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VENICE AT 60: ARTICLE 5 AND THE ACCEPTABLE LIMITS OF USE

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ABSTRACT: The *Venice Charter* is central to modern conservation, and foundational for ICOMOS specifically; yet its contemporary relevance is debatable. These and other issues were discussed by ICOMOS in Budapest 20 years ago, in a conference marking the Charter's 40th anniversary. However, questions remain as to its ongoing significance. As Bogusław Szmygin asked in 2004, does the Charter remain the 'Decalogue' of the conservation discipline, or has it itself become a 'Historical Monument'?

The *Venice Charter* as a product of high modernity, with its belief in a definitive break with the past and an overcoming of tradition. The paper assesses the *Charter's* ongoing relevance in relation to one pressing issue in contemporary conservation, the limits to the acceptable use of – and change to – historic buildings (Art. 5), and using an example of recent change to an English parish church.

The paper argues that the acknowledged need for the interpretation of the *Charter* requires a hermeneutically literate approach which acknowledges the limits of a scientific/technical reading of any historic monument – the *Charter* included – and the importance of a dynamic understanding of the living tradition that is conservation. It concludes that the *Charter* remains a central text for the conservation discipline, which itself is a tradition in good health, and for that very reason its status will continue to be fiercely debated.

KEY WORDS: Venice Charter, English Parish Church, change, Nara Document, authenticity

Few would argue against the *Venice Charter's* foundational status both for the discipline of conservation generally, and for ICOMOS specifically. But beyond that general agreement, there are sharply contrasting views as to its contemporary relevance. These and other issues were discussed by ICOMOS in Budapest 20 years ago, in a conference marking the *Charter's* 40th anniversary. However, questions remain as to its ongoing significance. As Bogusław Szmygin asked in 2004, does the *Charter* remain the 'Decalogue' of the conservation discipline, or has it itself become a historical monument[1]? And if the latter, how (in its own terms) can it be used 'for some socially useful purpose'?

The *Charter* is a rich and skilfully condensed piece of writing which rewards close scrutiny. It contains within it both evidence of the age in which it was conceived – for example, in its focus on authenticity – and the seeds of other topics that have been greatly elaborated subsequently, such as significance. This paper considers the *Charter's* ongoing relevance in light of one pressing issue in contemporary conservation, the limits to the acceptable use of historic buildings. The *Venice Charter* addresses this under Article 5, which also points towards the related question of the legitimacy or otherwise of change in response to use.

1. Context – the English Parish Church

The understanding and application of any text requires at least a degree of interpretation, and the Venice Charter is no exception; it is important, therefore, to state the context from which this reading is made. The view of the Venice Charter advanced in this paper is intimately related to my professional practice, particularly my work with listed church buildings in England. Many of these are hundreds of years old – some 8,000 retain at least some medieval fabric – and typically have developed through multiple episodes of change, sometimes with each successive generation. These are buildings of more than historic interest, for they continue in the use for which they were first built; they are therefore 'living buildings' which exemplify intergenerational continuity. Figure 1 shows one such building, the grade 1 listed medieval parish church of St Mary, Ely.

[1] Szmygin B. (2005). The Venice Charter: Decalogue of Conservation or Historical Monument? [in:] ICOMOS, *The Venice Charter 1964-2004-2044? The Fortieth Anniversary (Budapest-Pécs, Hungary, May 22-27, 2004)* (p. 192). Hungarian National Committee of ICOMOS. https://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2962/1/K649-Monuments_and_Sites-v11-2005.pdf

Fig. 1St Mary's Church, Ely: view from north east. Photo: author

Such buildings raise a cluster of interrelated concerns. First, their survival rests on their remaining in beneficial use. In an English context, there is a general consensus that keeping buildings in use is a priority. As Historic England's official guidance states,

> *Very few significant places can be maintained at either public or private expense unless they are capable of some beneficial use; nor would it be desirable, even if it were practical, for most places that people value to become solely memorials of the past*[2].

