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## THE VENICE CHARTER IN THE AGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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**ABSTRACT:** This article is a reflection on the *Venice Charter* as a product of the 1960s and places it in the context of the built heritage and the discourse related to it at that time. It provides reflections on the continued validity of the Charter, and, in particular, on its significance in times of changing climatic conditions. The article aims to re-contextualize the Charter in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and makes suggestions to ensure its continued relevance. While the *Venice Charter* defined the main principles of heritage conservation in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it remains unclear whether these principles although recognized and acknowledged can be maintained in a world with very different conditions for built heritage.

**KEY WORDS:** Climate change, Authenticity, Venice Charter, Sustainability

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## 1. Introduction

After having been in existence for 60 years, the *Venice Charter* can still be regarded as one of the most significant documents that frame built heritage preservation principles<sup>1</sup>. It influenced generations of restorers/conservators and inspired concepts like authenticity, which are at the heart of the current heritage discourse<sup>2</sup>. This is a huge success, and it is remarkable that the *Venice Charter* has managed to retain its relevance in a world spoiled by a plethora of charters, documents, and principles which, for long, have allowed justification for almost any kind of intervention within built heritage<sup>3</sup>. Apart from the inflation of doctrinal texts, the past six decades witnessed tremendous changes not only within the world of heritage but also in respect of societal transformations in many places, globalization and efforts of decolonialization, unprecedented losses of and attacks on built heritage, and the beginning of a dramatic shift in climatic conditions.

These new and still changing circumstances make it necessary to review the conditions in which the *Venice Charter* was set up in 1964 and to comprehend the nature of the changes that have taken place since, as well as their influence on the topicality of the Charter. At this point, it is also noteworthy to remark that the *Venice Charter* was one of the first international agreements to address preservation principles after such a wish had been first expressed in 1889<sup>4,5</sup>. Moreover, it was ratified eight years before the World Heritage Convention and 14 years before the first World Heritage sites were listed. The validity of the *Venice Charter* has by no means been diminished by this tremendous change in the global conceptualization of heritage. So, when we still refer to the *Venice Charter* today and discuss its validity, we indirectly confirm that its authors aimed for a universal and sustainable character of the Charter. This makes it possible to reflect on the need to update or complement the Charter in order to maintain this objective in a changing world.

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<sup>1</sup> The anniversary of the Charter is celebrated with several conferences: *Venice at 60: Doctrinal Documents in the Protection of Cultural Heritage*, Florence, 7-8 March 2024; *Venice Charter [Re] Framed 1964-2024: New Heritage Challenges*, Lisbon, 27-30 May, 2024; '1964-2024, *The Venice Charter*'. *Theoretical reflections and operating practices in the restoration project*, Florence, 25-26 October 2024; *Revisiting the Venice Charter: Critical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges*, Ouro Preto, 10-17 November 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Mager T. (2016). *Schillernde Unschärfe. Der Begriff der Authentizität im architektonischen Erbe*. DeGruyter.

<sup>3</sup> Meurs P. (2007). A charter for each intervention: from generic to specific guidelines. *City & Time*, 3(3) (pp. 53–60).

<sup>4</sup> Normand C. (Ed.). (1889). *Congrès international pour la protection des œuvres d'art et des monuments, tenu à Paris du 24 au 29 juin 1889*. Imprimerie Nationale; Normand C. (1889b). Premières idées sur l'organisation de la Croix Rouge pour la protection des monuments en temps de guerre. *L'Ami des monuments*, 3 (pp. 272–277).

<sup>5</sup> A direct predecessor is the *Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments*, an outcome of the *First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments* in Athens in 1931 (not to be confused with the 1933 Athens Charter on urban planning).

This article reflects on the necessity of such a complement and aims to provoke thought into how far a doctrinal text is sacrosanct, or a valid subject for change, as the world around it changes as well. This year's conferences, on the one hand, spoke to the unbroken validity of the Charter, but, on the other hand, also pointed at weaknesses that will only increase with time. To provide a sound basis for such considerations, this article will look into the circumstances behind the process of the *Venice Charter* coming into existence to facilitate a comparison with the today's world. In this manner, the article will restrict its lens to issues related to climate change. Moreover, it reflects the significance of the Charter for the current heritage discourse and the necessities of a doctrinal text for this discourse. Finally, it will provide suggestions for a conceptualization of the *Venice Charter* in the heart of 21<sup>st</sup> century heritage management.

