



VENICE CHARTER AND ITS ROLE IN SHAPING CONCEPTS IN THE HERITAGE PROTECTION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT: The Venice Charter is one of the fundamental doctrinal documents sharing the contemporary system of heritage protection. In its preamble and the articles regarding definitions, the essence of the statements defining the purpose of the heritage protection system has been covered. It provides a rationale for why the heritage protection system should exist. It defines what should be understood as heritage, and the articles defining the intention emphasizes that it is “to safeguard them no less as works of art than as historical evidence”. These concise yet comprehensive definitions form the foundation for further doctrinal considerations.

Subsequent doctrinal documents and modern strategic papers contain numerous formulations which are addressing both the definition of the monument (as the object of protection) and the purpose of the activity. A notable trend is the broadening of the understanding of the term “monument” and the expansion of justifications for the system's functioning. Monuments are preserved not only for cultural or historical reasons but also for economic, social, climatic, and other impacts. This process leads to a deconstruction of the heritage protection system, wherein the definition of the object of protection, the values justifying the system's existence, and its goals become increasingly ambiguous. The perspective for the functioning of the heritage protection system requires a re-evaluation of its assumptions and a return to basic concepts, which are explaining and guiding its existence. It is worth considering, whether and how, under contemporary conditions, the basic definitions and principles of the Venice Charter can be rearticulated to reinforce their relevance in shaping the rules of how the system is operating. Without an updated definition of the monument and a clear articulation of the purpose, its role will be taken over by other socio-economic activities. Consequently, conservation concepts will be undergoing further modification, ultimately threatening the preservation of resources and the established traditions of heritage protection.

KEY WORDS: Venice Charter, monument, conservation doctrine, monument protection

Introduction

Between May 25 and 31, 1964 the IInd International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments was held in Venice. The outcome of the congress was the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, commonly known as the Venice Charter. It has been over half a century since the document's publication – specifically, 2024 marks 60 years since its formulation. This period corresponds to the activity of at least two, if not three, generations of conservators and has witnessed profound civilizational changes. Despite this, the Venice Charter remains present in conservation discourse as a binding voice in discussions and a point of reference. It continues to be a significant guide to the meanings of concepts such as monument, conservation, and restoration¹.

The Charter has also become an autonomous subject of study, contributing to the development of theoretical reflection on cultural heritage preservation². Even those who question the contemporary relevance or validity of the document feel compelled to reference it, even critically. On one hand, the Venice Charter is a fundamental doctrinal document summarizing the experiences of its predecessors and shaping – or actually justifying – the modern heritage conservation system. On the other hand, it is a statement that remains at a high level of generality. One might argue that this generality, coupled with a clear directional message, is the source of the Venice Charter's success. The document outlines the logical framework for action, not a formula for solving individual problems. It does not replace detailed conservation analyses in specific cases but provides clear guidance on the types of solutions to seek and for what purposes. It focuses on the intellectual phase of solving conservation problems.

The dysfunction of interpreting the Charter too literally or dogmatically was concisely expressed by Andrzej Tomaszewski, who wrote that *the Charter has become for many a decalogue, requiring not thought but mere application, thereby removing responsibility. After all, it is always easier to believe once than to constantly think*³.

Criticism of the Charter sometimes seems to be a rhetorical turn lacking deeper reflection. An example of this is a statement by Krzysztof Czyż, co-creator of the “Rekonstrukcje Odbudowy” (“Reconstruction Restorations”) initiative, involved in the concept of building the Danziger Hof in Gdańsk. During a discussions about a specific reconstruction project, he stated: *...in Poland, the guidelines of the outdated, modernist Venice Charter are still used as a “shield” by groups of modern architects, developers, and conservators- doctrinaires who have an interest in*

¹ Krzyżanowski L. (1975). Karta Wenecka czy Karta Konserwacji Zabytków? *Ochrona Zabytków* 28/3-4 (110-111) (pp. 217-221).

² To confirm this thesis, it is enough to mention the scientific conference “Karta Wenecka 1964-2014” (“The Venice Charter 1964-2014”) organized by the Department of Conservation at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, held from October 10-12, 2014, or the publications: Bukowska W., Krawczyk J. (Eds.). (2015). *Karta Wenecka 1964-2014*. Toruń; Krasnowolski B. (2023). *Ochrona zabytków: Historia, doktryny, systemy prawne* (pp. 223- 225). Kraków; Szymgin B. (2023). *Międzynarodowe teksty doktrynalne ochrony konserwacji zabytków*. Lublin.

