



Practice Information Note

SC1610

The History & Philosophy, Principles & Practice of Conservation

Robin Kent qualified at Oxford and Kingston Polytechnics and his first job was as architect to the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, recording Islamic heritage. He started his own practice in 1981 and ten years later achieved a York University MA in Conservation Studies, subsequently joining Historic Scotland as a senior conservation architect. He returned to private practice in 1997, and has been accredited in conservation since 1998. He has published and lectured widely on conservation related subjects and is a member of the RIAS Conservation Committee and an assessor for both the RIAS and AABC conservation accreditation schemes. The RIAS are extremely grateful to Robin Kent for this fascinating insight into conservation.

Introduction

This article is based on a talk given by Robin Kent as part of the RIAS Conservation Accreditation Workshop held at Rutland Square on 22nd March. The aim of the workshop, which was attended by about 25 architects, was to assist those considering applying for accreditation, by developing participants' knowledge and background understanding of conservation principles and their understanding of conservation theory as a basis for decision making. A number of speakers addressed a range of relevant topics and there was also a practical group exercise. The workshop provided participants with tools they will need to submit an application and attendance at such a workshop is strongly encouraged by the RIAS.

The article offers pointers for further study, and highlights areas of the history and philosophy, principles and practice of conservation which are particularly important for practising conservation architects.

History & Philosophy

Historic building conservation is part of the whole sustainability spectrum, alongside environmental conservation and nature conservation, and the conservation of energy and resources. Like them, it is based on the moral imperative of Stewardship.

The main purpose for conserving the built heritage is Identity. Our sense of community depends on memory, history and commemoration. The built heritage gives us a place in time and provides a basis for future decision making.

We need to realise that our view of cultural identity is not universally accepted. It is not, for example, shared by the Islamic State, as can be seen in the destruction of pre-Islamic heritage such as the First century Temple of Baalshamim in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of ancient Palmyra last year. The built heritage carries meanings that can make it as objectionable to some, as it is important to the identity of others.

We are by no means the first to conserve the heritage. There are records of heritage conservation in Ancient Israel and Ancient Greece. The modern interest in conservation dates from the 19th century and was initially a reaction to industrialisation and unsympathetic over-restoration. In the early 19th century Robert Reid (1774 –1856) who, as the King's Architect and Surveyor in Scotland, was the precursor of Historic Scotland suggested an approach to historic monuments in 1829, in which:

'restoration or embellishment should not be the object, but that repairs...should be executed...with the view solely to their preservation, and in effecting that object the less appearance of interference with their present state and construction the better'¹

This approach was later codified in William Morris' (1834-96) famous Manifesto of 1877.² What these conservation pioneers objected to was over-restoration, like that carried out at St Albans Abbey, where the early 19th century conservation work of George Gilbert Scott (1811-1878) was extended in the 1880s by Edmund Beckett, 1st Baron Grimthorpe, resulting in the loss of much of the original medieval fabric.

¹ Fawcett, R, *Report on Works at Dunfermline*, Historic Scotland.

² Manifesto. William Morris, *Manifesto*, Society of the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), 1877.



RIAS | The Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland

The loss of built heritage in the two World Wars again focussed attention on conservation. The iconic picture of St Paul's Cathedral surviving the blitz of 29/30 December 1940 is well known. The Luftwaffe's 'Baedeker Blitz' of April –June 1942 specifically targeted buildings marked with three stars in the Baedeker tourist guidebook, to destroy Britain's heritage. After the Second World War, in 1954, the Hague Convention on the laws of war (1899-1907) was expanded to include the protection of cultural property in armed conflict.

Modern conservation practice is guided by an ever-growing list of charters and other documents. The most important is probably the *Venice Charter* (1964), the introductory paragraph of which is almost a mantra for conservation in the Western world:

'Imbued with a message from the past, the historic monuments of generations of people remain to the present day as living witnesses of their age-old traditions. People are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage. The common responsibility to safeguard them for future generations is recognized. It is our duty to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity.' (Venice Charter³)

To this should be added the *Burra Charter* (1979),⁴ which introduces the idea of cultural significance; the *Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994),⁵ which stresses cultural heritage diversity; English Heritage's *Conservation Principles* (2008),⁶ and BS7913:2013,⁷ which makes significance the basis of all conservation work.

