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Challenges and Dilemmas in Heritage Conservation

Silvio Mendes Zancheti

Heritage conservation has become a big issue in global society. More and more people are involved and consequently there is a growing interest in training activities in this field. Some decades ago there were few conservation training programs in universities and higher education institutions. Professionals were normally trained in their practical activities with the support of some short-term programs. The International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) was a pioneer institution in offering many types of programs in various fields of specialization.

Today it is different. There are many training activities in all specializations of heritage conservation and at all levels of academia and professional expertise. Educational programs in conservation have also spread to all continents and, with the exception of only a few countries, it is possible to find groups of professionals, with different fields of expertise, capable of setting up graduate specialization courses at the diploma level. Certainly, the World Heritage Centre of UNESCO was one of the main organizations responsible for promoting and providing the start-up resources for these programs, as was the case in Brazil and some other Latin American countries.

The complexity of the training activities has also increased. Using again the experience of ICCROM, we may take a quick glance of what has happened in the past two or three decades. Initially, ICCROM provided courses in architectural conservation and specialized courses on the restoration of building materials, such as its stone and

wood conservation programs. These courses aimed to train specialists in many countries, who are today leading experts in their local settings. With the spread of architectural conservation programs all over the world, ICCROM has changed its scope to include the conservation of collections of objects, other materials (such as paper and textiles), and entire cities and territories. Today, one of the most important programs run by ICCROM is Sharing Conservation Decisions, which is focused on the process of conservation with many stakeholders involved in decisions regarding what to do when restoring/conserving any type of material or nonmaterial object.

My purpose in this chapter is not to provide an account of how conservation training has evolved recently, but to present the hypothesis that conservation education is facing a big challenge due to a shift in the conservation/restoration paradigm.

The Big Shift

Since the 1980s, what is understood to be an object worthy of conservation has shifted from architectural monuments and sites to cultural and urban landscapes. The scale of urban conservation areas may contain many thousands of buildings, public spaces, and even a wider natural or built environment. The enlargement of the field of action of conservation is the result of the social inclusion of different kinds of people in the planning and decision processes relating to cultural policy. It is the outcome of the enlargement of the political participation process of social groups that are gaining self-confidence regarding the importance for society of their cultural representation. A new concept of culture is being formed as a network of symbolic systems that make sense to groups of people belonging to many generations. Thus, culture and heritage are seen in a

more pluralistic and diverse perspective that goes beyond the narrow scope of high culture.

Part of this movement is the recognition that development is always culturally oriented. There is no culturally neutral development, as Amartia Sen has argued,¹ and the links between heritage, memory, and social practice make conservation and development an inseparable pair in cultural, social, economic, and environmental policies. This does not mean that the dynamics of conservation and development may not differ during certain periods of time, however. When they do differ, the consequences may be disastrous.

Culture and heritage are part of people's daily lives. Those involved with conservation policies, plans, and projects are not only professionals, but may come from a broad spectrum of society. The challenge is to establish what heritage is and who defines it in this new context. Conservation policies and regulations rule over large urban areas and territories as is, for example, the case of the city of Rio de Janeiro, recently inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List. With a population of more than six million, Rio de Janeiro is one of the most dynamic cities in the world and the second most important economic pole of Brazil. The urban area of the city will be under a conservation regulation since it was considered a buffer zone for protected areas.

The Challenges

The big shift in the social importance of heritage conservation has led to a change in the scientific scope of the discipline and the requirements for academic and professional education. The conceptual and theoretical framework of the conservation discipline is being revised due to problems that came directly from the application of

policies and regulations for new objects, especially large urban areas and cultural landscapes. At least three main challenges have been identified regarding these issues:

1. the change in the *scientific paradigm* of the discipline from a scientific objective to a postmodern cultural standpoint
2. the decision process involving many stakeholders and the search for a balance between the use of *new and traditional knowledge, techniques, and materials* in diverse cultural contexts
3. the renewed importance of a *conservation ethic* for professional practice

The Change in the Scientific Paradigm

Since the 1980s, the long and sound tradition of conservation theory (Ruskin, Viollet-le-Duc, Boito, Giovannoni, and Brandi) has been revised according to the postmodern standpoint.² The Burra Charter's concept of "significance" was used in the interpretation of "different individuals or groups."³ This was well explained and contextualized by Salvador Muñoz Viñas,⁴ when he advanced the following: (1) the uses of objects are necessarily a concern for conservation; (2) the new approach to the discipline is no longer attached to the ideas of truth and objectivity; (3) there is a shift from objects to subjects (people or stakeholders); and (4) conservation is conditioned by expressivity and interpretation of the meanings of objects.