³ Tomaszewski A. (2012). *Ku nowej filozofii dziedzictwa* (p. 132). Kraków.

maintaining its guidelines. And today, it is these groups that officials side with, hiding behind the Venice Charter without considering the opinion of residents or the proven solutions in Gdańsk that have made it what it is today – one of the most beautiful Polish cities⁴. Such an interpretation of the Venice Charter is contradicted by its genesis and history. After all, its Polish signatory and co-creator was Jan Zachwatowicz, who, having experienced the reconstruction of Warsaw and other Polish cities, simultaneously confirmed the validity of a doctrine based on fundamental concepts related to monuments and the authenticity of conservation⁵. Therefore, recognizing the Venice Charter as a manifesto of a generation that faced the challenges of post-World War II reconstruction and returned to the ideals outlined in the Athens Charter⁶, we should pay attention to the conceptual definitions contained in the document.



Fig. 1 Venice, a city symbolizing the challenges of heritage protection, was not coincidentally chosen to give its name to the doctrinal document of 1964. (by A. Siwek)

⁴ Czyż K. (2017). *Karta Wenecka – eksperyment, który się nie powiodł*, Gdańsk Strefa Prestiżu - Niezależny serwis Gdańska, Pomorza i okolic, 20 June 2017; <https://www.gdanskstrefa.com/eksperyment-ktory-sie-nie-powiodl/> [access: 1.07.2024].

⁵ Pleskaczyńska-Chylińska M., Majewski P. (2013). *Jan Zachwatowicz (1900 – 1983). Architekt* (p. 109). Warszawa: Zamek Królewski w Warszawie.

⁶ Lalewicz M. (1933). *Sprawozdanie z Międzynarodowej Konferencji zwołanej w roku 1931 Atenach w sprawie ochrony konserwacji zabytków sztuki i historii, odczytane dn. 18 marca 1932 r. na posiedzeniu Polskiej Komisji Międzynarodowej Współpracy Intelktualnej w Warszawie*. <https://polona.pl/item-view/ffb9cd96-6565-4c7e-9c95-c5d80c91ce20?page=2>

Definitions – basic concepts

The preamble of the Venice Charter and its introductory points encapsulate the essence of the statements defining the purpose of the heritage protection system. The preamble of the document serves as a justification for why the heritage protection system should be established and maintained. Let us repeat the often-quoted words of the introduction to the Venice Charter: *Imbued with a message from the past, the historic monuments of generations of people remain to the present day as living witnesses of their age-old traditions. People are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage. The common responsibility to safeguard them for future generations is recognized. It is our duty to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity*⁷.

It can be said that, over time, these words have become commonplace, repeated like a mantra in textbooks and doctrinal discussions. Therefore, let us emphasize their context anew – these words were written twenty years after the end of World War II, which brought incalculable destruction to cultural heritage, particularly to historic structures. From the Polish perspective, we focus on local experiences and losses symbolized by the destroyed and reclaimed Warsaw⁸. However, from a broader perspective, this twenty-year period post war is the time for answering the questions: what should be done with the destroyed Leipzig, Berlin or Munich, ruins of Rotterdam, cities in Russia⁹, with Havre¹⁰, ruins of Monte Cassino¹¹, Coventry cathedral¹² any many more monuments touched with the destroying hand of the war. Examples could be multiplied, but they certainly cannot be forgotten when characterizing the situation in which a return was made to doctrinally ordering conservation concepts, emphasizing "unity of human values" and the "common responsibility" for safeguarding monuments for future generations. Unfortunately, both the threat of destruction and loss, as well as the need to shape a shared, universal responsibility for values that enrich, or in the case of loss, impoverish all, have not lost their relevance, despite the passage of time. The experiences of destruction in Syria¹³, terrorist actions directed against monuments by Islamic fanatics¹⁴, or the persistent threat to cultural heritage in Ukraine¹⁵, are painful reminders. It can be stated that the fundamental message of

⁷ <https://www.icomos.org/en/participer/179-articles-en-francais/ressources/charters-and-standards/157-thevenice-charter>

⁸ Paragraph 2, *Rekomendacja Warszawska w sprawie odbudowy i rekonstrukcji dziedzictwa kulturowego*. (2018) (p. 2). Warszawa.

⁹ Bullock N. (2002). *Building the Post-War World*. London.