The implications of this spelt out in the following paragraph:

> *Keeping a significant place in use is likely to require continual adaptation and change; but, provided such interventions respect the values of the place, they will tend to benefit public (heritage)…*[3]

The legal mechanism for gaining permissions for change to historic church buildings in the UK is known as the 'Ecclesiastical Exemption'[4]. The official guidance for the Exemption in England and Wales includes the following characterisation:

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[2] Historic England. (2008). *Conservation principles: Policies and guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment*. English Heritage (p. 43) https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/conservation-principles-sustainable-management-historic-environment/

[3] Ibidem.

[4] Walter N. (2023). *The Ecclesiastical Exemption in Practice. Historic Churches: The Conservation and Repair of Ecclesiastical Buildings* (30) (pp. 17–20).

> *The Ecclesiastical Exemption reduces burdens on the planning system while maintaining an appropriate level of protection and reflecting the particular need of listed buildings in use as places of worship to be able to adapt to changing needs over time to ensure their survival in their intended use. It is widely acknowledged that keeping a building in use is more likely to result in the preservation, proper maintenance and sustainability of that building*[5].

This raises a second central question for conservation, that of our understanding of the relation of People and Place. This is a fundamental – and I would argue neglected – aspect of conservation theory, and a discipline-specific application of the rich philosophical argument around materiality and non-human agency[6]. It is also an area where subsequent doctrinal documents have pushed back against the vision of conservation in the *Venice Charter* – for example, with the introduction of social value in the *Burra Charter,* or in the multiple bases of authenticity listed in the *Nara Document on Authenticity* (see below).

Third, in a UK context, the approval process for proposed change to a protected building involves the balancing of 'Harm' (to the architectural and historic significance of the building) with the 'Public Benefit' that would be achieved by permitting the proposed change. This, finally, feeds into a fourth issue in conservation, an assessment of a historic building's 'Tolerance for Change', a phrase popularised by Gustavo Araoz in his paper delivered to the ICOMOS Advisory Committee in Valletta in October 2009[7].

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[5] DCMS. (2010). *The operation of the ecclesiastical exemption and related planning matters for places of worship in England* (p. 6) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/77372/OPSEEguidance.pdf

[6] See for example: Dobres M.-A., Robb J. E. (2000). Editors' introduction [in:] M.-A. Dobres, J. E. Robb (Eds.), *Agency in archaeology* (pp. 3–17). Routledge; Miller D. (Ed.). (2005). *Materiality*. Duke University Press; Walter N. (2020). *Narrative theory in conservation: Change and living buildings.* (pp. 29-32). Routledge.

[7] Araoz G. F. (2011). Preserving heritage places under a new paradigm. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, 1(1), (pp. 55–60). https://doi.org/DOI 10.1108/20441261111129933; Araoz G. F. (2012). Protecting Heritage Places under the New Heritage Paradigm & Defining its Tolerance for Change. A Leadership Challenge for ICOMOS. [in:] W. Lipp, J. Štulc, B. Szmygin, S. Giometti (Eds.), *Conservation turn—Return to conservation: Tolerance for change, limits of change* (pp. 47–52). Edizioni Polistampa.

Fig. 2 St Mary's Church, Ely: Internal view looking east, July 2021. Photo: author

As an illustration of the sort of change that can be permitted under the UK system, Figures 2 and 3 show the recent transformation of the interior of St Mary's Church, Ely. The scheme, by the author's practice Archangel, included the removal of most of the nineteenth-century furnishings and the replacement of the floor. The result is a building that is usable for a much wider range of activities than the Victorians deemed appropriate; it is now in use seven days a week, instead of just one.

In raising these four concerns – Beneficial Use, the relation of People and Place, the balancing of Harm against Benefit, and a building's Tolerance for Change – English Parish Churches such as Ely form an excellent background against which to reflect on the question of how conservation deals with change, and more broadly on the contemporary relevance of the Venice Charter.

