

**Authenticity, Identity, Heritage
Values and Meaning in Victoria's
Community Narrative: An
Evolution of International Charter
Thinking**



Authenticity, Identity, Heritage Values and Meaning in Victoria's Community Narrative: An Evolution of International Charter Thinking

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In values-centred conservation, as described by Randall Mason, Laurajane Smith, and many others, heritage values are characterized by four attributes: they are socially constructed, situational, multivalent and contested. One group's values are not meant to cancel another's, but by fully understanding the range of values inherent in a historic place, we come to a much deeper and richer understanding of the past.

In her book, *Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Urban History*, urban historian Dolores Hayden opens with a classic essay in which the late New York Times architectural critic, Ada Louise Huxtable, has a public argument with sociologist Herbert Gans over heritage values. She promotes aesthetic values and the social values. As Hayden correctly points out, it isn't an either/or situation, but one where both need to be acknowledged and understood because, both are present.

This approach is best summarized by the position document of the recently founded Global Heritage Collaborative, Our World Heritage Initiative, under the title "New Heritage Approaches".

New heritage approaches should inquire why and for whom the heritage

sites are designated, providing meaningful narratives for the users to ensure their preservation. Gender, ethnicity, race and income are key aspects of diversity and inequality in the current geopolitical context to be considered. New heritage approaches should create living and integrated sites in a territorial and urban landscape perspective, articulating nature and culture, considering the tangible and intangible dimensions of heritage, fostering strategies to decolonize the notion of heritage, (re)interpreting its values and attributes through proactive strategies of conservation. Sustainable strategies should congregate the development of heritage education and social participation as instruments to enhance emancipation, citizenship and democratization of decision-making processes. The integration of heritage conservation in territorial planning politics and tools with a broad participatory perspective is also crucial to ensure an appropriate and inclusive heritage management. (https://www.ourworldheritage.org/new_approaches/)

Victoria's general approach to Heritage Conservation is an outdated relic of the 1970s. The UNESCO Victoria World Heritage Project, which has been examining the potential fit of Victoria to more recent approaches to heritage conservation, is intended to come as a wake-up call.



Victoria's problem is highlighted by the absence of a credible public interpretation program for Old Town or any other of the City's heritage assets. Another problem is the fact that there is no Victoria community museum. In addition, Statements of Significance, essential tools in managing heritage

property, exist for few of Victoria’s designated buildings and districts, and for even fewer non-designated (‘contextual’) ones, such as Old Town. The Statements of Significance that do exist rarely identify values beyond architectural significance and attachments to historical (mostly dead and unfamiliar) personalities. Very few refer to community values, such as community memory and sense-of-place. Few explain what is of significance to whom.

The **Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites** is a set of guidelines, drawn up in 1964 by a group of international conservation professionals. It provided a global framework for the preservation of historic buildings. Searching for an ethical and methodological framework on which to base the principles of the Venice Charter, the group adopted the approach used for Fine Art conservation and archaeology. This approach places the treatment of the artefact over public consideration. The entire conservation process is placed in the hands of “experts”, reflecting the values of the 1960s. This approach was carved into stone by national guides to heritage conservation practice, such as **Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada** (2003/2010), which was adopted as policy by the City of Victoria in 2012.



The Concept of Cultural Significance

Some say that the *Venice Charter* was out of date by the time it was published. A document now known as *The Quito Norms* (1967), prepared at a meeting of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in Quito, Ecuador, affirmed the need to for heritage to support economic development. It particularly pointed out the need to adapt the historic fabric of sites to accommodate tourism. This and other significant shortcomings of the *Venice Charter* were addressed by the now universally accepted document adopted by ICOMOS at a meeting in Burra, Australia, in 1992. (*Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter* (1979/2004) What the *Burra Charter* did was to affirm the fact that the real ‘clients’ of the conservation are people and society, and not historic buildings for their own sake. The *Burra Charter* also reassigned governance of the conservation process from experts to “community”. This process legitimized a framework that we call values-driven conservation. A few excerpts from the *Burra Charter* demonstrate this:

The concept of cultural significance is used in Australian heritage practice and legislation to encompass all of the cultural values and meanings that might be recognised in a place. Cultural significance is the sum of the qualities or values that a place has, including the five values— aesthetic, historic, scientific, social and spiritual—that are listed in Article 1.2 of the Burra Charter.

