

ANDRÉ DE NAEYER*

SUSTAINABILITY AND MODESTY:
A PERMANENT CHALLENGE
FOR CONSERVATION ARCHITECTS

ZRÓWNOWAŻENIE I SKROMNOŚĆ:
PERMANENTNE WYZWANIE
DLA ARCHITEKTÓW KONSERWATORÓW

Abstract

New needs in society ask for new approaches and new criteria in cultural heritage. Still, they brought new solutions which are not always consistent with those of Venice Charter (1964) or Krakow Charter 2000. We inherited everything around us, including the landscape and all semantics related with that environment. In the eternal and universal dilemma between progression or conservation, conservation should prevail, as we are conservators; yet sometimes progression has to be part of it if we can guarantee by this way the rescue and survival of the monument or heritage. The article aims at presenting the answers for the challenges of today's conservation of cultural heritage, in the modified and diversified society- both linguistic and regarding architectural practice. Thus the author proposes the approach marked by sustainability and modesty and also gives three definitions and three categories of heritage (of historic or artistic value), allowing for a variegated approach – in the decreasing scale of restraints concerning change or transformation.

Keywords: sustainability, modesty, challenges, conservation, architect's approach

Streszczenie

Nowe potrzeby społeczeństwa wręcz proszą o nowe podejście i nowe kryteria w dziedzinie dziedzictwa kulturowego. Przyniosły jednak nowe rozwiązania, które nie zawsze pozostają w zgodności z rozwiązaniami proponowanymi przez *Kartę Wenecką* (1964) i *Kartę Krakowską 2000*. Odziedziczyliśmy wszystko wokół nas, w tym krajobraz i całą semantykę związaną z tym środowiskiem. W wiecznym i uniwersalnym dylemacie stawianym przez progresję i konserwację powinna przeważać konserwacja, jako że jesteśmy konserwatorami. Jednak czasem progresja musi być jej częścią, jeśli tą drogą możemy zagwarantować ratowanie i przetrwanie zabytku czy dziedzictwa. Artykuł ma na celu przedstawienie odpowiedzi na wyzwania dzisiejszej konserwacji dziedzictwa kulturowego, w zmodyfikowanym i zróżnicowanym społeczeństwie – zarówno odpowiedzi lingwistycznych, jak i dotyczących praktyki architektonicznej. Autor proponuje zatem podejście nacechowane zrównoważeniem i skromnością i podaje także trzy definicje dziedzictwa (o wartości historycznej czy artystycznej), pozwalając na podejście wariantowe – w malejącej skali ograniczeń dotyczących zmiany lub transformacji.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważenie, skromność, wyzwania, konserwacja, podejście architekta

* Prof. André De Naeyer, Prof. Emeritus, Artesis University College Antwerp, Belgium.

Sustainability became a very fashionable concept in all disciplines since its introduction by the famous Brundtland report of 1987¹. Although there is no major reference to culture or history in this report, increasingly architectural and urban conservation projects are based on the sustainability concept of economic, ecologic and social justice, on fairness and a long term use guarantee. Sustainability has been integrated in conservation theory in a natural way, as conservation is not restricted any more to the traditional monuments, but has been widened to the global built environment. New needs in society ask for new approaches and new criteria. However, this new approach and new criteria brought new solutions which are not always consistent with those of Venice Charter (1964) or Krakow Charter 2000, and alienate quite strongly from the traditional principles or the familiar image. Rather negative examples of this new type of approaches are the excessive mix with modern materials, the often poor level of traditional craftsmanship, some quite debatable reconstructions, or the collage of extreme designed structures upon the historic substance, often by celebrated architects. All this raises basic questions about the orthodoxy of such intervention.