Fig. 3 St Mary's Church, Ely: Internal view looking east, December 2022. Photo: Archangel

2. What (Use) is the Venice Charter?

In 2004 a conference was held in Budapest to mark the 40th anniversary of the *Venice Charter;* the collected papers from this conference were published by ICOMOS in the Monuments and Sites series[8]. Different authors characterised the *Charter* in quite different ways. The late Michael Petzet, at that time President of ICOMOS, characterised the Charter as

> *…admittedly in some respects a historical document typical of the time of its creation [that] needs to be newly interpreted time and again. However, it is and remains an irreplaceable instrument for our work on the international level...*[9]

Wilfried Lipp described the *Charter* as 'somewhat similar to a Diva, who is getting older and has concealed her real age and has in the meantime in a special sense become timeless'[10]. Tamás

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8 ICOMOS. (2005). *The Venice Charter 1964-2004-2044? The Fortieth Anniversary (Budapest-Pécs, Hungary, May 22-27, 2004).* Hungarian National Committee of ICOMOS. https://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2962/1/K649-Monuments_and_Sites-v11-2005.pdf

9 Petzet M. (2005). The Venice Charter—40 Years Later [in:] *ICOMOS, The Venice Charter 1964-2004-2044? The Fortieth Anniversary (Budapest-Pécs, Hungary, May 22-27, 2004)* (p. 138). Hungarian National Committee of ICOMOS. https://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2962/1/K649-Monuments_and_Sites-v11-2005.pdf

10 Lipp W. (2005). The Charter of Venice as a Document of the Times [in:] *ICOMOS, The Venice Charter 1964-2004-2044? The Fortieth Anniversary (Budapest-Pécs, Hungary, May 22-27, 2004)* (p. 107). Hungarian National Committee of ICOMOS. https://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2962/1/K649-Monuments_and_Sites-v11-2005.pdf

Fejerdy explicitly addressed Article 5, declaring that its 'phrasing […] truly concurs with the attitude accepted today of the "management of change", laying down the limits of acceptability'[11]; it should be noted that this optimistic assessment implies a quite different understanding of the management of change compared, for example, with the guidance in England cited above.

Meanwhile, Bogusław Szmygin asked whether the *Charter* should be seen as the 'Decalogue of Conservation' – that is, the discipline's Ten Commandments – or as a 'Historical Monument'[12]. By 'Decalogue' I take Szmygin to mean a sacred text that can claim enduring authority, as opposed to a product of a specific cultural context for which the passage of time progressively restricts that authority. Szmygin's question is a powerful one. Whichever response is made we are forced to engage with the text hermeneutically; given the passage of time, the *Charter* is in need of interpretation, whether this text be 'Decalogue' or 'Monument'.

3. Article 5 and the Question of Use

2024 of course marks the 60th anniversary of the creation and adoption of the *Venice Charter*. Framing itself as an updating of the *Athens Charter* of 1931, it has become the foundational document for conservation. One fundamental reference point for the *Charter* is its introduction of the principle of authenticity[13], though without definition. In the context of a postwar period that saw both a growth in reproduction artworks and less-than-ideal restoration schemes, this was understood as authenticity in material terms. Miles Glendinning[14] notes that this was a reassertion of the moral prohibitions of John Ruskin and William Morris, 'but now in a more up-to-date guise, shaped by the Modern Movement preference for a contrast of old and new'; the focus was very much material-based.

In this context, Article 5 of the *Charter* specifically addresses the question of use:

> *The conservation of monuments is always facilitated by making use of them for some socially useful purpose. Such use is therefore desirable but it must not change the lay-out or decoration of the building. It is within these limits only that modifications demanded by a change of function should be envisaged and may be permitted.*

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11 Fejérdy T. (2005). Who Wanted it? What is the Charter?...And Today? [in:] *ICOMOS, The Venice Charter 1964-2004-2044? The Fortieth Anniversary (Budapest-Pécs, Hungary, May 22-27, 2004)* (p. 49). Hungarian National Committee of ICOMOS. https://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2962/1/K649-Monuments_and_Sites-v11-2005.pdf

12 Szmygin B. (2005). The Venice Charter: Decalogue of Conservation or Historical Monument? [in:] *ICOMOS, The Venice Charter 1964-2004-2044? The Fortieth Anniversary (Budapest-Pécs, Hungary, May 22-27, 2004)* (p. 192). Hungarian National Committee of ICOMOS. https://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2962/1/K649-Monuments_and_Sites-v11-2005.pdf

13 Jokilehto J. (1999). *A history of architectural conservation* (p. 296). Butterworth-Heinemann.

14 Glendinning M. (2013). *The conservation movement: A history of architectural preservation: Antiquity to modernity* (p. 398). Routledge.

