Authenticity and Spirituality (Wim Denslagen)


Western values differ from those in the East. That is what Seung-Jin Chung from the Hyupsung University of Korea believes and on the basis of this conviction he develops a theory on conservation which has inspired me to develop the following considerations.

In his article 'East Asian Values in Historic Conservation', published in the Journal of Architectural Conservation of March 2005, Seung-Jin Chung states that Western conservation principles, such as those of John Ruskin (1849) and Camillo Boito (1883), are not adequate in the Asian culture. Seung-Jin Chung wants us to believe that there really exists something like the Asian culture and something like the culture of the West, which is, he explains, rooted in Greece. He also believes that the West values architecture as 'permanent structures', whereas in the East it is 'the spiritual message' that counts. 'There are many clichés about Asia', Ian Buruma wrote in God's Dust (1989), and one of these is the sweeping dichotomy of the spiritual West and the materialist West. Seung-Jin Chung is one of those who try to defend this dichotomy in the field of conservation principles and I hope he will not be offended by the critical remarks I would like to put forward here.

According to the Venice Charter of 1964, which is based on these Western attitudes towards conservation, the fundamental value is the authenticity of the material. This simply means that a monument from the past ought to be cared for as a historical document. The authentic substance from the past is the thing we have to take care of. That thing may have certain cultural and historical values. It may for instance be very old or it may be very illustrative of some historical style or of some religious ritual. It may have a lot of different values in the eyes of those who describe that thing. Values vary depending on time and place. The description (of a certain object) made in Russia in 1950, is not necessarily the same as the one made in Canada in the year 2008. And if there is no thing, but an intangible value, such as a choral tradition or a craft, then there is no use for the word authenticity. Speaking of authentic traditions sounds interesting, but is probably confusing.

The Western emphasis on the substance, Seung wrote, does not correspond with the Asian emphasis on the spiritual messages embodied in such structures beyond the reality of the visible material world. Nobody would I think deny that there are differences between cultures, but it is quite another thing to state that these differences are essentials. Seung quotes a famous Chinese painter who stated somewhere in the fourth century AD that he wanted to 'portray the spirit through the form'. The painter wanted to say that the spiritual message was more important than the material form. Seung assumes that this statement from the fourth century describes the essential artistic attitude of the entire Asian civilization. Although the evidence Seung produces is not very impressive in its quantity, I do not want to deny his proposition. I only want to ask how we can detect any difference between the view of the Chinese painter and that of the Church Father Saint Augustine who wrote in De Ordine that true beauty is anchored in metaphysical reality? Saint Augustine was one of the most influential authors during the Middle Ages in Europe and his thinking was deeply rooted in the philosophy of the ancient world. Saint Augustine lived in the fourth century AD, the same century in which the Chinese painter lived.

In contrast to what Seung thinks, it is not far beyond the truth to state that spirituality was one of the main characteristics of medieval art in the West. 'The medieval mind was preoccupied with the symbolic nature of the world of appearances. Everywhere the visible seemed to reflect the invisible,' concluded Otto von Simson in his study The Gothic Cathedral (1956).

More about the symbolism of medieval architecture from contemporary sources (for instance the thirteenth century Rationale Divinorum Officiorum of Guillaume Durandus) may be found in the dissertation of Joseph Sauer (Symbolik des Kirchengebäudes und seiner Ausstattung in der Auffassung des Mittelalters), published in 1902 in Freiburg im Breisgau. According to Durandus almost every element of a church has a deeper, symbolic meaning. The columns represent the Apostles, the mortar symbolizes love which holds together the stones, which represent the worshippers and so on. We also know from the study of Rudolf Wittkower that Renaissance architecture 'was based on a hierarchy of values culminating in the absolute values of sacred architecture'. These values were derived from a cosmic harmony: architecture as the reflection of divine harmony. One could go on giving examples of a spiritual interpretation of Western architecture, even from the nineteenth century in which styles could be the symbol of a mentality. Neo-Gothic could be interpreted as the expression of devout Catholicism or of the spirit of rational workmanship. Classicism could be seen as expressing the spirit of humanism or democracy, or both.
I have the impression that Asia is not entirely entitled to claim the monopoly of spirituality. What could then be the difference between East and West as far as the conservation principles are concerned? Seung proposes that the ‘Chinese did not regard a building as a permanent structure in the manner of the European cathedral’. Asian architecture has been ‘continuously repaired, enlarged, and reconstructed’, Seung writes, and this fact shows that permanence is not important in Asia. What would be more important in Asia is the ‘spiritual message’ of the architecture.