The conservation of cultural heritage is an activity involved with the maintenance of past and present cultural significances. To achieve sustainable conservation, managers of urban areas and other stakeholders act on the attributes of the heritage objects that convey cultural meanings identified throughout *intersubjective* processes. These attributes may be of a material (tangible) or a nonmaterial (intangible) nature. The social

agents involved in conservation may retain, change, restore, reshape, or replace attributes or even objects. They may also engage in activities that help to foster meanings as part of the collective memory of society, through educational and cultural activities. The actions of managers and other stakeholders should be guided in such a way that the meanings, the integrity, and the authenticity of the objects' attributes are maintained over time.

This means that sustainable conservation seeks to maintain the condition for the interpretation of the relation of attributes-meanings between generations because it should (1) carry forward the present meanings of heritage to future generations; (2) maintain records of meanings given by past generations for the use of present and future generations; and (3) leave open to future generations the possibility of interpreting and associating new meanings with past and present heritage. But in order to do this, it is fundamental for sustainable heritage conservation to maintain the integrity and the authenticity of material or nonmaterial attributes of objects. So conservation has to deal with the relation between objects and subjects. I explore this point in some detail below.

The Use of New and Traditional Knowledge

The conservation of heritage is an activity that walks a razor's edge between new and traditional material and construction techniques. This is a question that will certainly never be solved because there will always be room for both. What I discuss here is the need for conservators to judge the use of traditional materials and construction techniques since they have already been trained in the use of modern materials and techniques.

The problem is very difficult since contemporary conservation practice is still strongly attached to the material fetishism of scientific conservation.⁵ Hard sciences, such as chemistry and physics, came to dominate the thinking of conservators as the answer to

practical questions. After many years of research and application of scientific principles, however, fundamental questions have still not been answered: Are the new materials more efficient than the traditional ones? How can the choice of materials and techniques be made in relation to the conservation of the significance of objects?

It is quite difficult to find conservators of monuments and sites who have this knowledge to a sufficient degree to allow them to decide which way to choose. Traditional techniques are not normally considered at universities, at least not in Latin American countries like Brazil. This knowledge is held by a restricted number of artisans, artists and master craftsmen who are rarely involved in the education system. What I am identifying as a challenge is the capability of conservators to understand the local contexts in which decisions are made since the choice of materials and techniques is not culturally neutral. Their choices reflect the training background of the specialist, their commitment to the criteria of authenticity, and the availability of master craftsmen with traditional knowledge, among other factors.

Nowadays, it seems that these questions are important because we will soon face the problem of preserving the built heritage of the twentieth century. This heritage was built under the umbrella of scientific knowledge and innovation as cultural values in themselves since the use of modern techniques and materials formed the strongest part of the ideology of the modern movement.

The Renewed Importance of Conservation Ethics

The challenges outlined above are certainly associated with moral judgments and hence with ethics since ethics involves the decisions related to social values, therefore to ideas as “good or bad” or “right or wrong.” Ethics has been an important subject in the

discipline of heritage conservation, as shown by Miriam Clavir.⁶ It may be defined as “any and all sets of moral principles and values that govern individual and group behavior.”⁷ John Ruskin formulated his ideas based on ethical principles. He advocated that we did not have the right to touch historical monuments because they belonged to the past generations and the future generations have the right to receive them as we did.⁸ His ideas were very close to the present definition of sustainable development, which is certainly based on a moral stance. Since Ruskin, the ethics of conservation has been associated with the idea of truth, which was later associated with the concept of authenticity. Cesare Brandi, who was concerned with the signs of the passage of time on objects, said that restoration activity should not produce something that is artistically or historically a fake.⁹

From Viollet-le-Duc to Brandi, the responsibility of specialist conservators for the definition of what a heritage object is and how to conserve or restore it went unquestioned. But this is no longer the case. The role of science is not accepted as completely determining conservation action and the opinion of the common people has been brought into the field so far as conservation decisions are concerned. For example, what we perceive as damaged is completely different from what it was understood to be some time ago. Nowadays, damage is associated with “those changes that we regard [as] undesirable”¹⁰ so it is seen throughout subjective evaluations. On the other hand, the conservation of complex heritage objects, such as urban areas or the cultural landscape, may impact the lives of thousands of people. Therefore, ethical principles require that the conservators should evaluate the consequences associated with the transmission of

heritage from generation to generation, as was the case with Ruskin's or Brandi's approach, and with the present use and the way people evaluate heritage.