The *Charter* thus welcomes keeping historic buildings in use, noting that this facilitates their conservation (and thus survival). However, while acknowledging the desirability of such use, the second sentence then precludes any meaningful change to the building, while the third sentence underscores this constraint, and specifically applies it to the question of adaptive reuse. Change is thus seen as threatening the destruction of the integrity – the authenticity – of the historic monument; the *Venice Charter* frames change and authenticity as standing in direct opposition.

How does this relate to the context of the English Parish Church set out above? Certainly, the *Venice Charter* acknowledges that keeping these buildings in beneficial use is important to their survival. But the prohibition on change is entirely unrealistic. In many cases these church buildings need to adapt if they are to remain in use and therefore survive, which, as noted above, is explicitly recognised in the official guidance to the legislation in England, and which the example of Ely helps illustrate.

Beyond that, however, the *Venice Charter*'s prohibition on change betrays a specific understanding of time. Its approach to change is ahistorical, in the sense that these are buildings that have changed multiple times in their career to date; in that sense change is in their nature. As a result, it is the ability to read those episodes of change that gives such buildings their character. Sometimes it is possible to find work within a single building from every chapter of medieval architecture from Saxon through Norman, Early English, Decorated and Perpendicular, and on through Laudian, Georgian, Victorian and the Twentieth Century. If change is in their nature in this way, why on earth would we think we were helping by now preventing that change? Only, surely, if we declare that the mechanics of the living tradition that brought these buildings into being and shaped them over many centuries has definitively ceased. And while that is an attitude that was more commonplace at the time the *Venice Charter* was written, it cannot now be assumed.

4. Other Anniversaries

Before considering some other aspects of the *Venice Charter*, it should be noted that 2024 is a crowded year for conservation anniversaries. The next most obvious is the *Nara Document* of 1994, which sought to develop and clarify the idea of authenticity, particularly in light of non-Western conservation practices, leading to a broader definition than that found in the *Venice Charter or the Operational Guidelines for the World Heritage Committee*[15], both of which retain an exclusively material focus[16].

[15] UNESCO. (1977). *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (art. 9)*. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. https://whc.unesco.org/archive/opguide77b.pdf

[16] For the story of the elaboration of the principle of authenticity, see: Falser M. S. (2010). From Venice 1964 to Nara 1994—Changing concepts of authenticity? [in:] M. S. Falser, W. Lipp, A. Tomaszewski (Eds.), *Conservation and preservation: Interactions between theory and practice: In memoriam Alois Riegl (1858-1905)* (pp. 115–132). Edizioni Polistampa.

The relation of conservation and use is addressed in Article 13 of the *Nara Document*:

> *Depending on the nature of the cultural heritage, its cultural context, and its evolution through time, authenticity judgements may be linked to the worth of a great variety of sources of information. 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.*

From the point of view of buildings such as the English Parish Church, these 'aspects of the sources' offer a far more nuanced and generous understanding of authenticity than does the *Venice Charter*. Authenticity is firstly understood to be situational, dependent on cultural context, the type of heritage, and that key question of the process of its development; and, secondly, authenticity moves from a simple question of material preservation to a multi-dimensional understanding, involving 'a great variety of sources of information'.

These sources are expanded in a list of seven pairs of attributes, the last being the catch-all of 'other internal and external factors'. The list starts with the conventional aspects of 'form and design, materials and substance', which form a continuity with the understanding of the *Venice Charter*. Much commentary focuses on the sixth pairing of 'spirit and feeling', which for many authors describes a shift towards a postmodern understanding. For the purpose of this discussion, however, it is the third pairing – 'use and function'– which is most relevant for our purposes, since this explicitly acknowledges use amongst the sources of authenticity, not as a threat to it, as the *Venice Charter* envisages. The fourth pairing – 'traditions and techniques' – is also relevant, nodding to what is now conventionally considered under the heading of 'intangible heritage'[17]; it is noteworthy that the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* was itself a development from UNESCO's *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore*[18].

