

The Venice Charter in a Changing World

(Slide 2) The Venice Charter contains principles for conservation and restoration that largely have served us well. The principles are clear but also flexible enough to be relevant in various situations. However, our cultural heritage must also be adapted and modified sufficiently to remain relevant to today's and tomorrow's societies. Here, the charter can be overly strict, and its principles often need to be seen more as ideals where one must be prepared for compromises and tough prioritizations. Changes in the field of cultural heritage management and in society as a whole, have also contributed to this, and I will focus on three aspects:

(Slide 3) 1. Expansion of the Cultural Heritage Field in Numbers and Types of Sites

The cultural heritage field has, to some extent, become a victim of its own success in recent years. To take my city, the capital Oslo, as an example:

(Slide 4) From our first list in 1962 with 56 buildings of national heritage value, the overview of cultural heritage objects and sites for the City of Oslo today includes approximately 20,200, of which 15,350 are buildings. This accounts for about 12% of all buildings in the municipality, including the majority of the building stock in the city center, as shown by the colored objects in the illustration. Most of these are assessed to have national or regional cultural heritage value. It is neither possible nor desirable, considering the living city, to only allow changes in use if the building's layout and decoration are preserved according to Article 5, or to conserve the surroundings as in Article 6, for such an extensive building stock.

It is also not realistic to meet the charter's objectives regarding investigation, documentation, and preservation of original materials for such a number of sites, as required by Article 9. And even if one seeks to preserve the entire history of the site in accordance with Article 11, in most cases, the original structure will carry the most weight, and later changes and additions will be where new modifications and additions are most easily accepted.

And while the original list consisted of traditional buildings with structures and materials that were relatively easy to maintain, the challenges of adhering to the principles of the charter have increased further as it now also encompasses a much broader range of objects and sites.

(Slide 5) One group that has particularly challenged us in Norway is old industrial sites, after most manufacturing has moved abroad. The production line, which provided the original logic of the site, disappears first. Many of these sites also had production lines that generated excess heat, and the buildings were therefore uninsulated, with slender and open structures. When converting these buildings for new uses, they often cannot bear snow loads or thicker and insulating exterior constructions without extensive replacement and reinforcement.

(Slide 6) Another challenging group is the 20th-century cultural heritage, which includes sites from the modern industrial society that have now become a historical layer like all the others, and must be considered for preservation alongside the older sites. These often consist of buildings and technical installations with structures and materials that were not designed to be maintained but must be replaced when they age or become damaged. Some also contain components that are no longer legally permissible to use, such as asbestos, and many were designed for very specific functions, where changes in economic, technological, or functional

conditions mean that the physical structure is no longer suitable for its original use and cannot be easily converted for new uses—potentially requiring significant rebuilding. In these cases, the guidelines of the charter must be interpreted quite freely.

(Slide 7) 2. Changing Alliances, Values, and Power Dynamics

(Slide 8) In the 1960s, the cultural heritage field was a marginal discipline dominated by academically trained restoration architects and art historians. Authenticity and scientific values were central. The counterculture movement of the 60s/70s led to a popular embrace of preservation, and in later years, preservation has largely become mainstream within society. At the same time, concepts such as local distinctiveness, continuity, identity, and sustainable resource management have emerged as central arguments for preservation. In recent years, commercial interests have also begun to recognize the value of cultural heritage in the context of marketing. Also - a municipal audit in 2014 examined the economic value impact of listing and found not just that listing had a positive effect on sales, but also that increased property values correlated with higher cultural heritage density and stronger preservation.

During the same period, both the responsibility and tools for preservation have been democratized and shifted from national authorities to local municipalities. The assessments of what is worthy of preservation have broadened, and the emphasis has shifted from the scientific and unique to the more subjective, experiential aspects and to a diversity of everyone's cultural history. At the same time, local politicians are often more willing to compromise to please property owners and voter groups. These compromises often go against the principles of the charter.

One of the results is that the emphasis on modern expressions in changes or additions, as indicated in Article 9, and the readability when original materials are replaced, has been toned down in favor of what is perceived as a harmonious expression. Another is that context often is compromised. In this landscape, professional cultural heritage management must, on the one hand, maintain certain professional principles and guide based on these. At the same time, we are subject to political governance and must be careful not to alienate public support.

The images here show, on the left, an environment where the City Heritage Management Office came into conflict with the owners when we argued that this originally poor district could never have afforded to establish a cobblestone pavement and the street therefore should be kept with gravel. In the top right, we accepted an extension at the end of the very small tenant house, but the politicians also accepted that the apple orchard behind it was developed. In the bottom right, you see the row of boathouses along the river in Trondheim, one of the city's trademarks. Many of these have been significantly altered or replaced, partly in line with the charter's principle of contemporary architecture, but the principle has not been consistently applied.

(Slide 9) 3. Contemporary Challenges

We are also facing new societal challenges where the cultural heritage field must contribute to remain relevant. This includes universal accessibility, risk preparedness against terrorism, mitigating the nature crisis with the loss of biodiversity, and sustainable urban development with densification, energy cuts, and climate adaptation. I will touch on three of these.

(Slide 10) Risk preparedness – Terrorism. Oslo experienced a terrorist attack in 2011 with heavy loss of lives and extensive damage on the government complex in the center of the city. We had another, though smaller attack by a gunman in 2022. The work of making the city safer, and at the same time not looking as a war zone has been going on for the last 13 years, and will be high on the agenda also for coming years. It includes new safety measures built into buildings and alterations of streets and public spaces, and challenges the principles of the charter in many cases.

(Slide 11) Energy Reduction. Energy saving has been a topic for some years now, and solutions have partly been found in line with the charter, as seen here where Oslo City Hall has installed solar panels on the roof. However, it also occasionally challenges the charter's requirements for material authenticity and the clarity of replacements when original elements are lost, as shown on the right, where both exterior panels and windows have been renewed, and the outer wall externally insulated.

(Slide 12) Storm Water. Torrential storm water is an issue that Oslo Municipality has worked diligently on in recent years, due to increasingly extreme rainfalls. The city lies in a landscape amphitheater, with the historic, dense city at the bottom. Cultural heritage management must therefore contribute to solutions on how we can safeguard cultural heritage values and how we can help ensure that the city center as a whole becomes more robust against surface water events.

(Slide 13) The municipality has adopted a strategy and action plan with various follow-up projects. Developers must manage surface water on their own property, but the major challenge will be implementing measures where the city is already built. In the outer city, this is manageable given sufficient incentives, and the goal is that all surface water should be stopped upstream and not burden the city center.

(Slide 14) Oslo city center will be the major challenge for cultural heritage management. We are continuously developing our policy for green roofs, walls, streets, and urban spaces. A surface water map has also been established, showing drainage lines with modeled water depths and speeds, which will form the basis for assessing more extensive measures. However, much of this will have to challenge the principles of the Venice Charter—both concerning building preservation and the preservation of environments/surroundings with their cultural-historical character.