Principles & Practice

There is no single agreed list of conservation principles and processes, but those most commonly encountered can be grouped together under the following headings: Informed Conservation; Minimal Intervention; Reversibility, and Harmony. These are examined further below. Together, they provide practical guidelines for a range of conservation processes. Underpinning them all is the definition of conservation. Here are a few of the best known definitions:

'all acts that prolong the life of our cultural and natural heritage' (Bernard Fielden, 1919-2008) ⁸

Everything which may ensure:

'a continuity of useful life in a durable fabric' (Derek Linstrum, 1923-2009) ⁹

Both of the above were conservation architects. To these definitions can be added:

'all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance' (Burra Charter)
¹⁰

But the most up to date and comprehensive definition of conservation is probably that of English Heritage:

³ Venice Charter. *International Charter for The Conservation and Restoration of Monuments And Sites*, (The Venice Charter) 1964.

⁴ Burra Charter. *The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance*, 1979, 2013.

⁵ Nara Document on Authenticity. <http://www.icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf>.

⁶ Conservation Principles. *Conservation Principles Policies and Guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment*, English Heritage, 2008.

⁷ British Standard BS7913:2013, *Guide to the conservation of historic buildings*, BSI, 2013.

⁸ Fielden, Bernard M. *Conservation of Historic Buildings*, Butterworth, 1982, 3rd ed., Elsevier, 2005, p3.

⁹ Linstrum, D. 'The Principles of Conservation, The York Gospel According to Derek Linstrum.' unpublished paper given at the Centre for Conservation Studies, University of York, 1990, p1.

¹⁰ *Burra Charter*, Article 1.1.



RIAS | The Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland

'the process of managing change to a significant place in its setting in ways that will best sustain, reveal or reinforce its cultural and natural heritage values.'(Conservation Principles)¹¹

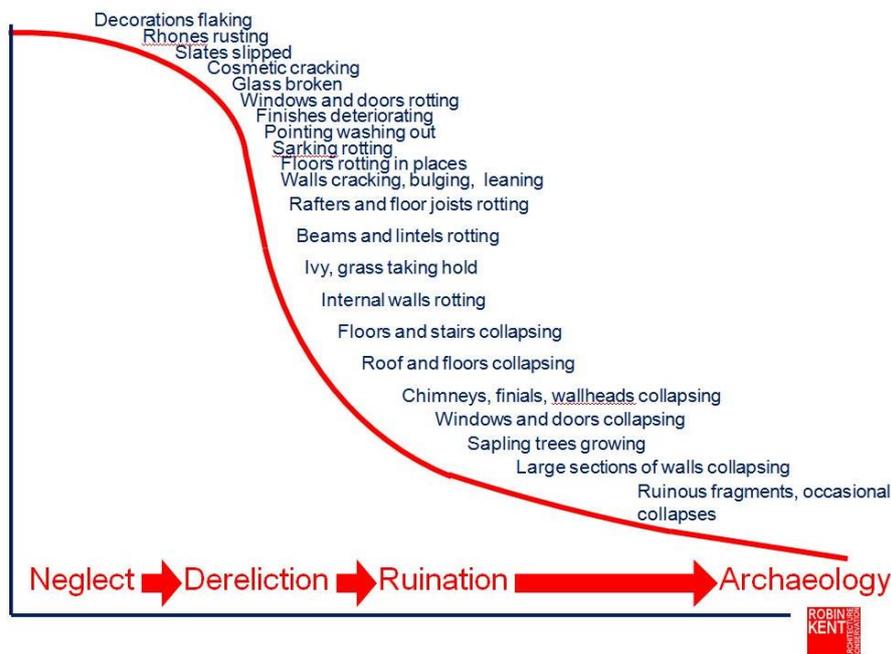
As these quotations show, conservation accepts the need for change. It is not merely preserving historic buildings 'in aspic'. It is not just carrying out work to old buildings, rather, it aims to conserve and enhance their significance. Conservation therefore presents architects with special design challenges.

Informed Conservation

The principle of informed conservation puts the assessment of Significance at the heart of conservation architecture. It requires detailed surveys and analysis, and the preparation of conservation plans and statements. Key guidance for this can be found in Heritage Lottery Fund and English Heritage publications.¹² The conservation architect is concerned with preserving and enhancing the genuine, authentic significance, based on a full and unbiased understanding of the building.

To this should be added the principle of Uniqueness, or individuality, which recognises that every building is different and presents a unique set of problems. There are no fixed rules or universal panaceas in conservation.