But the conservation anniversaries do not end with Nara. 120 years ago, and thus a full 60 years before Venice, the Sixth International Congress of Architects met in Madrid. The outcome of this Congress was not a *Charter* as such, but rather the adoption of six resolutions. Of these, the first three state that:

1. Monuments may be divided into two classes, *dead monuments*, i.e. those belonging to a past civilisation or serving obsolete purposes, and *living monuments*, i.e. those which continue to serve the purposes for which they were originally intended.

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[17] UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage*. (art. 2.1, 2.2.). https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention

[18] Muñoz Viñas S. (2023). *A theory of cultural heritage: Beyond the intangible* (pp. 23-24). Routledge; UNESCO. (1989). *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore*. UNESCO. https://www.univeur.org/cuebc/downloads/PDF%20carte/80.%201989%20UNESCO%20Recommendation.PDF

2. Dead monuments should be preserved only by such strengthening as is indispensable in order to prevent their falling into ruin; for the importance of such a monument consists in its historical and technical value, which disappears with the monument itself.

3. Living monuments ought to be restored so that they may continue to be of use, for in architecture utility is one of the bases of beauty[19].

This distinction of 'living' monuments/buildings from 'dead' ones continues a line of argument from earlier conservation discourse, and which continued on well into the twentieth century. Jukka Jokilehto notes this distinction not only in the Madrid Congress, but beforehand in the work of Louis Cloquet, and its use after by Professor C. Weber in 1909 and Raymond Lemaire in 1938[20]. The distinction disappears from view for around a half century – in his coverage of the *Venice Charter* Jokilehto notes that the 'previous references to "dead" and "living" monuments were not considered relevant'[21], which is significant, not least since Raymond Lemaire himself was the Reporter of the committee that drafted the text. However, the distinction later re-emerges in the context of ICCROM, starting with the Forum on the Conservation of Living Religious Heritage held in October 2003[22].

Resolution 1 of the Madrid Congress also provides a helpful definition of living buildings – as 'those which continue to serve the purposes for which they were originally intended'. English Parish Churches fit very well with this definition. Resolution 2, with its focus on the 'historical and technical value' of dead monuments, is entirely compatible with the *Venice Charter.* Resolution 3 also accords with the *Venice Charter* in championing the desirability of continuity of use, but goes much further than the treatment of use in Article 5 as a merely instrumental benefit. Instead, Resolution 3 gives this a positive rationale, that 'in architecture utility is one of the bases of beauty'.

It happens that these three anniversaries – 30th, 60th, 120th – are neatly disposed at intervals of multiple decades; in this, they appear almost like a set of Russian matryoshka dolls. Taken in this context, it is interesting to observe that the first (Madrid) and the last (Nara) show more of a shared understanding, at least on the question of use, than does the middle one (Venice), which thus appears as something of an outlier. This, of course, is a very different – some might say heretical – view to the conventional framing of the *Venice Charter* as foundational to the modern conservation movement.

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19 Locke W. J. (1904). Recommendations of the Madrid Conference. *The Architectural Journal, Being the Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects,* XI, (pp. 343–346).

20 Jokilehto J. (1999). *A history of architectural conservation* (pp. 196, 250). Butterworth-Heinemann.

21 Ibidem (p. 289).

22 Stovel H., Stanley-Price N., Killick R. G. (Eds.). (2005). *Conservation of living religious heritage: Papers from the ICCROM 2003 Forum on Living Religious Heritage: Conserving the sacred*. ICCROM; Wijesuriya G. (2015). *Annexe 1: Living heritage: A summary*. http://www.iccrom.org/wp-content/uploads/PCA_Annexe-1.pdf

5. Use and the Work of Art

I suggest that the reason the *Venice Charter* appears as the outlier amongst the three anniversary documents lies in its foundational understanding that historic buildings are primarily works of art. This was a key theme for Cesare Brandi, whose *Theory of Restoration* was an important reference point for the authors of the *Charter*[23]. Indeed, this understanding is evident in Article 3, in the *Charter's* definition of the very purpose of conservation, where the article states that the status of historic buildings as works of art is of equal or greater importance than their status as historical evidence.