## 2. Venice 1964: The Second Congress of Architects and Specialists of Historic Buildings

The *Venice Charter* originates from a resolution adopted at the *Second Congress of Architects and Specialists of Historic Buildings* that took place from 25 May to 15 June 1964 in Venice's Palazzo Grassi. (Another resolution of this congress resulted in the creation of the International Council on Monuments and Sites [ICOMOS] an advisory body to UNESCO in World Heritage matters that is thereby indirectly linked to the principles of the Charter.) The Charter can be seen as an outcome of a demand that was first formulated during the *Congrès international pour la protection des œuvres d'art et des monuments*, which was held in 1889 in Paris. There, the wish for international efforts to safeguard built heritage and to set up a *Croix Rouge pour la protection des monuments en temps de guerre* was expressed for the first time. While the latter became true at the 1954 *Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*, the 1931 *Athens Charter* can be seen as the first international manifesto as regards preservation. However, the *Venice Charter* has become a much more concise document of greater practical use and more widespread acceptance. It emerged from a basic framework conceived by the architect Piero Gazzola together with the architectural historian Roberto Pane from a revision of the *Athens Charter*<sup>6</sup>. The *Venice Charter* is built on a wide range of considerations the week-long congress with 622 participants consisted of more than 160 international contributions. It not only presented definitions of the 'historic monument' (*Venice Charter*, Article 1) or 'conservation and restoration' (*Venice Charter*, Article 2), but also introduced the concept of authenticity into the heritage discourse<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Gazzola P., Roberto P. (1971). *Proposte per una Carta internazionale del Restauro* [in:] ICOMOS. *Il monumento per l'uomo: atti del II Congresso Internazionale del Restauro Venezia, 25–31 maggio 1964 = Le monument pour l'homme: actes du II Congrès International de la Restauration = The monument for the man: records of the II International Congress of Restoration* (p. 14). Marsilio.

<sup>7</sup> Mager T. (2016). *Schillernde Unscharfe. Der Begriff der Authentizität im architektonischen Erbe* (p. 93). DeGruyter.

The comprehensive publication of the Venice congress provides an insight into the considerations that formed the basis of the guiding principles at the time. The contribution of the Polish Conservator General Jan Zachwatowicz, under whose direction large parts of destroyed Warsaw were rebuilt, is exemplary of the attitude towards material authenticity expressed in the Charter: *'Naturellement, la plus grande valeur du monument historique consiste dans son authenticité, authenticité de la forme autant que de la matière et du matériel'*<sup>8</sup>. He continues by establishing authenticity as the foundation and constitutive starting point and associating it with the concept of the original: *'La thèse fondamentale c'est l'authenticité du monument historique et l'inviolabilité de ce qui, en lui, est original'*<sup>9</sup>. What he is concerned with, however, is precisely not in his words 'passive' position of pure preservation. Zachwatowicz is decidedly in favour of the introduction of a new criterion, a 'critère d'estimation', which he sees as the basis for heritage conservation that goes beyond the individual object and takes greater account of the aspects of social and urban planning. In doing so, he refers to the situation and experiences after the world wars, which was defined by a colossal loss of built heritage and the neglect of existing sites caused by more pressing societal issues. However, in proposing that heritage conservation be developed from its radical and purely preservation-based position to a more social and contemporary discipline, he emphasizes the authenticity of form and material as the basis of monuments: *'L'authenticité de la forme et de la matière doit toujours dominer avec l'alliage des changements et compensations qui l'ont enrichi de nouvelles valeurs, selon des critères scientifiques, importantes pour l'histoire de l'art et de la culture'*<sup>10</sup>.

