Protection of Cultural Heritage 25 (2026)
DOI: 10.35784/odk.9465

ICOMOS AT 60: SURVEYING OUR PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS, AND HOW THEY MIGHT BE FIXED

WALTER Walter [1]

[1] Nigel Walter, University of York
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1152-522X

ABSTRACT: ICOMOS was called into being by the Venice Charter which, as well as being held in great affection, also forms our ideological foundation. As a community, we are happy to engage with the theory of conservation, including debating our ever-growing collection of doctrinal documents, but we pay surprisingly little regard to questions of philosophy. This is a major concern, because it is at this level of philosophy that we i) understand our own commitments and purpose, ii) engage with others beyond our own discipline, and iii) are able to respond to external challenges.

This paper argues that, as well as being unexamined, the philosophical foundations of the Venice Charter (and thus of ICOMOS) are weak. The Charter is built on a foundation of a taken-for-granted positivism and, for lack of consideration of more appropriate alternatives, this remains ICOMOS's strongest philosophical commitment. This commitment is evident in the way we continue to dress our processes in the language of the 'scientific' and typically limit our energies to discussion of case studies and technical approaches to conservation. Meanwhile, we see little engagement with philosophies of significance, tradition, and change through time, to name but three issues essential to the care of cultural heritage.

As a result, ICOMOS faces legitimate challenges from outside its domain; examples include the Faro Convention, and censure from the rapidly developing discipline of Critical Heritage Studies, which accuses us of 'the fetishising of expert knowledge'. We struggle to respond well to these challenges because we lack the philosophical tools to do so. This paper will offer a diagnosis of this problem, suggesting some areas of urgent philosophical investigation, and concluding that TheoPhilos – the home of Philosophy as well as Theory of Conservation– is the natural forum for this important and urgent work, as we contemplate the next 60 years of ICOMOS.

KEY WORDS: Conservation Philosophy, Conservation Theory, ICOMOS, Venice Charter, Hans-Georg Gadamer

ICOMOS was called into being by the Venice Charter (ICOMOS, 1964), on which modern conservation is founded. The Charter is part of the collection of what are now termed 'doctrinal texts', and which form a prominent part of what conservation authors refer to as the theory or the philosophy of conservation – the terms are used interchangeably. Conservation authors typically use 'philosophy' in the weak sense of a collection of ideas or guiding principles, as opposed to the strong sense of the exploration of fundamental questions of knowledge, reality and existence. This paper argues that the two terms should not be used interchangeably, and that the failure to distinguish between them obscures an uncritical acceptance within conservation of varying forms of philosophy in the strong sense.

Whether it is understood or even recognised, an underlying philosophy will shape and influence the disciplinary construction built upon it; and a badly chosen philosophy will potentially undermine that construction. This paper proposes an epistemic model for the relation of the work of conservation professionals to theory and practice, attempts to diagnose the implicit philosophy that shaped modern conservation at the time of the writing of the Venice Charter, draws out the ongoing implications of that philosophy, and finally suggests a more fruitful philosophical line of enquiry. Hereafter, the word 'theory' will be used in place of the weak sense of philosophy and 'philosophy' for the stronger sense, as would be recognised by professional philosophers.

1. Conservation Stratigraphy

'Stratigraphy' is a geological term used to describe the order and relative position of rock strata. By extension, the term is used by archaeologists for the analysis of the order and position of layers of archaeological remains and, in a further metaphorical sense, by buildings archeologists to denote the phases of activity that shaped a standing building (Frieman 2023, 13). I suggest that the discipline of conservation can similarly be imagined as a stratigraphy of at least four levels (Fig. 1). At the topmost level (1) are Projects, the specific conservation activities and interventions through which conservation professionals care for historic buildings. Whatever the scale or ambition of the works involved, this part of conservation is absolutely essential to the safeguarding and care of the historic environment; without it, we would in time lose all our historic buildings. Level 1 is the domain of the specialist practitioner; here, conservation engages with the wider public, often at a local level, and particularly when we intervene to save or change a historic building valued by a particular community.

