

A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH TO THE CONSERVATION OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

The principal aim of this paper is to set the problem of the conservation of the cultural heritage and to indicate its dimensions.

A conceptual approach is attempted taking into consideration the new realities and tendencies formulated recently in the fields of education, research and development and the practice concerning the conservation of the cultural heritage.

A historical overview is presented including general concepts, documents, declarations and charters in which new ideas have been introduced and courses of action have been set forth by international organisations (UNESCO, ICOMOS, OWHC etc.).

Given the difficulty in defining what precisely is meant by the terms preservation, restoration and rehabilitation we try to get an insight into the relationship of our society to its built heritage and into the question of how we encounter with existing forms and structures.

We emphasise the fact that the problem we are facing demands an interdisciplinary approach and the collaboration of scientists of different areas.

INTRODUCTION

The demand for the conservation of the cultural heritage - especially built heritage which consists of monuments, historic urban centres, traditional rural settlements etc.- has received great impetus after the rapid deterioration of the natural and man-made environment which has resulted from the well known explosive phenomena of our era: technological advances, population growth, urbanisation and industrialisation [1].

Unbalanced technological evolution has become so institutionalised that change is now seen as synonymous with progress. We are in an era of technological obsolescence, where objects become economically useless without reference to any residual physical utility. Current concepts and modern inventions are the victims of this era, the result of the industrial revolution [2].

Through the concept : "It's cheaper to throw the old one away and get a new one", the elements of our cultural heritage become more scarce and, consequently, more valuable as historical and artistic tokens. They acquire special significance as enclaves of ecological balance, variety and human scale within the contemporary surroundings which is characterised by anarchy, monotony and gigantism. Moreover, the role of prototype is of great importance in the evolution of both our material culture and our philosophical attitudes toward it.

Nowadays, specially in the highly developed countries, aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgement are based upon private contact with duplicate and facsimile, rather than upon public participation in the exposure to great originals. Such a development can lead only to the impoverishment of the sensual and aesthetic life of each individual and in a drastic alteration in the role of the entire culture.

Our environment is continually rebuilt to reflect changing motives and tastes as societies evolve politically, economically and technically. However, an identifiable past offers a line of communication with others : a line among the living, the dead, and those still to be born. It provides a reference to previous experience, an illustration of how men went about creating a civilised environment, a reservoir and perpetual source of historical delight, a culture to be accepted, altered, rejected, re-interpreted or rediscovered. A country without a past has the emptiness of a barren continent, and a city without old buildings is like a man without a memory.

The conservation of the cultural heritage does not attempt to create a new “past”. It tries to bridge the gap between the past and the future, to construct a mediate way that could forge a link with the past in order to increase one’s awareness of a place’s cultural root. A sense of the past is equally important as the sense of the future to the built environment [3].

CONSERVATION CONCEPTS

The artefacts we deal with, display all the pathological processes of life, including that of simple ageing. Therapeutic interventions, therefore, have to cover a wide spectrum of treatments, from the conservative to the radical.

The rapid expansion of the field we are examining is marked by the need for more precise definitions and terminology. The concept of Protection of the historical and artistic heritage is embodied in European practice while the term Conservation is standard in Great Britain. In the United States, however, this term already belongs to a highly structured field of expertise, the conservation of works of art, with its own specialised profession in being.

Such terms describe specific areas of investigation which must be understood before a successful therapy can be undertaken. The role of materials science and technology in discovering the mechanism of deterioration and in suggesting methods of treatment is now accepted as a very crucial parameter and the results are really impressive [16], [17], [18].

Conservation is a cultural, artistic and technical as well as a craft activity based on humanistic and scientific studies and systematic research. The object of conservation is to prolong the life of cultural heritage and, if possible, to clarify the artistic and historical messages therein without the loss of authenticity and meaning [4].

Conservation can take two approaches [5] :

Preventive conservation which consists of indirect action to retard deterioration and prevent damage by creating conditions optimal for the preservation of cultural heritage as far as is compatible with its social use. Preventive conservation embodies correct handling and use, transport, storage and display.

