

THE ICOMOS–ENAME CHARTER: NEW PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING CULTURAL HERITAGE SITES

The ICOMOS–Ename Charter Initiative: Rethinking the Role of Heritage Interpretation in the 21st Century

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“OF MAKING MANY BOOKS THERE IS NO END,” writes the biblical author of Ecclesiastes—and so it seems that of the making of many international heritage conventions, principles, and guidelines there also seems to be no end in sight. Beginning with the 1931 Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments, through the 1964 Venice Charter, and continuing with the recent adoption of the 2003 ICOMOS Charter for the Analysis, Conservation and Structural Restoration of Architectural Heritage, the international heritage community has produced and ratified a long line of doctrinal texts setting out standards for best practices in the conservation and maintenance of cultural resources all over the world. Still, there remains a gap in the international consensus. While most existing cultural heritage charters and documents deal primarily with issues of physical conservation and site management, none specifically addresses the principles of effective *communication* of the significance of cultural heritage sites.

The activity of physical conservation is the indispensable core and focus of all attempts to preserve the material heritage for future generations, yet it is entangled in a dense web of political, economic, social, and even psychological relationships that—if ignored—can doom even the most sophisticated conservation projects to neglect and eventual destruction. International guidelines for physical conservation have indeed been broadened and strengthened in recent years by the formulation of international standards on professional training, heritage tourism, and procedures for site management that address the importance of site

interpretation in varying degrees of detail. But few have examined the direct relationship between various interpretation types, methods, and technologies and the wider social context, conservation rationale, or the ultimate sustainability of cultural heritage sites.

Admittedly, interpretation is an exceedingly abstract and subjective concept, when compared to the tangible conservation challenges of frescoes, mosaics, stonework, and earthen architecture. Yet no less than ancient pigments, tesserae, ash-lars, and mudbricks, interpretation gives life to the ideas and images that determine how

people relate to the material remains that surround them. The sheer effort invested in interpretation in recent years is clear evidence of this perceived importance. Traditional didactic, museum-type text displays are now utilized mostly when budgetary constraints mandate only the cheapest, no-frills presentation. More creative and energetic interpretive solutions, such as special-interest or thematic guided tours, costumed or character-based interpreters, special educational activities, and interactive applications and virtual reality experiences are usually utilized when the project budget permits. But they are of widely differing cost, quality, and technical means. And their impact on visitors, on attendance figures, and indeed on the perception of the site as a whole among the local community have only now begun to be studied in great detail.

There is another ominous development in the heritage field that further underlines the need for a closer examination of site interpretation. In an era when public culture budgets are shrinking and cultural institutions of all kinds are being forced to become self-sustaining, the choice of site interpretation methods and technologies is often determined by their ability to stimulate local economic development: by paid admissions, subsidiary sales of postcards and other museum-shop items, employment opportunities, and a steady flow of tourist revenue for hotels, shops, and restaurants in the immediate vicinity. All too often, finances and balance sheets are now allowed to become the real tyrants in determining how cultural heritage sites are presented to the public. This transformation of cultural heritage sites into venues for tourism and leisure-time entertainment poses great dangers for the cause of conser-

vation in the long-run. If the right balance is not achieved between the contribution of outside scholars, exhibit designers, and heritage professionals and the local community, the site development project, even if financially successful, can appear to local residents as an outside imposition—like a shopping mall or private theme park—with solely or mainly economic significance for the community. It can also sow resentment among those not immediately benefiting from the gains, and who often suffer from the successful site's side effects—a lack of parking, traffic congestion, and disruption of normal routines. It can thus be dismissed as “someone else's” monument, an alien intrusion not meaningfully integrated into the memories, stories, and attitudes that constitute the entire community's shared identity.

Economic success, of course, is by no means guaranteed. Some sites, no matter how meticulously researched and elaborately developed, will never attract large numbers of visitors, for the routes of tourism are exceptionally inflexible, based less on content than on the convenience of nearby highways and airports, the pressures of itinerary planning, and the most comfortable facilities. Although everything may look perfect to the invited dignitaries and guests at an elaborately preserved and interpreted site on a festive opening day, three to five years later, when unrealistic expectations of increased visitation have failed to materialize and the costs of adequate staffing, maintenance, and regular content updating have soared, a site's degraded physical state and its outdated interpretive infrastructure can cripple its usefulness as a viable, valuable memory institution for both outside visitor and for the members of the local community.

History of the Ename Charter initiative

These concerns about interpretation plans and methods served as the impetus for the formulation of a charter that might achieve international consensus about the intellectual, ethical, social, and economic contexts in which heritage interpretation might be most effectively and constructively carried out. In the spring of 2002, an initial draft was formulated by the staff of the Ename Center, based on close consultation with a range of international colleagues, and following the model of earlier charters in the cultural heritage field. This first draft was circulated widely during the summer of 2002 in anticipation of the **Ghent Conference on Heritage, Technology and Local Development** later that year.

