

LOST IN THE LABYRINTH

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INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE

The acceptance of new values in the designation of heritage sites has led to an unprecedented expansion of heritage over the last two decades and thrust the field of conservation into the mainstream political dialogue. The rapid emergence of new heritage site typologies has not allowed for the development of new processes and mechanisms required for their protection to keep pace with this expansion.

It is a premise of this short paper that over the past 25 years this emergence of new heritage site typologies has brought about a new paradigm that stands side-by-side of the old one, which still remains valid. Not only are the values attributed to these emerging sites of a different nature; but contrary to previous paradigms, these values do not always rest on the physical elements extant in the place, but on other intangible carriers for whose safeguarding traditional conservation can provide little guidance.

While the road of traditional conservation has been linear, this new paradigm has led us into what appears to be a labyrinth that we have yet to understand.

BACKGROUND

An examination of the evolution of the modern heritage conservation movement from the early 19th century on quickly demonstrates that the values attributed to heritage sites were mostly historic, documentary and aesthetic in nature; more importantly, they rested on the material components of the place.

In response to this focus on the materiality of heritage, traditional conservation theory and *praxis* were built on gathering and compartmentalizing information about the characteristics and behavior of building materials and their effect on image, form and space. The philosophies inherent in or advanced by the work spanning more than 150 years of, *inter alii*, Stern, Ruskin, Morris, Viollet-le-Duc, Beltrami, Boito, Giovannoni, Pane and Brandi attempted to advance certain ways to approach the conservation of the extant materials in a place, but despite their methodological opposition to each other, all accepted without questioning that the significance of heritage lay on the material aspect of heritage.

The Venice Charter makes a point of the overarching importance of this materiality in article 9, when it states that

“[The] *aim* [of the process of restoration] *is to preserve and reveal the aesthetic and historic value of the monument and is based on respect for original material and authentic documents.*”

Crucial in understanding this exclusive concern with materiality are the words “historic” and “aesthetic” which are the only two values explicitly recognized by the Venice Charter, and that

are also at the very core of Brandi's successful and brilliant philosophical reconciliation of the conflicting treatments that each of these two values implies.

This focus on the material evidence as the carrier of values and significance is of fundamental importance because it lies at the very foundation of the complex legal, technical and administrative machine that has been painstakingly developed to protect heritage since the drafting of the 1964 Venice Charter and the founding of ICOMOS. It is for this reason that when we talk of conservation of heritage, there is on the part of the public an axiomatic assumption that the task at hand is the conservation of the material and spatial evidence. Given this historic trajectory, protection of the tangible fabric is the goal of most heritage legislation; it is at the very root of the principles of authenticity and integrity; reversibility; minimal intervention; preventive conservation; the ban on reconstruction; and the inter-generational contract of heritage sustainability. In fact, as carriers of values, materials are also the focus for most definitions and proofs of authenticity and integrity in heritage sites.

Contrary to pervasive assumptions, conservation is not so much about preserving significance or values, but about protecting the carriers where significance and values lie. Historic fabric is the common carrier of significance for the vast majority of heritage sites recognized and registered throughout the world. At the root of this are the earliest European recognitions of places as heritage, which were limited to places whose significance was material-based.

But not all heritage significance is material-based. Alois Riegl was the only among the early preservation theorists to go beyond this limited notion in that he understood the complex relationship of **monument-value-significance** when he analyzed the field of heritage that existed in Austria at the beginning of the 20th Century. Unfortunately, his broad analytical approach was never fully absorbed into the development of preservation theories that followed after him and his reasonings did not have a full application to practice.

HOW THE LABYRINTH WAS BUILT: ANALYSIS OF CURRENT SITUATION AND EMERGING ISSUES

A common mistake that has helped build the labyrinth and fostered disorientation is the mistaken notion that heritage conservation is about preserving values. In the context of heritage, values are an expression of the public will to give importance to a place. In that sense, they can be disseminated, enhanced and even proselytized; but not preserved. Values – and their attribution to place – precede conservation.

In many heritage site classifications emerging over the last 20 years, the carriers of values and significance are not the material substance but an immaterial something else that at times is difficult to define. As an added difficulty, a whole new range of values have begun to spring from community-based groups, and not from heritage specialists and historians as was the rule for most of the 20th century.