Again, I can see no difference with the history of architecture in Europe. Almost every major cathedral in Europe has been repaired, enlarged and reconstructed during the last centuries. Someone from 1550 would have trouble to recognize the cathedral of Cologne after its rebuilding and completion during the nineteenth century. These reconstructions of medieval architecture during the nineteenth century have been promoted by ideological motives, or if you want by spiritual considerations. Nationalism for instance has promoted the reconstruction of many medieval castles and churches in the different countries of Europe during the nineteenth century. All these restorations and reconstructions of important historical monuments were executed with the aim of emphasizing the prestige of the nation and of heightening the sense of nationhood. It is now very difficult to find a historical monument in Europe which has not been restored and partially remade during the last two centuries. So, the dichotomy between permanence in the West and spirituality in the East is probably less impressive as some people might believe.

There is another argument in the article of Seung which is important to understand and that is the concept of harmony with nature. In the East architecture is, he states, part of nature. This would mean that the value of a building is closely related to its natural environment. That is an important remark and perhaps the relationship between building and landscape may have received more attention in the East than in the West. But why would this be essential for the East? And what would be the difference here with a villa in a park? Europe abounds in villa’s which are composed in a landscape. But even if there would be reason to believe that the Asian approach is different in this respect, even then it is in my view not necessary to draw the conclusion that the difference is to be called essential.

Seung-Jin Chung quotes L. Shih-Cheng, who wrote in 1947 that the ‘essence of a Chinese layout is the grouping of individual buildings with courtyards and gardens over a wide area’. This is also something which would be unique for Asia and Seung comes to the conclusion that ‘this is a quality of East Asian architecture that cannot usually be found in Western architecture’. It can probably not be denied that there are more courtyards in China and the neighbouring countries, at least if one takes 1947 as a measuring point, but again we are dealing here with architectural characteristics and not with a conflict between conservation principles. China should try to protect those layouts and those courtyards. That is the important issue I think. The question is if China is doing enough for the protection of all these unique Asian architectural relicts.

**UNESCO**

Seung-Jin Chung attacks the Charter of Venice (1964) because it promotes the conservation of authentic material and does not touch upon the spiritual or immaterial values of historical architecture. As mentioned before, the authentic substance of a monument, that is the building as it has come down to us from the past, is the only tangible thing and it seems evident to take care of it and to hand it on as it is to a future generation. This is what the charter in fact recommends, but everyone knows that it is an ideal that is often difficult or even impossible to defend against the need to adapt monuments to new functions. Even in a conscientiously carried out restoration one cannot avoid a certain reduction of the authenticity. That is a pity, but there is no other solution, at least if we want to continue the existence of the monument. Nevertheless the notion of *authenticity* will not lose its meaning in the process of restoration and adaptation, because one might want to record the extent of the reduction of authentic material.

This does not at all mean that *authenticity* is the only value of the monument. The Venice Charter is a document that has been issued with one main objective and that was to stop the wave of reconstructions which destroyed on a huge scale the architectural legacy of the nineteenth century. It wanted to promote the protection of the monuments as documents of the entire history. It rejected reconstructions of the so-called original state.

All this should be understood against the background of the prevailing restoration practice of that period, the fifties and sixties of the Twentieth century. As already said it was aimed at the corruption of the historical substance. At a later stage the message of the charter has been misused in circumstances that were totally different. The message of the charter was of course not invented in 1964. The same message is to be found in the writings of John Ruskin, William Morris, Georg Dehio, Max Dvorak and
others. After the Second World War this message was not forgotten, but temporarily suspended when the people of Europe were confronted with a massive devastation of their heritage. Nobody with a sound mind protested in the name of the conservation principles, because these were never meant to restrain people from restoring their bombed cities. Warsaw was rebuilt and the whole world admired the bitter enterprise. Some things are more important than conservation principles.

So, it was with great disbelief and discontent that the people of Afghanistan received a message from the UNESCO concerning their project to rebuild the two statues of Buddha in Bamiyan, which were destroyed by the Taliban. The message of the UNESCO was that in case Afghanistan decided to rebuild the statues, the site shall be removed from the list of World Heritage.[6] This message is only understandable for conservationists who have learned to believe that a newly built reconstruction has no historical value in the strict sense, that such a thing is no authentic document from the past. These conservationists are right, but they are also inhuman and what is worse they are not aware of the fact that most historical buildings in the world are the products of endless restorations. Stones only seem durable to someone from China or Japan. Most natural stones with which our old cathedrals have been built must repeatedly be renewed, because some stones are easily eroding by wind and rain. Medieval stones have most of the time been replaced in the course of the nineteenth century and a lot of these have been replaced in the course of the twentieth century. The conservationist of the UNESCO know that or ought to know that and they also ought to know that people have a spiritual bond with their heritage and that it is far from strange to rebuild treasured buildings after destruction by fire or bombardment. The history of conservation abounds with reconstructions as a means to restore the ties with the past. The conservationists of the UNESCO ought to read more about the history of reconstructions, for instance about the way the cities of Flanders were rebuilt after the First World War. No solace after tragedies, is that what the UNESCO wants?[6]