The structure of this first draft of the Ename Charter for the Interpretation of Cultural Heritage Sites was entirely focused on the role of heritage professionals in the interpretive process. Its central theme was the importance of integrated planning—in which the interpretation would not be seen merely as a matter of information transmission or scenography meant to fill the silences and empty spaces of an otherwise unembellished cultural heritage site. The text was divided into sections on scientific and professional guidelines; planning, funding and management; tourism aspects; and heritage education. Its goal was to address the most common planning and management problems that had time and again doomed meticulously (and expensively!) developed sites to become deteriorating eyesores in just a few years.

As a follow-up to the discussions in Ghent, a special roundtable discussion on the Ename Charter was organized by the U.S. National Park Service in Washington on 13 November 2002. The National Park

Service's chief archaeologist, Francis P. McManamon, brought together representatives of the Ename Center, of numerous NPS programs and departments, as well as of the U.S. **Advisory Council on Historic Preservation**, Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, Archaeological Institute of America, Society for Historical Archaeology, Archaeological Conservancy, and the University of Maryland Center for Heritage Resource Studies and Historic Preservation Program. Also present was Gustavo Araoz, executive director of US/ICOMOS (the U.S. National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites). The discussions at this roundtable were fruitful, highlighting common concerns and emphasizing the need for this document to go beyond planning issues into the larger social implications of heritage interpretation. Araoz, also serving as the ICOMOS International vice-president for international scientific committees, encouraged further development of the charter and a closer working relationship with the international scientific committees and national committees of ICOMOS International.

In January 2004, the executive committee of ICOMOS agreed that the work of review and revision of what would now be called the “ICOMOS–Ename Charter” would be undertaken under the auspices of a small editorial group consisting of international vice-presidents Gustavo Araoz and Sheridan Burke; the international secretary-general, Dinu Bumbaru; and the international treasurer, Giora Solar (who were appointed to this group by ICOMOS President Michael Petzet), working closely with a team chosen by the Ename Center (consisting of Ename Center director Neil Silberman and former ICOMOS secretary-general Jean-Louis Luxen).

Unlike other charters in the past, whose drafting and initial review process was the responsibility of a particular ICOMOS International Scientific Committee (ISC), the ICOMOS–Ename Charter’s relevance to a range of specializations within the heritage disciplines—and its potential importance to a wide range of stakeholder groups—lessened the need for a single sponsoring ISC. Accordingly, it was decided to distribute an initial draft of the text to all of the ICOMOS ISCs as well as a small group of interpretation professionals for overall comments, reactions, and suggestions. This first round of ISC review took place during the period April–June 2004. At the conclusion of this review cycle, Draft Two (dated 24 June 2004) was distributed to all national committees of ICOMOS. By the end of August 2004, Draft Three (dated 23 August 2004) was produced by the editorial committee, integrating the many detailed comments received from ICOMOS national committees, individual scholars and experts, and the executive committee of ICOMOS.

Presentation versus interpretation

Through continuous and intensive consultation, the text has evolved considerably from its earlier form that was more narrowly focused on the concerns of heritage professionals into a more broadly based document dealing with seven main principles that firmly position heritage interpretation as a contemporary activity within a wider social context. One of the most important conceptual insights that arose in the course of the charter review process was the distinction that should be made between the terms “presentation” and “interpretation” when referring to cultural heritage sites. “Presentation” denotes 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. “Interpretation,” on the other hand, denotes the totality of activity, reflection, research, and creativity stimulated by a cultural heritage site. Although professionals and scholars play important roles in this process, the input and involvement of visitors, local and associated community groups, and other stakeholders of various ages and educational backgrounds should be seen as essential to the goal of transforming cultural heritage sites from static monuments into places of learning and reflection about the past, as well as valuable resources for sustainable community development and intercultural and intergenerational dialogue.

To that end, each of the main principles deals with a theme in which the broader and more inclusive interpretive activity can and should be encouraged.

Principle 1: Access and Understanding suggests that the public discussion of a site’s significance “should be facilitated by effective, sustainable Interpretation, involving a wide range of associated communities, as well as visitor and stakeholder groups.” Access here refers to both *intellectual* and *physical* access, highlighting the role of interpretation can play in offering a direct connection between the heritage resource and the personal experiences and challenges of the contemporary community. These include the provision of multilingual programs (where appropriate and necessary), facilities for persons with physical disabilities, and respect for cultural sensitivities (as in places of worship and other sacred places) where the need for public

interpretation must be balanced with the traditional function and contemporary significance of the site.