Conservation is a set of actions involving identification, analysis, judgments, and decision making. For the new paradigm of conservation, critical judgment is a double act of synthesis and choices that, first, seeks out knowledge so as to be able to interpret the value of the heritage and, second, decides which material and physical attributes will be chosen and how they will be used, depending on how their conditions of integrity and authenticity are judged. The contemporary theory of conservation recognizes its dependence on subjective evaluations.

This theory does not interpret the conservator as an enlightened rational human being, as imagined by Brandi, but as a social agent who works in a context of intersubjective interpretations and decisions. His or her role is to work with intersubjectivity, recognizing that individuals and groups value heritage differently and thus seek to identify the maximum social consensus that can be reached on conservation decisions.¹¹

It is on these plural bases that decisions as to what and how to conserve are taken, supported by practical knowledge, common sense, and prudence; that is, on *phronesis*, the Aristotelian concept for defining the capacity of individuals to form judgments regarding conflicting values in different situations or contexts.¹² Viñas expresses the new role of the conservator very well when he states that the “contemporary theory of conservation calls for ‘common sense,’ for gentle decisions, for sensible actions. What determines this? Not truth or science, but rather the uses, values and meanings that an object has for people. This is determined by the people.”¹³

The cultural relativism of today makes it difficult to apprehend what is common. The conservator must support decisions and actions on ethical principles that may help him or her to define professional conduct in three senses: (1) in relation to objects; (2) in relation to the people involved with objects; and (3) in the relation of people with objects. This is certainly a new form of engagement in society that goes beyond the role of the scientist or the artist.

The Dilemmas

The dilemmas for educational systems are framed by these challenges. These systems must train specialists in “positive” knowledge and technical expertise, the capacity to participate in decision making, openness to the opinion and participation of social agents, and the capacity to act according to clear ethical principles. But, where should the emphasis be placed? Should heritage conservators be specialists, generalists, or facilitators?

Certainly the answer is multifaceted and associated with improving the critical capacity of heritage conservators to promote continuity of meanings and values across generations in changing cultural contexts. Communities across the world, which are seeking new and innovative solutions, active project participation, and sustainability, will define these meanings and values. In the words of the Institute of Conservation’s “Positive Future in an Uncertain World” conference of 2013, *2013* “Rather than being suspicious of this paradigm shift conservators need to develop their communication skills to respond to the intricacies of community engagement.”¹⁴ Heritage is seen by professionals more and more as belonging to broad communities, but it may retain meaning and value if it is recognized by local people as their heritage.

As social contexts are so fundamental for designing conservation training strategies it is difficult for me to present an opinion about training challenges in the United States. Certainly, for the United States the challenges are different from those in most Latin American countries. So what follows is my brief evaluation of what is happening in Brazil and other Latin American countries.

Conservation can only be an effective concept in the development of Latin American countries if it is well understood and accepted by large sectors of the population, politicians, administrators, intellectuals, and, in particular, development decision makers. Today, in Latin America, there are some training institutions dealing in heritage conservation. They cover only a small part of the spectrum of the educational structure needed to raise the conservation awareness of the population, however. In general, conservation courses are in the graduate programs of some universities. The conservation institutions of the area are also largely dependent on professionals trained in foreign universities, with the exception of Mexico and Brazil, which have their own professional training centers.

In two surveys, conducted some years ago by Paulo Ormino and me, respectively, it was found that most of the training programs in Latin America are architecture-oriented and lack interdisciplinary work as well as a management context. In addition, architecture undergraduate programs generally do not deal with conservation issues. Again, Mexico and Brazil are the exceptions.

Recently, there have been some initiatives to create graduate programs in heritage conservation and its relation to the sustainable development process. These programs are quite new, however, and they have not had the time to increase the number of

professionals with multidisciplinary training. Therefore, the capacity of these people to influence the decision-making process is limited. There is a need to expand training activities to other levels of the educational system and to include conservation principles in different subjects of the general curricula of the educational system.

One of the main tasks is to integrate heritage conservation within the environmental conservation training programs that have been introduced at all levels of the educational system, especially at the first level, with the younger generation. The environmental movement is very successful in propagating conservation principles and this experience may be very helpful. This strategy may have a very important long-term impact because it involves the younger generation in the process.

Some Experiences

The education and training developed at the Center for Advanced Studies in Integrated Conservation (CECI) provides a better approach to the challenges in bringing together conservation and development. CECI began with a group of researchers and professors at the graduate program in urban development of the Federal University of Pernambuco, located in Recife, Brazil. It started its activities in 1997, launching the graduate program in Integrated Territorial and Urban Conservation, the ITUC/BR, in partnership with the World Heritage Centre and ICCROM.