The Venice Charter answered the questions of the 1950's and 1960's, but society has changed and needs have changed fundamentally. I still remember my first trip to Poland organised by ICOMOS in the mid-1970's to visit 'best practices' of the Venice Charter in your country. We saw the reconstruction site of the Royal Palace in Warsaw, the conservation works at Krakow Castle, the city centre and Artus Court in Gdansk, some of your famous PKZ workshops, and many other places. Poland has always greatly contributed into dissemination and application of excellent conservation, and I thank you and your colleagues of that time for all what myself and my students learned here during many other visits. Also the Charter of Krakow 2000 and the follow-up conference '10 years later'² under the aegis of your present chairman and dear friend, prof. Andrzej Kadłuczka, again gave important updating in theory and philosophy of our discipline.

As I said, society and needs have changed a lot since the 1960's. Society became more complex and more diversified and today, man needs proper wording and reading to understand the value and significance of his environment and of the past. Speaking about her childhood, Marguerite Yourcenar says that "speaking about the past means speaking about the love for life as life is much more about the past than it is about the present. Those who love life, also love the past while this is the present that lives on in one's memory. This does not mean that the past is a golden period, it is, just as the present at the same time cruel, magnificent, brutal or just something special"³. Together with Yourcenar, I believe that quality of life presupposes the physical presence of the past. For that reason, it belongs to our mission not only to keep the bearers of that past, i.e. monuments and the built heritage, but also to detect, to analyse and to valorise them in modern multicultural society.

I said: 'monuments and the built heritage', and here we might have a problem. Today, nearly the complete existing environment can be considered as more or less valuable 'built heritage'. As a matter of fact, we inherited everything around us, including the landscape and all semantics related with that environment. Etymologically speaking, it is all 'heritage' as we inherited it from our fathers. As a matter of fact, the widening of our action field from

¹ G.H. Brundtland (ed.), *Our common future. Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*, United Nations Document, New York 1987.

² A. Kadłuczka (ed.), *Cracow Charter 2000 – 10 years later*, Actes International Conference, Cracow 2011, p. 415.

³ M. Yourcenar, *Les yeux ouverts – Entretiens avec Matthieu Galey*, Paris 1981, p. 317.

‘monuments’ into ‘heritage’ is not a pure linguistic phenomenon, but the logical result of the continuous extrapolation since the 1970’s of the word ‘monument’ versus ‘place of memory’ and now up to ‘built heritage’. But does it all cover really the same content? Only few people still use the word ‘monument’ and ‘conservation of monuments’. E.g. in recent Belgian legislation and administration (with once the very first European law to protect monuments in 1835) the word ‘monument’ disappeared and is now called ‘immoveable heritage’! Although this is a very general concept, we understand by ‘immovable heritage’ more than the average and insignificant environment; we expect some extra cultural and/or aesthetic value, maybe not so unique or important as in case of the ancient monument concept but nevertheless. Such extrapolation has also his consequences in the way things are preserved. Someone dealing with ‘heritage’, may consider the importance of authenticity and historic material looser or more flexible than in case of a ancient type monument. So, linguistics have their role also in conservation and it is very difficult, even impossible to draw a precise line between ‘heritage’ and ‘monument’, and even more difficult to draw up a list of what kind of interventions or level of modification is yes or no acceptable in both cases. A matter which confuses professionals and laymen, often bringing sad results and irritation.

Coming back to the examples of excessive design or aggressively contrasting collages upon monuments, we have to take position as conservators. This problem was also one of the mayor topics at the international conference five years ago “Krakow 2000 Charter – 10 years later”⁴. There have been already many meetings and conferences about where and when conservation stops and transformation starts. We all know good, bad, very good and very bad examples, although here, as always when art or architecture is involved, it is often a question of personal taste and understanding. Charter of Venice is quite clear by saying on one hand that “...the use of the monument for a social purpose is desirable, but this use or change of use may not modify the lay-out or decoration of the building” (art.5). Concerning the creation of new architecture the same Charter specifies that “the conservation of a monument implies preserving a setting which is not out of scale. ...No new construction, demolition or modification which would alter the relations of mass and color must be allowed “(art. 6). I think we all agree that such statements are now completely out of date. On the other hand, the Venice Charter keeps current topicality by specifying that “new interventions must bear a sign of our time” (art. 9) and “be distinguishable from the original” (art. 12).

