months later, in 1965, to meet the equally pressing need to create means for exchange among professionals involved in the field. ICOMOS came to adopt the Venice Charter, and such supplementary documents as were developed to explain or interpret its provisions in a variety of contexts.

The Venice Charter has been frequently criticised since its creation: it has been described as Euro-centric by some; others have suggested its principles more easily address the conservation of stone than ephemeral materials like wood; and some have criticised it for not explicitly focusing on values as the source of conservation activity.

ICOMOS has done its best to address these criticisms. While with time, the Venice Charter itself has become a kind of holy writ and essentially untouchable, ICOMOS has acknowledged various shortcomings, and embarked on a series of improvements. For one thing, ICOMOS asks critics to ensure that the Charter is read as a whole, and individual articles not applied out of context. ICOMOS has also encouraged those responsible for heritage protection in specific national, regional or thematic contexts to adapt the Venice Charter to their needs. As a result, we now have ICOMOS charters which attempt to consolidate conservation principles in areas like Historic Towns, Historic Gardens, and Archaeological Heritage Management. Equally, we have national charters in Canada, Australia and New Zealand and other countries which have attempted to adapt the principle of the Venice Charter to local conditions.

I should note that the New Zealand ICOMOS charter,<sup>1</sup> only recently finalised, represents both an excellent effort to codify and clarify conservation ideas at a national level, but one which succeeds in advancing conservation thinking at the international level. Its acceptance of the inevitability — indeed the possible desirability of decay — in dealing with the heritage of indigenous peoples is an important accomplishment in the development of conservation doctrine. For the first time, the aspirations and the cultural values of indigenous people are directly linked to defining provisions for appropriate care.

To further underline the importance of establishing a sound philosophical framework, I would like to look at two of the historic sites we have visited while here this week. In both Pompallier and the Waitangi Treaty House, new conservation work has been directed to correcting what have been described as the falsifications of the past. In both cases, the quality of the research and technical investigation has been outstanding and yet, to be honest (and I hope not offensive to our hosts), I believe their legitimacy may be questioned. No doubt the debates have waxed strongly here and will continue, but what has struck me most strongly here as an outsider is the degree to which each major restoration in the life of structures, even where correcting "falsehoods", may contribute to loss of integrity of original or important material. We may believe ourselves sure of our conclusions now, but who is to say that our predecessors were not? And who is to say that the research capacities of

our successors will not reach new heights of truth — heights which may suggest yet again the need for restoration? If you believe this is far-fetched or extreme, I could also give you numerous examples of North American buildings now embarking on their 5th or 6th major restorations, each successive intervention moving a little closer to interpretive truth, at the expense however, each time, of significant building fabric. I believe it is incumbent upon all of us in the conservation field to approach our work with modesty, to live by the rule of minimum intervention (which requires aggressive exploration of non-intrusive alternatives to meet needs), and to hold back from restoration unless we can be absolutely sure that our decisions are beyond questioning now, and will remain so in the future. If we cannot be sure, we should back away from restoration and let time reveal or decide what is truly significant.

The key concept here is caution. If those new to the practice of conservation take away one central idea from this presentation, it would be the value of caution in conservation decision-making. A further example and one fresh from several of my recent contacts with the ICOMOS Wood Committee has to do with the use of chemical preservatives in treating decay in wood. For years, the conventional wisdom in the field has been to pump deteriorated wood full of chemicals to retard fungal and insect decay. We have always paid some attention to preventative measures but usually as a complement to the needed dose of chemical, which is somehow seen as the primary intervention. The ICOMOS Wood Committee as a result of 15 years of monitoring the use of chemicals in projects around the world has come to a startling conclusion — we do not need them, or we may need them only in the most exceptional circumstances. A consensus seems to have emerged that chemical preservatives don't necessarily solve the problems they are directed to, and that in the process of application, over long years, they may do more harm than good. This new preference for caution it should be acknowledged is emblematic of a significant shift in the orientation of our thinking: the unquestioning belief of past generations in technical advances has been replaced by an equally deep-seated suspicion for overly complex technical intervention.

But to return to my principal theme which is the necessity of establishing a philosophical context for technical intervention. If we accept this as the goal, and if we accept caution as the by-word in our attempts to reach this goal, we must still ask ourselves: how can we do better in achieving this goal?

From my perspective, part of the answer rests with the decision-making process and our role in it. One of the points where we fall down most often is in failing to attribute sufficient weight or time to the determination of values in that process, in order to ensure that the values we recognise are widely shared and clearly identified. The most innovative conservation programmes of the past decades have been those that have moved in this direction. Since I've heard discussions of Main Street programmes while here in New Zealand, I will use these as an example. These programmes usually describe as their aim the economic revitalisation of

small town cores as a means of stimulating preservation activity. The real result of such programmes, in my Canadian experience, has been a mobilisation of grassroots support for preservation, but more importantly, the beginning of direct participation by communities in the definition of their own heritage values and of the means appropriate for their care. This has been one of the keys to the success of the programme — the degree to which decisions reflect shared values, and therefore to some degree can be said to objectively identify the essence of what it is important to conserve. The key both in determining values, and in applying principles is ensuring adequate debate. With it, decisions gain credibility, and programmes gain community support.

I have wandered fairly far from the technical in insisting that we focus on the philosophical context — especially if you had been led by my presentation's title to expect a diet of nuts and bolts. But I am convinced of the necessity of establishing this context if we are to improve the quality of our work.

I would like to focus finally on the implications, for professionals such as myself of a concern for process, for ensuring technical decisions acknowledge and respect shared

appreciation of value in sites. We must realise that the success of our efforts has as much to do with our ability to facilitate and encourage the kind of broad discussion essential to legitimately establish the values our actions must support, as with the scientific expertise we bring to problems. And equally, we must recognise that no amount of technical virtuosity can ever substitute for not getting the values right.

And finally in conclusion: I would like to do my best to embarrass Harald Langbery, (who is here among you and who you should recognize as a singer of the original Venice Charter), by focusing on something he once said. In the ICOMOS General Assembly of October 1990, in Lausanne, Harald Langberg took the floor at a particular moment, and pointing to the youngest participant in the discussions (who happened to be my four month old son Colin), said — "We do it for him and his generation. We conserve for the future." It was well said, and from the heart — we conserve so that future generations may understand and profit from that understanding. From that pre-eminent moral obligation springs the need to exercise the utmost care in imposing decisions which could sacrifice or risk the integrity of that legacy.

\* *Notes from a presentation at the 6th International Conference of National Trusts held in New Zealand.*

<sup>1</sup> *The ICOMOS New Zealand Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Heritage Value is published in full on pages 23 - 25.*