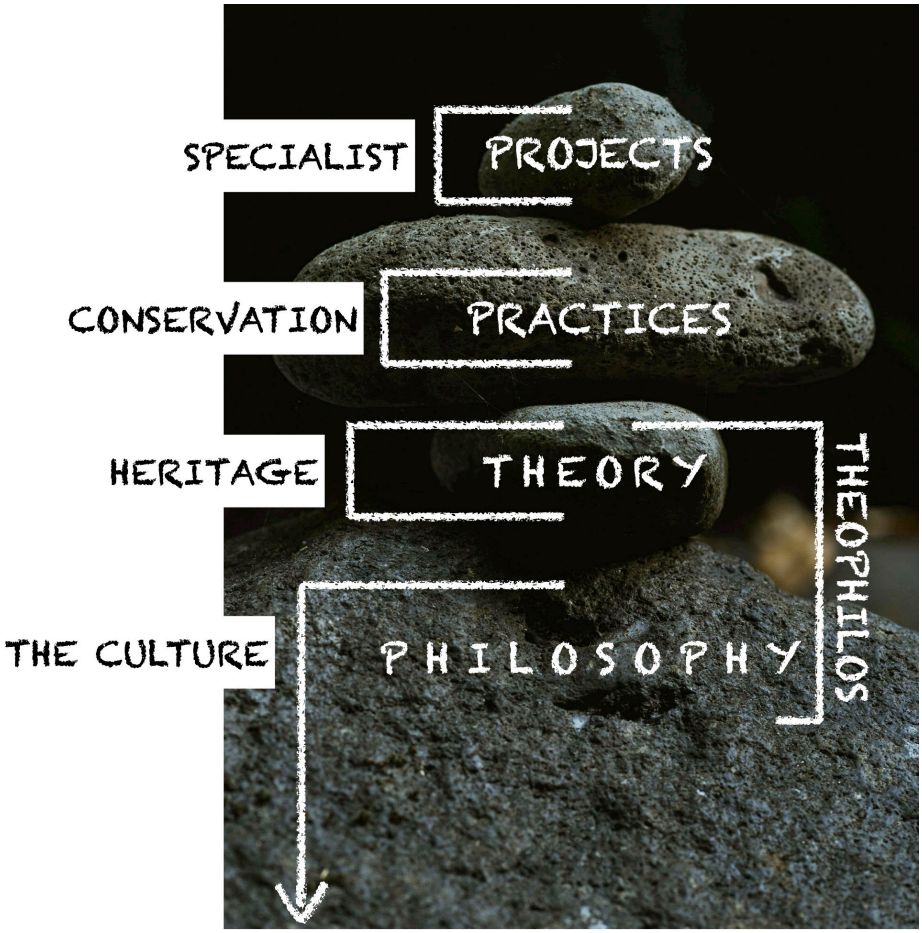

Fig. 1. Conservation as a four-level stratigraphy. Image: author

At level 2 we encounter the conservation Practices which provide an agreed framework within which the projects or interventions of level 1 sit. This level helps shape our interventions, and the practitioners making these interventions need to ensure their practice is congruent with this second layer in order to have confidence that their interventions are for the good, and are seen to be so. This level of shared practices is also where conservation professionals engage with regulatory structures, particularly those at national or sub-national level, and where national guidance and permissions processes sit.

Beneath the top two levels lie the more conceptual levels of Theory (level 3) and Philosophy (level 4). As already discussed, it is common for philosophy to be conflated with theory, reduced to its most general sense of a set of (not necessarily cohesive) ideas that guide practice. A similar conflation can be seen in the much older discipline of history; João Ohara notes that 'many historians make no distinction between "theory" and "philosophy of history" [and] many others understand that teaching "theory" equals teaching the history of historiography with an emphasis on "method"' (Ohara, 2022, 18–19).

Within conservation, the conflation of theory and philosophy is widespread. Examples include former ICCROM director and author of the Venice Charter preamble Paul Philippot in his important paper 'Historic Preservation: Philosophy, Criteria, Guidelines' (Philippot, 1976) and the otherwise excellent book by John Earl, *Building Conservation Philosophy* (2003); neither of these has anything whatever to say about philosophy, properly defined, though Philippot does at least engage with the idea of historical consciousness. The same confusion is visible in former ICOMOS Presidents Michael Petzet – in his critical reference to '"Australian" heritage philosophy' (Petzet, 2009, 10) – and Gustavo Araoz (2013); it is even present in the work of Jukka Jokilehto (1999, 300), despite his evident engagement with a variety of recognised philosophers. For the purposes of this paper, I am placing Theory at level 3, and using it to refer to conservation's 'doctrinal texts' – its charters, principles and guidance documents – and the disciplinary culture built around them.

Conventional conservation faces challenges at this third level of Theory. These challenges may come from competing documents such as the so-called Faro Convention (Council of Europe, 2005), which is very much concerned with the same built heritage for which conservation professionals care. The Convention was authored from outside of conservation and raises substantial questions for the discipline; in my view the challenge it lays down is both welcome and helpful (Walter, 2025). This is also the level at which conservation faces a more systemic challenge, notably from the Association of Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS), which accuses conventional conservation of 'the fetishising of expert knowledge' (Association of Critical Heritage Studies, n.d.). At this third level of Theory, conservation therefore finds itself engaging with other voices in heritage.

While many in conservation see no need to venture further than this third level, beneath it lies the fourth and final level of Philosophy. I am using the term 'philosophy' in the strong sense, as the systematic and academically credible study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence. This fourth level is characterised by conservation's engagement with recognised philosophers as, for example, Critical Heritage Studies does when it explicitly owns its roots in Critical Discourse Analysis (Smith, 2006, 15–16), and thence the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, amongst others (Macaraan, 2015; Van Dyke, 2018).

As we go down through these four stratigraphic layers, a number of things happen. First, while the top layer addresses the immediate concerns of the individual conservation professional, as we dig through the layers, the focus widens, from the site-specific through the national/regional to the international and (perhaps) universal. Second, this widening of concern is matched by a widening of the audience from those engaged in a specific site, to conservation professionals as a community at national level, to a broader heritage community; at the lowest level, the philosophical, the discipline of conservation is able to address the culture as a whole.

Third, there is a progression in which the upper levels are more concerned with 'how' questions (for example, how lime work should be specified, how timber should be detailed, or how conservation projects should be structured), while the lower levels concern themselves increasingly with 'why' questions, not least why we should care for historic buildings and why the historic environment is relevant to other societal goods. TheoPhilos (the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on the Theory and Philosophy of Conservation and Restoration) proclaims in its name its concern with the lower two strata, with *both* Theory *and* Philosophy, and therefore with those 'why' questions.

The metaphor of stratigraphy suggests that each lower level supports and justifies the ones above. Thus it is by being based in the shared understanding of good practice that a project is justified as exemplary – or not, if it departs from recognised good practice. Similarly, that understanding of good practice at level 2 is justified on the basis of the underlying theory that conservation has developed at level 3, and so on. It should be said that these layers are not isolated categories, but merge into one another. Indeed, any one individual or organisation will range across more than one level, or perhaps all.