¹⁰ Damais J.-P. (1963). *La Nouvelle Ville du Havre, reconstruction et population*. Paris.

¹¹ Rennie K. R. (2001). *The Destruction and Recovery of Monte Cassino, 529-1964*. Amsterdam.

¹² Spence B. (1962). *Phoenix in Coventry. The building of a Cathedral*. London.

¹³ Cunliffe E. (2012). *Damage to the soul: Syria's cultural heritage in conflict*. Durham. https://web.archive.org/web/20120710192645/http://ghn.globalheritagefund.com/uploads/documents/document_2107.pdf

¹⁴ Chlebowicz P. (2019). Działania ISIS wymierzone przeciwko światowemu dziedzictwu kulturowemu. *Studia Prawnoustrojowe* 43, (pp. 23-34).

¹⁵ Wójcicki H. (2023). Ciche ofiary wojny w Ukrainie: Dziedzictwo kulturowe i jego losy w trakcie konfliktu. *Kwartal* 02(27) (pp. 12 – 21).

the Venice Charter contained in the preamble has not lost its relevance; moreover, it cannot be marked as "accomplished"¹⁶. Next, in the content of the Charter, in the „Definitions” section, the material scope of the term “monument” is specified: *not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or a historic event*¹⁷. At the same time, the concept was focused on immovable and site-based monuments, for which artistic value is designated by the term “work”, or historical value is linked to the evaluative phrase "significant development" or character of an “event”. Additionally, a reservation was made that the concept “applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time”. This is a clear echo of Riegl's understanding of a monument as a historical source. It also reinforces the dilemma already recognized by him, that every object from the past gains historical significance over time, however, *it is impossible to take into account the vast array of events for which both direct and indirect evidence has survived, constantly expanding into infinity...*¹⁸. The Venice Charter did not provide a clear path or the necessity for verifying the value of classifying monuments, relying solely on general terms such as “cultural significance”, “work” or “significant development”. Although some degree of hierarchy can be recognised even in these general terms, the dominant message expands the understanding of the concept of a monument and obliges attention to every trace of the past with “cultural significance”. This message shaped the evolution of the heritage protection system at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, a period characterized by the inclusion of ever-expanding categories of objects under the term “monument”¹⁹.

Next, in the "Venice Charter," it is succinctly stated that *the intention in conserving and restoring monuments is to safeguard them no less as works of art than as historical evidence*²⁰. It is hard to find a more general yet simultaneously unequivocal indication of the direction of action. The strength of the Venice Charter lies in its general, directional nature. The more the protection system, along with its doctrinal framework, becomes fragmented and detailed²¹, the more subsequent guidelines lose their significance, as they lose their universality. The weakness of the system is the tendency to fit all protective actions into rigid schemes and guidelines, which seemingly limit the need for a thorough individual consideration of each monument and its conservation needs.

¹⁶ Of course, on the "achieved" side, one should note all the accomplishments related to the UNESCO World Heritage List of cultural and natural heritage. However, this does not exhaust humanity's obligations towards the global cultural heritage resource.

¹⁷ <https://www.icomos.org/en/participer/179-articles-en-francais/ressources/charters-and-standards/157-thevenice-charter>

¹⁸ Krawczyk J. (2006). *Alois Riegl, Georg Dehio i kult zabytków* (p. 28). Warszawa.

¹⁹ Szmygin B. (2000). *Kształtowanie koncepcji zabytku i doktryny konserwatorskiej Polsce XX wieku* (pp. 204 – 255). Lublin.

²⁰ <https://www.icomos.org/en/participer/179-articles-en-francais/ressources/charters-and-standards/157-thevenice-charter>

²¹ <https://www.gov.pl/web/kultura/wytyczne-generalnego-konserwatora-zabytkow>



Fig. 2 Rønne, Bornholm, Denmark. The city was bombed on May 7 and 8, 1945, serving as an example of the devastation of local heritage with the dimension of universal destruction of values. A ceramic composition in the façade of a house commemorates these events. (by A. Siwek)