The situation of Europe's built heritage in the early 1960s is also noteworthy. A look at it helps reveal and explain the Charter's emphasis on material authenticity. The illustrated catalogue of the exhibition accompanying the congress *2a Mostra internazionale del restauro monumentale* (25 May–15 June 1964, Palazzo Grassi, Venice) gives an impression of the situation of the monuments at that time<sup>11</sup>. The examples from 35 countries (Italy being, by far, the most strongly represented) demonstrate the desolate and sometimes ruinous condition of the built heritage at that time, which in many cases demanded rigorous decisions in respect of their restoration. In the foreword, the Italian art historian Bruno Molajoli explains the inspiring nature of the restorations presented, which primarily served to save these 'most direct witnesses'<sup>12</sup> of human

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<sup>8</sup> Zachwatowicz Jan. (1971). *Nouveaux Aspects de la Théorie de Conservation des Monuments historiques* [in:] ICOMOS. *Il monumento per l'uomo: atti del II Congresso Internazionale del Restauro Venezia, 25–31 maggio 1964* = *Le monument pour l'homme: actes du II Congrès International de la Restauration* = *The monument for the man: records of the II International Congress of Restoration* (p. 50). Marsilio.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem (p. 51).

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem (p. 51).

<sup>11</sup> Direzione generale per le antichità e belle arti. (1964). *2a Mostra internazionale del restauro monumentale, Venezia, Palazzo Grassi, 25 maggio–25 giugno 1964, in occasione del II. Congresso internazionale degli architetti e tecnici dei monumenti*. Palazzo Grassi.

<sup>12</sup> Molajoli, B. (1964) [in:] Direzione generale per le antichità e belle arti. (1964). *2a Mostra internazionale del restauro monumentale, Venezia, Palazzo Grassi, 25 maggio–25 giugno 1964, in occasione del II. Congresso internazionale degli architetti e tecnici dei monumenti* (p. VI) Palazzo Grassi.

history and civilization. The numerous reconstructions and restorations provide a form of compensation for the enormous destruction caused by war and neglect. It allows conclusions to be drawn about the understanding of authenticity, which, at that time, could hardly have been limited to the preservation of the material substance and the preservation of the historical layers. Rather, the re-experiencing of what was once there, what was lost through neglect and destruction, is of great significance.

What is important in this context is the attitude expressed in the Charter towards reconstruction, which is not mentioned as an effective means of preservation. In this sense, the reconstruction of wilfully destroyed works of symbolic character is, therefore, not legitimate. Authenticity, thus, moves to the centre of the qualities of the concept of the monument. That is why their protection is mentioned prominently in the preamble of the Charter as the purpose of preservation. Authenticity is diffusely linked to concepts like originality and uniqueness; in this way, authenticity expresses the unrepeatability of a monument, and refers to the material, design, and location of a monument.

The *Venice Charter* must be understood as a set of basic guidelines, which lays down important principles, the correctness of which must be weighed up in each individual case. It must nevertheless be criticized for reaching its limits as it is mostly within the sphere of the most important cultural monuments in Europe only four of the 23 authors are not European. Although the congress is international, the historical and theoretical foundations of the Charter are based on over a century of intensive European discourse on the preservation of monuments. The Charter also raises numerous questions about other building forms less prevalent in Europe, such as clay and timber architecture, whose preservation requires measures that sometimes contradict the Charter's guidelines. The casual handling of the concept of authenticity and the ambiguity of its meaning are particularly evident in its inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. This is ultimately the origin of the current debate surrounding it.

### **3. 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges to built heritage**

Currently, the built heritage even if we would only look at Europe is in a completely different situation than 19 years after the Second World War. This concerns, for example, the state of preservation of the sites, their recognition, the technology for their preservation, the institutions, and the (global) discourse to which they are subject. The changing climatic conditions alone challenge the established means of built heritage preservation as they set new conditions and require more frequent reaction to novel types of damage. For the first time, global warming is on average 1.5 degrees above the reference period for one year<sup>13</sup>. This comes along with a variety of challenges: long periods of heat and drought, severe storms with heavy rainfall and hurricane-like storms that lead to changes in the water table and soil structures, which trigger problems in the building fabric. Very hot temperatures can cause a wide variety of material damage

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<sup>13</sup> ECMWF (European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts). (2024). Copernicus: 2023 is the hottest year on record, with global temperatures close to the 1.5°C limit. Press Release, 9 January.

extreme humidity and temperature fluctuations lead to cracks and surface damage<sup>14</sup>. In addition to extreme events, gradual climate change seriously threatens architectural monuments, e.g., continuous rises in temperature, fluctuations in temperature and humidity, or fluctuations in frost/thaw periods<sup>15</sup>.

