

## **The Venice Charter and the United States Preservation System**

The significance of the Charter to our preservation practice arises from the indirect influence of the document and its principles on the basic «rules» of our practice. These are embodied in what is called the Secretary's Standards. The Secretary being equivalent to Minister in other countries. Lacking a Department of Culture, our national program for preservation comes under the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

In the National Preservation Act of 1966, Congress enlarged the national policy to recognize and preserve historic properties. The Act provided for a greatly expanded National Register of Historic Places and created a system by which matching federal grants for preservation work, called «acquisition and development grants», would be channeled through the states for the preservation of properties listed in the National Register. This new system created several new documents. The first was the *National Register Criteria*, an official way for determining the eligibility of individual buildings, structures, sites,

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districts and objects for inclusion in the National Register. A second was *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation Projects*, which defined what is and is not acceptable preservation practice. A third document, *Definitions for Historic Preservation Project Treatments*, spelled out the nature of different types of preservation projects. These delineated seven specific types of treatment, listed in order of the severity of intervention for historic preservation: acquisition, protection, stabilization, preservation, rehabilitation, restoration and reconstruction.

The need for federal standards was generated by a number of events of the early to mid — 1970s — the availability in 1971 of the first federal matching grants for historic preservation projects, the 1974 creation by Congress of an emergency home assistance program for rehabilitating existing housing stock, and the 1976 passage by Congress of the Tax Reform Acts, providing special income tax benefits for the rehabilitation of properties on the National Register. While all of these new federal initiatives provided substantial preservation opportunities, they also carried with them the danger that, without a uniform set of standards and definitions for guidance in executing individual projects, actions could be taken that would harm rather than help the physical fabric of significant buildings <sup>(4)</sup>.

The principal sources of guidance in preparing the Secretary's Standards were documents of the Historic Resources Committee of the American Institute of Architects; the National Park Service Management Policies and the Venice Charter itself. The last played an especially significant part in establishing the new national preservation philosophy.

The Secretary's Standards consist of eight general standards applicable to all treatments undertaken on historic properties listed in the National Register regardless of the nature of the preservation work. These are supplemented by 2 to 5 additional standards for each type of intervention or preservation project. Further advice is provided in the form of a set of «Guidelines» for each of the types or levels of project, and these are set forth describing various practices as «Recommended» or «Not Recommended». Additional advice is provided by the National Park Service through technical briefs, special bulletins, published case studies on specific topics or subjects, and direct access to experts on its professional staff.

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(4) Gary L. Hume, «The Development of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. «Preservation News,» National Trust for Historic Preservation, October 1986.

The Secretary's Standards were first published in 1978. While remaining under constant scrutiny since that time, they have been changed in only minor aspects. They have been applied to more than 7,000 federally subsidized acquisition and development projects, and as of 1988, to more than 20,000 rehabilitation undertakings known as «Tax Act» projects. The latter have by now generated more than \$13 billion worth of preservation work. Adherence to the Standards is obligatory in cases where federal benefits are involved.

The majority of projects have been for rehabilitation. Restoration-reconstruction projects have been mostly limited to a relatively small number of important historic properties under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service.

Not only are the Secretary's Standards the guiding principles applied to all federal programs, they are generally accepted as the central document of preservation philosophy and practice in the U.S. While each state is free to adopt its own standards of performance, several have adopted the federal standards for their own projects. Similarly, while under no obligation or pressure to do so, many local governments have done so as well.

A weakness of our situation is that The Secretary's Standards can be ignored; states or local authorities may not require its application and many architectural schools do not give courses in preservation. This is compounded by the fact that a national standard for qualifying restoration architects has been under discussion but has not yet been adopted.

### **The Charter and the Standards Compared**

There is a widespread convergence between the principles of the Charter and the Standards. The Standards strongly urge the re-use of historic buildings for their original or a compatible use. Conjecture is not allowed when re-integrating the missing parts of a building. Historic buildings must be preserved in perpetuity. The Standards recognize that changes to a building during its lifetime take on an important historical significance of their own. They urge the protection of archeological sites and they recognize the dual historic and aesthetic character of buildings.