Confrontation with the present

From the perspective of the years that have passed since the announcement of the Venice Charter, a natural question arises: to what extent does this document remain relevant? Leaving aside any direct criticism, answers can be sought by confronting the message of the Venice Charter with contemporary doctrinal and strategic documents. It will then become apparent that, in the formal discourse, little remains of the original systemic assumptions. In contemporary doctrinal and strategic documents, a number of formulations can be found, relating both to the definition of a monument (as the subject of protection) and the purpose of action. A common denominator of many of these statements is the attempt to expand the understanding of the concept of a monument, the clarification of terms leading to the fragmentation of the doctrine, and the elaboration of justifications and goals for the functioning of the protection²². Monuments are protected, among other reasons, to achieve economic, social, environmental, and other benefits. If we assume that local government monument protection programs combine the professional perspective of the authors with a response to public demand in the sphere of protection, the goals formulated within them will provide an interesting insight into a contemporary image. As an

²² Szmygin B. (2023). *Międzynarodowe teksty doktrynalne ochrony i konserwacji zabytków* (pp. 32-43). Lublin – Warszawa.

example, the document formulating the framework for the monument protection in the Lesser Poland Voivodeship for the years 2022-2025 („Wojewódzki program opieki nad zabytkami w Małopolsce na lata 2022–2025”), defines as its strategic purpose: *The harmonious use of the cultural heritage resources of Lesser Poland to meet the challenges of the present and future, and to ensure a high quality of life for the inhabitants of Lesser Poland*²³. A similar document for the years 2021-2024 and for the West Pomeranian Voivodeship says the following: Three long-term goals are set for implementation:

I. Maintaining monuments as an integral element of the cultural landscape that shapes the spatial order of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship.

II. Increasing the attractiveness of monuments in the process of social, economic, and tourist activation of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship.

*III. Strengthening an open society through the growth and popularization of knowledge about monuments and cultural heritage of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship*²⁴.

In turn, the heritage protection program for the Subcarpathian Voivodeship for the years 2022-2025 („Wojewódzki program opieki nad zabytkami w województwie podkarpackim na lata 2022-2025”) states: *The main strategic goal of the next edition of the Program is to strengthen the heritage protection system in order to shape memory and respect for the past as a force that builds social bonds and opens new development perspectives for the future*²⁵. These examples of phraseology justifying actions in heritage protection through other social factors can be multiplied. Of course, specific objectives related to heritage protection and conservation are subsequently assigned to these strategic goals, but the fundamental justification for these actions must be broader. A significant signal of the approach to monuments is the name of the key ministerial program supporting conservation work. It is titled: *Rządowy Program Odbudowy Zabytków*²⁶ (*The Governmental Program for the Reconstruction of Monument*). It is to be assumed that the use of the word „reconstruction” in the title of the program is not a coincidence. Similarly, socio-economic phraseology dominates in relation to heritage in European Union documents. On the official pages of the European Commission, we read:

Europe’s cultural heritage is a rich and diverse mosaic of cultural and creative expressions, an inheritance from previous generations of Europeans and a legacy for those to come.

²³ Wojewódzki program opieki nad zabytkami w Małopolsce na lata 2022–2025. Załącznik do uchwały Nr LVI/800/22 Sejmiku Województwa Małopolskiego z dnia 4 lipca 2022 roku; https://www.malopolska.pl/_userfiles/uploads/kultura%20i%20dziedzictwo/Zabytki/WPONZ_2022-2025.pdf

²⁴ Wojewódzki Program Opieki nad Zabytkami Województwa Zachodniopomorskiego na lata 2021-2024 przyjęty Uchwałą Nr XXIX/338/21 Sejmiku Województwa Zachodniopomorskiego dnia 28 października 2021 r.; <http://eregion.wzp.pl/sites/default/files/zalacznik1.pdf>

²⁵ Wojewódzki Program Opieki nad Zabytkami w województwie podkarpackim na lata 2022-2025 przyjęty Uchwałą Nr LVI/972/22 Sejmik Województwa Podkarpackiego 28 grudnia 2022 r. <https://podkarpackie.pl/index.php/kultura/wojewodzki-program-opieki-nad-zabytkami/wponz-2022-2025>

²⁶ Uchwała Nr 232/2022 Rady Ministrów z dnia 23 listopada 2022 r. w sprawie ustanowienia Rządowego Programu Odbudowy Zabytków. <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/rzadowy-program-odbudowy-zabytkow>

Cultural heritage enriches the individual lives of citizens, is a driving force for the cultural and creative sectors, and plays a role in creating and enhancing Europe's social capital.

It is also an important resource for economic growth, employment and social cohesion, offering the potential to revitalise urban and rural areas and promote sustainable tourism²⁷.

