

Nara +20: a theory and practice perspective

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Abstract

The 1994 Nara Document played an important role in building bridges between tangible and intangible heritage and supporting a shift towards a broader values-based approach to the stewardship of the historic environment. Nara +20 marks a second stage in this process, and places the discussion in the context of the present day in the prevalent discourse of globalisation as well as the more nuanced concerns for sustainability and resilience. In identifying five prioritised action areas it calls for the development of new processes and methodologies that recognise heritage values as evolving more than ever before and that decision-making in the conservation field is a complex process dependent on effective negotiation at a time when threats to cultural heritage are also on the increase. Through an emphasis on stakeholder involvement through communities of interest Nara +20 implicitly signals the diminishing role being played by the State in the heritage field and by extension that of the expert and the scientific discourse from which modern conservation evolved.

Key words: globalisation and heritage, role of the State, science and conservation,

It is well documented (Jokilehto 1999; Glendinning 2013 amongst others) that the theoretical basis of the universally shared principles of building conservation has been one generated in western Europe. Philosophies, influenced by romanticism and rationalism, shaped what became known as modern conservation in the 20th century and are embedded in international doctrine, charters and conventions, including the World Heritage Convention. Ultimately they inform practical conservation decisions concerning materials, structures, choice of repair techniques, what to and what not to keep. Muñoz Viñas (2004) summarises this western attitude as one of material fetishism linked to a belief in scientific knowledge. The post-Enlightenment approach to classification and ordering, and in the case of architectural history the clear definition and delineation of various periods and grouping of building typologies, has subsequently lead to the desire to justify decision making in heritage conservation in a quantifiable and 'scientific' manner.

The Nara document of 1994, and the process that it emerged from can be considered as a turning point, in that it gave a voice to other world-views in the discussion and placed these into the theoretical framework that informs conservation. In doing so it also challenged the

prevailing quantitative approaches to cultural heritage decision-making and a growing need to prove economic value (Mason 2008) by promoting a qualitative and non-empirical approach to how cultural heritage is valued. The Nara document also coincided with a general shift to and popularisation of value-based approaches to heritage conservation (de la Torre 2002) and a more post-modern outlook embracing multivocality and recognition that historic places could have multiple meanings and more than one story to tell.

Twenty years on is a good point in time to test the effectiveness of the 1994 Nara document, reflect on what it has achieved and how it has been implemented and used. It is now clearly evident that a broader way of viewing and valuing heritage is becoming established practice. Intangible heritage, with a dedicated UNESCO convention (2003), is no longer an adjunct but part of the heritage discussion and appreciation of values. The evolution of Australia's Burra Charter from its first incarnation in 1979 to the revisions in 1999 and 2013 clearly illustrates a broadening of understanding of indigenous heritage and the spiritual values and 'meanings of a place' that go beyond the more evidential indicators of significance (Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, 1979, 1999 and 2013). Meanwhile, ICCROM's Africa 2009 programme, amongst other international and local initiatives has brought an African viewpoint into the fold. Although the Middle East and Islamic world still remains under-represented in contributing their own philosophical approaches to the international conservation debate, research is beginning to emerge in this field too. For example a panel discussion on Historic Preservation in the Middle East at the forthcoming annual conference of the Society of Architectural Historians specifically aims to 'focus on theories and methodological approaches to architectural restoration and conservation developed in the region since the 19th century' (Society of Architectural Historians, 2015). This builds on research being conducted at established centres of research on Islamic Architecture such as MIT and Harvard and in emerging research groups at various Universities in the Gulf region.

Most critically though, the word 'authenticity' lies at the heart of the 1994 document and continues to represent one of the key tests for successful WHS nominations, in terms of both survival and subsequent conservation of cultural properties. In this respect much hinges on how authenticity is articulated in different cultural contexts. Derek Linstrum (1989) in discussing the difficulties in defining the word 'conservation' quotes Humpty Dumpty saying to Alice, 'when I use a word it means what I choose it to mean'. The same can be said about 'authenticity' and the way it is defined and appropriated to justify conservation decisions. While authenticity in the case of art works and antiques is a defining factor of value, the same is not necessarily the case where historic buildings are concerned. Nonetheless, Linstrum (1989) goes on to articulate authenticity as being a 'quality' that is the concern of

conservation. The call of Nara +20 for a better understanding of 'the processes by which authenticity can be [...] assessed' simultaneously recognises that there is still a need to establish these process whilst the cultural context in which they are assessed is also evolving.

