

2005 US/ICOMOS International Symposium :: Charleston Declaration

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Charleston Declaration on Heritage Interpretation

7 May 2005

Charleston, South Carolina, USA

On the occasion of the 8th International Symposium of US/ICOMOS, "HERITAGE INTERPRETATION, Expressing Heritage Sites Values to Foster Conservation, Promote Community Development, and Educate the Public," approximately 200 delegates from all over the United States, more than a dozen nations and several disciplines met in Charleston, South Carolina, from 5 to 8 May 2005, to share experience, draw lessons and address issues surrounding the public interpretation of cultural heritage sites.

The symposium benefited from continuing scholarly and professional discussion of the methods and philosophy of heritage interpretation in many regions of the world and the ongoing review and revision process of the ICOMOS Ename Charter on the Interpretation of Cultural Heritage sites, drafted under the scientific auspices of ICOMOS and sponsored by the government of the Province of East-Flanders and the Flemish Community of Belgium. This document seeks to establish an international consensus on the scientific, ethical, and educational principles for the public presentation and interpretation of cultural heritage.

US/ICOMOS, the Ename Center, and other organizations and individuals are embarking on a multi-year program of activities connected with the charter initiative, in order to facilitate the development of site interpretation principles and techniques. Although the objectives and principles of this Charter deal primarily with interpretation at, or in the immediate vicinity of cultural heritage sites, they may equally apply to off-site interpretation.

The need for such a document has become clear in recent years, as regional governments, municipalities, tourist authorities, private firms, and international organizations have become increasingly concerned with the importance of communicating heritage values and information to the general public, investing in expensive and technologically advanced presentation systems as a spur to tourist development. Yet while there are a large number of international charters, declarations, and guidelines to maintain the quality of the conservation of the physical fabric of ancient monuments and the management of cultural heritage sites, there is no generalized international consensus on the methods and quality standards of public interpretation.

In the current draft of the charter, reviewed by the International Scientific and National Committees of ICOMOS, principles of cultural heritage interpretation were formulated 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 a wide range 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.
- The aim of the ICOMOS Ename Charter is thus 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 further recognizes that the interpretation of cultural heritage sites can be contentious and should acknowledge conflicting perspectives.

Based on the proceedings of this conference, we propose the following definition and recognition of the conceptual and operational difference between “Presentation” and “Interpretation”:

- “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. The input and involvement of visitors, local and associated community groups, and other stakeholders of various ages and educational backgrounds is essential to interpretation and the transformation of cultural heritage sites from static monuments into places and sources of learning and reflection about the past, as well as valuable resources for sustainable community development and intercultural and intergenerational dialogue.

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We also recognize that there is still much to do. The following are major areas where clarification and consensus are still needed, and to which special attention is needed:

- Incorporating stakeholder perceptions and values in interpretation programs remains a challenge.

- The interpretation of religious and sacred sites, places of contested significance, and sites of conscience or “painful memory” needs further analysis in terms of establishing acceptable boundaries and better guidance as to their interpretation.
- In spite of years of expert discussion, the concept of “authenticity” continues to be elusive. Additional research and discussion is needed to define its nature and role in heritage interpretation.
- Certain cultures and communities oppose or prefer alternative methods for the public interpretation of their cultural heritage sites. This requires a continuing dialogue and analysis of how heritage site categories and the circumstances that surround them should influence the decision to interpret as well as the level of interpretation.

These fundamental areas of inquiry will be the focus of discussion and other activities in the coming three years. By approaching the topic of interpretation from many geographic, cultural and professional directions, we believe that a consensus can be reached that may serve as a source of guidance in the proper interpretation of heritage sites.

Proposed at the US/ICOMOS 8th International Symposium at Charleston, South Carolina, 7 May 2005