In 2003, CECI became an independent nonprofit institution devoted to the promotion of the scientific field of integrated conservation. From the outset CECI has acted as a training, research, publishing, and community service institution, working in partnership with many Brazilian and international institutions. All the activities of CECI are self-financed since it does not receive any grants for its functioning. Today CECI has

a record of more than 300 trained graduated students, 17 published books, a series of research articles with more than 100,000 downloads in 3 years, the scientific journal *City & Time*, and innumerable research, restoration, and urban planning projects undertaken for many institutions and for the community at large.

I briefly report on three of the graduate training programs developed by CECI.

In spite of the differences between the three programs in terms of objectives, concepts, and methods, they share common ground in their approach and the way that they deal with the challenges explained above. These programs start from the following premises:

- Objects, monuments, and sites are heritage because they are culturally meaningful to different groups of people in a society.
- The assessment of the values of this heritage is made through a long and continuous intersubjective process of comparing the relative values of the meanings of objects, monuments, and sites.
- The conservation process of heritage is not scientifically defined. It is a matter of searching for partial consensus among the stakeholders involved with the heritage in question, taking into account their objectives/expectations and available resources.
- The management of the conservation process of heritage requires an interdisciplinary and conflict management approach.

The ITUC/BR Program

The ITUC/BR program was designed as an urban conservation management course intended mainly for public officials working in local urban administrations. It was

inspired by MBA programs and focused on training managers of heritage conservation. CECI has made an effort to define a clear theoretical line for its actions on training for urban conservation. This effort was based on the definition of usual concepts associated with the discipline of heritage conservation: the management of heritage conservation and integrated conservation.

Urban management is understood as the part of the public management of cities that comprises the management of the public and semipublic goods and the supply of public services. Training in urban management is normally based on theories of public management and government. The city as a public good poses a challenge for these theories because of its conflicting facets: it is a source of innovation and development and also the source of dispute and conflict among its stakeholders. The action of the public/government management is thus considered essential on an everyday basis to mediate disputes and conflicts. The heritage of urban areas is an exemplary case of the need for a differentiated public management for the following reasons:

- the multifaceted character of public heritage, which comprises private and semiprivate assets depending on the perspective of the management action
- the irreversibility of the heritage assets
- the criteria for assessment and evaluation of the values of the heritage public assets, which are based on ethical principles as well as relative cultural perspectives
- the absence of clear definitions as to what it means to conserve, to restore, or to protect, which are essential concepts for the practice of heritage conservation management

All the uncertainties contribute to making the process of urban heritage management open ended, non-teleological, contingent, and conflictive. The ITUC/BR program defines urban heritage conservation as “the public process of decision making on the management of urban areas and the allocation of resources for urban conservation in a context of dispute between multiple public and private actors with differentiated capacities, perceptions and objectives relative to the political mobilization to define the use of public goods and other resources.”

The second concept, integrated conservation, is widely used in the field of conservation in general. Since its initial formulation in the Declaration of Amsterdam (1975),¹⁵ however, it has not been precisely defined. This was not a problem since it was in continuous elaboration and flexible enough to be adapted to new ideas regarding heritage conservation, urban planning, and sustainable development. In the ITUC/BR program it was the central concept for the development of the theoretical and practical parts of the program and it was defined as follows:

- Integrated conservation is part of the general process of planning and management of cities and territories, according to a multi-referential perspective (economic, political, social, cultural, environmental and spatial);
- It centers on (but does not limit itself to) the physical and spatial aspects of consolidated urban areas that are socially recognized as of cultural value and seeks to maintain the integrity, authenticity and continuity of the urban areas of cultural value for present and future generations;

- It emphasizes the conservation of the physical and spatial aspects within the development/transformation process of the city, while seeking sustainable development by treating the cultural values of the city as assets that aggregate value in all dimensions of the development process (economic, political, social, cultural, environmental and spatial).

These two concepts were used to formulate a management approach that guided the development of the content and the syllabus of the training program. The approach is defined by a structure of four groups of management activities performed simultaneously by the public manager responsible for the conservation process of an urban site. The activities are:

- analysis and evaluations;
- negotiation;
- proposals;
- monitoring and control.

These tasks are directly entwined with the management of conservation measures and indirectly linked to action taken by agencies in other sectors of public administration. The relationships between tasks and implementing bodies will depend on the style of the public administration in charge of urban conservation.

The ITUC/BR program is composed of seven modules:

- one theoretical and conceptual module
- four modules corresponding to the activities of the management approach
- one practical module for designing and developing a management plan for an urban heritage site

- one individual research module

The first five modules use distance-learning methods and the sixth is a group work done in situ.

