
ACCESS TO CULTURAL HERITAGE AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT: About the Faro Convention, we agree what says in the article 12, a, b: “Access to cultural heritage and democratic participation”, but we must clarify somethings in points c and d in particular about the “voluntary organisations”. What organizations we are talking about? When should they act? We must recognize which are the heritage communities, organizations and other people who can be part of the protection system. And then when must give its opinion. An example of participation is that of the “Servei” of monuments in Barcellona, Spain. In the method (that we will explain) is included in one part to have the opinion of different statements when the works of restoration are advanced. A not good example is the work in the Leon Cathedral by “Amigos de la Catedral”.

KEY WORDS: Participation, cultural heritage, experts, stakeholders

The 'Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society' of 27 October 2005 emphasised the need to place people and human values at the centre of a broadened and interdisciplinary concept of cultural heritage.

On page two of that Document we read:

However, the decisions made by conservation experts/specialists are often incomprehensible or even contrary to the expectations of other interested parties.

It is therefore necessary to define and clarify them among all participants.

Let's not forget the importance of the Amsterdam Declaration, that celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. In fact, the Faro Convention is an offshoot of Amsterdam Declaration; both emphasise the importance of culture as a tool for social cohesion and sustainable development. They recognise the educational and formative value of culture, emphasising how it can contribute to the formation of aware and participative citizens. Furthermore, both texts promote international cooperation in the cultural field, although in different ways: the Amsterdam Declaration¹ invites member states to collaborate actively, while the Faro Convention encourages collaboration between local communities and national and international institutions.

The Faro Convention promotes the idea that cultural heritage should be accessible to everyone. This includes not only physical access to sites and monuments, but also intellectual and emotional access.

In the Article 12 of the Faro Convention called: "Access to cultural heritage and democratic participation" we can read:

The Parties undertake to:

a) encourage everyone to participate in:

- the process of identification, study, interpretation, protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural heritage ;*
- public reflection and debate on the opportunities and challenges which the cultural heritage represents;*

This can happen by organising, for example, work camps on restoration projects such as those organised by Young in Heritage (Jeunesse Patrimoine), in France (Fig. 1), or the Cultural Association Cayrel in Spain (Fig. 2), where young people have their first approach and experience to restoration sites.

¹ The Congress likewise affirms that Europe's architectural heritage is an integral part of the cultural heritage of the whole world and has noted with great satisfaction the mutual undertaking to promote co-operation and exchanges in the field of culture contained in the Final Act of the Congress on Security and Co-operation in Europe adopted at Helsinki in July of this year.



Fig. 1. Jeunesse Patrimoine. Source: <https://lepetitvendomois.fr/education-formation/le-patrimoine-une-affaire-de-jeunesse/>, accessed March 2025



Fig. 2. Cultural Association Cayrel. Source: <https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcQVfG3212iTLAe2X75aOOXqYXNVtNB6hloMYQ&s>, accessed March 2025

In point b) of the Article 12, we can read:

[The Parties undertake to:] b) take into consideration the value attached by each heritage community to the cultural heritage with which it identifies;

In this context, the Faro Convention promotes an integrated vision of cultural heritage, in which dialogue between communities, institutions and experts becomes fundamental. Through consultation and cooperation processes, local communities are invited to express their opinions and actively contribute to decisions regarding cultural heritage. This approach not only strengthens participatory democracy but also promotes greater awareness and responsibility towards heritage. This can take place through specially organized meetings or initiatives by administrations and designers that include the population.

In line with the principles of the Faro Convention, historical and contemporary architecture can act as a catalyst for this participation. Architectural structures are not just physical constructions, but rather dynamic spaces that host community activities, cultural events and educational initiatives. The use of heritage architecture can facilitate the creation of meeting places, where people can exchange ideas and collaborate on projects that reflect their cultural and historical identity.

BUT we must differentiate between participation by stakeholders.

In fact, some stakeholders funded restoration works of a monument and organize temporary exhibitions and fashion shows in it, such as Valentino did in the Ara Pacis (Fig.3), where he organized an anniversary fashion show and people have paid more attention on it and not on the monument, or at the Temple of Venus and Rome (Fig. 4-5), where columns, now removed, were created exclusively for the celebratory fashion show, among which the models parade.