In his *Theory of Restoration*, Brandi makes the primary distinction between 'objects of the so-called "applied arts"' and works of art:

> *But 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 the property of use is, in the end, only a secondary or supplementary part of the restoration, and never the primary or fundamental aspect, that lies in having respect for a work of art as a work of art*[24].

Brandi was himself an art critic and historian, and it is notable that his philosophy of conservation contains within it a particular (and arguably an impoverished) view of architecture, of what a building is. In the terms of the Madrid Conference Resolutions, Brandi's view is one that effectively treats all historic monuments as dead. (The further accusation from a Living Heritage view would be that conservation built on this foundation runs the serious risk of removing the life from the living building, thus rendering it 'dead'.) Living things change; if a historic building is still living – that is, it is still in use particularly for its original purpose – then it will change. And yet, if we see the historic building primarily as a work of art, then naturally we will oppose change to it; changing a work of art – for example a Rembrandt painting – to suit modern 'needs' or tastes would be unconscionable, because we would thereby destroy its significance.

Compare this, however, with Stewart Brand, who in his book *How Buildings Learn* (coincidentally also dating from 1994) argues that buildings *inevitably* change:

> *There is a universal rule – never acknowledged because its action is embarrassing or illegal. All buildings grow. Most grow even when they're not allowed to*[25].

He goes on to note that this process of adaptation is most refined in those buildings that endure in sustained use for a given purpose over time, but that this process is anathema to some, including many architects and art historians. In reflecting on his research, Brand praises conservationists as

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23 Jokilehto J. (2023). Observations on Concepts in the Venice Charter. *Conversaciones Con.,* 11 (p. 355).

24 Brandi C. (2005). Theory of restoration [in:] G. Basile (Ed.), C. Rockwell (Trans.), *Theory of restoration* (p. 47). Nardini Editore. (Original work published 1963)

25 Brand S. (1994). *How buildings learn: What happens after they're built* (p. 10). Viking.

> *… the only building professionals with a pragmatic interest in the long-term effects of time on buildings. They work creatively with the economics and changing uses of buildings, and they promote expertise in the crafts of longevity. Architectural historians, on the other hand, had almost nothing for me. As a subset of art historians, they are interested only in the history of intention and influence of buildings, never in their use. Like architects, they are pained by what happens later to buildings*[26].

On this measure, both Brandi and the *Venice Charter* display an orientation more towards art history than conservation, broadly understood.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, the decisive figure in the expansion of hermeneutics to cover all forms of human understanding, touches several times on the nature of buildings, including the role of aesthetics and function. In his magnum opus *Truth and Method,* he argues that a building's *purpose* (along with its situatedness in a specific place) is what elevates its status to that of a work of art. He strongly resists the reduction of architecture to aesthetics:

> *A building is never only a work of art. Its purpose, through which it belongs in the context of life, cannot be separated from it without its losing some of its reality. If it has become merely an object of aesthetic consciousness, then it has merely a shadowy reality and lives a distorted life only in the degenerate form of a tourist attraction or a subject for photography. The "work of art in itself" proves to be a pure abstraction*[27].

This 'degenerate' form of existence is the fate that awaits when the modern urge towards preservation of the old privileges the aesthetic and ignores the purpose for which a building was created. Gadamer goes on, in words that echo Brand's, to insist that

> *Works of architecture do not stand motionless on the shore of the stream of history, but are borne along by it. […] Even the restorer or the preserver of ancient monuments remains an artist of his time*[28].

That last sentence speaks to the reality that, strictly speaking, preservation is an impossibility because, when the purpose and life of a building is excluded, something new is created. This is a direct challenge to the understanding of authenticity presented in the Venice Charter. Elsewhere, Gadamer speaks directly of the dangers posed for both viewers and buildings from reducing them to the abstraction of aesthetics:

> *The fact that the gaze has been weaned away from what is given, which speaks to the constructivist power of abstraction typical of modern technology, has in fact destroyed a lot, cities and streets, spaces and places. Above all, it makes the spectators blind, as if a work of architecture always has to be an isolated artwork,*

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26 Brand S. (1994). *How buildings learn: What happens after they're built* (p. 90). Viking.