These different levels should, therefore, work together in concert. A professional delivering projects (level 1) who does not base his work on the shared practices of conservation (level 2) will struggle to deliver work responsibly; for this reason, a thorough knowledge of that level of practices represents an important signifier of competence under most conservation accreditation schemes. In this regard the 14 ICOMOS training guidelines (ICOMOS, 1993) form a key part of that second layer of shared practices; it's how we identify what 'good' looks like, and is therefore central to most professional accreditation processes[1]. However, those same professionals will be considerably better skilled if they have not only mastered the shared practices at level 2 but also understand the theory from which those practices come (level 3). And with level 4 comes a working knowledge of the philosophy that has shaped modern conservation, which enables us both to engage critically with the structures of the discipline – as this paper seeks to do – and to justify the discipline to the culture as a whole.

As the above examples of Philippot, Earl, Petzet, Araoz and Jokilehto show, there is plenty of engagement with the theory of conservation (level 3), including debating our ever-growing collection of doctrinal texts. However, we pay surprisingly little regard to questions of philosophy (level 4); for large parts of the conservation discipline this fourth level is *Terra Incognita*, an unknown land. Perhaps it is actively avoided because the discipline doesn't understand the profound impact our choice of philosophy has on individual historic buildings and on the communities we are meant to be serving. This reluctance to engage with philosophy leaves a great void beneath our feet. It threatens the stability of the whole structure of our discipline, and comes at a huge opportunity cost, as discussed in Section 4 below.

2. A Scientistic Foundation

As discussed, the Venice Charter is seen as 'foundational', both for ICOMOS and by extension for modern conservation more generally; but what lies beneath that foundation? While there is no indication that the authors of the Charter sat down and explicitly chose any particular philosophy as the foundation for their work, that does not mean that there is no such philosophy in place that can be unearthed. Despite the discipline's general lack of interest in philosophy, there are clear indicators of some distinct philosophical commitments within modern conservation; and these, for better or worse, have proved formative for the discipline.

[1] In the UK, for example, all seven of the professional conservation accreditation schemes use the ICOMOS training guidelines.

The twentieth century witnessed a profound scientific revolution, comparable in many ways to the birth of modern science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The application of the resulting technologies helped address many longstanding aspects of human deprivation and suffering, for example with the control of many diseases and increases in food production. This bred a confidence within Western culture, and a belief amongst many that scientific processes could profitably be applied to any area of human endeavour. The philosopher W B Gallie (following Kant) notes an 'inherent progressiveness of the sciences' (Gallie, 1957, 124, emphasis added), which was a key component in the optimism of modernity. These factors resulted in a widespread faith in the power of scientific knowledge and technique, and its methodologies as applicable to all areas of human endeavour. This faith, developed from nineteenth-century positivism (see Section 3), is known as 'scientism', a term which frames natural science as a privileged form of knowledge, and scientific method as normative. Importantly for our context, scientism views traditional knowledge as superseded, and it shares modernity's belief in a rupture between past and present, resulting in what is termed 'historical consciousness'.

Given that the adoption of the Venice Charter in 1964 and the founding of ICOMOS the following year occurred during a high point of this faith in science, it is unsurprising that those drafting the Charter might embrace the ambition to be 'scientific'. It is unclear to what extent the cultural ramifications of these implicit philosophical choices were understood; but once they become evident then those choices can and should be questioned. This section therefore explores the language used in the Charter, before considering the philosophical roots of that language and the ramifications of those implicit choices.

There are several indicators of a scientistic approach in the text of the Charter. At the level of vocabulary, the word 'scientific' is used twice. Article 10 deals with non-traditional materials, and sensibly requires the use of any modern techniques to be backed up both by experience and 'scientific data'. Article 15 requires excavations to 'be carried out in accordance with scientific standards'; the lack of definition here suggests the usage is more aspirational than substantive.

Article 2 is perhaps more revealing. It addresses the resources which conservation and restoration should use; these are limited to 'sciences and techniques', with any cultural or interpretative skills entirely ignored. Furthermore, the aim of using these skills is 'the study and safeguarding of the architectural heritage'; that heritage is thus framed as something disengaged from the flow of life, the object of disinterested concern for the detached professional, rather than something to be engaged with and used. While Article 1 mentions cultural significance (an idea subsequently elaborated in the Burra Charter, Australia ICOMOS, 2013) here this is envisaged as coming from the past, being acquired 'with the passing of time', with no mention of its possible creation in the present; indeed, the idea that the historic buildings of today might be part of a living culture is entirely absent. The reference in Article 9 to restoration as 'a highly specialized operation' and the call for the publication of 'analytical and critical reports' of relevant works in Article 16 offer further indicators of a scientistic approach.

The overriding focus on the physical and material is matched by the comments on the use of buildings; Article 5 acknowledges this as desirable for their conservation, but insists that such use

'must not change the lay-out or decoration of the building'. The idea that a community might wish to change its historic building, in the way that such buildings may have changed multiple times over their history to date in response to their use, is seen as entirely unacceptable. Paul Philippot, one of the authors of the Venice Charter, speaks for modernity when he describes the rupture with the past from the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent development of a historical consciousness. He describes how 'since this rupture, the past has been considered by Western man as a completed development', that 'this new historical distance has produced the conditions necessary for a more objective, scientific approach to the past', and that conservation 'express[es] the modern way of maintaining living contact with cultural works of the past' (Philippot, 1976, 367).