We have to look at the *aggiornamento* of the Venice Charter by the Charter of Krakow 2000 art. 3 “If necessary for a proper use of the building, completion of more extensive spatial and functional parts should reflect contemporary architecture”. Also ‘Krakow 10 years after’ accepts new architecture in specific situation by putting in Conclusion art. 4 that, the same as in restoration of paintings, new interventions have to be realized “in undertone” and that “the creation of new buildings in historic centers, to replace collapsed or demolished structures...must be considered as restitution in urban lacunas...”, so, also “in undertone... without disturbing the built fabric or superposing inappropriate linguistic expressions”⁵.

Two relating questions to this texts:

- a. What about extensions for functional or safety motives which are not “to replace collapsed or demolished structures?” And when sustainability considerations plead in favour of (limited) transformation that “modifies lay-out and decoration of the building?” It is

⁴ See note No. 2 and G. Cristinelli, A. De Naeyer (eds.), *Cracow Charter 2000 – 10 years later*, Roma 2014, p. 117.

⁵ G. Cristinelli, A. De Naeyer, *op. cit.*

obvious that such extension or modification through new building must be possible, also when it “changes the traditional setting or scale” certainly when one takes in consideration the other keyword of my title: ‘modesty’.

- b. We refer to Charters and there is plenty of Charters, Recommendations and Ethic Conservation Principles available. They are all of great theoretical value and helpful in decision making, but also very interpretable and don’t give, and can’t give anyway, precise indications in specific and concrete cases. All cases are different and no conservation project can copy the solutions from another. They all have their proper context and decided by individuals with different backgrounds and different positions. Their ‘generality’ is the greatest confinement of all those texts. Also concerning this art. 4 of the Krakow – 10 years after meeting, the concept of working “in undertone” is variable and flexible, and *disturbing*, or of *inappropriate linguistic expression* is mostly a subjective judgment depending on the person, the time and the place.

Conservation architects are in the first place ‘architects’ who are educated not only to conserve but also to create new or merge new with old and preferably in a surprising and progressive way. Modern society (market oriented) forces them to pop up, out of the large group of builders; they need to radiate ‘vision’ and, similar to artists, create their identity and ‘imago’. They should know very well that conservation supposes another attitude, other criteria and other boundaries. But again, the position and strength of those boundaries is flexible and variable. Sometimes it ends in too progressive results (or considered as such) on the expenses of the archeological, historical or artistic values.

When I see recent projects by celebrated architects, I often have a double feeling: admiration for the fine and staggering design and construction, but also regret or sadness for the subordinate or even suppressed role of history and ancient architectural canons. On top of this double feeling, one realises that many of this contemporary creations are strongly dated, there where dignified architecture is timeless and does not change every five or ten years. It reminds me also old discussions about what is preferable for new creations: working in analogy or in contrast with the existing fabric. You certainly know good examples of both ways. Today, architectural magazines and internet guarantee wide dissemination of those price winning projects, suggesting followers to this new fashions, colours and forms within a omnipotent modern technology. This is not so good for conservation, but the same way as we don’t work anymore as Viollet-le-Duc or Ruskin, we have to accept development not only in materials but also in ideas. In the eternal and universal dilemma between progression or conservation, conservation should prevail, as we are conservators; but sometimes progression has to be part of it if we can guarantee by this way the rescue and survival of the monument or heritage.