27 Gadamer H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer, D. G. Marshall, Trans.; 2nd, rev. ed.) (p. 156). Sheed and Ward. (Original work published 1960).

28 Ibidem (p. 157).

> *having no other purpose than to give expression to its time; as if it is not rather always built into a life-world which was prepared by a long past*[29].

6. Modernity and the (Mis-)Understanding of Tradition

Conservation (understood as preservation) is both a product of the modern period and, as Bruno Latour[30] has argued, can itself be seen as integral to modernity, the flip side of modernity's belief in its definitive break with the past. One indication of conservation's alignment with modernity is the frequent use of the word 'scientific' in the ICOMOS lexicon; important as a scientific reading undoubtedly is, it can only ever be partial. Given modernity's antipathy towards tradition, is it not strange that modern conservation can think that it can adequately care for the products of tradition using only the tools provided by modernity? The outlawing of meaningful change, as demanded by Article 5, can only be justified on the basis of a specific belief in the discontinuity of modernity from all preceding eras which is, at the very least, debatable; as the title of Latour's book claims, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

There are further signs of the Charter's status as an artefact of modernity. For example, the evocative Preamble, the text of which is attributed to Paul Philippot[31], starts with the following rallying cry:

> *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.*

For Philippot our glorious historic buildings are only 'living' in the most passive of senses, as survivors which now merely act as 'witnesses'. For him, as for Brandi, these buildings have entered retirement, and are no longer actors in their own right. The appeal to 'age-old traditions' (plural), rather than tradition (singular) is also significant; the central importance of tradition (singular) for human understanding is a central argument for Gadamer[32] and Alasdair MacIntyre[33], among others.

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[29] Gadamer H.-G. (2022). The End of Art? From Hegel's Doctrine of the Pastness of Art to the Anti-art of Today (1985) [in:] A. Iyer, P. Vandevelde (Trans.), *Ethics, aesthetics and the historical dimension of language: The Selected Writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer Volume II* (p. 73). Bloomsbury Academic. (Original work published 1985).

[30] Latour B. (1993). *We have never been modern* (C. Porter, Trans.) (p.69). Harvard University Press.

[31] Jokilehto J. (2023). Observations on Concepts in the Venice Charter. *Conversaciones Con.,* 11 (p. 356).

[32] Gadamer H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer, D. G. Marshall, Trans.; 2nd, rev. ed.). Sheed and Ward. (Original work published 1960).

[33] MacIntyre A. C. (2007). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (3rd ed.). Duckworth. (Original work published 1981).

Gadamer envisages understanding as a process involving the 'fusion of horizons' – that is, the horizon of the present and the horizon of tradition. He suggests that 'In a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other'[34]. This is a challenge to modernity, which typically foregrounds the new; conservation (conceived as preservation) is the flipside of this, a part of modernity where the old is foregrounded over the new.

In his important book, *The Past in the Present*, Ioannis Poulios characterises the material-based approach to conservation thus:

> *The aim of [material-based] conservation is to preserve heritage, seen as belonging to the past, from human practices of the present that are considered to be harmful, and transmit it to the future generations. In this way, a form of discontinuity is created between the monuments and the people, and between the past and the present*[35].

That discontinuity flows from modernity's understanding of time, as discussed, but it also has significant implications for the relation of historic buildings to the communities who care for them – that is, between people and place.

This understanding is clearly evident in the final sentence of the Preamble's first paragraph, which states that 'It is our duty to hand [ancient monuments] on in the full richness of their authenticity', clearly equating authenticity to minimal material change. By contrast, the view from within a tradition would more likely be that to hand a historic building on 'in the full richness of its authenticity' will involve the building having been well used and enriched by further change within the constraints of that tradition. Such an approach is entirely alien within the framework of the *Venice Charter*.