It should be noted that while the preceding Athens Charter of 1931 also had a material focus, the only linguistic reference there to the 'scientific' is a general one to the protection of 'monuments of artistic, historic or scientific interest'; the Venice Charter is considerably more scientistic in both language and content than its predecessor. In summary, therefore, we can discern three indicators of the scientistic orientation of the Venice Charter: the scientistic language, the near-exclusive focus on material aspects of conservation, and the associated neglect of the interests of building owners/users (Article 5).

This scientistic commitment in the Venice Charter continues to shape the discipline of conservation. It is evident in the way we in ICOMOS continue to dress our processes in the language of the 'scientific', for example with our 'International Scientific Committees'. While some of these committees are indeed concerned with genuinely scientific questions such as the behaviour of specific materials (wood, stone, earth, etc.) the topic of most of these groups are more cultural in focus and 'scientific' only in the scientistic sense discussed above. The scientistic commitment is also visible in the way the discipline is structured. Starting from a focus on material heritage which produced the World Heritage Convention, it was then necessary to define the non-material as a separate realm, resulting in the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003). That sequence suggests that the human and intangible are a bolted-on afterthought; one can read the many assertions of the interdependence of tangible and intangible forms of heritage (e.g. Bouchenaki, 2003; UNESCO, 2004; ICOMOS, 2008, 2024 etc.) as acknowledging a structural error.

3. From Scientism to Positivism

Twentieth-century scientism has its roots in the mid-nineteenth-century development of positivism by Auguste Comte. Comte's positivism was a systematic philosophy that limited genuine knowledge to the fruits of empirical observation and scientific method. He proposed the "Law of Three Stages," arguing that human thought progresses from theological through metaphysical to positive (scientific) understanding, the last marking intellectual maturity. Positivism had a profound effect on nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture; key aspects are the elevation of empiricism such that legitimate knowledge is restricted to phenomena accessible to observation and measurement, and excluding 'metaphysical' questions such as ultimate causes, essences, purposes, or meaning. In his history of positivism, Leszek Kołakowski describes the legacy of Comte:

> *Comte's doctrine has been influential, not in its complete "universal" version, but only fragmentarily. What might be called its "scientistic" features became a lasting part of subsequent positivist thought: the Law of the Three States, the rejection of metaphysics, faith in the essential unity of the sciences, the ideal [...] of reducing all knowledge to a single universal formula, and the interpretation of knowledge as ultimately of practical value or nothing.* (Kołakowski, 1969, 65)

Positivism, however, proved to be both ideological and self-defeating. As Jürgen Habermas notes, 'The knowledge that Comte invokes in order to interpret the meaning of positive knowledge does not itself meet the standards of the positive spirit', and goes on to critique 'the intention of early positivism [as] the pseudo-scientific propagation of the cognitive monopoly of science' (Habermas, 1971, 71). Jorge Larrain makes a similar point, suggesting that, 'One of the features of positivism is precisely its postulate that scientific knowledge is the paradigm of valid knowledge, a postulate that indeed is never proved nor intended to be proved' (Larraín, 1979, 197).

That 'cognitive monopoly' is illustrated by the philosopher RG Collingwood; describing the attempts of nineteenth-century anthropologists to account for magic in so-called more primitive peoples, he says their

> *answer to this question was determined by the prevailing influence of a positivistic philosophy which ignored man's emotional nature and reduced everything in human experience to terms of intellect, and further ignored every kind of intellectual activity except those which, according to the same philosophy, went to the making of natural science.* (Collingwood, [1938] 1958, 58)

Positivism shaped the so-called 'new archaeology' which developed from the early 1960s onwards, with its belief that the past should be approached objectively through empirical observation, quantitative data, and scientific testing; Shanks and Tilley highlight some attendant drawbacks in 'the treatment of the social world as an extension of the natural, the reduction of practice to behaviour, the separation of "reality", the facts, from concepts and theories' (Shanks and Tilley, 1994, 29). Interestingly, they suggest that the adoption of a positivist approach in archaeology reflected a drive for disciplinary prestige, a wish to be seen to be scientific (1994, 31–32). Similarly, Paul Fairfield notes how 'In the nineteenth century the historical profession was anxious to establish its intellectual credentials in the university, and in a positivist era this meant giving it as scientific an appearance as possible' (Fairfield, 2025, 14). It is not difficult to imagine the same ambition enthusing those drafting the Venice Charter.

Whatever the motivation, this unreflective embrace of scientism comes at the cost of the exclusion of whole areas of enquiry, a rejection of historical understanding and the effective disbarring of the symbolic and the social; it would profoundly distort any discipline concerned with human society and culture. Heritage deals with common meanings across time, typically expressed, under current models, in the attribution of values-based significance. (It should be noted that values were introduced into nineteenth-century German philosophy precisely in reaction to positivism; hence Heidegger says that 'Value and what is valuable are turned into a positivistic substitute for the metaphysical' (Heidegger et al., 2002).) Anything of importance to individuals

and communities will be the subject of debate. Positivism, however, limits valid knowledge to that which is established beyond debate through empirical verification, and favours judgements that are atemporal; after all, for the results of a scientific experiment to be valid they must be repeatable at any time.