Nara +20 builds on an evaluation of how authenticity has been used and applied in the conservation and management of cultural heritage since 1994 within different cultural contexts and for different purposes. From this evaluation it sets out an action plan of priority areas to be addressed in the field. In doing so it implicitly picks up on some of the prevalent globalisation narratives of our time. The globalisation discourse often refers to a growing cultural homogeneity, but also a heterogeneity and a search for local identity and a need to 'belong' (Ritzer, 2011). Globalisation processes are both instigating and enabling the formation of communities of interest and associated identity formation whilst also reducing the power of the State, especially in economic matters (Bisley, 2007). The emphasis on 'wider stakeholder involvement' in Nara +20 is in recognition of this evolving environment where the national context, and arguably the State as a decision maker, is positioned between local contexts and communities of interest and the political and economic power wielded by global players. The concept of continuous change is also evident in the shifting nature of urban planning whereby short term and small packages of 'tactical' interventions are increasingly being seen as a way forward for the revitalisation of places and an alternative to long-term and fixed masterplanning practices (Bishop and Williams, 2012).

The first point of Nara +20 draws attention to the diversity of heritage processes, and emphasises the Nara (1994) concept that authenticity resides in its own cultural context. There has always been a broad range of approaches to heritage globally, in terms of its production (tangible, intangible), valuation (of its time, and informed by historic philosophical processes) and its conservation. From the late 20th century western viewpoint, Muñoz Viñas's 'material fetish', in-situ conservation safeguarding original material and employing traditional materials and techniques in repair is often taken as a guiding principle and considered to be truly 'authentic'. Other approaches may facilitate to a degree the safeguarding of original material or craft skill, to enable the 'communication of history and meaning'. On the other end of the spectrum rebuilding and reconstruction and a fair amount of adaptation are seen as valid methods of conservation. As the philosophical field broadens so does the means for justification of actions and inevitably these different stand points generate different positions across what might be seen as a spectrum of approaches.

Therefore how much conservation decisions are genuinely influenced by cultural norms and how much they are dictated by the ease of development options also needs to be questioned. The opening up of new tourism markets and cultural commodification fuelled by the experience economy is not only influencing preservationist approaches in heritage conservations (Holtorf, 2012), but is also leading to an unprecedented growth in heritage reconstruction ranging from the complete rebuilding of urban quarters to more small scale interventions of embellishment to increase the 'heritage' value of a building or place. Even within the densely rich Medina of Tunis, a recent project has sought to add 'heritage' features such as grilled projections to blank elevations in order to enliven a designated tourist route (Figure 1). In this respect, much of the process of evaluation may lie in establishing values associated with and attributed to places of historic significance and appraising how these have been upheld in terms of their conservation, reconstruction and presentation.

Whether such an evaluation can also establish a tipping point where heritage is no longer heritage, or is too devoid of values that make it such. This too could have different outcomes based on who is making the judgement: the tourist who takes what he sees to be authentic, or takes it for what it is but enjoys it nonetheless, compared to the professional's judgement based on analysis and framed in theory. Following a period of rapid growth and urbanisation, a belated realisation that heritage matters both as an expression of community identity as well as a source of tourism income, a number of Gulf States have in the past decade embarked on extensive heritage conservation and reconstruction projects. These projects vary in scale and approach from European style material conservation through to reconstructions that pay lip service to rather than replicate the original in layout, style or location (Orbaşlı, 2007). Where some of these practices may fall well short of the approaches advocated in the body of international conservation doctrine, for most tourists to the region they present a seamless continuum of experiences from old neighbourhoods now populated with art galleries, to so called *souqs* and modern day shopping malls, such as Dubai's Madinat Jumeirah constructed in a historicist style complete with a creek (Figure 2). It can be argued that in most of these projects cultural heritage is viewed as a concept rather than a material object.