Through the processes of investigating the place and assessing each of these values, we can clearly describe why a place is important. This is the first step towards ensuring that our decisions and actions do not diminish its significance.

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(Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, 1979/2004)



The *Burra Charter*, or at least the thinking behind it, underpins UNESCO’s notion of “cultural landscape”, a term that we use to describe a historic city or a part of it – such as Victoria and its Old Town. To achieve this way of thinking, the proposal to nominate Victoria for inscription on the World Heritage List would take a massive shift in the local administration and management of built heritage, how it is researched and recorded, how it is used and conserved, and how it is perceived by the general public.

Authenticity and Cultural Identity

The principles behind the Burra Charter have reformed how heritage sites are conceived and how they are managed. A good example of current thought and practice is described in the ICOMOS *San Antonio Declaration (1996)*:

The **authenticity** of our cultural heritage is directly related to our **cultural identity...**

Because cultural identity is at the core of community and national life, it is the foundation of our cultural heritage and its conservation. Within the cultural diversity of the Americas, groups with separate identities co-exist in the same space and time and at times across space and time, sharing cultural manifestations, but often assigning different values to them. No nation in the Americas has a single national identity; our diversity makes up the sum of our national identities.

The authenticity of our cultural resources lies in the identification, evaluation and interpretation of their true values as perceived by our ancestors in the past and by ourselves now as an evolving and diverse community. As such, the Americas must recognize the values of the majorities and the minorities without imposing a

hierarchical predominance of any one culture and its values over those of others.
(Excerpt from the ICOMOS *San Antonio Declaration* March 1996)

An understanding of the history and significance of a site over time are crucial elements in the identification of its authenticity. The understanding of the authenticity of a heritage site depends on a comprehensive assessment of the significance of the site by those who are associated with it or who claim it as part of their history. For this reason, it is important to understand the origins and evolution of the site as well as the values associated with it. Variations in the meaning and values of a site may at times be in conflict, and while that conflict needs to be mediated, it may, in fact, enrich the value of the heritage site by being the point of convergence of the values of various groups. The history of a site should not be manipulated to enhance the dominant values of certain groups over those of others.

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An approach to respecting **authenticity** in the **treatment of materials** again reinforces values-driven site and monument management.

The material fabric of a cultural site can be a principal component of its authenticity. As emphasized in Article 9 of the Venice Charter, the presence of ancient and original elements is part of the basic nature of a heritage site. The Charter also indicates that the material elements of our tangible cultural heritage are bearers of important information about our past and our identity. Those messages include information about a site's original creation as well as the layered messages that resulted from the interaction between the resource and new and diverse cultural circumstances. For these reasons, those materials and their setting need to be identified, evaluated and protected. In the case of cultural landscapes, the importance of material fabric must be weighed along with the immaterial distinctive character and components of the site...

The degree to which documented missing elements are replaced as part of restoration treatments varies within the Americas in accordance to the cultural characteristics of each country. Some national policies indicate that what is lost can only be part of our memory and not of our heritage. Elsewhere, policies encourage the replacement of fully documented elements in facsimile form in order to re-establish the site's full significance...

We recognize that in certain types of heritage sites, such as cultural landscapes, the conservation of overall character and traditions, such as patterns, forms and spiritual value, may be more important than the conservation of the physical features of the site, and as such, may take precedence. Therefore, authenticity is a concept much larger than material integrity and the two concepts must not be assumed to be equivalent or consubstantial.

Authenticity and Social Value

San Antonio doubles down on the critical link between **authenticity** and **social value**.

Beyond the material evidence, heritage sites can carry a deep spiritual message that sustains communal life, linking it to the ancestral past. This spiritual meaning is manifested through customs and traditions such as settlement patterns, land use practices, and religious beliefs. The role of these intangibles is an inherent part of the cultural heritage, and as such, their link to the meaning of the tangible elements of the sites must be carefully identified, evaluated, protected and interpreted.

