Process Not Product: The ICOMOS Ename Charter (2008) and the Practice of Heritage Stewardship

by Neil Silberman

The ratification of the ICOMOS Ename Charter on the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites[1] has potentially far-reaching implications for the development of international heritage policy. Through the adoption of this charter, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) —for the first time since its establishment as an international professional organization and UNESCO advisory body in 1965—specifically addressed the social, economic, and educational dimensions of heritage interpretation. It did so by defining public heritage interpretation not merely as the communication of factual scientific, artistic, or historical data about archeological sites, cultural landscapes, and historic buildings—but as a complex public exercise of historical reflection among *many* stakeholders, characterized by a concern for open access, sustainability, and inclusiveness. In a word, the new charter defined interpretation not as a particular performance, narrative, or script but as an ongoing process of relating to the past.

While earlier ICOMOS charters[2] had dealt with the subject of heritage interpretation, they had done so in very general terms, seeing it as the "public face" of specialized archeological research, highly technical conservation efforts, and academic historical analysis. Moreover, the earlier charters used inconsistent terminology, variously describing public heritage communication as "dissemination," "popularization," "presentation," and "interpretation," never explicitly defining what any of these terms meant.

A more systematic approach to this subject was clearly needed: in an age of evermore pervasive digital media with a growing tide of cultural tourism in every region of the world, the public communication of information about ancient sites and historical monuments was becoming evermore elaborate, vivid, and entertainment-oriented. Many important heritage sites in every region of the world were coming to embody the physical form of multimedia theme parks. At the same time, at the other end of the spectrum, the public interpretation of more traditional heritage sites, consisting only of bare facts, dates, and figures, was increasingly criticized as being "out of touch" with 21st-century educational and social realities. Recognizing this huge and growing gap between heritage-as-leisure and heritage-as-cultural-lesson, an initiative began within ICOMOS to formulate an international consensus about the direction towards which heritage interpretation should develop. Yet in light of the diversity of linguistic, religious, and cultural differences among the

ICOMOS National Committees, there was never any attempt to dictate interpretive content or to insist on any particular narrative, educational, or technological forms.

Through the next six and a half years, after three complete review cycles of ICOMOS national and international scientific committees, countless comments and suggestions submitted by individual ICOMOS members and outside experts, and seven successive drafts of the charter, its text gradually evolved from a primary concern with interpretation's relationship to research, management, tourism, and education to the central role of interpretation in the planning, management, and wider community activities surrounding a cultural heritage site.[3] Although the terms "presentation" and "interpretation" had often been taken as synonyms, the charter explicitly distinguishes between the two. It defines "presentation" as "the carefully planned arrangement of information and physical access to a cultural heritage site, usually by scholars, design firms, and heritage professionals." As such, it is largely a one-way mode of communication from experts or professionals to the public at large.

Although professionals and scholars would continue to play important roles in the process of interpretation, the input and involvement of visitors, local and associated community groups, and other stakeholders of various ages and educational backgrounds was, by the charter, seen as essential to transforming cultural heritage sites from static monuments into sources of learning and reflection about the past, as well as valuable resources for sustainable community development.

"Interpretation," on the other hand, was seen by the contributors to the charter to denote the totality of activity, reflection, research, and creativity stimulated by a cultural heritage site. In a word, "interpretation" was seen as an ongoing process—both a personal and collective activity that could and should be carried out by everyone, layperson and expert, child or adult, local resident and outside tourist alike. Although professionals and scholars would continue to play important roles in the process of interpretation, the input and involvement of visitors, local and associated community groups, and other stakeholders of various ages and educational backgrounds was, by the charter, seen as essential to transforming cultural heritage sites from static monuments into sources of learning and reflection about the past, as well as valuable resources for sustainable community development.

In its final form, the charter highlighted seven distinct principles seen as essential to this wider interpretive involvement in heritage and conservation activities: (1) Promoting Access and Understanding; (2) Reliable, Broad-based

Information Sources; (3) Attention to Setting and Context; (4) Preservation of Authenticity; (5) Planning for Sustainability; (6) Concern for Inclusiveness; (7) Importance of Research, Training, and Evaluation. Yet in attempting to accommodate the wide range of regional, linguistic, and cultural perspectives within ICOMOS and the rest of the international heritage community, the basic principles articulated in the charter necessarily remained quite abstract.