Inevitably how we treat places of historic value in terms of conservation, adaptation or presentation is directly linked to who values them and what they value about them. This is picked up in the second point 'Implications of the evolution of cultural values', where a periodic assessment of values is advocated in light of the continuous evolution cultural heritage undergoes. This point also maintains a parallel narrative to the adaptive and 'fluid' nature of decision making that is being advocated through the urbanism discourse which also

recognises the power and influence that local communities can have in shaping their environment, now commonly referred to in practice as tactical urbanism (Lydon and Garcia, 2015).

Muñoz Viñas (2004:175) argues that in contemporary conservation we move away from the conservation of truth to the conservation of meanings. Conservation has thus become a negotiation of values (Avrami 2009) some of which are very much of the present time, both in a local and a global sense. Values can indeed be subjective (Poulios 2010) and will range from those supported by science and a research base to values linked to local communities and norms of 'collective memory' and political narratives of 'identity'. The process of negotiation and the fundamental premise of values-based approaches necessitate the involvement of multiple stakeholders, the third point of Nara +20.

These multiple stakeholders ultimately represent the State, experts and communities (including communities of interest) who are involved in heritage protection, conservation and management. The process of negotiation will thus play out in the power relationships that operate at various levels of society. In an era of virtual communities, online petitions and TV contests where the audience influences the outcome via text message the social and community narrative also takes on another dimension. Schmidt (2008:131) for example cites a report prepared on behalf of the German Green Party, where the de-nationalisation of heritage and its replacement with a people power approach is recommended giving the public the power to vote for what is kept and what is demolished. Schmidt argues that this could result in the loss of buildings with negative connotations and those deemed to be 'ugly' by a present generation. Such approaches not only seek to remove the State from the heritage management process in an act of 'democratisation' (Holtorf, 2007:34), they also correspond to a neo-liberal political leaning that seeks to relieve the State from some of its obligations by devolving them to the market (private sector) or to communities, volunteers and third sector organisations.

A shrinking State, open society networks, the emergence of new global virtual communities, and the growing power of global businesses operating outside the boundaries of the State all have an influence on how heritage is protected. Most notably though is the evident shift in the role of the 'expert'. As the remit of cultural heritage broadens, management and presentation are taking over from conservation as the prevailing narrative. Meanwhile the protection and management of heritage is being devolved to the private sector to operate as a business or to any number of stakeholders to take on the responsibility for things they value, but with limited financial provision to do so. With competing market forces and a public

voice, the knowledge and professional base that shaped conservation in the latter half of the 20th century is increasingly being eroded.

The need for overcoming conflicting claims and interpretations of cultural heritage, the fourth point of Nara +20, is even more chillingly apparent in some very serious conflicts we are facing today. The Taliban set the tone with the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2011, and in the few months since the Nara +20 document was published there has been an unprecedented destruction of cultural heritage of all periods in the Middle East deliberately by IS militants as well as in collateral damage as a result of civil conflicts. At the same time the debate surrounding the reconstruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas aptly summarises the 'current issues in authenticity'. In a recent article in *The Art Newspaper*, Martini and Rivetti (2014) report on a debate in which the international watchdog UNESCO was condemning German restorers for reconstruction of the feet of the smaller of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 'reinforced concrete' and bricks. Both sides have used conservation doctrine to argue their case, the German team claiming that re-construction was the best way of preserving the surviving fragments, and UNESCO arguing that the absence of the Buddhas is also part of the story and the best 'way of remembering them'. The article concludes with an image of a proposed visitor centre, a post-modernist structure of unidentified design context, which is to be funded by South Korea with the explicit purpose of 'making money' through tourism for the local community.