Remedial conservation which consists mainly of direct action carried out on cultural heritage with the aim of retarding further deterioration.

We accept these definitions keeping in mind that we need to reconsider in a profound way what it means for things “to be”, before we can consider either what it means for things to be adequate or how we are to act in relation to them. In other words we have to remember that we shall fail to get beyond arrogant “homocentrism” about material culture until we gain ontological insight into how to let the things around us fully “be” [6].

HISTORICAL ATTITUDES

In the history of civilisation every intensely progressive and creative period has tended to be, if not hostile, at least indifferent towards monuments [7], [8].

Brunelleschi’s *Ospedale degl’ Innocenti* (Florence, 1421), is regarded [2] as the first expression of a passionate interest in the past. The rediscovery of classical art gave the Western world its basic alphabet and grammar of the idioms of the Renaissance, baroque, rococo and neo-classic revivals.

In the next three centuries restorers improvised in every case according to their intuition and relative knowledge.

In the 19th century the conflict between the two great European representatives of the Romantic School, Viollet-le-Duc and J. Ruskin, led to the development of two violently opposed schools which still influence modern specialists in their attitude towards monuments. Viollet-le-Duc, responding to the new concepts of evolution by Charles Darwin, applied evolutionary theory to architecture while Ruskin argued for the existence of a life cycle in monuments, as in living organisms, so that every break in the continuity of this cycle was sacrilegious [12].

At the First International Conference for Monuments, (Athens, 1931), organised by the International Office for Museums and in the Charter of Athens [9] which includes the results of the IVth International Congress for Modern Architecture (C.I.A.M.), (Athens, 1933), the need for international co-operation and for the respect of historical and artistic phases of the cultural heritage and the possibility of use of new materials for its conservation, was introduced.

With the last post-war Charter of Venice (1964) [10], which is based on that of Athens, new and rigorous rules are laid down for the work of specialists

on monuments, and the fundamental principles for the conservation of the cultural heritage are established.

The Amsterdam Declaration (1975) [11] brought to the field the concept of “integrated conservation”. Integrated conservation presumes the improvement of methods and techniques, the readjustment of legislative and administrative measures, the responsibility of local authorities and the proper financial support.

The mobilisation of the international community for the conservation of the world cultural heritage can be clearly seen in the creation of independent and highly specialised statutory organisations (ICOMOS, ICCROM, ICOM, etc.) with the initiative of UNESCO. All these organisations are active in the protection of movable and immovable cultural property, and particularly in its study, conservation and presentation.

Because of the influence they wield, and their knowledge and experience, specialists working for the purposes of UNESCO have been able to ensure that the decisions taken are both balanced and authoritative.

These organisations have also provided the opportunity for a continuous exchange of scientific knowledge and ideas, as well as the preparation of technical personnel trained in the conservation of the cultural heritage. Moreover, they have often played the role of pressure groups on national governments, either through direct intervention or by mobilising public opinion in favour of conservation causes [13].

DESTRUCTION AND CONSERVATION

Destruction of cultural heritage is not a regrettable side effect but a central outcome of modernity as we have already mentioned. This includes not only the destruction in the obvious, visible sense but also in the less obvious sense of a general loss of economic, political and intellectual meaning.

The proliferation of large technological systems -systems defined as sociological models, as systems “socially constructed” to transform energy and materials into goods and services for human consumption [14]- was rapidly transforming both the urban and the rural landscapes. This transformation was far more complicated than a shift in balance between city and country, for the proliferation of technological systems renders that distinction obsolete.

On the one hand, those systems permitted the country to “invade” the city, as country dwellers migrated to the metropolis in huge numbers. On the other hand, systems originating in the metropolis extended further and more effectively into formerly rural areas. This internal migration has a number of unfortunate consequences. It alienates the displaced population even further from its urban base, transposing the slum and ghetto instead of eliminating it. It has the effect of pushing a wide range of small stores and workshops either into bankruptcy (because they cannot survive forced transplantation) or out of the central city altogether. Thus, while the physical fabric of the heritage may be preserved and enhanced, the lifestyles it has generated and supported may be impoverished.