The challenge of the next phase of work is therefore to anticipate the consequences of the implementation of each of the principles and to recognize that each of them have the potential of being either a great opportunity or a dangerous Pandora's Box. Indeed, the real value of the newly ratified charter to the practice of heritage stewardship may not only be the principles it proclaims but the questions it begs—and the opportunity for continuing policy development and elaboration it provides.

Principle 1: **Access and Understanding. Open and Easy or Difficult and Closed?**

The first principle of the charter stresses the importance of access to cultural heritage resources, by the general public, in all its physical, linguistic, cultural, and intellectual diversity. It urges that cultural heritage sites offer no less accessibility than other public places, and that the opportunity to enjoy and benefit from heritage resources be available to all.

Yet the charter clearly highlights the cases where public access to a cultural heritage site is *not* desirable, among them, in cases of physical danger, property restrictions, conservation concerns, and cultural sensitivities. In each of these cases the assumption is that access to, and understanding of the site, is obstructed only by special circumstances. In all of these cases, it is recommended that "interpretation and preservation be provided offsite." Yet are all sites of cultural heritage fair game to become public cultural heritage sites?

Do the sacred places of religious groups, kinship associations, or private places of mourning and burial necessarily need to provide public access to the general public? The solution in many places of worship, such as churches, mosques, and synagogues has been to restrict visitation at times of religious ritual and to require decorum in other times as well. But what of the cases, like Uluru/Ayers Rock in Australia and medieval Jewish cemeteries in Spain and Eastern Europe, where associated groups have opposed their use as public cultural heritage sites at all? What is the right of associated communities to refuse to explain or even reveal their customs to curious visitors? The charter, having placed the issue of interpretive access on the international heritage agenda, provides an opportunity to further reflect upon and elaborate the ethical and philosophical dimensions of public interpretive access.

Principle 2: **Information Sources. What If They Contradict Each Other?**

Another of the central principles of the charter is the importance of using a wide variety of information sources, encompassing both empirical scholarship and living traditions, including all types of tangible and intangible evidence. The motivation for this principle is obvious: traditional site presentation was based on an academic or professional sensibility that stressed seemingly objective, factual, and historical aspects, implicitly avoiding emotion and subjectivity. Of course that was never entirely true; there were always subjective and emotional subtexts in every site presentation, and in recent years the critique of the myth of scholarly objectivity in history and heritage has become a common academic theme.

In the past several decades, subjectivity and individual perspectives have become recognized as legitimate and valuable sources of historical knowledge and interpretive content, first through the rise of the oral history movement within public history and the increasing use of personal narratives in heritage and later with the recognition of the importance of the performance of intangible cultural heritage traditions of indigenous and traditional communities, as officially promoted by the 2003 UNESCO Convention.[4]

But how should one deal with traditional creation stories, or tales of the ancestors when geology and archeological investigation has shown them to be literary and poetic rather than factual? What happens when rival communities' memories discredit each other's political claims? How can interpretation address these conflicts of information sources and meaning without implicitly discrediting one version or creating a new globalized Ur-mythology? The conflicts of different world views are sometimes not amenable to conciliation; they represent different living systems and living orders expressed in the language of the past. Thus another significant challenge connected with the charter is not only to recognize the need for a wide range of information and information sources, but also to develop techniques to establish programmatic frameworks in which differing visions about the very same sites can be productively discussed. Acknowledging the full range of information about a particular site is only the beginning. And the next step, inspired by the charter, is to recognize that interpretation is not just communication about heritage resources; it is fully entangled with contemporary landscapes, communities, and civic life.

Principle 3: **Attention to Context and Setting. Where Are the Boundaries?**

No heritage site is an island, and the charter emphasizes the need to interpret (and help conserve) every site's full range of environmental, chronological, and cultural contexts. From the inception of the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention, attention to environmental considerations and the more prosaic

and practical requirement of a buffer zone around every World Heritage property has helped to encourage the recognition of each site's wider context. Throughout Principle 3, the charter advocates an approach that broadens connections with nature, history, associated communities, intangible heritage aspects, and even cross-cultural significance. These recommendations clearly indicate a movement away from essentializing schools of heritage interpretation, where one period or culture is exclusively highlighted as an aesthetic or patriotic icon. Of course it is also possible to go too far in the opposite direction, with interpretation becoming so broad and encyclopedic that the site's distinctive sense of place or specific cultural contribution is lost.