Context requires the townscape or landscape setting of the building to be considered. It includes the physical and social, or community setting. It also includes the historic setting, ie the contributions of all its different periods of development. Conservation aims for Sustainability, includes finding appropriate new uses, because these will ensure future maintenance. It is important to remember that conservation work is teamwork and the conservation architect will almost always need to obtain Specialist Advice from a range of other experts in addition to the usual design team, such as archival researchers, materials scientists and archaeologists. Finally, informed conservation requires conservation projects to be properly Recorded, dated, documented and archived to ensure that future conservators are properly informed. If possible, conservation projects should also be published.



The above diagram aims to show, in a very simple way, some of the main building decay mechanisms which conservation work aims to arrest. It shows the natural decline of a building which is not maintained or repaired, going from disuse and neglect, to a derelict building, to a roofless ruin, and eventually returning to the ground as archaeology after a long period of time. (©Robin Kent).

¹¹ Conservation Principles, s.4.2.

¹² Clark, K. Informed Conservation, EH, 2001; Conservation Plans for Historic Places, HLF, 1998.



Minimal intervention

The conservation approach aims to do *'as much as necessary... but as little as possible'*,¹³ to slow down the inevitable process of decay illustrated above, so as to preserve the cultural significance of the building. This is known as Minimal Intervention, or Conservative repair. Didron characterised it as:

*'It is better to consolidate than to repair, better to repair than to restore, better to restore than to rebuild, better to rebuild than to embellish. In no case must anything be added and, above all, nothing must be removed.'*¹⁴

Minimal intervention implies Respect for the existing fabric, including later alterations. It is often called Conservation 'as found'. It should include preserving the stains, leans, bulges and sags that mark the passage of time, and not cleaning them off or smoothing them out, providing they are not causing actual harm: these are the *'patina of age'*¹⁵ and in William Morris's words: *'Age can confer a beauty of its own'*¹⁶ Avoiding unnecessary damage requires an understanding of historic construction, materials and decay processes, to prevent over-zealous repairs. All of this takes time, and conservation work should not be rushed. It is often possible to make unobtrusive changes to correct original details or materials that caused defects. But new materials should always be adapted to the old and not the old adapted to accept the new.

Reversibility

The principle of Reversibility is probably the next most important grouping of principles. It is all too often a response to the damage caused by well-intentioned past conservation efforts, such as the use of over-hard cement mortars for repointing most of our national monuments. To prevent mistakes like this happening in future, conservation interventions need to be capable of being removed without causing damage, acknowledging that a better method or more accurate understanding of the building may be found in the future. Reversibility parallels the precautionary principle of environmental and natural heritage conservation. Instead of experimenting on the irreplaceable resource which is the built heritage, only Tried and tested materials and techniques should be employed. Often these will be Traditional materials, in preference to untried, unpredictable modern innovations, bearing in mind that the service life of historic buildings must be measured in hundreds of years. The use of compatible traditional materials and methods is also referred to as 'Like for like' repairs.

Harmony

The principle of Harmony requires that repairs and replacements should be Sympathetic to the existing appearance. They should be Unobtrusive and integrate harmoniously with the whole. Usually, this means that repairs to historic buildings should be visually Recessive, for example darker in tone than the existing work, so that they do not stand out.

At the same time, repairs and replacements must be Honest and undisguised so that they do not falsify the historic record, for example, artificial aging of any kind can be misleading. But new work should not stick out 'like a sore thumb', it only needs to be identifiable on close inspection,¹⁷ to the expert eye.

Conservation Processes

Building conservation embraces a wide range of processes and it is important that conservation architects use the correct technical terms to describe these, to avoid misunderstandings. The following are a few standard definitions:

Controlled Deterioration, or allowing natural decay to proceed with only limited protection, can be appropriate in some cases, such as ruins. However, health and safety considerations usually make this impractical and some minimal maintenance is usually advisable.

¹³ *Burra Charter*, Preamble.

¹⁴ A N Didron (1806-67), *Bulletin Archeologique*, vol. 1, 1839, n.p.

¹⁵ 'Patina is something that cannot be produced artificially [being] only acquired by time. Patina does not include dirt' (Fielden, pps 249-50).

¹⁶ *Manifesto*.

¹⁷ *Burra Charter*, Article 19.