The Management of Architectural Restoration Site Program

This program is one of the most successful initiatives of CECI. It is aimed at managers working in situ on architectural restoration work. Its target group is made up of mid-career architects and engineers with some previous experience in conservation/restoration of architecture. This program places a strong emphasis on introducing traditional materials and construction techniques to managers to improve their capacity to judge and make decisions in the field. It requires the improvement of the communication skills of the participants since it brings together very different groups of professionals. The students are, in general, architects and engineers and many of the instructors are artisans or master craftsmen specializing in traditional crafts such as wood carving and carpentry, stone cutting and carving, mortar and plaster, stucco, wrought iron, lime painting, reinforced concrete, and others. The program is divided into three modules:

- management of construction sites and services
- theory and practice of building systems
- practice of traditional crafts, fieldwork, and in situ case studies

The final work of the students is the development of a management plan of a specific restoration site chosen by the individual participant.

The MARC/AL Program

The MARC/AL program was designed to answer some questions such as the following: “Is specific training for the conservation of modern architecture necessary, and does it need to be different from traditional approaches? What sorts of disciplines are necessary? What is the best balance between theory and practice? How is it possible to unite different professional viewpoints (practicing architects, architectural historians, conservationists, engineers) into a single approach?”¹⁶

The conservation of the modern architecture has raised many questions about the relevance of the contemporary theory of conservation to answer specific problems related to this type of architecture. The development of the MARC/AL and its application in 2009 has shown that there is need for specific training in the conservation of modern architecture but there is no need to search for another conservation theory. What is necessary is to deal with three main questions related to: (1) the identification of the values of this architecture among the different social groups and individuals; (2) the aging process of building material used experimentally in this architecture; and (3) a better understanding of the main concepts of the conservation theory applied to the conservation practice of the modern buildings, specifically those that are not socially recognized as possessing outstanding cultural values.

Final Remarks

Heritage conservation is certainly a field where many changes are occurring in terms of theory, practice, and the involvement of people and institutions. The challenges faced by educators in developing training programs are also considerable and there is certainly no clear path to follow. There is an open horizon with a great diversity of

prospects. In my opinion the great challenge today is to organize training activities that respond to the new theoretical challenges posed by the shift in the conservation paradigm.

Notes

¹ See Amartia Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

² “Postmodernism is largely a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality. In essence, it stems from a recognition that reality is not simply mirrored in human understanding of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality. For this reason, postmodernism is highly skeptical of explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person. In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually. Postmodernism relies on concrete experience over abstract principles, knowing always that the outcome of one’s own experience will necessarily be fallible and relative, rather than certain and universal” (<http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gengloss/index-frame.html>).

³ ICOMOS Australia, Burra Charter, 1999,
<http://australia.icomos.org/publications/charters>, accessed 12 December 2012.

⁴ See Salvador Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* (Oxford: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005).

⁵ Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, 86.

⁶ Mirian Clavir, *Preserving What is Valued: Museums, Conservation and First Nations* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), 26–66.

⁷ Clavir, *Preserving What is Valued*, 26.

⁸ John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1989), 185–86.

⁹ Cesare Brandi, *Teoria del Restauro* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 6.

¹⁰ Sarah Staniforth, “Group Report: What are Appropriate Strategies to Evaluate Change and Sustain Cultural Heritage?” in *Durability and Change: The Science, Responsibility, and Cost of Sustaining Cultural Heritage*, ed. W. E. Krumblein, P. Bribblecombe, D. E. Cosgrove, and S. Staniforth (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1994), 218.

¹¹ Clavir, *Preserving What is Valued*, 43.

¹² Bent Flyvbjerg, “Phronetic Planning Research: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections,” *Planning Theory & Practice*, 5:3 (2004), 283–306.

¹³ Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, 212.

¹⁴ Institute of Conservation, *Positive Future in an Uncertain World 2013*, conference preliminary program, 2012,

http://www.iconpf13.com/uploads/1/3/7/6/13769325/programme_draft_01_november__2012.pdf.

¹⁵ Congress on the European Architectural Heritage, Declaration of Amsterdam, 1975, <http://www.icomos.org/en/charters-and-texts/179-articles-en-francais/ressources/charters-and-standards/169-the-declaration-of-amsterdam>.

¹⁶ Diniz Moreira and Luiz Manuel do Eirado Amorim, “Capacitação em conservação da arquitetura moderna: a experiência do CECI e do MDU-UFPE,” in Proceedings of the 9^o *Seminário Docomomo Brasil: Interdisciplinaridade e experiências em documentação e preservação do patrimônio recente* (Brasília:

DOCOMOMO Brasil, 2011),

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[CapitacaoEmConservacao-ART_fernando_moreira.pdf](#), accessed 3 January 2013.