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ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites

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The ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites

Reviewed and revised under the Auspices of
the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee
on Interpretation and Presentation

Ratified by the 16th General Assembly of ICOMOS
Quebec, Canada

4 October 2008

Preamble

Definitions

Objectives

Principles

PREAMBLE

Since its establishment in 1965 as a worldwide organisation of heritage professionals dedicated to the study, documentation, and protection of cultural heritage sites, ICOMOS has striven to promote the conservation ethic in all its activities and to help enhance public appreciation of humanity's material heritage in all its forms and diversity.

As noted in the Charter of Venice (1964) "It is essential that the principles guiding the preservation and restoration of ancient buildings should be agreed and be laid down on an international basis, with each country being responsible for applying the plan within the framework of its own culture and traditions." Subsequent ICOMOS charters have taken up that mission, establishing professional guidelines for specific conservation challenges and encouraging effective communication about the importance of heritage conservation in every region of the world.

These earlier ICOMOS charters stress the importance of public communication as an essential part of the larger conservation process (variously describing it as "dissemination," "popularization," "presentation," and "interpretation"). They implicitly acknowledge that every act of heritage conservation—within all the world's cultural traditions - is by its nature a communicative act.

From the vast range of surviving material remains and intangible values of past communities and civilisations, the choice of what to preserve, how to preserve it, and how it is to be presented to the public are all elements of site interpretation. They represent every generation's vision of what is significant, what is important, and why material remains from the past should be passed on to generations yet to come.

The need for a clear rationale, standardised terminology, and accepted professional principles for Interpretation and Presentation* is evident. In recent years, the dramatic expansion of interpretive activities at many cultural heritage sites and the introduction

* See definitions on page 3.

of elaborate interpretive technologies and new economic strategies for the marketing and management of cultural heritage sites have created new complexities and aroused basic questions that are central to the goals of both conservation and the public appreciation of cultural heritage sites throughout the world:

-- What are the accepted and acceptable goals for the Interpretation and Presentation of cultural heritage sites?
-- What principles should help determine which technical means and methods are appropriate in particular cultural and heritage contexts?
-- What general ethical and professional considerations should help shape Interpretation and Presentation in light of its wide variety of specific forms and techniques?

The purpose of this Charter is therefore to define the basic principles of Interpretation and Presentation as essential components of heritage conservation efforts and as a means of enhancing public appreciation and understanding of cultural heritage sites*.

* Although the principles and objectives of this Charter may equally apply to off-site interpretation, its main focus is interpretation and presentation at, or in the immediate vicinity of, cultural heritage sites.

DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of the present Charter,

Interpretation refers to the full range of potential activities intended to heighten public awareness and enhance understanding of cultural heritage site. These can include print and electronic publications, public lectures, on-site and directly related off-site installations, educational programmes, community activities, and ongoing research, training, and evaluation of the interpretation process itself.

Presentation more specifically denotes the carefully planned communication of interpretive content through the arrangement of interpretive information, physical access, and interpretive infrastructure at a cultural heritage site. It can be conveyed through a variety of technical means, including, yet not requiring, such elements as informational panels, museum-type displays, formalized walking tours, lectures and guided tours, and multimedia applications and websites.

Interpretive infrastructure refers to physical installations, facilities, and areas at, or connected with a cultural heritage site that may be specifically utilised for the purposes of interpretation and presentation including those supporting interpretation via new and existing technologies.

Site interpreters refers to staff or volunteers at a cultural heritage site who are permanently or temporarily engaged in the public communication of information relating to the values and significance of the site.

Cultural Heritage Site refers to a place, locality, natural landscape, settlement area, architectural complex, archaeological site, or standing structure that is recognized and often legally protected as a place of historical and cultural significance.

OBJECTIVES

In recognizing that interpretation and presentation are part of the overall process of cultural heritage conservation and management, this Charter seeks to establish seven cardinal principles, upon which Interpretation and Presentation—in whatever form or medium is deemed appropriate in specific circumstances—should be based.

Principle 1: Access and Understanding
Principle 2: Information Sources
Principle 3: Attention to Setting and Context
Principle 4: Preservation of Authenticity
Principle 5: Planning for Sustainability
Principle 6: Concern for Inclusiveness
Principle 7: Importance of Research, Training, and Evaluation

Following from these seven principles, the objectives of this Charter are to:

1. **Facilitate understanding and appreciation** of cultural heritage sites and foster public awareness and engagement in the need for their protection and conservation.

