

# ICOMOS–Ename Charter for the Interpretation of Cultural Heritage Sites

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## Preamble

Just as the Venice Charter established the principle that the protection of the extant fabric of a cultural heritage site is essential to its conservation, it is now equally acknowledged that Interpretation<sup>1</sup> of the meaning of sites is an integral part of the conservation process and fundamental to positive conservation outcomes.

A significant number of charters, principles, and guidelines, including the ICOMOS Charter for the Protection and Management of the Archaeological Heritage (1990), the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), the Burra Charter (1999), the ICOMOS International Charter on Cultural Tourism (1999), and the Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China (2002), have emphasized the fundamental role of sensitive and effective interpretation in heritage conservation.

The aim of this Charter is to define the basic objectives and principles of site interpretation in relation to authenticity, intellectual integrity, social responsibility, and respect for cultural significance and context. It recognizes that the interpretation of cultural heritage sites can be contentious and should acknowledge conflicting perspectives, and their open and honest recognition can significantly enrich contemporary reflections about the significance of heritage.

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

The Charter seeks to encourage a wide public appreciation of cultural heritage sites as places and sources of learning and reflection about the past, as well as valuable resources for sustainable community development and intercultural and intergenerational dialogue.

## Objectives

This charter seeks to establish principles of cultural heritage interpretation in order to:

- **Facilitate understanding and appreciation** of cultural heritage sites and foster public awareness of the need for their conservation. The effective interpretation of heritage sites across the world can be an important medium for intercultural and intergenerational exchange and mutual understanding.
- **Communicate the meaning** of cultural heritage sites through careful, documented

recognition of their significance, including their tangible and intangible values, natural and cultural setting, social context, and physical fabric.

- **Respect the authenticity** of cultural heritage sites, by protecting their natural and cultural values and significant fabric from the adverse impact of physical alterations or intrusive interpretive infrastructure.
- **Contribute to the sustainable conservation** of cultural heritage sites, through effective financial planning and/or the encouragement of economic activities that safeguard conservation efforts, enhance the quality of life of the host community, and ensure long-term maintenance and updating of the interpretive infrastructure.
- **Ensure inclusiveness** in the interpretation of cultural heritage sites, by fostering the productive involvement of all stakeholders and associated communities in the development and implementation of interpretive programs.
- **Develop technical and professional standards** for heritage interpretation, including technologies, research, and training. These standards must be appropriate and sustainable in their social contexts.

## Principles

**Principle 1: Access and Understanding.** *The appreciation of cultural heritage sites is a universal right.<sup>2</sup> The public discussion of their significance should be facilitated by effective, sustainable Interpretation, involving a wide range of associated communities, as well as visitor and stakeholder groups.*

- 1.1 The primary purpose of interpretation should be to communicate the values and range of meanings of cultural heritage sites. Effective interpretation should enhance experience, increase public respect and understanding of the significance of the sites, and should also communicate the importance of conservation.
- 1.2 Interpretation should aim to encourage individuals and communities to reflect on their own perceptions of the site and their relationship to it. Effective interpretation should establish an emotional connection to the site and provide insights—as well as facts. It should seek to stimulate further interest and learning.
- 1.3 Interpretation should be considered an integral part of the conservation process. It should explain the specific conservation problems encountered at the site, as a means of enhancing public awareness of the threats to the site’s physical integrity.
- 1.4 Interpretation is a dynamic, ongoing activity, in which the possibility of multiple perspectives should not be excluded. All associated communities and stakeholders should have an opportunity to be involved in the development of heritage interpretation programs as both their right and their responsibility.
- 1.5 Interpretation programs should identify and assess their audiences demographically and culturally. Every effort should be made to ensure that heritage interpretation meets the needs of its varied audiences and is accessible to a wide public, in all its diversity, including persons with disabilities.
- 1.6 The diversity of language among visitors and associated communities connected with a heritage site should be reflected in the interpretive infrastructure.

- 1.7 Physical access and on-site interpretation of a cultural heritage site may be restricted in some cases, due to cultural sensitivities, conservation issues, or safety concerns. In those cases, interpretation should be provided off-site or by other means such as publications, digital media, videos, or internet websites. It is acknowledged that in some cases, an associated community may prefer not to have a site publicly interpreted.

**Principle 2: Information Sources.** *The Interpretation of heritage sites must 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. It should also clearly identify the sources of this information.
- 2.2 Interpretation should be based on a well-researched, multidisciplinary study of the site and its surroundings, but should acknowledge that meaningful interpretation also necessarily includes conjecture, hypotheses, and philosophical reflection.
- 2.3 Visual reconstructions, whether by artists, conservation experts, or computer model, should be based upon detailed and systematic analysis of environmental, archaeological, architectural, and historical data, including analysis of building materials, structural engineering criteria, written, oral and iconographic sources, and photography. However, such visual renderings remain hypothetical images and should be identified as such.
- 2.4 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 programs should incorporate these oral testimonies—either indirectly, through the facilities of the interpretive infrastructure, or directly, through the active participation of members of the associated communities as on-site interpreters.
- 2.5 Interpretation activities and the research and information sources on which they are based should be documented and archived for future reference and reflection.