Positivism rules questions of history, meaning, ethics, and interpretation as out of scope. The fact that conservation of cultural heritage is concerned with just such things suggests that positivism is entirely unsuited as a philosophical foundation for conservation. The lack of overt reference to positivism in the Charter does nothing to lessen its positivistic character. Indeed, this lack of acknowledgement, and the more general lack of differentiation of levels 3 and 4 of the stratigraphy described earlier, is itself significant and adds to the case; as Habermas points out (1971, 79), a lack of engagement with philosophy is itself a characteristic of Comtean positivism.

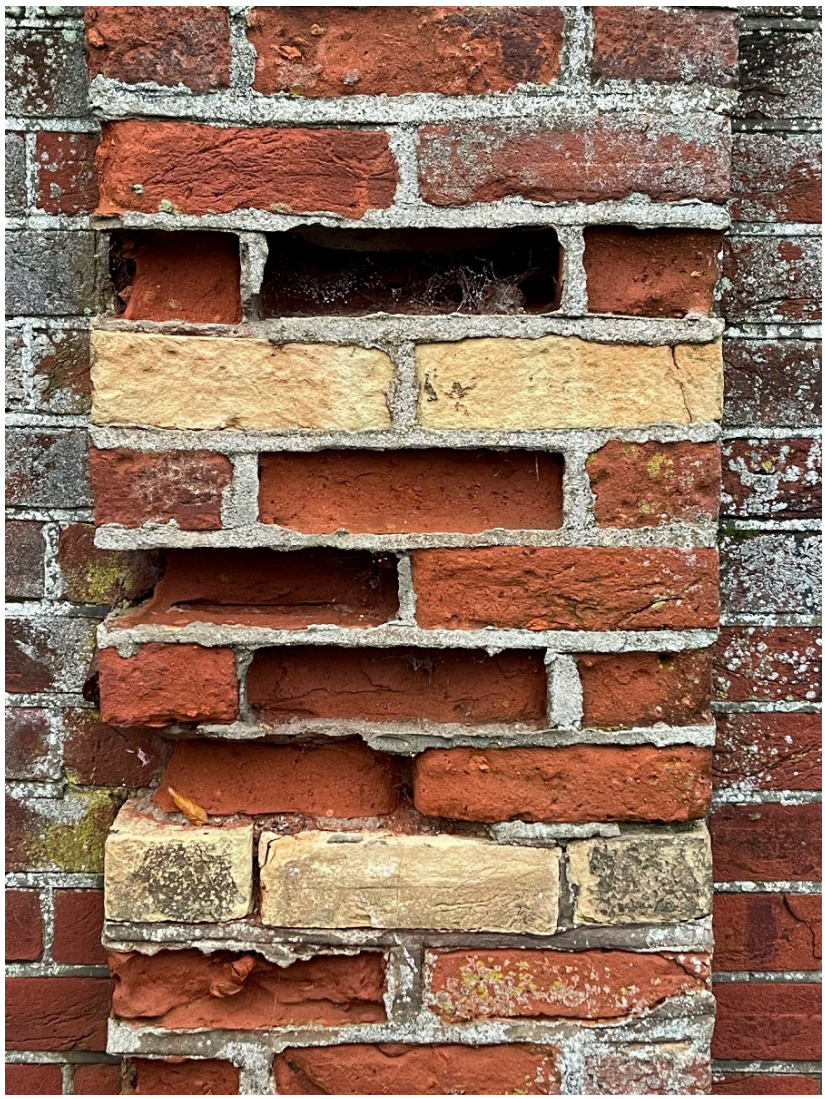

Fig. 2. Decaying brickwork, Suffolk. Photo: author

4. Dangers and Costs

But how much, one might ask, does this really matter? Figure 2 shows a nineteenth-century brick pier photographed in Suffolk, near England's east coast, and offers a cautionary tale on the dangers of mixing modern and traditional materials. The erosion of many of the red bricks results from the application of modern cement-based mortar for repointing. In traditional masonry construction, the lime-based mortar has a degree of elasticity and is breathable. As rain wets the structure, the mortar and bricks work together to expel the moisture, principally through the mortar. This mortar slowly erodes over time; it is thus termed 'sacrificial', and periodic repointing is required to maintain the wall. The image illustrates the problems that arose with the widespread availability in the early twentieth century of modern cement. 'Ordinary Portland Cement' was and is an attractive material – it is readily available, easier to work with, and lasts longer. But it is also far less flexible, and, worse still for historic structures, it is unbreathable. That, in turn, means that the bricks themselves remain wetter after rain, which with repeated freezing and thawing causes the erosion of the softer brick instead of the mortar, as shown. The result is that the modern cement-based mortar can be said to *actively cause* the destruction of the brickwork.

In a UK context, this is a paradigmatic conservation problem, and one which any competent conservation professional should be able to 'read' at first glance; it is thus relevant to levels 1 and 2 of the stratigraphy outlined above. But beyond illustrating a conservation problem (level 1), the image also offers a metaphor for a *philosophical* problem. Let us imagine the individual bricks to be historic buildings, and the mortar to be the philosophy undergirding levels 1–3. The metaphor implies that the application of an inappropriate philosophical framework is not just unhelpful but *positively destructive.* I suggest that positivism, with its exclusive focus on the material aspects of heritage, is both inappropriate and destructive in just this way. To use the language of the metaphor, the very strength of the philosophy in its focus on material fact renders it inflexible, and its blindness to those other essential human aspects of heritage makes it unbreathable.

