

Venice Charter (1964) and Madrid-New Delhi Document (2017)

Some Conceptual Developments on Authenticity

Larissa Mörschbacher

University of São Paulo (USP), Brazil, larissa.morschbacher@usp.br;

Abstract

This paper proposes a reflection on the concept of authenticity in the field of cultural heritage preservation, based on an analysis of the Venice Charter (1964) and the Madrid-New Delhi Document (2017). By comparing two texts of distinct natures and contexts, the paper seeks to understand how this principle is conceived and what implications it has for international conservation guidelines. The Venice Charter, a foundational document of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), establishes a notion of authenticity closely tied to the materiality of the historic monument as it has been transformed over time. The Madrid-New Delhi Document, developed by the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Twentieth Century Heritage, proposes a broader understanding of the concept, reflecting the intense debate on the subject since the 1960s. To outline this discussion, the text first presents an analytical overview of both documents, then explores key issues related to authenticity. The analysis highlights conceptual and methodological developments that shape the contemporary debate on intervention criteria. This aspect is particularly relevant in light of the challenges associated with the adaptive reuse of twentieth-century buildings. By examining the tensions and transformations around the notion of authenticity, the paper contributes to a critical approach to international instruments that guide conservation practices in the twenty-first century. This study is part of the author's ongoing PhD research, supported by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), Brazil (Grant No. 2024/11145-4).

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Twentieth-Century Buildings, Authenticity

Introduction

Present in numerous guiding documents and constituting a central concept in debates on the preservation of cultural heritage, the term authenticity still requires further scrutiny for its effective operationalization in preservation practices. The polysemy of the term and the challenges arising from it, particularly with regard to intervention practices on cultural heritage assets, have been identified by scholars in the field as a possible subterfuge for legitimizing any form of intervention (Choay 2023; Kühl 2023). Although the term remains central to the debate, its isolated use contributes little to preservation practice, as it is often invoked to justify different or even opposing approaches. The effects of this conceptual imprecision become evident in the preservation of twentieth-century architectural heritage.

The relatively recent temporal distance of these works, the fragility of certain materials, and the existence of extensive documentary archives raise questions about the pertinence of an understanding of authenticity based on materiality as transformed over time implicit in the Venice Charter, the foundational document of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Such issues often manifest through the tension between material, image, and conceptual authenticity. To contribute to this discussion, the present paper examines the concept of authenticity based on an analysis of the Venice Charter (1964) and the Madrid-New Delhi Document (2017). The latter resulted from an international debate held between 2010 and 2017 through conferences, meetings, and consultations organized by the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Twentieth Century Heritage, aimed at establishing principles to guide conservation practices for twentieth-century architectural heritage. By comparing the concept in two documents of distinct natures and contexts, the study seeks to understand how this principle is conceived and what implications it bears for international conservation guidelines. The discussion begins with an analytical overview and contextualization of both documents, followed by an exploration of issues concerning authenticity, as well as its developments and challenges in preserving the architectural legacy of the twentieth century.

Authenticity: from the Venice Charter to the Madrid-New Delhi Document

The International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, known as the Venice Charter, resulted from the II International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments held in 1963. The meeting gathered specialists to review the principles established by the Athens Charter (1931), a pioneering document whose main goal consisted in developing a shared international basis for heritage preservation. The Venice Charter was written within a context of revising the principles of philological and scientific restoration – approaches that had guided the Athens Charter – and of criticism toward stylistic restoration. Its formulation was directly influenced by critical restoration and Cesare Brandi's theory, as extensively discussed by Kühl (2010). More than six decades after its publication, the document remains a fundamental reference in the field of preservation. Its principles continue to be reaffirmed, revised, or challenged by scholars in dialogue with the social, cultural, and conceptual transformations that have occurred over time.

Among the concepts widely debated since the publication of the Charter, authenticity stands out. The term appears explicitly in two fragments. The first, in the preamble, states: “People are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage. The common responsibility to safeguard them for future generations is recognized. It is our duty to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity.” (Venice Charter 1964, 1). The second occurs in Article 9: “The process of restoration is a highly specialized operation. Its aim is to preserve and reveal the aesthetic and historic value of the monument and is based on respect for original material and authentic documents” (Venice Charter 1964, 2). These excerpts highlight the importance attributed to authenticity in preservation practice; however, the document provides no explicit definition of the term. As Kühl (2023) observes, although the meaning of authenticity can be inferred from the text as a whole—particularly in relation to respect for the work's configuration and materiality as transformed over time—the absence of a

clear conceptualization led to interpretative ambiguities, allowing the term to be applied to distinct and even contradictory actions.