For even if cultural heritage sites are interpreted in the widest possible environmental and historical contexts, they can still be regarded by modern visitors and residents as isolated enclaves, intentionally taken out of place and time. This is true not only for discrete monuments with perimeter fences and ticket booths, but also for historic town centers and cultural landscapes if they are too consciously set apart from daily life.

The determination of the boundary between universal and particular is to a certain extent a matter of cultural preference, yet the general recommendations of the charter need to be elaborated in more detail. In addition, there is another dimension of the context and setting of cultural heritage sites that needs to be recognized: their place as a part of a living, evolving contemporary landscape—and a factor in the lives of contemporary communities. For even if cultural heritage sites are interpreted in the widest possible environmental and historical contexts, they can still be regarded by modern visitors and residents as isolated enclaves, intentionally taken out of place and time. This is true not only for discrete monuments with perimeter fences and ticket booths, but also for historic town centers and cultural landscapes if they are too consciously set apart from daily life.

The search for ways that applied research and the celebration of cherished traditions can combine or co-exist to create a real sense of connectedness between modern concerns and ancient achievements (and tragedies) needs to be developed and deepened, as Little and Shackel have clearly pointed out.[5] The charter expresses a similar international consensus that the link between past and present, between conservation and the wider public interest must necessarily be communicated more effectively through interpretive programs. The challenge that lies ahead is to integrate that insight into the day-to-day practice of heritage as embodied in existing legislation and policy.

Principle 4: **Preservation of Authenticity. What is it exactly?**

However universally the quality of "authenticity" is prized and praised in the heritage community, its precise definition and qualities still eludes us all. It might have been easier and clearer for the charter to contain a principle condemning "inauthenticity," for it is often easier to identify sites and interpretations that are demonstrably inaccurate, fraudulent, or phony than to define what authenticity actually is.

Proactively conserving authenticity is a more difficult matter, however, for the general theoretical concept of where heritage significance or "authenticity" resides has been dramatically shifting over the past half-century. As Gustavo Araoz has pointed out[6], the implicit intention of the Venice Charter was to ensure that original fabric—that is, ancient or significant material remains—is the main index and embodiment of heritage authenticity. Yet the post-Venice discussions at Nara[7] and the 2003 UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage[8] have shifted the locus of significance and authenticity of an element (tangible or intangible) of cultural heritage to its meaningfulness as an expression of identity or connectedness by living or associated communities. Thus the shift has been to the social and cultural significance from the *thing*. Yet it is clear that in the years to come, interpretation activities in their full social context of living significance, rather than academic or commemorative interest, must help define further the characteristics of this elusive concept.

Principle 5: **Planning for Sustainability. Making It More than a Slogan**

As already mentioned, the utter *unsustainability* of so many heritage interpretation and presentation programs was one of the prime motivating factors for the charter initiative. Quite beyond the serious questions of reliable, meaningful, and authentic communication, interpretation at cultural heritage sites had suffered in recent years from extravagant investments made with unrealistic expectations of visitation, or, alternatively, from shrinking public budgets and insufficient visitor appeal. Heritage conservation absolutely depends on long-term sustainability; without it the sites themselves would steadily deteriorate and cease to exist. Interpretation and presentation obviously play an important role in communicating the significance of the sites and their conservation, yet with the increasing use of more expensive and complex digital technologies at cultural heritage sites (for example, Virtual Reality, interactive multimedia applications, and 3-D computer reconstructions) interpretation and presentation have themselves often come to represent a significant part of a cultural heritage site's budget.

The charter's Principle 5 stresses the need to incorporate interpretive planning in the overall budgeting and management process, and to calculate the

possible impact of interpretation programs (and increased visitation) on the sustainability of the site. The development of effective impact assessment is of course tied to the collection of reliable data and that is clearly an area where the charter could encourage further research. All too often, the design and expenditure for elaborate interpretation and presentation programs is directed toward a site's opening day. New tools are needed to monitor not only visitor experience and visitor satisfaction with interpretive programs, but also to measure quantitatively as well as qualitatively the relation between investment and (visitor) income; to anticipate the likely visitation rates at specific sites (according to their geographical location and transportation infrastructure); and to project what the "invisible" costs to the local community of increased traffic, sanitary facilities, and trash removal might be.

Indeed the creation of "sustainable" interpretation and presentation programs must begin to be seen as an important factor in the cultural economics of heritage. Having established this principle as an accepted element of international heritage policy, the charter can serve as a rationale for quantitative studies and further policy development.