The challenge in these shifts is that much of the work needed to protect, conserve and manage the site must be re-directed from the material evidence and re-evaluated for applicability to immaterial carriers, with the added complexity that many immaterial carriers are in a constant state of fluid change. Thus far, few tools have been developed for understanding, identifying or characterizing what those other immaterial carriers of significance are, much less what the appropriate technical, legal or even moral procedures for preserving them would be.

There have been a number of timid, albeit serious, attempts to expand the foundational theory of heritage conservation to address the needs of such sites. The first was the 1982 ICOMOS – IFLA Florence Charter that addressed the conservation of constantly evolving historic gardens whose material evidence includes living botanical specimens that defy traditional conservation. Later came the 1994 Nara Document, the 1996 Declaration of San Antonio and the 1999 Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage, all of which recognized (but did not solve) the difficulty of dealing with the dynamic nature of the materiality of certain heritage classifications, and in turn also attempt to address the immaterial forces that lie behind this state of evolution or self-renewal.

Non-material carriers of significance are not limited to new classifications of heritage sites. Long recognized as special places, battlefields and other sites valued for having been the stage of an important non-repeating event that society wished to perpetuate in the communal memory are sites where some carriers of significance are non-material, and difficult to identify, much less protect. Where are the immaterial carrier in battlefields? In the public memory? In the official governmental recognition? In the stories told about the place? In the emotions of a few? The material carriers - topography, flora and the ephemeral or transient objects that occupied a battlefield on the eventful day of the actual battle - are impossible to preserve in the same way that one protects traditional historic fabric in heritage where significance is material-based. Thus, the attempt to “freeze” these sites in time – or preserve them - is more an allegory of preservation than actual preservation.

For a whole new range of more recently emerged heritage site classifications whose significance is not material-based or only partially so, the challenge may not lie so much in identifying the carriers of their significance, but on the proper, even moral, mechanisms for protecting them, as the implications of doing so may directly affect the social, political and economic situation of specific social or ethnic groups at the expense of others.

Take, for instance, vernacular architecture and settlements, whose significance lies in part on its material manifestations, but whose value is equally dependent on traditional knowledge about constructive techniques, settlement patterns and communal rituals that have been generationally transmitted over long periods of time, as well as on the (increasingly rare) desire of the people who carry these traditions to continue to live according to the ancestral ways. The carriers of the vernacular heritage significance include both the well-known material evidence (buildings, setting and settlement patterns) and the intangibles of communal knowledge and desire. In today’s world we have the tools to protect the material aspects of vernacular heritage; yet somewhat contradictorily, we also recognize that this materiality undergoes constant renewal as traditions adapt to new needs. But more important and challenging is the question: what can or should we do regarding preservation of the immaterial carriers? There are moral decisions to be taken when we combine the knowledge that traditional living outside the globalized modern economy may be equated to a condemnation to relative poverty with the knowledge that conservation of vernacular heritage classifications depends on communities retaining the traditional values that sustain vernacular expression.

There are of course, many valid ad-hoc responses to this specific challenge, as garnered from the American, Canadian, Australian and African experiences, to mention only a few. Even though dealing with this issue is becoming common enough to have expanded certain approaches, the protection of immaterial carriers of significance at such sites remain devoid of sound philosophical foundations, of a practical classification or taxonomy, and of effective preservation techniques and explicit legal protection.

Perhaps no other site classification presents a greater challenge to preservationists than cultural landscapes. These sites present the same complexity of battlefields in that they are composed of an ever-changing arrangement of natural and man-made elements, but unlike battlefields, cultural landscapes sustain and harbor human life. In fact it is the historic evolution resulting from the symbiotic sustenance between the two that makes cultural landscapes significant. As with battlefields, the carriers for that significance do not lie entirely in the material evidence (which is changing constantly), but in the historic patterns of change that result from the human interaction sustained over time with its surroundings.

In other words, a principal carrier of significance **IS** the process of change, which brings heritage conservation to the apparent oxymoron **of having to protect and preserve change – or better yet: historic patterns of change**. Since preservation has long been assumed to be concerned with the prevention of change in material culture, our field has had to re-define its mission: it is not so much about preventing change any more; it is about **managing change**.

Other types of properties where significance is not material-based, the issue of what needs to be protected and how it is to be preserved can become very ambiguous and conflictive because ultimately, it is unclear what exactly has to be conserved.