Fig. 3. Exposition of Valentino at the Ara Pacis. Source: https://www.larosaitaly.com/larosa-uploads/2007/07/valentino_1.jpg, accessed March 2025



Fig. 4. Valentino at the Temple of Venus and Rome. Source: https://mekane.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/FestaValentino_09.jpg, accessed March 2025



Fig. 5. Valentino at the Temple of Venus and Rome. Source: https://mekane.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/FestaValentino_09.jpg, accessed March 2025

In other cases, stakeholders restore the architecture and transform it into their headquarters, as for example the case of the Prada Foundation in Milan (Fig. 6): that architecture has been adapted from an industrial space into the foundation's headquarters. The complex consists of seven restored historic industrial buildings and three new structures: the Tower, the Podium and the Cinema. This combination creates a varied and dynamic exhibition environment, which integrates past and present in a harmonious way. The Tower, completed in 2018, is a 60-metre building in exposed white concrete, with nine floors offering exhibition space for the permanent collection and a panoramic restaurant.

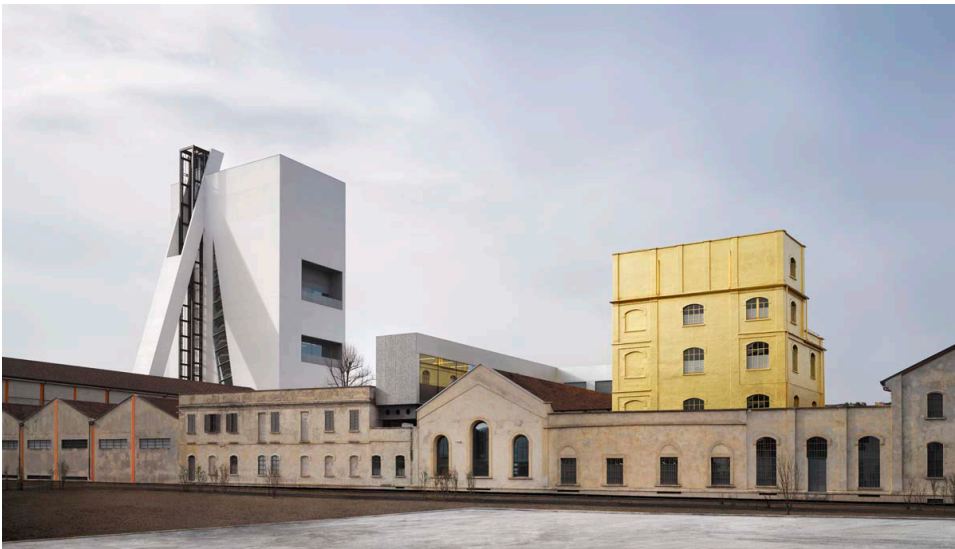


Fig. 6. Prada Foundation in ex industrial space, Milan. Source: <https://www.fondazioneprada.org/>, accessed March 2025

In Wien, the private Leopold Foundation financed an entire museum to exhibit its private collection in the Museumsquartier. (Fig. 7) Founded in 1994 by Rudolf Leopold in collaboration with the Republic of Austria and the Austrian National Bank, the foundation was established to preserve and make accessible to the public the extensive collection of modern Austrian art collected by Leopold and his wife Elisabeth over more than five decades.



Fig. 7. Museumsquartier, Wien. Source: <https://es.wikiarquitectura.com/edificio/Museo-Leopold/>, accessed March 2025

An extreme case is that of Graz in Austria where some organisations have created this big cultural centre that had a strong impact on the citizens and also a particular link between historic architectures and new ones. A Museum of Contemporary Art in Graz, The Kunsthaus, floats like a mysterious blue bubble suspended between the roofs of the Old Town. (Fig. 8)



Fig. 8. Graz, Austria. Source: <https://i0.wp.com/www.rejsrejsrejs.dk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/kunsthau-graz-oesterreich-werbung-julius-silver-d.jpg.3146687-e1562786764206.jpg?fit=990%2C464&ssl=1>, accessed March 2025

In some cases, stakeholders finance the restoration of the cultural pre-existence by participating in work decisions, such as the Fendi Foundation did for the Velabro, in Rome (Fig. 9): an entire historic architecture was adapted into a cultural centre nowadays known as ‘Palazzo Rhinoceros’ that houses residences, exhibition spaces, art galleries and a panoramic rooftop restaurant.



Fig. 9. Palazzo Rhinoceros, Fendi Foundation, Rome. Source: <https://www.tribune.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Photo-Lucilla-Loiotile-.jpg>, accessed March 2025

Another example of it is Horti Farnesiani in Rome (Fig. 10), in which the intervention has strongly influenced and change the architecture. The Rain Nymphaeum, a late Renaissance structure designed by Girolamo Rainaldi, was closed to the public for decades, it was re-opened in 2023 after a complex operation of structural consolidation, resolution of infiltrations and intervention on the frescoes and sculptures.