7. How then should we understand the Venice Charter?

I suggest we can conclude three things about the *Venice Charter* from the foregoing discussion. First, the *Charter* is very much a product of its time, which, for conservation, arguably marked the highwater mark of high modernity. It is instructive to trace the developing argument in defence of the *Venice Charter*, for example through the writings of Wilfried Lipp (often on the occasion of an anniversary such as this). Not only was Lipp a former President of ICOMOS Austria and a founder member of TheoPhilos, his writing is characterised by a consistent engagement with philosophy and with the broader cultural setting within which conservation sits. What I read in these periodic engagements with philosophy is a defence of a high modern understanding of conservation, primarily in terms of Preservation. His most recent contribution, circulated prior

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[34] Gadamer H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer, D. G. Marshall, Trans.; 2nd, rev. ed.) (p. 306). Sheed and Ward. (Original work published 1960).

[35] Poulios I. (2014). *The past in the present: A living heritage approach—Meteora, Greece* (pp. 19-20). Ubiquity Press. https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/33207

to this conference, sees 'change at the centre of the ideology of monument preservation'[36], but argues, almost wistfully, that the increased risk that comes from greater change will provide a renewed 'opportunity for monument preservation'[37]. Whilst I disagree with the conclusion of this argument, I stoutly defend the need to bring such an argument into dialogue with the case for living buildings and change, and that providing the forum for such a debate is a core purpose for a group such as TheoPhilos.

Second, and following this, the *Charter* is much more like a Historic Monument than a set of timeless truths, or a 'Decalogue of Conservation' in Szmygin's phrase. This is hardly a new idea; just 13 years after the *Charter* was introduced, Cevat Erder in a journal article, suggested just this:

> *As camps form to press one view or another for inclusions, revisions and expansions I will make a radical proposal. Let us preserve the Venice Charter as an historic monument*[38].

Nevertheless, the Charter's status in conservation's pantheon is assured. It will remain central to our discipline for decades to come; it is simply that it will not be treated as having the universal validity it once claimed.

The third point is that, since the *Charter* is the product of modernity, it almost inevitably therefore misunderstands tradition. However hostile modernity is to tradition, it has not overcome it. Indeed, tradition is unavoidable – as Gadamer reminds us, 'belonging to a tradition is a condition of hermeneutics'[39]. Alasdair MacIntyre defines a living tradition as 'an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute the tradition'[40]. As conservation professionals, we belong to just such a living tradition, and can only engage in this debate because of that, so of course we will argue, as our conferences continue to attest!

MacIntyre goes on to state that "within a tradition, the pursuit of goods extends through generations…"[41]. As we anticipate subsequent 'big anniversaries' for the *Venice Charter* (2039, 2064…) we should expect this debate to continue, and on that basis we will know we remain a living tradition in robust good health.

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36 Lipp W. (2024). *60 years and not a bit quiet: Reflections on the history of time and ideas for an anniversary* (p. 8).

37 Ibidem.

38 Erder C. (1994). The Venice Charter under Review, Ankara, 1977. *ICOMOS Scientific Journal* (4) (p. 24). (Original work published 1977).

39 Gadamer H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer, D. G. Marshall, Trans.; 2nd, rev. ed.) (p. 291). Sheed and Ward. (Original work published 1960).

40 MacIntyre A. C. (2007). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (3rd ed.) (p. 222). Duckworth. (Original work published 1981).

41 Ibidem.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for a hermeneutically literate approach to the interpretation of the *Venice Charter*, seeing it as a historic monument in the living tradition that is conservation. The *Charter* is very much a product of its time, an expression of how high modernity understood the premodern world, including most obviously the cultural products of that world, which – because of the presumed temporal discontinuity – become treated primarily as works of art. For conservation to define itself simply as the obverse of modernity's destructiveness in the name of progress is to sell not only ourselves, but also the buildings we care for and the communities we engage with, woefully short. Nevertheless, the *Venice Charter* is and will remain a central text for the conservation discipline, and for that very reason will continue to be fiercely debated. As Jukka Jokilehto wisely said in concluding his contribution to the 2004 Budapest conference, 'In the end, conservation is a cultural problem'[42].

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[42] Jokilehto J. (2005). The Doctrine of the Venice Charter: An ICCROM Perspective [in:] *ICOMOS, The Venice Charter 1964-2004-2044? The Fortieth Anniversary (Budapest-Pécs, Hungary, May 22-27, 2004)* (p. 77). Hungarian National Committee of ICOMOS. https://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2962/1/K649-Monuments_and_Sites-v11-2005.pdf

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