Such a philosophy, however passively chosen, works against the whole enterprise of conservation. Where Paul Philippot sees scientific conservation as the modern bridge linking the present to the cultural works of the past, as quoted above, this image suggests it may be more like a destructive wedge. A discipline built on such a compromised philosophical foundation cannot hope to stand in the long term; and yet, for lack of consideration of more appropriate alternatives, this taken-for-granted positivism remains ICOMOS's default philosophical commitment.

And that brings with it significant costs. ICOMOS has left itself open to legitimate challenges from outside its domain. As its full name suggests, the Faro Convention (Council of Europe, 2005) places heritage in the context of society as a whole, asking important questions of the relation of experts to other stakeholders; our philosophical foundation provides no help whatsoever in engaging with that important debate. More directly, ICOMOS faces censure from the rapidly developing discipline of Critical Heritage Studies (CHS), which accuses us of 'the fetishising of expert knowledge' (Association of Critical Heritage Studies, n.d.). Indeed, Laurajane Smith, key to the development of CHS, in her keynote at the ICOMOS General Assembly in 2024 called for the retirement of the Venice Charter, saying that

> *Heritage must become something entirely different than is currently defined in the [Venice] Charter, something that is indeed not only changeable but, as I will argue, something that explicitly is engaged with the present and is overtly political.* (Smith, 2024)

There is plenty of scope to argue back against CHS, not least on the basis of its own philosophical commitments, but conventional conservation struggles to respond well because we lack the philosophical tools to do so. Our choice of philosophical foundation, however passively chosen, has proven to be hugely consequential.

5. Fixing Our Foundation

In 1971 in an important paper, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor highlighted the inadequacy of a positivist model for addressing 'common meanings', which he describes as the basis of community; he gives the example of francophone national identity for Québécois, which is 'not just shared, and not just known to be shared, [but is a] common reference point [for] all public life' (Taylor, 1971, 30). Heritage, by definition, deals with both shared and common meanings; indeed it is nothing without them. One historical illustration of this is the time taken by the British Parliament to enact its first heritage protection legislation (the Ancient Monuments Protection Act, 1882); this was delayed for nearly a decade by fierce resistance from land owners to the principle of a shared or common interest in private property (Delafons, 1997, 25). And the Venice Charter itself asserts the foundation of heritage in common meaning; the heroic preamble confidently states that people now 'regard ancient monuments as *a common heritage*' (ICOMOS, 1964, emphasis added).

In the same paper, Taylor also differentiated between 'sciences of verification', for which the methods of the natural sciences are appropriate, and the 'hermeneutical sciences' in which 'a certain measure of insight is indispensable, and this insight cannot be communicated by the gathering of brute data, or initiation in modes of formal reasoning' (Taylor, 1971, 46). The principle that different objects of investigation require different methods goes back to Aristotle (Fairfield, 2025, 9; Shields, 2023). The late nineteenth-century philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) drew on this same principle to mount a foundational challenge to Comtean positivism by arguing that the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), because they are concerned with 'humanly significant meanings, expressions, and artifacts rather than naturally occurring and material objects' (Fairfield, 2025, 10), require a fundamentally different method from the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*). Where Comte sought universal causal laws based on empirical observation, Dilthey argued that human life – saturated with meaning, intention, and historical particularity – demands interpretive understanding (*Verstehen*) rather than causal explanation (*Erklären*). In his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Dilthey, [1883] 1989), Dilthey contended that human experience is irreducibly historical and cannot be captured by positivist abstraction.

Dilthey, who paved the way for the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur – is of prime relevance to this current argument for his resistance to scientistic expansionism and his assertion of a distinct epistemology for the humanities. In a later essay ('The Rise of Hermeneutics', Dilthey, 1996, 235–258), he positions hermeneutics specifically as the connecting link between philosophy and history, thus popularising hermeneutics and making this the philosophical foundation of the humanities. Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it in these terms:

> *Philosophical hermeneutics participates in a philosophical movement of our century that overcame the one-sided orientation toward the scientific fact, taken for granted by neo-Kantianism as well as by the positivism of that time. […] Hermeneutic reflection discloses conditions of truth in the sciences that do not derive from the logic of scientific discovery but are prior to it.* (Gadamer, [1960] 1989, 556).

Gadamer's development of philosophical hermeneutics has been extensively discussed elsewhere and by those with far more expertise; it is enough here simply to observe Dilthey's establishment of hermeneutics as foundational to the humanities. This includes heritage, which is cultural before it is technical; interpretation lies at the heart of conservation, whether in the interpretation of signs of decay and hence the diagnosing of defects and prescribing of remedies, or the simple need to 'read' a monument in order to understand its development, or the interpretation of doctrinal documents, to enable their application to real world situations. Is it not appropriate, therefore, to investigate whether the philosophy of interpretation – that is hermeneutics – might provide a more fitting philosophical foundation for conservation?

One key aspect of a hermeneutic approach is a recognition that we are historically situated beings; history, language, and culture all shape our speech and actions, and all understanding is historical in nature. There is no detached position from which culture can be surveyed, contra positivism. It was Gadamer who coined the somewhat unwieldy term 'effective history' (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) to describe the way tradition, including our already held beliefs, always shapes our understanding. Gadamer draws an explicit contrast with a scientistic approach:

> *My thesis is that the element of effective history affects all understanding of tradition, even despite the adoption of the methodology of the modern historical sciences, which makes what has grown historically and has been transmitted historically an object to be established like an experimental finding-as if tradition were as alien, and from the human point of view as unintelligible, as an object of physics.* (Gadamer, [1960] 1989, xxxiii–xxxiv)

He also speaks of the fusion of horizons in which the horizon of the interpreter in the present is enlarged to include the horizon of the past, passed on to us through tradition. Crucially,

> *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.* (Gadamer, [1960] 1989, 306)

This simple formulation offers a framework for characterising the development of modern conservation: modernity foregrounded the present over the past in the name of progress, while conservation simply sought to reverse the priority by foregrounding the past over the present – hence the Venice Charter's prohibition of any meaningful change (Art. 5). By contrast, under a hermeneutic approach, *'Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition,* a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated' (Gadamer, [1960] 1989, 290, emphasis original).