To keep the right balance between conservation and progression, I refer to both keywords in the title of this presentation:

- Sustainability i.e. a dynamic and respectful integration of the past into our plural and multicultural society by guaranteeing a longer and sustainable life to the historic building or the urban district, and this by giving it a new or renewed use compatible with the existing forms and structures without changing too much the authentic image (conform Charter of Venice Art. 5 and Charter of Cracow 2000 Preamble). Necessary modifications or extensions should be recognizable and (theoretically) reversible.
- Modesty i.e. the monument is always the most important ‘partner’ in this matter, and not the brilliant designer who needs to sell himself. Inevitable transformations for modern

comfort, safety, energy saving and any other contemporary standard, must be possible without disturbing too much the original or authentic situation. New design should be modest and timeless with respect to the past.

To avoid the linguistic confusion I mentioned before, I suggest three definitions and three categories of historic or artistic valuable material with decreasing scale of restraints concerning change or transformation:

- a) monuments, groups of buildings, and sites: cfr. ICOMOS definitions⁶ keeping in mind the etymological meaning of the monument concept as *quia monet mentem* (i.e. what remind us about something or somebody = the 18th century definition by Diderot et d'Alembert). Where useful, one could add also the condition of administrative or juridical registration or protection by local, national or international regulations. All interventions have to follow the internationally accepted texts (Charters and other).
- b) (built) heritage: this is the logic extension of the 'monument'-concept and indicates that this architectural or urban object is bearing commemorative values or has evident memory capacities, but of lower importance or important for only few people or local situation. In this case the architect is quite free the way he implements the user's needs as long as he "preserves the setting which is not out of scale" (Venice, art. 6) and a "harmonious integration with respect for all parts of the building or the built environment" is guaranteed (Venice Charter and art. 1 & 4 *Cracow Charter 2000 – 10 years later*)⁷.
- c) existing fabric: this is all existing architectural, urban and landscape structures without any specific conservational connotation. But it has to be considered from prevention point of view, as it may contain, on top of the obvious economic and functional values, hidden or unknown elements of conservation importance. For that reason, it is important that in case of transformation or demolition all precautions and research procedures have to be followed to detect (and consequently eventually to valorize) possibly unknown, hidden or forgotten data of historic or artistic value. After such research and in accordance with all stakeholders, the architect is bound by the current regulations and the results of the analysis of eventual new discoveries⁸.

Being an engineer, I realize very well that such definitions are not a mathematical frame where all objects of the built environment find a place together with the appropriate intervention level. But I think it can help and protect our 'immovable or tangible' heritage (= built and archaeological heritage) from too strong museification as well as from too fashionable or short lifetimed architectural forms.

⁶ ICOMOS Conclusions 18th General Assembly, art. 3: Definitions, Florence 9–14.11.2014.

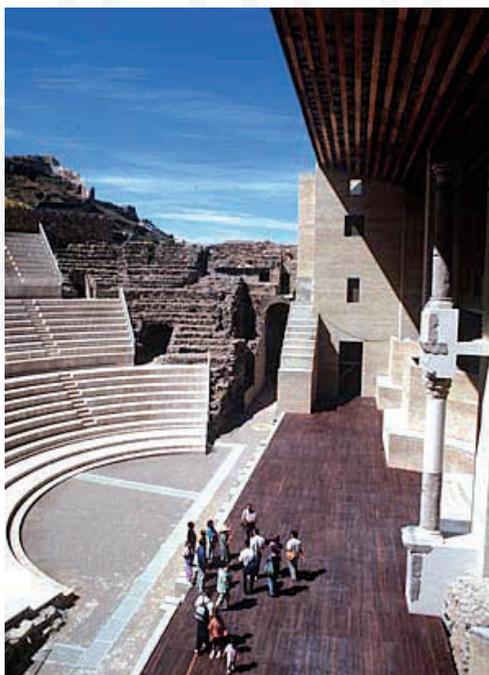
⁷ A. De Naeyer, *Built Heritage and Existing Fabric: two missions and two assignments*, [in:] G. Cristinelli, A. De Naeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 23–36.

⁸ Research procedures [in:] J. Cramer, S. Breitling, *Architecture in existing fabric*, Basel 2007, p. 219.