**Principle 3: Context and Setting.** *The Interpretation 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, social, political, spiritual, and artistic contexts. It should consider all aspects of the site’s cultural and environmental significance.
- 3.2 The contributions of all periods to the significance of a site should be respected. Although particular eras and themes may be highlighted, all periods of the site’s history as well as its contemporary context and significance should be considered in the interpretation process.
- 3.3 Interpretation should also take into account the cultural contributions of all communities associated with the site, including minority groups.
- 3.4 The surrounding landscape, natural environment, and geographical setting are all integral parts of a site’s historical and cultural significance, and, as such, should be taken

into account 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, personal customs and cuisine should be noted and included in its interpretation.
- 3.6 The cross-cultural significance of heritage sites, as well as co-existing or contested viewpoints, should become part of the interpretation, providing outside visitors as well as local residents and associated communities with a sense of personal connection.

**Principle 4: Authenticity.** *The Interpretation of cultural heritage sites must respect their authenticity, in the spirit of the Nara Document (1994).*<sup>3</sup>

- 4.1 Interpretation should contribute to the conservation of the authenticity of a cultural heritage site by communicating its significance without adversely impacting its cultural values or having recourse to irreversible alteration of its fabric or the installation of irreversible interpretive infrastructure. Physical reconstruction that permanently changes the character of the site should not be undertaken for the purpose of interpretation alone.
- 4.2 The public interpretation of a cultural heritage site should always clearly distinguish and date the successive phases and influences in its evolution, and clearly identify additional interpretive interventions.
- 4.3 Authenticity is a concern relevant to human communities as well as material remains. The design of a heritage interpretation program should respect and safeguard the traditional social functions of the site and the cultural practices and dignity of local residents and associated communities. It should also provide an opportunity for wider discussion of shared and conflicting heritage values.

**Principle 5: Sustainability.** *The interpretive plan for a cultural heritage site must be sensitive to its natural and cultural environment. Social, financial and environmental sustainability in the long term must be among the central goals.*

- 5.1 The development and implementation of interpretive programs must be an integral part of the overall management and planning process for a cultural heritage site. 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.
- 5.2 A wide range of interpretive strategies should be discussed early in the site planning process, to assess their cultural appropriateness as well as their economic and technical feasibility. The scale, expense and technology of interpretive programs must be appropriate to the location and available facilities.
- 5.3 All technical or technological elements in a site’s interpretive infrastructure should be appropriate for local standards and resources. They should be designed and constructed in a manner that will ensure effective and regular maintenance.
- 5.4 All visible interpretive programs and infrastructure (such as kiosks, walking paths, and

information panels) must be sensitive to the character, the setting and the cultural and natural significance of the site, while remaining easily identifiable. The light and sound from concerts, dramatic performances, screens and speakers must be restricted to their immediate area, so as not to affect adversely the surroundings or disturb nearby residents.

**Principle 6: Inclusiveness.** *The Interpretation of cultural heritage sites must actively involve the participation of associated communities and other stakeholders.*

- 6.1 The efforts and interests of associated communities, property owners, governmental authorities, site managers, scholars, tourism operators, private investors, employees, and volunteers should be integrated into the development of interpretive programs.
- 6.2 Interpretation should serve a wide range of educational and cultural objectives. The success of an interpretive program should not be judged solely on the basis of visitor attendance figures or revenue.
- 6.3 The traditional rights, responsibilities, and interests of the host community, property owners, and associated communities should be respected. These groups should be consulted and have a major role in the planning process of the interpretive program and in its subsequent development.
- 6.4 Interpretation activities and subsequent plans for expansion or revision of the interpretive program should be open for public comment and involvement. It is the right and responsibility of all to make their opinions and perspectives known.
- 6.5 Interpretive activities should aim to provide equitable economic, social, and cultural benefits to the host community at all levels, through education, training, and the creation of economic opportunities. To that end, the training and employment of site interpreters from the host community should be encouraged.
- 6.6 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 taken into account in the planning process.

**Principle 7: Research, Evaluation and Training.** *The Interpretation of a cultural heritage site is an ongoing, evolving process of explanation and understanding that includes continuing research, training, and evaluation.*

- 7.1 The interpretation of a cultural heritage site should not be considered to be completed with the establishment of a specific interpretive infrastructure. Continuing research and consultation are important to furthering the understanding and appreciation of a site's significance and should be integral elements in every heritage interpretation program.
- 7.2 The interpretive program and infrastructure should be designed and constructed in a way that ensures periodic content revision and/or expansion.

- 7.3 Interpretation programs 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 program should be seen as an educational resource and its design should take into account its possible use in school curricula, communications media including the internet, special activities, events, and seasonal volunteer involvement.
- 7.5 The training of qualified professionals in the specialized fields of heritage interpretation, such as conservation, content creation, management, technology, guiding, and education, is a crucial objective. In addition, basic academic conservation programs should include a component on interpretation in their courses of study.
- 7.6 On-site training programs 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 is essential to developing and maintaining standards in interpretation methods and technologies. To that end, international conferences, workshops and exchanges of professional staff 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.

## Endnotes

1. For the purpose of the present Charter, *Interpretation* is considered to be the public explanation or discussion of a cultural heritage site, encompassing its full significance, multiple meanings and values. *Interpretive infrastructure* refers to all physical installations, publications (guidebooks, videotapes, digital applications, etc.) and communications media devised for the purposes of interpretation, as well as the personnel assigned to this task.
2. As established in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), it is the right of all people to “participate freely in the cultural life of the community.” The ICOMOS Stockholm Declaration (1998) further notes that “the right to cultural heritage is an integral part of human rights” and that this right “carries duties and responsibilities for individuals and communities as well as for institutions and states.”
3. See <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/nara94.htm>.