There are a number of such sites in the United States National Register of Historic Places, such as the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York that acquired national prominence as the result of public riots that erupted when the bar customers reacted to violent homophobic police actions. The riots served to galvanize the gay rights movement, and eventually led to the full public and legal recognition of the civil rights of gays and lesbians. Based on these associative merits, the site and its surroundings were inscribed in the National Register in 1999. While recognition of this place as being one of national importance is fully warranted, the actual focus of what needs to be preserved is not at all clear. The bar itself is a viable commercial entity, and as such, its décor must change and cannot be frozen in time. In fact, according to the website, the Stone Wall is now closed and undergoing complete remodeling. The public space and sidewalks where the riots actually took place cannot be preserved either. Perhaps a plaque is the best that can be done. But does that constitute heritage conservation? In the end, it is the memory of these events that the Register seeks to protect, but the question is how does or should society extend legal protection to certain memories?

Another example of a type of sites that undoubtedly are significant, but whose conservation presents great ambiguity would be any of the Chinatowns historic districts that exist in a number of cities throughout the United States, and a number of which are listed in the National Register. As a rule, these districts do not possess an architecture that either is distinguished or differentiates them from other urban areas. What makes them unique is the character imbued by the community itself and the land use over time, which would include the type of life that the place sustains, a particular use of the public space, the communal rituals and commercial activities and their cyclical recurrence in time. There are also non-tactile sensory aspects that add to the character of the place, such as auditory and olfactory characteristics. In places such as these significance lies in the land use of the place by a specific group, and not necessarily on the physical and spatial fabric, which nonetheless are the *sine qua non* stage on which this life is staged. How does one protect such places? Preventing the Chinese community from moving out is both impossible and out of the question. In recent years Washington's Chinatown has been heavily "sino-ized" with all sorts of Chinese ornamental elements and signs celebrating what once was a quiet Chinese district. But the district has also been heavily gentrified to the point that many Chinese can no longer afford the costs and have left. The strong

focus on the materiality of the place and not on its immaterial carriers of significance has actually morphed the place into a caricature of its once self.

The issue of protection and preservation of properties significant to traditional cultures is even more ethereal and ambiguous. To cite only a few National Register examples: Inyan Karan Mountain in the Black Hills of South Dakota, is significant in part because it is the abode of spirits in the traditions of the Lakota and Cheyenne. Kootenai Falls on the Kootenai River in Idaho, part of the National Register-eligible Kootenai Falls Cultural Resource District, has been used for centuries as a vision questing site by the Kootenai tribe. The Helkau Historic District in northern California is a place where traditional religious practitioners go to make medicine and commune with spirits.

For properties such as these, the easiest action is to leave them in the hands of the traditional cultures that have managed them and protected for centuries, but that is not always possible, as was the case of Mount Shasta in California, a site that was sacred to some Native Americans as the center of creation, and more recently to more than 100 New Age sects who see it as the source of great mystical power. At the same time, it is a desirable and thriving ski station. Fortunately, mediation was possible in Mount Shasta, which probably means the neither the Native American groups, the New Age people, the Ski Park owners nor the skiers will ever be completely satisfied with the solution. But in the end, it points to the need for inter-cultural respect for the values held by others, even when conflicting.

We must accept that heritage properties whose significance rests on immaterial elements will never be simple to manage and protect. Other countries such as Mexico, Canada, New Zealand and Australia face similar challenges, but their experience everywhere is still tentative and ad hoc.¹

As Julian Smith has pointed out, the resulting situation is more than an expansion of heritage concepts. It is a major paradigm shift that relies on the acceptance of a new set of values that rest not on objects, but on processes that have become the immaterial, amorphous and changing carriers of significance, and that require a whole new way of conceiving heritage, beginning with new classifications that are based not so much on physical typology but on the type of carriers on which the site's significance rests.

UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF THE LABYRINTH

After two centuries of work, the preservation field understands and uses well the material-based vessels, and that will continue to be useful in preserving heritage sites whose significance lies on their materials. However, a clear understanding of the range, nature and implications of immaterial-based vessels has been slow to emerge, and the bulk of the response so far is fragmented due to its lack of a comprehensive vision of heritage.