Considering these threats, various recent publications reveal a shared concern regarding the validity of conservation as we know it. In the light of the seemingly unsurmountable challenges that await us, they argue in favour of avoiding loss<sup>16</sup>, the curation of decay<sup>17</sup>, a managed retreat<sup>18</sup>, transformative change<sup>19</sup>, and replications of unsavable sites<sup>20</sup>. Thereby, they suggest conceptualizations of heritage and/or management principles that stand at odds with today's established norms that are rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were refined and internationalized in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The assessment of these concepts as unacceptable or incompatible with the conventional conservation doctrine cannot be maintained in the long term, as pointed out in these publications. However, continuing the established idea of conserving sites also requires the inclusion of principles that speak to climate change issues. These include sustainability, risk preparedness, adaptation, collaboration, education and awareness, documentation and monitoring, advocacy, and policy.

As mentioned, the *Venice Charter* was created in, and for, a different world. This in no way means that it is invalid or that its principles no longer apply. But it is obvious that for many sites in endangered areas it will become impossible 'to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity' (*Venice Charter*, Preamble). Rather, it is likely that we will either need to revise conservation principles to keep the bulk of heritage manageable in changing climatic conditions, or take the bold stance of curating decay and bidding some farewell, as DeSilvey suggests. In this context, it can be helpful to reactivate the repair discourse initiated by Lipp in the 1990s<sup>21</sup>. Back then, he envisioned a society that would base its material survival on repair

<sup>14</sup> Seck A. (2021). Klimaopfer Denkmal. *Monumente online*. 6, 2021, <https://www.monumente-online.de/de/ausgaben/2021/3/Klimaopfer-Denkmal.php> (access: 18 March 2024).

<sup>15</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. (2022). *Strengthening cultural heritage resilience for climate change – Where the European Green Deal meets cultural heritage* (p. 5). Publications Office of the European Union.

<sup>16</sup> Holtorf C. (2015). Averting loss aversion in cultural heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21(4), (pp. 405–421). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2014.938766>

<sup>17</sup> DeSilvey C. (2017). *Curated Decay: Heritage beyond Saving*. University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>18</sup> Mach K. J., Siders A.R. (2021). Reframing strategic, managed retreat for transformative climate adaptation. *Science*, 372, (pp. 1294–1299). DOI:10.1126/science.abh1894

<sup>19</sup> Priebe J., Reimerson E., Hallberg-Sramek I. et al. (2022). Transformative change in context—stakeholders' understandings of leverage at the forest–climate nexus. *Sustain Sci*, 17, (pp. 1921–1938). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-022-01090-6>

<sup>20</sup> Weststeijn T. (2023). *De Toekomst van het verleden. Erfgoed en Klimaat*. Prometheus.

<sup>21</sup> Lipp W. (1994). Vom modernen zum postmodernen Denkmalkultus? Aspekte zur Reparaturgesellschaft, [in]: W. Lipp, M. Petzet (Eds.) *Vom modernen zum postmodernen Denkmalkultus? Denkmalpflege am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege; Langenberg S. (Ed.) (2018). *Reparatur. Anstiftung zum Denken und Machen*. Hatje Cantz; ICOMOS. (2024). *Anpassungsstrategien für Baudenkmale im Klimawandel*. ICOMOS.



rather than renewal. In terms of monument preservation, this could mean, for example, a move away from restoration in favour of permanent maintenance, including the visibility of its traces. Cultural heritage stakeholders also largely agree that the intensity and regularity of interventions need to be reviewed. This also includes the current obstacles in terms of financing and the legal framework.