Thirty years later, the Nara Conference on Authenticity (1994) took place. According to Stovel (2008), the meeting was motivated by the need to recognize Japanese preservation practices that did not fit within the prevailing international understanding of authenticity. At that time, authenticity was a requirement for inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List. As Stovel explains, the conference marked the first international effort to debate the concept, representing a turning point in its understanding: authenticity began to be regarded as relative to context rather than in absolute terms. Despite these efforts, and similarly to the Venice Charter, the resulting Nara Document did not provide a precise definition. Cameron (2019), reflecting on Stovel's (2008) contributions, notes that the event consolidated an ongoing debate rather than initiating a new one. To support her argument, she cites Parent (1979), who had already questioned the relativity of the concept years before the Nara Conference. Jokilehto (2019) similarly notes that the need to reconcile a universal approach with regional specificities was already implicit in the Venice Charter, which states: "It is essential that the principles guiding the preservation and restoration of ancient buildings should be agreed and be laid down on an international basis, with each country being responsible for applying the plan within the framework of its own culture and traditions." (Venice Charter 1964, 1). Thus, as both Cameron and Jokilehto argue, while the Nara Conference gathered momentum for these discussions, they had already been underway for decades.

The Madrid-New Delhi Document (2017), titled "Approaches to the Conservation of Twentieth Century Cultural Heritage", explicitly refers to both the Venice Charter and the Nara Document. Developed through international debates organized by the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Twentieth Century Heritage between 2010 and 2017, it sought to establish principles for safeguarding twentieth-century heritage. The text reflects growing concern among committee members over threats arising from a lack of recognition, urban development pressures, insensitive interventions, and neglect. Although it shares the same institutional affiliation as the Venice Charter, the Madrid-New Delhi Document differs in both nature and scope. It is not a heritage charter, has a more specific focus, and was not formally adopted at an ICOMOS General Assembly.

In this document, the concept of authenticity is expanded. While the term appears in several sections, unlike the Venice Charter, it is no longer central to the document's stated objectives. A major difference, compared with both the Venice and Nara documents, lies in the inclusion of a definition in its glossary: "Authenticity is the ability of a heritage place or site to express its cultural significance through its material attributes and intangible values in a truthful and credible manner. It depends on the type of cultural heritage place and its cultural context" (ICOMOS 2017, 12). Thus, the document incorporates the Nara Conference's contribution by emphasizing the relativity of authenticity to cultural context. However, despite this openness, it still privileges materiality, echoing the Venice Charter. This is evident in Article 9, "Respect the authenticity and integrity of the place or site" which advises that interventions should prioritize the conservation of significant elements through stabilization, consolidation, and repair, avoiding complete reconstructions except in extraordinary and well-documented circumstances. Later alterations and the patina of time are likewise valued as part of the site's historical and cultural significance and should

be preserved when meaningful.

While remaining consistent with the Venice Charter's principles, the Madrid-New Delhi Document seeks to advance the conceptualization of authenticity by emphasizing its contextual understanding. Yet, despite proposing a definition, it remains somewhat imprecise, relying on terms—such as “credible” and “truthful”—that themselves demand further epistemological scrutiny in the heritage field. That said, it is necessary to question the implications of these conceptual developments for architectural practice, particularly regarding twentieth-century buildings, and whether they truly address the conceptual fragilities identified since the Nara Conference.

Authenticity and the Architectural Legacy of the 20th Century

After examining the formulations present in international documents, this study turns to Françoise Choay's epistemological critique, originally developed for the Nara Conference (1994) and published as “Seven propositions on the concept of authenticity and its use in heritage practices” (Choay 2023). In that study, Choay analyzes the challenges arising from the transposition of the term authenticity into the field of heritage preservation, highlighting its conceptual ambiguities and theoretical implications. Her contributions remain relevant today because of their conceptual and methodological rigor (Kühl 2023). Three negative conditions discussed by Choay are revisited here to establish connections with problems surrounding interventions in twentieth-century architectural works.