Within ICOMOS, the cultural landscapes group has been working for over a decade in trying to come to terms with the new paradigms. More recently, a new International Committee on Intangible Heritage has been established, but has yet to produce substantial results. By and large, ICOMOS - and the heritage field at large - have been reluctant to enter the field head-on because its membership, history and composition are mostly made up of material-based heritage

¹One can argue that the Australians may claim greater progress than other countries with the adoption of the Burra Charter to guide such work. However, one could also postulate that all the Burra Charter does is admit our joint ignorance and provide a road map to follow on each individual case.

professionals who are intimidated by a challenge that we barely understand. As a result ICOMOS is lagging and involved only in the periphery of these new issues. Most of the truly innovative work that is being proposed is taking place outside of our organization and in the hands of professional groups that have never been courted seriously by ICOMOS: ethnographers, sociologists, and folklorists.

The inherent danger in this segregation of labor could be the rupture of the heritage field into two separate and distinct branches that follow parallel paths, or worse, divergent ones, as is made ominously possible by the implementation of separate UNESCO Conventions on tangible and intangible heritage.

The re-conceptualization and protection of heritage under such terms will require a deeper understanding than now exists of the immaterial carriers where values and significance lie. It will need to rely on broad national and international discussions among heritage experts and with stakeholders. For the time being, this study has tentatively identified five principal heritage classifications that rely on the vessel where their significance lies:

1. Sites of architectural or historic merit where significance lies in the extant material and spatial. Depending on the preservation traditions, habitual local practice and attribution of values, the material evidence may be:
 - a. Historic fabric from the original construction
 - b. Historic fabric resulting from additions following original construction
 - c. Reconstructed fabric to replace documented missing elements
 - d. Evolving botanical specimens
 - e. Natural formations
2. Architecturally undistinguished sites that are place-specific but whose significance does not depend on interpretation of material form, but that lies in a specific type communal life that the land use sustains
3. Sites where an important non-repetitive event worth remembering took place can be classified in two ways:
 - a. In places where the setting for the event can be identified or preserved, significance lies in both the material evidence and the communal memory
 - b. In places where the fabric and the setting are only incidental to the significance and do not merit special protection, the significance is inextricably associated to place, but does not lie in the material evidence.
4. Sites whose natural features have special meanings that convert them into cultural properties. Significance lies in the natural setting and in the communal memory
5. Sites whose nature is dynamic in that they depend on change to retain their meaning to society – historic urban districts, cultural landscapes. Significance in these place is split between the extant historic fabric and the ability to sustain the continuing patterns of their historic evolution.

The following matrix is an attempt to express graphically the above outline

CARRIERS OF VALUES									
	MATERIAL				IMMATERIAL				
	Fixed physical elements	Moveable artifacts	Evolving Plant features	Natural formations	Historic land use	Sacred Beliefs & Myths	Periodic events & rituals	Historic patterns of change	Communal commemorative will
Aesthetic Values									
Age Values									
Historic Values									
Scientific Values									
Social Values									
Identity Values									
Economic Values									
Political Value									
Utilitarian Values									

This table insinuates the need to correlate the type of values that are attributed to heritage and the type of carriers where they may lie. However, such an attempt is well beyond the scope of this paper, and for now, we will just add this task to our “things to do” list.

The certainty of knowing where values lie and the nature of the carrier is important as the starting point to understand how the heritage conservation field will move forward. More pragmatic, however, might be to correlate carriers to the principal mechanisms and ultimate objectives that have driven the conservation of material carriers of significance until now. We can query their effectiveness to do the same for immaterial carriers. In other words, we need to test whether immaterial carriers can be preserved or safeguarded with the present content of our toolkit, or whether we need to design and construct new instruments.

As a starting point, this paper would propose investigating the following, accepting that there may be others that we may be overlooking:

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PRINCIPLES	Neutrality of material carriers	Y	Y	N						
	Exhaustive documentation									
	Slowing down changes	Y	Y	N						
	Reversibility	Y	Y	Y/N						
	Missing parts	Y	Y	Y/N						
	Reconstruction	Y	Y	Y						
	Authenticity	Y	Y	Y						
	Sustainability	Y	Y	Y						
TOOLS	Preventive Conservation	Y	Y	N						
	Legal Protection	Y	Y/N	Y						

TEST 1. NEUTRALITY OF HISTORIC FABRIC

As with historic written texts, all traditional conservation practice relies on the historic belief that due to their relative inalterability, materials carry an intrinsic, unbiased and impartial record of the past that is both incorruptible and inexhaustible in terms of the information it can provide. While the interpretation given to those materials and the values attributed to them may vary in time and space, materials themselves must remain unchanged to prevent human tampering with the primary inherent in them.