The goal of preserving memory and its cultural manifestations must be approached by aiming to enrich human spirituality, beyond the material aspect. Historic research and surveys of the physical fabric are not enough to identify the full significance of a heritage site, since only the concerned communities that have a stake in the site can contribute to the understanding and expression of the deeper values of the site as an anchor to their cultural identity.

In cultural landscapes, including urban areas, the process of identifying and protecting social value is complex because so many separate interest groups may be involved...We recognize that sustainable development may be a necessity for those who inhabit cultural landscapes, and that a process for mediation must be developed to address the dynamic nature of these sites so that all values may be properly taken into account. We also recognize that in some cases, there may be a hierarchy of values that is related to the stake of some groups in a site.

San Antonio also addresses the thorny problem of sites in contemporary use, what it labels as the authenticity of dynamic and static sites. This important

to the consideration of Victoria which exhibits the characteristics of what this Charter calls “a dynamic site”.



The heritage of the Americas includes dynamic cultural sites that continue to be actively used by society, as well as static sites such as archaeological sites no longer used by the descendants of their builders. These two types of sites have differing natures; and their conservation needs, the determination of their authenticity, and their interpretation vary according to their character.

Dynamic cultural sites, such as historic cities and landscapes, may be considered to be the product of many authors over a long period of time whose process of creation often continues today. This constant adaptation to human need can actively contribute to maintaining the continuum among the past, present and future life of our communities. Through them our traditions are maintained as they evolve to respond to the needs of society. This evolution is normal and forms an intrinsic part of our heritage. Some physical changes associated with maintaining the traditional patterns of communal use of the heritage site do not necessarily diminish its significance and may actually enhance it. Therefore, such material changes may be acceptable as part of on-going evolution.

Static cultural sites include those valued as the concluded work of a single author or group of authors and whose original or early message has not been transformed. They are appreciated for their aesthetic value, or for their significance in commemorating persons and events important in the history of the community, the nation, or the world. In these sites, which are often recognized as monumental structures, the physical fabric requires the highest level of conservation in order to limit alterations to their character.

The role of respecting authenticity in site stewardship calls for education and sensitization of the resident population as well site administrators.

The heritage of the Americas is characterized by very heterogeneous patterns of ownership and stewardship. While many sites are properly protected by their stewards, at times some sites are under the jurisdiction of local authorities that lack the ability to determine properly the comprehensive value of the sites or the appropriate treatments for their conservation. Other times, the original inhabitants who created and cared for a cultural site have been replaced by new populations that have little or no cultural affinity for the site and place little or no value in it, leading to its abandonment and decay. This situation urgently demands that the proper national and local authorities and the present owners, stewards and inhabitants be made fully aware of the value that other majority and minority sectors of the population may have for the site. Both the communities and the constituted authorities must be provided the means for the correct knowledge and evaluation of the heritage, its protection and conservation, and the promotion of its artistic and spiritual enjoyment, as well as its educational use.



A section on authenticity and economics addresses the contemporary reality of heritage conservation in the market-driven capitalist environment.

The authenticity of heritage sites lies intrinsically in their physical fabric, and extrinsically on the values assigned to them by those communities who have a stake in them. Tourists constitute one of those groups that values the site and has an interest in its meaning and conservation.

Since cultural tourism is often a substantial source of revenue for local and national economies, its development is acceptable, as originally formulated in the Norms of Quito. Nevertheless, the limited values that tourists may place on a site and the economic concerns for tourism revenue cannot be allowed to be the

overriding criterion in a site's conservation and interpretation. This is especially true when the authenticity of fabric and its context, and of the site's broader values and message are altered, diminished, or threatened...

Furthermore, within the framework of economic development, the problem of permanently poor populations remains a critical factor in the urban cores of many historic cities of the Americas. Bringing about an awareness of the cultural value of the urban heritage on the part of these poor sectors cannot be achieved without a comprehensive approach to solve their marked material and social marginality.