It is fair to ask what the benefits might be of adopting a hermeneutical foundation, compared with our current scientistic one. There are many issues within conservation which a hermeneutic and tradition-literate philosophy would inform and enrich. For example, where within conservation is a proper consideration of how the physical world is meaningful to us? The standard explanation within contemporary heritage discourse is that people *attach* meaning to things, and that significance is (in some unspecified manner) the sum of those attachments. Clearly there can be some element of individual attachment – for example, a place may be meaningful to me because what I did there – but such attachments hardly offer an adequate explanation of shared and common meanings, which, as already touched on, are highly relevant to heritage. Heidegger's idea of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) describes the insight that to be human is to find ourselves already situated in a particular world where particular things already matter (Wrathall and Murphey, 2013, 14). This implies the profound need for conservation to engage with the discipline of history, and the philosophy of language, which clearly also plays a role.

Related to this, the absence of any engagement with the philosophy of tradition is a particular embarrassment for conservation, which, in its concern for historic buildings, precisely deals with the objects of tradition (Walter, 2020, 124–148). A hermeneutical approach understands the past as having a degree of agency in the present; this idea of a 'living past' suggests how conservation could finally fulfil the evocative promise held out by the Venice Charter's preamble when it frames historic monuments as 'remain[ing] to the present day as living witnesses of their age-old traditions' (ICOMOS, 1964). As discussed above, Philippot, who wrote the preamble, understood modernity to have created a rupture between past and present, and thus unreflectively treated tradition as a dead thing. The cost here is huge, since it leaves the objects of tradition vulnerably detached from what remains of their cultural context. A third observation is that conservation has barely engaged with the important philosophical theme of identity, which addresses the question of how something, or indeed someone, can change through time while remaining recognisably the same. The hermeneutical philosopher Paul Ricoeur, in asking what sort of permanence a self can have, differentiates between sameness and selfhood (Ricoeur, 1992, 113–139), a distinction that could helpfully be applied to the way conservation treats change.

Each of these issues has a direct bearing on questions central to conservation, yet none can be approached through a positivist framing; by contrast, each can be addressed by means of a hermeneutically literate approach. To be human is to be carried along in the stream of history; to be a conservation professional is to be responsible for historic buildings, and to care for them as they too are carried along. As Paul Fairfield suggests, 'We are historical and temporal in our being, and it is because of this that we are able to become responsible for what is passed down to us by tradition' (Fairfield, 2025, 25) – and that very much includes the historic buildings for which conservation cares. We will find nourishment in a better choice of philosophy, nourishment that strengthens the other stratigraphic levels of theory, practices and projects. The conservation discipline is not alone in caring about the historic environment; if we are brave enough to engage wholeheartedly at the philosophical level, we will find a new zone of engagement with those outside our discipline, new partners in dialogue. And that dialogue will strengthen our resilience and help us to justify our discipline in society more broadly.

Conclusion

The history of conservation is one of proud resistance. However, while opposing destruction in the name of progress, conservation did not question the philosophy underlying modernity's commitment to progress, but instead attempted to construct a contrasting argument from the same compromised foundation. We should not, of course, be too harsh in judging that pioneering generation; but equally we should not shrink from taking corrective action as the implications of their choices become clear. Those implications include the 'museumification' of heritage buildings in the name of preservation, weakening or severing the link between a local community and its building.

We can all agree that the material world matters; but, in order to deal with it well, we must ensure the philosophy we bring to it is congruent. As the brick image suggests, choosing the wrong philosophy can do huge damage, not only to our cause but also, ironically, to the buildings in our care. The case is not being argued that every conservation professional must become a competent philosopher; the argument, rather, is that the discipline as a whole cannot afford to ignore philosophy, as it has seemed so keen to do; and, as noted above, this itself is indicative of a positivist influence. Our general ignorance of the fourth of the stratigraphic levels is a major concern, because it is at this level of philosophy that we understand our own commitments and purpose, that we engage with others beyond our own discipline, and that we are able to respond to external challenges.

The case made here results in two calls to action. First, the discipline of conservation must stop ignoring or taking for granted this fourth stratigraphic level; we must engage with philosophy, digging down and making connections with that lower stratum. Second, having done so, we need to choose a better – and in my view, for the reasons indicated above, a hermeneutical – philosophy. A proper engagement with philosophy is essential in order to keep us honest, and to avoid repeating some of the mistakes we have made to date. TheoPhilos – the home of *both* Theory *and* Philosophy in conservation – is the natural forum for this important and urgent work, as we contemplate the next 60 years of ICOMOS.

Acknowledgements

This paper was presented at the Theophilos conference on 'The Role of ICOMOS in the Evolution of Heritage Theory and Philosophy: Achievements, Problems, Challenges' in Liège, Belgium, on November 20, 2025. My thanks to colleagues for their constructive comments. All images by the author; base photo for Fig. 1 is by Sergio Camalich from https://unsplash.com/@camalich.