Can the same be said of immaterial carriers of significance?

TEST 2. DOCUMENTATION

Thorough documentation of the history of a site, of its material components and their condition has been at the very foundation of conservation practice. The purpose of such documentation has been to understand how significance is contained in the material carriers; what stories the materials can express; what answers they may provide. The information derived from

documentation has always served to avoid treatments and interventions that would diminish or alter the ability of materials to be carriers of meaning.

Is all or any part of this true for immaterial carriers?

TEST 3. SLOWING DOWN CHANGE

Even if we know that it cannot be achieved, preventing materials from changing in order to preserve intact the information carried in them has always been understood to be the ideal towards which all conservation strives.

Does it make sense, or is it even possible to slow down change in immaterial carriers? Are not immaterial carriers often unstable and in a constant evolution?

TEST 4. REVERSIBILITY

The almost sacred importance of the immutability of material fabric has led to the principle that all physical interventions and treatments should be reversible in a way that any changes or additions should be removable and leave no permanent mark on the original fabric.

TEST 5. AUTHENTICITY AND INTEGRITY

Sustaining the concept of material fabric as a carrier of information from the past is the principle of authenticity, which ensures that that information has not been tampered or falsified through interventions and changes in the physical fabric. Authenticity was redefined by the Nara Declaration to respond precisely to the transfer of significance from the exclusive material carriers to include the immaterial ones of traditional knowledge and communal rituals.

TEST 6. SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INTER-GENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION

In the field of heritage, sustainability has been defined as the ability of each generation to enjoy heritage sites without in any way altering it in ways that will diminish the next generation's ability to do the same. In practical terms, this has reinforced the principles of reversibility and authenticity as they govern the limits of alterations to the material carriers of significance.

Does this definition of sustainability and the inter-generational duties apply to immaterial carriers with the same implications?

TEST 7. PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION

To avoid the risk of irreversibly altering material carriers of significance through drastic interventions, the practice of low-impact, preventive conservation and periodic maintenance of heritage has been advanced.

Can immaterial carriers receive preventive maintenance? Does the concept even make sense?

TEST 8. LEGAL PROTECTION

Most heritage legislation has been developed to restrict changes to the material aspects of historic sites. Official recognition of sites with immaterial carriers of significance is common, but the actual legal protection of those immaterials is very diffuse and little developed. Zoning codes, for instance provide protection to land use but only in the amplest sense. Increasingly, legislation is being enacted to recognize the relationship of traditional cultures with their historic setting, but for mainstream cultures, such legislation is nonexistent.

If the answer to any of the above simple tests is either a no or a "perhaps," the whole doctrinal foundation on which our long-held practices rely may need a complete reassessment, and alternate theories may need to be developed to support new practices that will safeguard our heritage.

FINDING THE PATH OUT OF THE LABYRINTH

Over the last two hundred years, the heritage conservation professions have built a solid theoretical foundation on which to build effective mechanisms that protect the material evidence where significance lies. To meet the challenge of properly protecting emerging heritage classifications whose significance rests on immaterial carriers, the same will have to be done for them. The questions that need answering are many. If we look at only one of the above classifications, the dynamic heritage sites whose significance rests on their historic patterns of constant self-renewal, these are only some of the questions that need answers:

How does a dynamic heritage site, such as a cultural landscape, renew itself? If the historic patterns of its growth are a vessel where its values and significance rest, how do we characterize and document those patterns in terms of the evolution in form that they bring about? What has been the time span of these changes? Are there periods of accelerated growth? What is the historic time cycle of self-renewal?

In planning conservation for their future, how do we project an allowable growth that will fit within the traditional growth patterns? What type of changes will fit in the continuation of those patterns? Which do not? How fast can these changes take place to remain within the cycle of historic growth?

What are the historic political, social and, economic forces that have driven historic urban growth? What has been the nature of these forces? Have some forces been beneficial or harmful, and can that benefit or harm be predictable into the future? Have the forces been constant, have they been cyclical, or are have new ones been constantly emerging? If they are changing, is there a repetitive pattern and time cycle in how they ebb and flow? Can they be projected into the future to identify what changes can take place and be within the allowable limits? How can the pace of change be projected into the future?

Question such as these will require not only that we re-focus our attention in whole new directions, but also that partnerships be built with professions, specializations and organizations with whom the preservation field has not worked in the past. There is much to be done.