2. **Communicate the meaning** of cultural heritage sites to a range of audiences through careful, documented recognition of significance, through accepted scientific and scholarly methods as well as from living cultural traditions.

3. **Safeguard the tangible and intangible values** of cultural heritage sites in their natural and cultural settings and social contexts.

4. **Respect the authenticity** of cultural heritage sites, by communicating the significance of their historic fabric and cultural values and protecting them from the adverse impact of intrusive interpretive infrastructure, visitor pressure, inaccurate or inappropriate interpretation.

5. **Contribute to the sustainable conservation** of cultural heritage sites, through promoting public understanding of, and participation in, ongoing conservation efforts, ensuring long-term maintenance of the interpretive infrastructure and regular review of its interpretive contents.

6. **Encourage inclusiveness** in the interpretation of cultural heritage sites, by facilitating the involvement of stakeholders and associated communities in the development and implementation of interpretive programmes.

7. **Develop technical and professional guidelines** for heritage interpretation and presentation, including technologies, research, and training. Such guidelines must be appropriate and sustainable in their social contexts.

PRINCIPLES

Principle 1: Access and Understanding

Interpretation and presentation programmes should facilitate physical and intellectual access by the public to cultural heritage sites.

1.1 Effective interpretation and presentation should enhance personal experience, increase public respect and understanding, and communicate the importance of the conservation of cultural heritage sites.

1.2 Interpretation and presentation should encourage individuals and communities to reflect on their own perceptions of a site and assist them in establishing a meaningful connection to it. The aim should be to stimulate further interest, learning, experience, and exploration.

1.3 Interpretation and presentation programmes should identify and assess their audiences demographically and culturally. Every effort should be made to communicate the site's values and significance to its varied audiences.

1.4 The diversity of language among visitors and associated communities connected with a heritage site should be taken into account in the interpretive infrastructure.

1.5 Interpretation and presentation activities should also be physically accessible to the public, in all its variety.

1.6 In cases where physical access to a cultural heritage site is restricted due to conservation concerns, cultural sensitivities, adaptive re-use, or safety issues, interpretation and presentation should be provided off-site.

Principle 2: Information Sources

Interpretation and presentation should be based on evidence gathered through accepted scientific and scholarly methods as well as from living cultural traditions.

2.1 Interpretation should show the range of oral and written information, material remains, traditions, and meanings attributed to a site. The sources of this information should be documented, archived, and made accessible to the public.

2.2 Interpretation should be based on a well researched, multidisciplinary study of the site and its surroundings. It should also acknowledge that meaningful interpretation necessarily includes reflection on alternative historical hypotheses, local traditions, and stories.

2.3 At cultural heritage sites where traditional storytelling or memories of historical participants provide an important source of information about the significance of the site, interpretive programmes should incorporate these oral testimonies—either indirectly, through the facilities of the interpretive infrastructure, or directly, through the active participation of members of associated communities as on-site interpreters.

2.4 Visual reconstructions, whether by artists, architects, or computer modelers, should be based upon detailed and systematic analysis of environmental, archaeological, architectural, and historical data, including analysis of written, oral and iconographic sources, and photography. The information sources on which such visual renderings are based should be clearly documented and alternative reconstructions based on the same evidence, when available, should be provided for comparison.

2.5 Interpretation and presentation programmes and activities should also be documented and archived for future reference and reflection.

Principle 3: Context and Setting

The Interpretation and Presentation of cultural heritage sites should relate to their wider social, cultural, historical, and natural contexts and settings.

3.1 Interpretation should explore the significance of a site in its multi-faceted historical, political, spiritual, and artistic contexts. It should consider all aspects of the site's cultural, social, and environmental significance and values.

3.2 The public interpretation of a cultural heritage site should clearly distinguish and date the successive phases and influences in its evolution. The contributions of all periods to the significance of a site should be respected.

3.3 Interpretation should also take into account all groups that have contributed to the historical and cultural significance of the site.

3.4 The surrounding landscape, natural environment, and geographical setting are integral parts of a site's historical and cultural significance, and, as such, should be considered in its interpretation.

3.5 Intangible elements of a site's heritage such as cultural and spiritual traditions, stories, music, dance, theater, literature, visual arts, local customs and culinary heritage should be considered in its interpretation.

3.6 The cross-cultural significance of heritage sites, as well as the range of perspectives about them based on scholarly research, ancient records, and living traditions, should be considered in the formulation of interpretive programmes.

Principle 4: Authenticity

The Interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage sites must respect the basic tenets of authenticity in the spirit of the Nara Document (1994).