Principle 2: Information Sources suggests that the informational content conveyed at cultural heritage sites must “be based on evidence gathered through accepted scientific and scholarly methods as well as from living cultural traditions.” In contrast to more traditional presentations of sites that focus largely on the public communication of scholarly evaluations, the Charter urges that artistic, literary, and memory-based interpretation be included alongside the more strictly historical, archaeological, and scientific material. It also stresses the importance of maintaining full documentation of the sources from which the various types of information come.

Principle 3: Context and Setting recommends that the interpretation of cultural heritage sites should relate to their wider social, cultural, historical, and environmental contexts—in both an intellectual and a physical sense. The selective focus on certain periods of interest or historical actors, or the designation of a site as either cultural or natural, lessens its value as a means to appreciate its full significance as an element in the contemporary landscape.

Principle 4: Authenticity, while recognizing the difficulty and subjectivity of this term, nonetheless outlines certain standards regarding the use of reconstructions and advises against irreversible alterations to the physical integrity of the site that are undertaken for the purposes of interpretation alone. In addition, it acknowledges that potential danger that the classification of a place as a “heritage site” may pose to its traditional social functions.

Principle 5: Sustainability deals with

the potentially disruptive effects of interpretive technologies, facilities, and costs both on the physical stability of the cultural heritage site and its financial viability. In response to the increasing reliance on elaborate interpretation as an essential component of income-generating “heritage attractions” (both public and private), the charter stresses the importance of rational planning rather than unrealistic expectations or unanalyzed side-effects of tourist development.

Principle 6: Inclusiveness seeks to ensure that the interpretation of a cultural heritage site is not merely a carefully scripted presentation prepared by outsiders, but should “actively involve the participation of associated communities and other stakeholders.” Whether regarding the presentation of a community’s heritage, the physical plans for the site’s physical development, or the economic opportunities for employment and economic benefit by local residents, an interpretation program must be seen as a community activity rather than an alien imposition.

Principle 7: Research, Evaluation, and Training stresses that the “interpretation of a cultural heritage site “should not be considered to be completed with the establishment of a specific interpretive infrastructure” but must be seen as a dynamic, long-term activity that include continuous training, updating, and outreach into the community—and to other heritage sites around the world.

In sum, the ICOMOS–Ename Charter asserts that the raising of visitor attendance figures or increasing visitor attendance alone should not be the only target or criterion of success in the interpretation of cultural heritage sites. The communicated—and reflected upon—significance of a site

must also serve a range of educational and social objectives for the benefit of the local community. The underlying rationale for all of these recommendations is the achievement of a basic and far-reaching interpretive transformation: Not of a freshly excavated or conserved site into a beautifully and entertainingly presented attraction—but rather into an active, dynamic cultural institution within a *living* community.

The Future of the ICOMOS–Ename Charter

The charter text continues to benefit from continuing review and revision; a Revised Third Draft was compiled in the summer of 2005 (see accompanying article for the complete text) and further updates and information about the charter initiative can be found at the charter website (www.enamecharter.org; Figure 1). The

sively reflecting international consensus on the guiding principles of heritage interpretation. This will be used as the basis to launch a more exhaustive global dialogue on interpretation that will engage ICOMOS committees, individual members, and interested scholars and professionals in more dynamic, interactive forums, such as national, regional, and international workshops, conferences, and electronic discussion groups.

There is no question that interpretation has great potential for stimulating a public interest in conservation. But it can only do so when *all* of the potential conservers—from scholars, to design consultants, to heritage administrators, to business people, to community groups, to religious organizations, to neighbors and supporters—even to a bored, unemployed 17-year-old with a can of spray paint—are meaningfully involved in what is perceived as a community effort and have reason to consider the site not only “theirs,” but also an important part of their lives. Interpretation is at the heart of conservation and heritage conservation is a vital focus of collective memory.

Of the making of books—and of cultural heritage charters—there may indeed be no end. Yet the core aim of the ICOMOS–Ename Charter is to ensure that every community’s interpretation of its cultural heritage sites is inclusive, authentic, sustainable, and—yes—an *endless* source of knowledge, inspiration, and reflection about the past’s evocative, enigmatic, and always enlightening material remains.

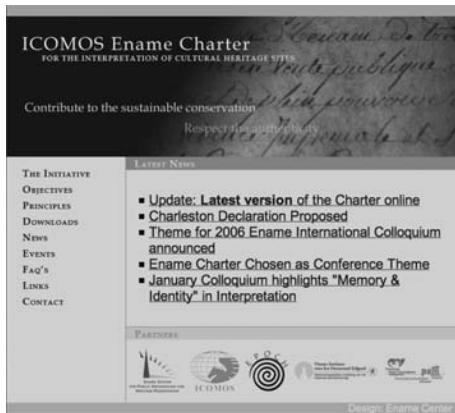


Figure 1. The home page of the Ename Charter.

intention now is to continue the cycles of reviews and revision that will eventually produce a Fourth Draft, more comprehen-

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