The Charter is essentially a general statement of philosophy which does not require any tie to the realities of political or economic life. The Standards, on the other hand, describe both a process and goals. If there are occasional pressures from the development community at the entry level of enforcement (the state historic preservation offices)

to accept marginal standards of compliance in rehabilitation projects, enforcement of the Standards in fact becomes increasingly strict as appeals are taken from state to regional, to national appellate levels within the National Park Service.

The Standards recognize that the search for perfection cannot outpace political reality, that no two buildings are alike, and that in the real world there is a need for breathing room in application to individual cases. Indeed, it is established ICOMOS doctrine that while «it is essential that the principles guiding preservation and restoration... should be agreed and laid down on an international basis... each country (is responsible) for applying the plan within the framework of its own culture and traditions».

### **An Assessment**

Discussion on the usefulness of the Venice Charter today reflects the changes which have been taking place throughout the world: industrialization, urban population growth, widespread mobility (including the growth of tourism). A concomitant problem has been the question of the renovation of historic centers and with it the problem of gentrification. These factors make the literal interpretation of all of the Charter's Articles difficult today in many countries of the world, including the United States.

Notwithstanding the widespread acceptance of the general philosophy delineated in the Charter, literal implementation of all its Articles in the U.S. would be difficult today. It is perhaps inevitable that a younger nation, still seeking to describe its roots and to define its essential character, will look to the associative value of history as the preeminent value in historic preservation. In the U.S., «historic» preservation is the common term; «architectural preservation» would be a less widely understood phenomenon. We are seeing an emerging interest in «cultural resource» and «heritage» preservation, providing a special relevance within the movement to the field of American Studies, and a new focus on preservation of the intangible cultural heritage, vernacular architecture, historical and «cultural» landscapes, the contributions of ethnic and native populations, and even such phenomena as commercial and industrial archeology. The Charter, with an apparent emphasis on monuments and buildings, would now be viewed by many as much too limiting in time and scope.

If a contemporary version of the Charter were to be proposed it should be a modern philosophy that recognizes — perhaps even emphasizes — the social utility of historic preservation in dealing with such

problems as poverty and economic development. It would have to acknowledge the value of existing neighborhoods, even those not so architecturally distinguished. While many preservationists continue to value fine buildings as the essence of our heritage, contemporary political realities suggest that this is no longer an entirely useful foundation on which to base programs requiring political approbation or funding. The broader array of conservation building techniques and materials, including those of a substitute nature which have become widely available, would have to be recognized.

A modern Charter, to be meaningful to a nation having a federal system, needs to acknowledge the limited control of central governments. It needs to recognize that nations covering a large territory make a uniform prescription for preservation, even one essentially philosophical in intent, difficult. Accommodation must be sought with respect to established preservation techniques, including the moving of buildings.

Such a charter would need to recognize the opportunities for innovation and experimentation presented by a mixed economy dominated by private property. There would have to be recognition of the potential conflicts presented by the concept of economic enterprise zones, by the domestic potential of debt/equity swaps as a cultural preservation tool, and by exploration of the limits of public intrusion into private property rights in the name of historic preservation. It needs to explore the potential for greater participation in cultural preservation on the part of private enterprise. It would deal with the gentrification issue, and the relevance of historic preservation in fulfilling such basic human needs as housing, jobs and a better quality of life. Such an approach is not antithetical to the traditional view of the importance of preserving the best of our artistic forms and traditions. It is merely a broadened perspective more appropriate for our contemporary society.

From our perspective, there are indeed significant general elements of the Charter that are appropriate for contemporary application in the United States. However, the Charter omits many important topics at its present level of generality, and is not too coherent. Our preference is thus in accord with established ICOMOS policies, which are to acknowledge the Venice Charter as a historic document which should not be revised. We would prefer to see the adoption by US/ICOMOS of a detailed charter or of charters aimed at specific problems and issues, rather than a single, general charter, too general to be applied to meeting the needs of different architectural, political

and economic situations, as well as widely differing architectural techniques and building materials. The Secretary's Standards would be a useful starting point, perhaps supplemented by our adaptations of ICOMOS charters for historic towns, gardens, archeology, tourism and the like.

### **Acknowledgement**

This paper was prepared in October 1989 by Robert E. Stipe. The assistance of Ernest Allen Connally, Hiroshi Daifuku, Gary L. Hume, Russell V. Keune, Mrs. Terry B. Morton and Charles E. Peterson is greatly appreciated.