#### **4. Update: Rethinking *Venice Charter* principles**

In the middle of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is becoming clear that a charter for the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites must reflect the changing climatic context. While the principles of the *Venice Charter* remain valid, an amendment is needed that recognizes the need for climate adaptation and the constraints and changes that this entails. It is noted that other disciplines have formulated their principles for the conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>22</sup>. This is not a call to replace the *Venice Charter*, but a call to reflect on the necessary adaptations that will be required sooner or later. Addressing climate change in a *Venice Charter* for the 21<sup>st</sup> century will strengthen its relevance and effectiveness in guiding heritage conservation efforts in the face of evolving environmental challenges. Here is a suggestion of what it could contain:

Recognizing the urgent need to address the impacts of climate change on cultural heritage, including historic monuments, sites, and urban areas, and acknowledging the role of the *Venice Charter* in guiding conservation practices, the following updates to integrate climate change considerations into the principles and guidelines are proposed:

**Principle of Sustainability:** Acknowledging the interconnectedness between cultural heritage preservation and climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts. Emphasizing the importance of adopting sustainable practices in the management, preservation, and use of cultural heritage to enhance resilience to climate impacts.

**Principle of Risk Preparedness:** Recognizing the need for proactive risk assessment and management strategies to address climate-related hazards such as flooding, erosion, storms, and temperature extremes. Encouraging the integration of climate risk assessments into preservation planning processes to safeguard cultural heritage assets.

**Principle of Adaptation:** Promoting adaptive preservation approaches that prioritize the resilience and flexibility of cultural heritage sites in the face of changing climatic conditions. Advocating the use of innovative technologies and materials that enhance the adaptive capacity of historic buildings and sites.

**Principle of Collaboration:** Emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and community engagement in addressing climate change challenges affecting heritage sites. Encouraging partnerships between heritage professionals, scientists, policymakers, and local communities to develop holistic and context-specific solutions.

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<sup>22</sup> E.g. The *Climate & Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations* (International Committee of the Red Cross 2021).

Principle of Education and Awareness: Fostering awareness and understanding of the climate change impacts on cultural heritage among stakeholders, including heritage professionals, policymakers, and the general public. Promoting capacity-building initiatives and educational programmes that integrate climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies into heritage preservation practices.

Principle of Documentation and Monitoring: Supporting the systematic documentation and monitoring of climate change impacts on cultural heritage sites over time. Advocating for the use of digital technologies and remote sensing tools to assess and track changes in heritage assets, facilitating evidence-based decision-making and adaptive management.

Principle of Advocacy and Policy: Advocating for the integration of cultural heritage considerations into national and international climate change policies and frameworks. Calling for the allocation of resources and incentives to support climate-resilient preservation practices and heritage protection measures at all levels.

## 5. Conclusion

While this article does not contest the validity of the *Venice Charter*, it earmarks the specific circumstances under which the Charter was adopted as dated. The ideal of the *Venice Charter* to maintain the authenticity of heritage sites has long been challenged from within the heritage discourse. Although the Charter prohibits any reconstruction of monuments, the inscription of reconstructions on the World Heritage List has long been common practice and ICOMOS even initiated a debate on permissibility and standards for reconstructions of monuments and sites<sup>23</sup>. Faced with unprecedented challenges in which the built heritage is increasingly exposed to climatic conditions that are alien to the nature of specific sites, the existing principles of built heritage preservation need to be reconsidered. On the one hand, this includes a recognition of novel contexts and the integration of sustainable and inclusive thinking. On the other hand, the very essence of the principles of heritage conservation could be at stake, as the management of cultural heritage as we know it could reach its limits. The rapid increase in climate-related damage, the still largely unknown nature of this damage and the inadequate maintenance cycles in this regard require more flexible and preventive strategies for preservation. In this respect, reconsidering the *Venice Charter* in accordance with the principles set out in this article in no way diminishes the importance of the Charter. On the contrary, taking the *Venice Charter* as a starting point strengthens the Charter's unbroken but jeopardized validity and carries its sustainable idea well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>23</sup> ICOMOS. (2014). *ICOMOS debate on permissibility and standards for reconstructions of monuments and sites*. <http://www.icomos.org/en/what-we-do/disseminating-knowledge/newsletters/704-icomos-debate-on-permissibility-and-standards-for-reconstructions-of-monuments-and-sites-online-survey>.



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