Let us overlook the fact that monuments are not highlighted here and remain implicitly integrated into the broader concept of heritage²⁸. In these texts, we find confirmation that today, the protection of monuments is not an autonomous goal but provides means to achieve other objectives. The process of renomination of the foundations of the protection system progresses parallel to the increasing consumption of monuments, touristification, globalization, theatricalization of heritage, the transfer of relations with monuments into the realm of digital augmented reality²⁹, reproduction of artifacts, and the advancing falsification of monuments³⁰. These processes lead to the loss of the human connection with the fully authentic testimony of the past, which, in the traditional understanding, is a monument. It replaces it with relationships in the virtual world or manipulated relationships in the real world. If we add to this image the yet-to-be-fully-diagnosed perspective of the widespread use of artificial intelligence, which will direct the evolution of attitudes and social awareness³¹, the mention of the simple principles contained in the Venice Charter may take on a new meaning. The aforementioned process of change leads to the deconstruction of the heritage protection system, in which the definitions of the object of protection, its values justifying the existence of the system, and perhaps most importantly, the goals of action become blurred. In such circumstances, the discussion on the principles of the functioning of the heritage protection system and conservation doctrine loses its foundation. One possible corrective path is to return to the roots of the system, and these are defined in the aforementioned definitions of the Venice Charter.

²⁷ <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/selected-themes/cultural-heritage>

²⁸ Kowalski K. (2017). Od zabytku do dyskursu. O kilku źródłach współczesnej definicji dziedzictwa. *Prace Etnograficzne* 45(1) (pp. 1 – 14).

²⁹ Zapłata R. (2016). Autentyzm zabytkowej architektury i palimpsest w przestrzeni historycznej – nowe media a prezentacja dziedzictwa kulturowego, *Architectus* 1(45) (pp. 97–114).

³⁰ A striking example of the falsification of a monument motivated by economic reasons is the case of the railway viaduct from 1863, located in the Grzegórzki district of Kraków. It was dismantled and rebuilt with technology corresponding to the requirements of rail traffic in 2022–2023.

³¹ Torczyńska M. (2019). Sztuczna inteligencja i jej społeczno-kulturowe implikacje w codziennym życiu. *Kultura i Historia* 36(2) (pp. 106 – 126).



Fig. 3. Kraków, railway viaduct from 1863 before demolition and reconstruction using new technology. An example of the relativization of the approach to the monument. (by A. Siwek)

Conclusions

The future of the heritage conservation system requires a re-evaluation of its assumptions and a return to the basic concepts that explain, justify, and guide its existence. It is essential to consider whether and how, under contemporary conditions, these basic definitions and principles of the Venice Charter can be expressed in a way that updates them, restoring their significance and instrumental role in shaping the system's operation. Without an updated – yet anchored in the discipline's tradition – definition of a monument, a justification for the creation of a conservation system, and determination of its objectives as well as the role of the system, will be overtaken by other socio-economic activities. The concept of conservation will undergo further modifications, which in fact threaten the loss of the heritage and the established tradition of monument protection. A humanistic approach and the survival of the relationship with the monument is at stake, the principle of an individual approach to each monument, requiring to study it and to understand both its material and immaterial structure. Similarly, the fate of preserving the nature of conservation as an art, rather than a set of standardized, mechanical, and imitative actions, hangs in the balance. In a world where we foresee (or experience already) the dominance of algorithms and virtual stimulants over empirical knowledge, a person's ability to engage with an authentic witness of the past – despite material imperfections and formal complexity – may become one of the few attempts to preserve humanity. The ability to experience emotions evoked

by the works of our ancestors and to reinterpret those works anew sets humans apart from the world of digital analysis and standardized action schemes. To avoid closing this perspective, we should re-examine the classical assumptions of the heritage conservation system contained in the Venice Charter and return to the statement: “The intention in conserving and restoring monuments is to safeguard them no less as works of art than as historical evidence” so that “the historic monuments of generations of people”, “imbued with a message from the past” can be handed on “in the full richness of their authenticity” to future generations. In other words, the preservation of the autonomous values of a monument should be a sufficient justification for the continuation of the conservation system, without the need for justification borrowed from other spheres of human activity.



Fig. 4 A wooden Orthodox church in Romania – the need to experience a direct connection with the object in its authenticity and material form as a testament to past epochs is at the heart of the humanistic relationship with the monument and the justification for conservation efforts. (pic. by A. Siwek)

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