Principle 6:   **Concern for Inclusiveness. Who Should Control the Past?**

The conventional understanding of interpretive inclusiveness is the representation of a wide variety of stories and historical communities in the explanation or discussion of a cultural heritage site. The charter is somewhat unconventional in that it has placed the issue of broad historical representation in the principle dedicated to "Context and Setting," and focusing the principle of "Inclusiveness" on the participation of contemporary communities in shaping and refining interpretive programs. This brings us back to the charter's basic distinction between "Interpretation" and "Presentation," in which the emphasis in the former is placed on active participation by experts and general public alike. That participation should not be restricted to the final, fully formulated interpretive program but should also include the public discussion and decisions on issues of content and significance.

As in the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society[9] *rights* to cultural heritage must be balanced against *responsibilities* to manage, conserve, and communicate. Contemporary individuals and groups with special connections to cultural heritage resources should play a part in the ongoing work of interpretation. That is not to say that heritage professionals should have no role in the process; on the contrary their challenge is rather to act in an essential facilitating capacity. How and in what legal or policy framework that should happen is a matter for future discussion and experimentation, but as the charter stresses, contemporary communities' rights should be respected and their opinions and input sought in both the formulation and the eventual revision of interpretive programs. The issues

of intellectual property rights, legal ownership, and the right to use images, texts, and other interpretive content are important new areas of community involvement, economic potential, and civic responsibility.

The challenge is to construct practical legal and professional frameworks to empower a wide range of memory communities, while ensuring equal access and participation for all.

Principle 4: **Research, Training, and Evaluation. Interpretation as Process, not Product**

The last of the charter's principles—no less than this viewpoint article itself—stresses the work that still remains to be done. In recommending continuing evaluation and revision of both infrastructure and content, the charter recognizes the dynamic dimension of heritage as an evolving cultural activity, not as a timeless truth defined once and for all. This is clearly acknowledged in the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, where its central definition stresses how this heritage "transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity."[10] That is the sense in which interpretation can serve as both an educational and cultural undertaking. And in order for it to do so, the charter's recommendations for training courses, involvement of local community members as site interpreters, and the constant international exchange of interpretive expertise constitute a concrete agenda for the work that lies ahead.

Conclusion

The ratification of the ICOMOS Ename Charter on the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites indeed may mark a new stage in the development of heritage policy. Drawing on the important insights and practical experience of a wide range of scholars and the ICOMOS National and Scientific Committees, it has set forth a group of social and professional standards that transcend the specifics of any particular national or cultural framework for heritage conservation. But the drafting and ratification of the charter was indeed just a beginning. Its importance to the practice of heritage stewardship is the process of continuing reflection it has the potential to stimulate—both within ICOMOS and the larger community of heritage stewardship all over the world.

Neil Silberman is President of the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Interpretation and Presentation (ICIP) and Coordinator of Projects and Policy Initiatives at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Center for Heritage and Society. He can be reached at **icomos**-icip@mailman.ucmerced.edu.

Notes

1 The text of this charter, ratified on October 4, 2008 at the 16th General Assembly of ICOMOS in Quebec, Canada, can be found at http://icip.icomos.org/downloads/ICOMOS_Interpretation_ Charter_ENG_04_10_08.pdf. Its name combines the name of its sponsoring organization with the name of a village and archeological park in East-Flanders, Belgium, where, at the Ename Center for Public Archaeology and Heritage Presentation, the interpretation charter initiative began. For a detailed chronology of the charter initiative, see http://www.enamecharter.org/ downloads/Interpretation%20Charter%20Chronology_EN.pdf

2 The texts of all ICOMOS charters, guidelines, principles, and declarations can be found at http:// www.international.icomos.org/charters.htm

3 The successive drafts of the interpretation charter can be found at http://www.enamecharter. org/downloads.html

4 http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=EN&pg=home

5 For archeology, see *Archaeology as a Tool of Civic Engagement*. eds, Barbara J. Little and Paul A. Shackel, (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007).

6 Gustavo Araoz, "Lost in the Labyrinth: Mapping the Path to Where Heritage Significance Lies," in *Interpreting the Past V/1: The Future of Heritage*, eds. Neil Silberman and Claudia Liuzza (Brussels: Flemish Heritage Institute, 2007), 7-20.

7 Knut Einar Larsen, ed. *Nara Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention* (Trondheim, Norway : Tapir Publishers, 1995).

8 http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php

9 http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/Conventions/Heritage/faro_en.asp

10 Article 2.1