The first negative condition of the transposition of authenticity to the heritage field concerns the fact that its notion does not stem from a subjective apprehension but is linked to an idea of institutional authority. Within the architectural realm, such authority can manifest itself in different ways—among them, through the justification of interventions based on existing documentation. Photographic records, technical drawings, conceptual sketches, and architects' testimonies are among the many materials that, particularly in the case of twentieth-century works, have become widely available. These documents—whether produced during the design process or at specific moments throughout a building's history—enable broader knowledge of this production compared to earlier periods. How these archives are mobilized determines their role in intervention practices: they may serve as project tools when critically and contextually used to guide decisions, or as instruments of authority when they legitimize actions aimed at restoring a visual state tied to a particular period or “correcting” a work to approximate an allegedly original concept envisaged by the author—one that may not have been fully realized due to financial, technological, or political constraints. Such authoritative operations are often grounded in relative notions of authenticity—such as those related to idea or image. These approaches tend to oversimplify the inherent complexity of twentieth-century architecture and frequently lead to invasive outcomes, as discussed by Salvo (2007).

The second condition refers to the impossibility of reducing authenticity to a single meaning, as it manifests itself only through the active engagement of those who interact with it—a process that constitutes, each time, a re-creation of the work. When recognized as expressions of a past period, twentieth-century architectural works also become valued as historic monuments, a notion first discussed by Riegl (2014) and later revisited by Choay (2017). At present, beyond their contemporary functions and uses, these works acquire a variety of associations derived from a sense of temporal rupture that views them as

testimonies of a distinct era, thereby multiplying the meanings attributed to them. Frequently, the recognition of twentieth-century examples is linked to their aesthetic qualities; however, the formal and material attributes that defined that period were deeply rooted in social convictions that identified in architectural expression the potential to improve quality of life at lower cost. Acknowledging these works as products of broader social contexts provides a rationale for their preservation on grounds that are not only aesthetic but also philosophical, social, and economic (Prudon 2008). The current material and formal conditions of these buildings function as stimuli that guide—but do not determine—interpretations and associations. From this perspective, it becomes necessary to overcome notions of authenticity tied to specific or restricted views. Instead, intervention approaches should consider the work as a whole, in its temporally and spatially expanded complexity.

The third condition identified by Choay is the impossibility of fixing the state of the object, since, by its materiality, it is in constant transformation. Authenticity, when linked to a specific moment in the work's trajectory over its existential time, thus becomes equally problematic. The rapid deterioration of certain materials used in twentieth-century buildings—often experimental at the time or applied without full knowledge of their long-term behavior—combined with the recurrent association of modern architecture with the idea of newness, contributes to the perception of aging as a defect to be corrected rather than a value to be protected, as noted by Salvo (2007). Such perception tends to justify invasive interventions supported by supposedly “authentic,” yet relative, notions, compromising other values associated with the asset.

The three conditions identified by Choay—the association of authenticity with authority, the impossibility of reducing it to a single meaning, and the object's continuous transformation—highlight the complexity of applying the concept to the preservation of architectural works recognized as culturally significant, especially those of the twentieth-century buildings. Authenticity should not be applied rigidly or in isolation but understood in its multiple dimensions—material, formal, and symbolic—as well as through the diverse interpretations the work elicits over time. In this sense, intervention practices require a critical and interpretative stance, guided by a balance between respect for the author's original intent, acknowledgment of the material, social, and historical transformations of the asset, and appreciation of the contemporary meanings it assumes.

The improvement of urban conditions, the reduction of environmental impacts, and the revitalization of characteristics associated with pre-existing buildings, spaces, and materials increasingly inform debates on the adaptive reuse of buildings (Crudeli 2024). As the heritage field comes to recognize a progressively broader and more heterogeneous set of heritage assets, the boundaries between restoration projects and other forms of architectural intervention become increasingly blurred. In this context, the adoption of relative positions on authenticity that fail to consider the work as a whole prove problematic, either by assuming an illusory character—since certain characteristics of the work must inevitably be negotiated to meet the requirements of contemporary uses—or by becoming excessively restrictive or unduly invasive in the face of those same demands. This situation underscores the need to foster critical reflection and intervention practices capable of articulating the cultural values attributed to the heritage asset with the material, technical, and functional conditions that enable its continued presence and significance in the present and future.