Minimising or preventing these disruptive effects of retrieval and recycling of historic districts clearly calls for new levels of sociocultural engineering. In a number of European cities, where experience is more extensive (Paris, Bologna) or legal and financial resources greater (Prague, Split), the process of preserving both the historic district and the traditional population is well under way [2].

However, due to the lack of an ethical code concerning the relation between technological progress and built environment, in many cases the result was in favour of an uncritical development which takes into consideration only the quantitative prosperity of people. The demand today is prominent for the establishment of a framework with which we will cope with existing forms and structures.

The conservation of the cultural heritage is a complex operation which involves a host of skills, described briefly as follows [15] :

- historical and artistic investigation of the artwork,
- restoration of the built fabric,
- environmental monitoring of the artwork’s surroundings, assessing the past and present influence of pollution upon its conservation,
- thorough study of the state of conservation of the consisting materials,
- restoration operation, which must bring the artefact back to its thermodynamic stability.

Our cultural heritage can be investigated today by means of non-destructive methods, originally conceived for monitoring safety or even

borrowed from the advances in electronics and computer technology. These methods -radiography, thermography, fibre optics and sonic methods- they do not entail local destruction on the monuments [21].

PERSPECTIVES

The General Assembly of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) at its 10th session (1993) recognised the importance of collaboration among different professions in the common purpose of conservation [4].

The interdisciplinary co-operation covers a variety of fields such as: architecture, chemistry, engineering, urban planning and social sciences.

Above and beyond their specialised training preservationists must also be generalists. They must see their own special area of expertise as being only one strand in a larger fabric. To work together effectively, they require common concepts of their curatorial task, shared methods and technologies for dealing with it, and a common language for describing it.

They must, on the one hand, be encouraged to develop the application of their own specialised skills and training while, at the same time, they are learning the interfaces between them and those of other specialists working alongside them in office, field and laboratory. They must understand the general methodology of scientific artefactual conservation, if only to know when, where and to whom they must turn for collaboration in such matters [2].

An interdisciplinary conservation strategy should focus on the interface between the formulation of environmental policy for the cultural heritage and the scientific and technical knowledge arising from the analytical assessment of the relationship between environmental and social parameters causing damage to cultural heritage. Such an approach should differ considerably from previous methods, since this effort for conservation planning is apart from interventions to the building materials and monument structures. It considers the problem in its full extent [19].

Briefly, a proper education and training program to fulfil these targets should comprise objectives such as [20]:

- The interaction of different disciplines and the combination of various techniques,

- The exchange of data from one field to another, as well as the possibility of their proper interpretation through a common terminology for the benefit of all interested parts,

- The establishment of a highly qualified scientific and technological potential with particular reference to the special needs of the various fields and the integration of this potential in the overall scientific areas,

- The consolidation of the results of thematic activities, required by the complexity of the history-culture-material-environment interaction and the novelties, specifically on materials science.

The education on the conservation of the cultural heritage must be planned in a way that will correspond to the new trends and procedures like those of cultural tourism, management of natural, built and cultural environment and the integrated local development. The new jobs that these activities will create widen the employment status and justify the intention of these education and training programs.

CONCLUSIONS

It is appreciated that there is a need to shift from a “react and cure” approach to an “anticipate and prevent” one. The mechanisms governing this change have started to appear since the problem we are examining has been set in all dimensions and new branches of science and technology (such as materials science) have entered the field.

Whilst the need to embrace these changes is practically universally acceptable, the mechanisms for change and the priorities for action have been far from well defined.

Given our cultural heritage’s potential in many activities, it can be clearly seen that re-evaluation of this heritage is needed by education and research, through promotion and development.

The above aims will only be achieved by recognising the importance of interdisciplinarity and the essence of project enforcement and implementation.

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