Armed conflict and its aftermath have always placed under scrutiny the way in which cultural heritage is valued and subsequently re-commemorated through memorialisation or rebuilding. The events that are underpinning our current time, in the Middle East and elsewhere, turns the spotlight onto how cultural heritage is valued by different communities that have become connected through globalised networks. Ironically, it is the very heritage that was valued and awarded monument status in a past world-order that has become the deliberate targets of today's wanton destruction. The rebuilding and re-evaluation of values that will one day follow these conflicts will also be a test of the Nara +20 call for consensus-building methods and the values that will prevail; notwithstanding the tourism and economic value arguments as demonstrated in the Afghanistan example above.

The first four points of Nara +20 synthesise cultural heritage thinking of our time, and while highlighting its multitude of conflicts also speak of its aspirations. The fifth and final point, the role of cultural heritage in sustainable development, brings the heritage debate up to date and in doing so also (inadvertently) connects the conservation field back to some of its more scientific origins. The sustainability argument that has been played out against historic

buildings in favour of energy savvy replacements has had to be counteracted not only by constructing a good case but also through scientific study. Research towards a better understanding of the energy performance of historic buildings and on ways in which to adapt them to perform more efficiently has been a major focus for organisations such as Historic Scotland or the Building Research Establishment in the UK, amongst many others across Europe. More holistic approaches to the discussion also recognise the broader cultural and social components of sustainability as stressed in the fifth point of Nara +20. Historic buildings not only have an inherent environmental value (e.g. embodied energy) but through their scale, familiarity and meaning also play a role in nurturing sustainable communities (Orbaşlı, 2009).

The Nara Document (1994) is often used to underpin the justification of what is considered sufficiently authentic to warrant WHS status. This is elaborated in Nara +20 with a specific emphasis on the need to develop inclusive and participatory methodologies of evaluation. The debate on how much re-building, reconstruction and re-imagining is acceptable will continue to be played out under the influences of global competition, prevalent tourism trends, post-conflict and post-disaster recovery and evolving community values. Viewed from a different angle the need to construct heritage is as much linked to the tourism industry and commodification of heritage, as to the notion of establishing a local, regional or national identity. These too are not without conflict as politically selective narratives collide with values upheld by smaller communities linked by a common identity or those of global communities of interest; and at times intangible and tangible values become contradictory rather than complimentary.

A recent special report in *The Economist* (2015) analyses the staying power and virtue of family firms, their age often imbuing them with a sense of trust and reliability. Similarly, heritage grounds places, gives them a back story and a sense of being. This longevity nurtures resilience in providing a longer planning horizon and stronger and established social structures and networks to support it. Furthermore, historic buildings, places and cities have already adapted to change many times over and therefore it can be argued that they have higher adaptive capacity to change, and in their multiple character areas can also experiment with small and incremental changes that will make them more resilient. At a time when not only the 'expert' but more significantly science is becoming decoupled from conservation and 'heritage', sustainability is also a reminder that the two must seek new ways and methodologies of convergence.

The 1994 Nara document on authenticity marked a turning point in conservation and also reflects a time of greater consciousness of how heritage is culturally valued. Twenty years later Nara +20 is a sign of our times and in its own way marks another, possibly more profound turning point at a time when we expect to have tested methodologies and established benchmarks we are finding ourselves confronted with conflict and uncertainty. New methodologies emerging in the heritage field will need to tread a careful path amongst these divergent interests, and maybe borrow from the language of sustainability to be flexible in approach, tactical in delivery and resilient in the face of adversity.

Figure 1: The addition of new balconies and window grilles to historic properties in the old Medina of Tunis is purportedly to increase the heritage appeal of a designated tourist route (Photo Aylin Orbaşlı)

Figure 2: For many tourists, the Madinat Jumeirah shopping mall is a seamless extension of Dubai's 'heritage' landscape (Photo Aylin Orbaşlı)

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Call for papers for 69th Annual International Conference to be held in Pasadena, California

April 6-10, 2016. Electronic document [http://www.sah.org/docs/default-](http://www.sah.org/docs/default-source/conference/sah-2016-call-for-papers-(includes-sessions)3f8a34dbac8564e5abfcff0000eafba5.pdf?sfvrsn=16)

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