Values and Heritage Site Management

Finally, *Burra* prompted the articulation of a conservation management procedure as outlined below. It embeds the values of the site throughout the entire identification, restoration, maintenance and public use life-cycle. This, or versions of it, have become standard practice throughout Australia and, indeed around the world.



Excerpts from ICOMOS San Antonio Declaration 1996 <https://www.icomos.org/en/resources/charters-and-texts/179-articles-en-francais/ressources/charters-and-standards/188-the-declaration-of-san-antonio>

Observations

- Victoria needs to reach back into community for a fresh “peoples charter” to direct and empower those we trust with the management of our built and intangible heritage. Such an effort could be a mix of learning circles, meetings, forums, conferences, education courses, school curriculum adjustments, commissioned scientific and academic investigations. In all respects the challenge would be to develop a new inclusive narrative, an informed memory, to underpin the meaning of our shared community identity.
- The City and the surrounding Municipalities need to audit their heritage commemoration practices to ensure they are aligned with the interests of local stakeholders, particularly minority voices and overlooked demographics. This would include reviewing the make-up of Heritage Advisory Panels, screening existing interpretive signage for biases, ethnic, race or gender-based exclusions. Recent undertakings by Saanich and Oak Bay to collaborate with First Nations on numerous cultural and heritage issues including geographical naming, plaquing and heritage recognitions, along with Victoria’s more general collaborative protocols constitute important first steps in this direction.
- The economic underpinning of heritage conservation in Victoria has always been a collaboration of private initiative, civic society leadership and local government support. Heritage resources have played a significant role in enhancing urban development, developing specialized trades and skills, and particularly driving tourist visitation. The delicate balancing act among these priorities is now threatened by pressures on the built environment from massive in-migration, the need for supportive amenities, requirements to meet new codes for carbon efficiency and disaster mitigation. In addition, development must accommodate huge lifts in land-values, construction costs, and also financial outlays to support preservation initiatives. Increasingly these values will

be represented as conflicting with heritage conservation principles.

- Appointments to municipal cultural and heritage advisory committees, heritage foundations, and public art juries, for instance, should seek genuine community diversity: First Nations, ethnic and cultural minorities, and gender balance.



- All levels of government should review their approaches to the articulation and identification of community heritage, starting with the procedures for developing Statements of Significance for both tangible and intangible heritage, and where SOS's do not exist to put the highest priority on producing them.
- Victoria needs to undertake an in-depth review of its application of the Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada (2003/2010), to make sure they align with local community expectations, identity, memory and sense of place. This might include: rebuilding of lost building fronts to achieve authentic sets of contiguous blocks of historic street frontage, the reconstruction of lost building elements such as side-walk verandahs/galleries or roof-top decorative elements, and also requiring historic building additions to better express traditional forms, materials and details even in contemporary design expressions.
- A discussion might also be had with the professional design community regarding a revival of Victoria's traditional building design vocabulary in new

projects accompanied by a revival of technical crafts and uses of materials.

- As has already become the standard practice by municipalities with respect to natural landscape interpretation, efforts need to be redoubled in working with First Nations and other minorities to develop comprehensive and representative interpretation programs. This starts with articulating general themes, identifying sites of significance, and includes plaque and marker texts.

Resources

The Venice Charter (1964) https://www.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf

The Burra Charter (1979/2013) <http://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2145/>

The Norms of Quito <https://www.icomos.org/en/resources/charters-and-texts/179-articles-en-francais/ressources/charters-and-standards/168-the-norms-of-quito>

The Declaration of San Antonio Declaration (1996)

<https://www.icomos.org/en/resources/charters-and-texts/179-articles-en-francais/ressources/charters-and-standards/188-the-declaration-of-san-antonio>

Conservation Management Plans Managing Historic Places: A Guide (1968)

https://www.heritage.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0022/514273/Conservation-Management-Plans-Managing-Heritage-Places.pdf

“New Heritage Approaches” Our World Heritage. https://www.ourworldheritage.org/new_approaches/

</Other/ICOMOS and UNESCO/UNESCO 31 Doc.AUTHENTICITY AND IDENTITY, HK Comments 4-21-22.docx>