Authenticity and Values

Authenticity is quite a different thing from originality. It denotes a historical object, whether or not damaged or altered, whereas the term originality refers to its first state. The copy of the Villa dei Papiri in Malibu, commissioned by J. Paul Getty in 1974, can thus be described as the original version of the authentic first-century villa in Herculaneum. The villa in California is an attempt to give the original building a new lease of life, because the real villa in Italy is no longer original, but merely authentic. In our modern parlance only the material substance is accepted as authentic; the word can never be applied to a replica. There is no need to make things more complicated than they already are and the German conservationist Michael Petzet was perhaps a little rash in his contribution to the Nara Conference on Authenticity of 1994 to introduce other forms of authenticity besides that of the materials. He introduced other interpretations such as authenticity of form, of technique, of function and of site.[7]

According to Michael Petzet, and others who came together in Japan to discuss the meaning of authenticity in the globalized world, there is not just one interpretation of the word, but more, many more. What is confusing here is that the notion itself has been split up into several other notions with the result that everybody is free to choose his or her own interpretation. If you think that the authenticity of the site is the essential thing, you would give this more attention than the authenticity of form. What could be the aim of the new definitions? Why was it necessary to give more meanings than one to a word which already had received a certain function in the field of conservation? There the word is mostly used to denote the thing itself as history has bequeathed to us.

If a definition is spit up in several others, one is free to choose the definition one likes. In other words the definition of authenticity in the Venice Charter has been blown up in Nara. The Nara Document on Authenticity, drafted by 45 participants states in chapter 13 that “authenticity judgements may be linked to the worth of a great variety of sources of information. Aspects of these sources may include form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors.”[8]

The wording may be a little unclear and bureaucratic, but the message is clear: humanity should respect cultural diversity. The aim of the document is to enhance the public interest in ‘heritage values’ all over the world. When the UNESCO wants to promote the interest in values, why would it be necessary to introduce the word authenticity? Why would it not be enough to use the word value? That would have been much clearer, because it may be easy to define the notion of authenticity, but it is more difficult to define what is not authentic. If a piece of architecture was produced in 1950 as a reproduction of something from 1650, one could perhaps call it an authentic piece of 1950. The meaning of the word authentic depends on how you want to describe the thing from the past.
The proposal to split up the notion into various aspects threatens to annihilate the traditional meaning of the notion. Nevertheless this proposal has been welcomed by various students in the field of architectural preservation. One of the many examples is to be found in the book *European Heritage. Planning and Management*, edited by Gregory Ashworth and Peter Howard in 1999. They teach us on page 44 that ‘there is functional authenticity (is a church or a castle now used as a museum still authentic?), contextual authenticity (is an authentic artefact or building that has been moved to a museum or a new location still authentic?), and, most important in the discussion users later, experiential authenticity (does the user enjoy an authentic experience?)’. The importance to management is that if there are a range of different authenticities, then there must be different policies for the preservation of different authenticities.\[9]\ The moral of this statement is that what we used to acknowledge as the real thing from the past, is going to be dissolved into more realities, with the possible result that the historical substance of the monument has the same value in the ‘management policy’ as other values, for instance the enjoyment of the ‘user’ (whoever he may be, for he might well be a person who hardly ever enjoys himself). Authenticity has been given a definition which can be used as a tool for achieving one’s aim.

**Conclusion**

In Japan there are monuments of wood, ‘an inherently impermanent material’, to quote Nobuko Inaba from his contribution to the Nara conference. He rightly concluded that the only difference between the restoration of stone structures and wooden structures is that wood has to be replaced more often than stone in the course of history. In his view there is in this respect not any conflict with the tenets of the Venice Charter. Nobuko Inaba also rightly concluded that the notion of *authenticity* has not much use in defining the value of the ‘intangible’ culture, like musical or dancing traditions. If the world wants to protect living heritage, it is necessary to describe it and to create favourable conditions for its survival.\[10]\ ‘Authenticity lies not only in the physical structures of the built heritage, but essentially in the continuation of the evolution and development of society’, explained the Belgian conservationist Marc Laenen in his contribution to the conference in Nara. It is clear what Marc Laenen means. He wants that the international institutions in the field of conservation must try to preserve not only the historical objects itself, but also the culture which produced them. These institutions should also pay more attention to the immaterial culture, to local cultural traditions, to a way of life which is on the brink of extinction. All this sounds very reasonable and I suppose that all participants of the conference in Nara would have agreed, but it would have been better to use the word *value* instead of *authenticity*.

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