III. 1. Verona Castelvecchio (arch. C. Scarpa)

II. 1. Werona Castelvecchio (arch. C. Scarpa)



III. 2. Sagunto Theater (arch. Grassi & Portaceli)

II. 2. Teatr Sagunto (arch. Grassi & Portaceli)

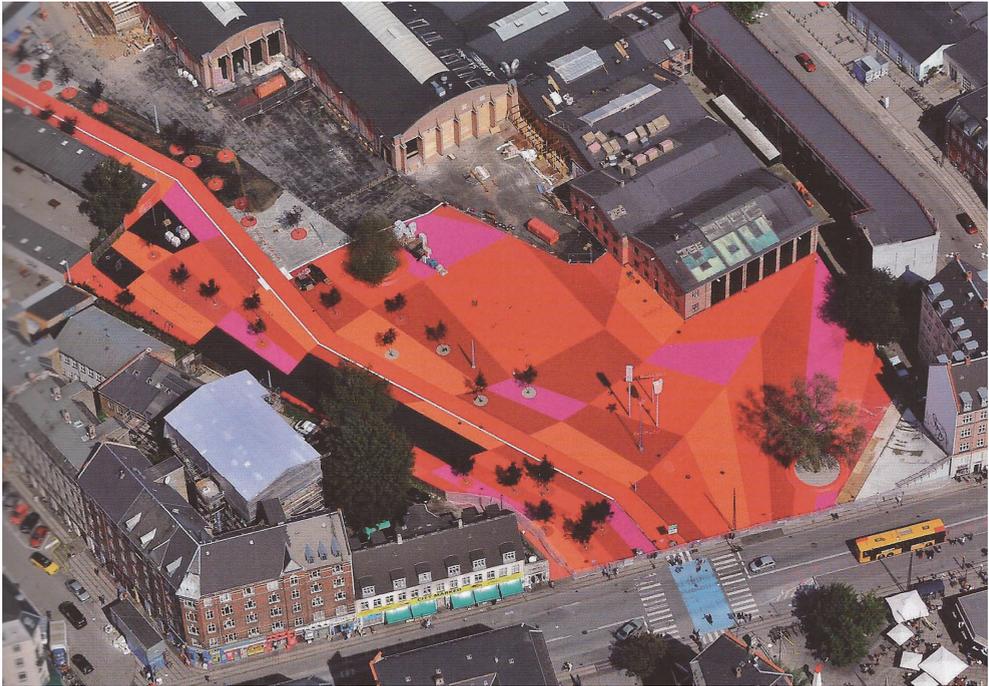
a)



b)



III. 3. a) Copenhagen converted power station; b) Antwerpen, Hofstraat
 II. 3. a) Kopenhaga, zaadoptowana elektrownia; b) Antwerpia, Hofstraat



III. 4. Copenhagen Park Superkilen (Big Architects)

II. 4. Kopenhaga, Park Superkilen (Big Architects)



III. 5. Mechelen Hotel Martin's Patershof

II. 5. Mechelen, Hotel Martin's Patershof



III. 6. Antwerpen, Redstar Line Museum, arch. Beyer Blinde Belle

II. 6. Antwerpia, Muzeum Red Star Line, arch. Beyer Blinde Belle



III. 7. Akron Ohio Art Museum Coop Himmelbau

II. 7. Akron, Ohio, Muzeum Sztuki Coop Himmelbau



III. 8. Antwerpen Havenhuis (arch. Z. Hadid)

II. 8. Antwerpia, Havenhuis (arch. Z. Hadid)



III. 9. Hamburg Elbphilharmonie (arch. Herzog & de Meuron)

II. 9. Hamburg, Filharmonia na Łabą (arch. Herzog & de Meuron)



III. 10. Toronto Royal Ontario Museum (arch. D. Libeskind)

II. 10. Toronto, Królewskie Muzeum w Ontario (arch. D. Libeskind)