RIAS | The Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland

Maintenance, based on condition inspections is the foundation of all conservation practice. BS7913 recommends regular, four or five-yearly professional inspections as the basis of planned preventive maintenance and minor repairs.¹⁸ An assessment of condition almost always precedes the design of interventions and the future maintenance needs of conserved historic buildings also need to be considered.

Indirect Conservation by controlling the environment, or forming separate Protection such as flashings or roofs to protect buildings or features that are specially vulnerable or delicate, may be preferable to damaging interventions. This calls for considerable sensitivity and design skill.

Repairs usually involve Replacing failed elements, such as repointing hungry joints. The durability of repairs needs to be balanced against the potential loss of existing fabric. Carrying out less durable repairs may preserve more historic fabric but require more maintenance.

Renewal or Renovation include, for example, replacing failed roof coverings. Like repairs, they should be limited to what is strictly necessary.

Restoration is the process of bringing back a building to its past appearance. It should always be based on firm evidence and must not stray into conjecture. It is not mentioned in BS7913:2013, which prefers to call it Reinstatement (though it was defined in the original, 1998 version). The Burra Charter calls it Reconstruction if missing elements are recreated, illustrating the vagaries of conservation definitions.¹⁹

Adaptive Reuse is the process of Altering a historic building to suit a new use. If it involves loss of historic fabric, then judgements will need to be made as to how far this can go without undermining significance. But conservation is positive about new uses and innovative architectural design interventions, providing they are properly informed and justified by conservation principles.

Extensions and Additions are also viewed positively, providing they do not detract from the significance of the building and its relationship with its surroundings. Conservation architects can often make positive design contributions which enhance the heritage.

Two recent projects show the contrasting approaches which are possible in conservation work:

On the one hand is the very thorough and scholarly restoration of Stirling Castle Great Hall as a tourist attraction by Historic Scotland in the 1990s. This project swept away the evidence of its conversion to a Hanoverian barrack block and recreated the building as it was assumed to have appeared when James IV completed it in the early sixteenth century. On the other, is the proposed restoration, also in the 1990s, of Castle Tioram in Loch Moidart. Burnt by its owner, Clan Chief Allan of Clanranald in 1715 to deny it to Hanoverian troops, a proposal to restore it as a home for its new owner was refused consent in 2001 so that the ruin could remain as a landscape feature despite being closed to the public due to falling masonry.

Both of these approaches reflected the rigorous application of conservation principles, illustrating something of the broad range of possibilities which are available to conservation architects.

Conclusion

This brief introductory article is only designed to offer a flavour of conservation philosophy, history, principles and practice. The additional skill and experience which are required for conservation accreditation reflect the fact that architects working in the field of heritage conservation are concerned not only with the constraints of design in three dimensions but with the fourth dimension of time. As well as serving the client, the conservation architect has to balance a wide range of often conflicting constraints, and be a faithful custodian of our shared cultural identity.

© Robin Kent
28 June 2016

www.robinkent.co.uk

Further reading and links

Brereton, C. *The Repair of Historic Buildings-Advice on principles and methods*, Aspects of Conservation 3. English Heritage, 1991.

¹⁸ BS7913:2013, Annex B.

¹⁹ BS7913:2013, s.6.17; *Burra Charter*, Articles 17-19.



RIAS | The Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland

Bell, D. *Guide to International Conservation Charters*, Historic Scotland TAN 8, 1997.

English Heritage. *Practical Building Conservation*, vols. 1-5, English Heritage Technical Handbooks, 2012.

Erder, C. *Our Architectural Heritage: From Consciousness to Conservation*, tr. A. Bakkalcioglu, Paris, Unesco, 1986.

Glendinning, M. *The Conservation Movement: A History of Architectural Preservation*, Routledge, 2013.

Jokilehto, J. *A History of Architectural Conservation*, 1999, Routledge, Oxon, 2013.

www.rias.org.uk/services/conservation/

www.understandingconservation.org

www.buildingconservation.com

www.historicenvironment.scot

www.historicengland.org.uk

www.hlf.org.uk

www.ahfund.org.uk

www.icomos.org

Note:

If you want to be notified of the next RIAS Conservation Accreditation Workshop or be included on the waiting list, please contact Elaine.Dobie@rias.org.uk. Numbers will be strictly limited.

While all reasonable care and skill has been taken to ensure the accuracy of all information contained in practice information, the Royal Incorporation cannot be held responsible for any errors and omissions. The views expressed in articles contributed by individual authors are not necessarily the views of the Royal Incorporation.