4.1 Authenticity is a concern relevant to human communities as well as material remains. The design of a heritage interpretation programme should respect the traditional social functions of the site and the cultural practices and dignity of local residents and associated communities.

4.2 Interpretation and presentation should contribute to the conservation of the authenticity of a cultural heritage site by communicating its significance without adversely impacting its cultural values or irreversibly altering its fabric.

4.3 All visible interpretive infrastructures (such as kiosks, walking paths, and information panels) must be sensitive to the character, setting and the cultural and natural significance of the site, while remaining easily identifiable.

4.4 On-site concerts, dramatic performances, and other interpretive programmes must be carefully planned to protect the significance and physical surroundings of the site and minimise disturbance to the local residents.

Principle 5: Sustainability

The interpretation plan for a cultural heritage site must be sensitive to its natural and cultural environment, with social, financial, and environmental sustainability among its central goals.

5.1 The development and implementation of interpretation and presentation programmes should be an integral part of the overall planning, budgeting, and management process of cultural heritage sites.

5.2 The potential effect of interpretive infrastructure and visitor numbers on the cultural value, physical characteristics, integrity, and natural environment of the site must be fully considered in heritage impact assessment studies.

5.3 Interpretation and presentation should serve a wide range of conservation, educational and cultural objectives. The success of an interpretive programme should not be evaluated solely on the basis of visitor attendance figures or revenue.

5.4 Interpretation and presentation should be an integral part of the conservation process, enhancing the public's awareness of specific conservation problems encountered at the site and explaining the efforts being taken to protect the site's physical integrity and authenticity.

5.5 Any technical or technological elements selected to become a permanent part of a site's interpretive infrastructure should be designed and constructed in a manner that will ensure effective and regular maintenance.

5.6 Interpretive programmes should aim to provide equitable and sustainable economic, social, and cultural benefits to all stakeholders through education, training and employment opportunities in site interpretation programmes.

Principle 6: Inclusiveness

The Interpretation and Presentation of cultural heritage sites must be the result of meaningful collaboration between heritage professionals, host and associated communities, and other stakeholders.

6.1 The multidisciplinary expertise of scholars, community members, conservation experts, governmental authorities, site managers and interpreters, tourism operators, and other professionals should be integrated in the formulation of interpretation and presentation programmes.

6.2 The traditional rights, responsibilities, and interests of property owners and host and associated communities should be noted and respected in the planning of site interpretation and presentation programmes.

6.3 Plans for expansion or revision of interpretation and presentation programmes should be open for public comment and involvement. It is the right and responsibility of all to make their opinions and perspectives known.

6.4 Because the question of intellectual property and traditional cultural rights is especially relevant to the interpretation process and its expression in various communication media (such as on-site multimedia presentations, digital media, and printed materials), legal ownership and right to use images, texts, and other interpretive materials should be discussed, clarified, and agreed in the planning process.

Principle 7: Research, Training, and Evaluation

Continuing research, training, and evaluation are essential components of the interpretation of a cultural heritage site.

7.1 The interpretation of a cultural heritage site should not be considered to be completed with the completion of a specific interpretive infrastructure. Continuing research and consultation are important to furthering the understanding and appreciation of a site's significance. Regular review should be an integral element in every heritage interpretation programme.

7.2 The interpretive programme and infrastructure should be designed and constructed in a way that facilitates ongoing content revision and/or expansion.

7.3 Interpretation and presentation programmes and their physical impact on a site should be continuously monitored and evaluated, and periodic changes made on the basis of both scientific and scholarly analysis and public feedback. Visitors and members of associated communities as well as heritage professionals should be involved in this evaluation process.

7.4 Every interpretation programme should be considered as an educational resource for people of all ages. Its design should take into account its possible uses in school curricula, informal and lifelong learning programmes, communications and information media, special activities, events, and seasonal volunteer involvement.

7.5 The training of qualified professionals in the specialised fields of heritage interpretation and presentation, such as content creation, management, technology, guiding, and education, is a crucial objective. In addition, basic academic conservation programmes should include a component on interpretation and presentation in their courses of study.

7.6 On-site training programmes and courses should be developed with the objective of updating and informing heritage and interpretation staff of all levels and associated and host communities of recent developments and innovations in the field.

7.7 International cooperation and sharing of experience are essential to developing and maintaining standards in interpretation methods and technologies. To that end, international conferences, workshops and exchanges of professional staff as well as national and regional meetings should be encouraged. These will provide an opportunity for the regular sharing of information about the diversity of interpretive approaches and experiences in various regions and cultures.