Bibliography

Araoz, G. (2013). Conservation Philosophy and Its Development: Changing Understandings of Authenticity and Significance. *Heritage & Society* 6 (2): 144–54. https://doi.org/10.1179/2159032X13Z.00000000010

Association of Critical Heritage Studies. (n.d.) ACHS 2012 Manifesto. Association of Critical Heritage Studies. Accessed 24 June 2025. https://www.criticalheritagestudies.org/history

Australia ICOMOS. (2013). *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance,* 2013. Australia ICOMOS.

Bouchenaki, M. (2003). *The Interdependency of the Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage: Keynote Address.* Paper presented at 14th ICOMOS General Assembly and International Symposium. 14th ICOMOS General Assembly and International Symposium: Place, Memory, Meaning: Preserving Intangible Values in Monuments and Sites, October. http://openarchive.icomos.org/468/

Collingwood, R. G. ((1938) 1958). *The Principles of Art.* Clarendon Press.

Council of Europe. 2005. *Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society.* https://rm.coe.int/1680083746

Delafons, J. (1997). Politics and Preservation: A Policy History of the Built Heritage, 1882-1996. *Studies in History, Planning, and the Environment* 22. E & FN Spon.

Dilthey, W. ((1883) 1989). *Introduction to the Human Sciences.* With Rudolf A. Makkreel. Vol. 1. Selected Works. Princeton Univ. Press.

Dilthey, W. (1996). *Hermeneutics and the Study of History.* Translated by Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi. Selected Works / Wilhelm Dilthey, v. 4. Princeton University Press.

Earl, J. (2003). *Building Conservation Philosophy.* 3rd edn. Donhead.

Fairfield, P. (2025). *History and Hermeneutics.* Cambridge Elements Elements in Historical Theory and Practice. Cambridge University Press.

Frieman, C. J. (2023). *Archaeology as History: Telling Stories from a Fragmented Past.* Elements in Historical Theory and Practice. Cambridge University Press.

Gadamer, H-G. ((1960) 1989). *Truth and Method.* Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. 2nd, rev. edn. Sheed and Ward.

Gallie, W. B. (1957). What Makes a Subject Scientific? T*he British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 8 (30): 118–39. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjps/VIII.30.118

Habermas, J. (1971). *Knowledge and Human Interests.* Beacon Press.

Heidegger, M. (2002). *Off the Beaten Track.* Translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge University Press.

ICOMOS. (1964). *International Charter on the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites*. https://admin.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Venice_Charter_EN.pdf

ICOMOS. (1993). *Guidelines for Education and Training in the Conservation of Monuments, Ensembles and Sites*. ICOMOS. https://admin.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/education_EN.pdf

ICOMOS. (2008). *Québec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of Place*. ICOMOS. https://www.icomos.org/images/DOCUMENTS/Charters/GA16_Quebec_Declaration_Final_EN.pdf

ICOMOS. (2024). *International Charter and Guidance on Sites with Intangible Cultural Heritage*. https://admin.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/ICICH-Charter-EN-FR_final.pdf

Jokilehto, J. (1999). *A History of Architectural Conservation*. Butterworth-Heinemann.

Kołakowski, L. (1969). *The Alienation of Reason: A History of Positivist Thought*. Anchor Books.

Larraín, J. (1979). *The Concept of Ideology*. Hutchinson.

Macaraan, W. E. (2015). Philosophical Foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis: A Diachronic Sketch. *Philosophia (Philippines)* 16 (January): 19–34.

Ohara, J. (2022). *The Theory and Philosophy of History: Global Variations*. Cambridge Elements. Elements in Historical Theory and Practice. Cambridge University Press.

Petzet, M. (2009). International Principles of Preservation. *Monuments and Sites* 20. Hendrik Bäßler Verlag.

Philippot, P. (1976). Historic Preservation: Philosophy, Criteria, Guidelines. In *Preservation and Conservation: Principles and Practices; Proceedings*, edited by Sharon Timmons. Preservation Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1992). *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. University of Chicago Press.

Shanks, M., & Tilley, C. Y. (1994). *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*. 2nd edn. Routledge.

Shields, C. (2023). Aristotle. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2023, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/aristotle/

Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge.

Smith, L. (2024). The Venice Charter at Sixty: Old and New Challenges. *Revisiting the Venice Charter: Critical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges*, 1–15. https://www.academia.edu/126326145/The_Venice_Charter_at_Sixty_Old_and_new_challenges

Taylor, C. (1971). Interpretation and the Sciences of Man. *The Review of Metaphysics* 25 (1): 3–51. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20125928

UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention

UNESCO. (2004). *Yamato Declaration on Integrated Approaches for Safeguarding Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000147097?posInSet=3&queryId=39b5fb37-d7d0-4339-8007-dbb9dc308b60

Van Dyke, T. A. (2018). Critical Discourse Analysis. In *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis,* 2nd edn, edited by Deborah Tannen, Heidi Ehernberger Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin. Blackwell Handbooks in Linguistics. Wiley Blackwell.

Walter, N. (2020). *Narrative Theory in Conservation: Change and Living Buildings.* Routledge.

Walter, N. (2025). Renegotiating the Role of the Expert: The Faro Convention, Historic Churches and the Role of Communities in Conservation. *Protection of Cultural Heritage,* no. 24 (December): 69–83. https://doi.org/10.35784/odk.7731.

Wrathall, M. A. & Murphey, M. (2013). An Overview of Being and Time. In *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger's Being and Time,* edited by Mark A. Wrathall. Cambridge Companions to Philosophy. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge Core. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139047289.002