Conclusions

The joint analysis of the Venice Charter (1964) and the Madrid-New Delhi Document (2017), in dialogue with Choay's epistemological reflection (2023), demonstrates that the concept of authenticity remains complex and multifaceted within the field of preservation. When applied to twentieth-century architectural heritage, this principle underscores the need to balance respect for materiality and authorial intention with an understanding of the natural and social transformations that buildings undergo over time. Although the Madrid-New Delhi Document (2017) broadens the scope of discussion, it remains fundamentally aligned with the Venice Charter, without offering an entirely new or divergent theoretical contribution, but rather deepening and specifying certain aspects.

Drawing on Choay's epistemological critique, it becomes clear that invoking authenticity in heritage practice requires a critical and interpretative approach—one capable of guiding interventions sensitive to the historical, formal, symbolic, and cultural dimensions of heritage assets. While neither the Venice Charter nor the Madrid-New Delhi Document provides definitive answers, both offer reflective instruments that can contribute to this purpose. The growing number of culturally significant works, combined with the difficulty of formulating large-scale public policies, makes the discussion of diffuse intervention practices increasingly urgent. Twentieth-century architectural production raises issues that must be evaluated both technically and conceptually within the design process. The increasing availability of precise documentation and the continuous renewal of materials and construction techniques are aspects likely to intensify in architectures of subsequent periods, demanding more articulated and conscious design responses that recognize the work as a whole. In this context, the distinction between reuse and restoration – the latter understood by Brandi (2004) as the recognition of the work in its dual historical and aesthetic polarity, with a view toward its transmission to the future – becomes progressively more tenuous and inseparable.

Bibliography

- Brandi, Cesare. *Teoria da restauração*. Cotia: Ateliê Editorial, 2004.
- Cameron, Christina. "Herb Stovel and Authenticity in World Heritage Conservation Practice". *Conversaciones. Revista de Conservación* 8, 95–106, 2019.
- Choay, Françoise. *A Alegoria do Patrimônio*. 6ª ed. São Paulo: Editora UNESP, 2017.
- Choay, Françoise. "Sete Proposições Sobre o Conceito de Autenticidade e seu Uso nas Práticas do Patrimônio Histórico". Tradução de Beatriz Mugayar Kühl. *Paranoá: Cadernos de Arquitetura e Urbanismo* 35, 1–30, 2023.
- Crudeli, Andrea. "Theoretical Foundations and Design Approaches in Adaptive Reuse". In *Adaptive Reuse: Theoretical Glossary and Design Labs*. Florence: STH Press, 2024.
- Escritório Internacional dos Museus, Sociedade das Nações. *Carta resultante do Congresso Internacional de Arquitetos e Técnicos dos Monumentos Históricos*. Carta de Atenas. 1931.
- ICOMOS. *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites*: Venice Charter. 1964.
- ICOMOS. *Approaches to the Conservation of Twentieth Century Cultural Heritage*: Madrid-New Delhi Document. 2017.

- Jokilehto, Jukka. Questions of Authenticity. *Conversaciones...* Revista de Conservación (Ciudad de México), 8, 55–72, 2019.
- Kühl, Beatriz Mugayar. Françoise Choay: proposições sobre a autenticidade. *Paranoá: Cadernos de Arquitetura e Urbanismo* (Brasília), 5, 1–14, 2023.
- Kühl, Beatriz Mugayar. “Notas sobre a Carta de Veneza”. *Anais do Museu Paulista* 18, 287–320, 2010.
- Parent, Michel. *Comparative Study of Nominations and Criteria for World Cultural Heritage, Principles and Criteria for Inclusion of Properties on the World Heritage List*. 1979.
- Prudon, Theodore H. M. *Preservation of Modern Architecture*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2008.
- Riegl, Alois. *O Culto Moderno dos Monumentos: a sua Essência e a sua Origem*. 1ª ed. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2014.
- Salvo, Simona. Restauro e ‘restauros’ das obras arquitetônicas do século 20: intervenções em arranha-céus em confronto. *Revista CPC* 4, 139–157, 2007.
- Stovel, Herb. Origins and Influence of the Nara Document on Authenticity. *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 39, 9–17, 2008.
- UNESCO, ICCROM, and ICOMOS. *Conferência sobre Autenticidade em Relação à Conservação do Patrimônio Mundial: Conferência de Nara*. 1994.