Fig. 10. Horti Farnesiani, Rom. Source: Photo by C.A.L. 2023

It is important to remember an work done all by the administration in Barcelona: the intervention on the Monasterio of San Lorenzo de Baga (Fig. 11-12), where the administration intervned with the restoration work and, when work was well underway, organised visits and events to show it. For example the visit of the “Friends of Catalan Romanic” where they gave their opinions and ideas on the work.



Fig. 11. Monasterio of San Lorenzo de Baga, Barcelona. Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d7/EXTERIOR_SANT_LLOREN%C3%87_PROP_BAGA.JPG/1200px-EXTERIOR_SANT_LLOREN%C3%87_PROP_BAGA.JPG, accessed March 2025



Fig. 12. Monasterio of San Lorenzo de Baga, Barcelona. Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d7/EXTERIOR_SANT_LLOREN%C3%87_PROP_BAGA.JPG/1200px-EXTERIOR_SANT_LLOREN%C3%87_PROP_BAGA.JPG, accessed March 2025

Another possibility, for a good and democratic participation, is to present the project in a public place or in the restoration site, before the beginning of the works, inviting people to give their opinions and impressions. In this way transparency and participation are respected and make sense because they can really influence decisions and initiatives.

After all these different examples, about the article 12 of the Faro Convention, it's important clarify the point C, where we can read:

[The Parties undertake to:] c recognise the role of voluntary organisations both as partners in activities and as constructive critics of cultural heritage policies;

But what kind of organization we are talking about?

One could talk about Italia Nostra, Espana Nostra, ecc. Europa Nostra and in particular ICOMOS.

The point d) of the article states:

[The Parties undertake to:] d take steps to improve access to the heritage, especially among young people and the disadvantaged, in order to raise awareness about its value, the need to maintain and preserve it, and the benefits which may be derived from it.

It is important that participation takes place correctly and at the right time. Different organisations cannot act on the same monument at the same time without a relationship and with different objectives because this generates problems and damages the monuments. For example, remember the case of the Cathedral de Leon, where administration left the restoration work of part of the roof to the “Amigos de la Cathedral” (Fig. 13-14) who managed part of the intervention without specific expertises.



Fig. 13-14. Amigos de la Cathedral for the Cathedral de Leon. Source: https://www.elimparcial.es/galerias-noticias/galerias/57767/medium/catedral_leon_renovada_obras_eje_100220240.jpg, accessed March 2025

Also remember the “Escuela taller” as, for example, the Monasterio Aguilar de Campoo where special works in restoration and conservation are explained and put in practice. This happened during 80’s, but it didn’t work very well. The Monastery of Santa María la Real in Aguilar de Campoo (Palencia, Spain) is an emblematic example of how vocational training can be integrated with cultural heritage conservation. In 1985, under the leadership of architect and designer José María Pérez ‘Peridis’, the first “Escuela Taller” was started to restore this Romanesque monastic complex, marking the beginning of an innovative model of heritage restoration through education and employment of young people. “Escuelas Taller” are Spanish public programmes aimed at unemployed young people between the ages of 16 and 25, combining theoretical and practical vocational training in areas such as restoration, crafts and construction. In the case of Aguilar de Campoo, this approach made it possible not only to save the monastery from decay, but also to train a new generation of professionals in restoration and traditional crafts.

In conclusion, as the Faro Convention also states, participation, information and transparency in the restoration of historical monuments are important, but international organisations created for the defence and restoration of cultural heritage should not be confused with associations that want to take action without being competent in the field. It is important that anyone involved in architectural heritage is competent and specialised in the field, and not just a financier or someone with a vested interest in it.

A similar situation arises with some stakeholders who, on the one hand, allow interventions for the conservation of monuments with their funding and, on the other hand, claim to direct and decide on works without having any competence in the matter.

Democratic participation in restoration work is essential to ensure that cultural heritage remains a shared heritage, accessible and recognisable to the whole community. However, this openness to public discussion and debate must be accompanied by a clear distinction of roles: the design and execution of works must be entrusted to qualified professionals with specific skills in conservation, archaeology, art history and architecture. It is essential that critical decisions are not dictated by needs unrelated to the protection of the property, such as those of sponsors or financiers who risk altering its significance or integrity for promotional or image purposes. Only a balance between civic involvement and scientific rigour can ensure respectful, lasting restorations that truly serve the collective memory.

Organising participatory visits, lessons and conferences is important for genuine democratic participation in interventions on monuments, but we must not confuse organisation and proper collective participation with expertise in cultural heritage and those who do not possess it, in order to avoid irreparable damage to architectural heritage.

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