

A Vision for CIAV. Addressing the challenges facing the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Vernacular Architecture

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Abstract

While the debate continues on what exactly is vernacular architecture, what are its values and significance, how could it be conserved and revitalized, some pressing questions must be addressed without delay. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate change, the pandemic, armed conflicts, displacements and other disasters such as fires, floods and earthquakes are some of the main challenges that have been recently escalating and must be addressed collectively by all humanity without any delay. These challenges that do impact the cultural heritage greatly. On the other hand, cultural heritage should play a key role in addressing these challenges. ICOMOS, as the leading international organization in the field has an important role to play. The ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Vernacular Architecture (CIAV) endeavours to fulfil its duty in addressing these pressing issues and their impact on the protection, conservation and management of the built vernacular heritage. The specificity of vernacular architecture raises particular challenges as well as offers opportunities that are particular to CIAV. This paper proposes a vision for CIAV that aims to include its new duties, which were not as urgent in the initial vision at the time of its foundation and during the drafting of the Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage, 1999 in Mexico. The ideas expressed in the paper aim to raise discussions not only among the members of CIAV and ICOMOS but also for all those who are interested in the built vernacular heritage. As a result, CIAV may need to revisit its charter or issue a declaration to include the proposed new vision in its activities and discourse through its newsletter, conferences, publications, webinars and other events.

Keywords: vernacular built heritage; conservation of built heritage; ICOMOS; CIAV.

1. Introduction

CIAV's objective is to promote the identification, evaluation, protection, conservation and revitalization of vernacular architecture, in keeping with ICOMOS' objective to foster international co-operation. CIAV forms an international network that defines, improves and promotes conservation principles, standards, research, responsible practice, innovation and knowledge about the built vernacular heritage. According to its strategy established in the

year 2000, CIAV's aims are: to offer a global view on the conservation of the vernacular tangible and intangible heritage, to provide a forum for the examination of the built vernacular heritage and to provide specialists with advice on its conservation. The current CIAV Strategic Plan 2021/23 states the following "Vision":

"As an ICOMOS Scientific Committee, CIAV aims to bridge the gap between academic research and professional practices in the field of

built vernacular heritage study, conservation and management. The ‘new normal’ during and after the corona virus pandemic opened a new window of opportunity for CIAV by the normalization of virtual meetings, webinars, and conferences, which permitted more members to participate and brought to the fore impressive contributions from emerging professionals, promising a more dynamic future for CIAV.”

Today, cultural heritage throughout the world is facing challenges that are not new but have become pressing. ICOMOS endeavours to bring them into the focus and so is CIAV. These are:

- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- Climate change
- Natural disasters
- The Covid-19 pandemic
- Wars and displacements
- Fires
- Human rights

In addition, special attention should be paid to working to reach a balanced representation of different regions of the world in CIAV’s membership as well as the subject of its work.

In its declaration of Climate and Ecological Emergency, ICOMOS 20th General Assembly opened the declaration by stating that “The planet is at a crossroads where business as usual is no longer an option.” This could be said for all the above issues. It is therefore, the author’s suggestion that CIAV has to specifically aim to address these issues in the Committee’s work and include them in the Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage (1999), which CIAV sets as the guidelines for international best practices for the study and conservation of built vernacular heritage. The paper addresses each of the identified issues and concludes by the proposal to integrate them in CIAV’s vision, work and activities, which may require an update to its Charter.

One common characteristics of the issues identified by this paper is that they are a common challenge to all humanity. They, therefore, should be addressed collectively. This is why this is a paper addressed to the field of vernacular built heritage and not as an internal document for CIAV members. There is a pressing need for collaboration and coordinating efforts by all institutions, groups and individuals who work in the field.

2. Sustainable Development Goals

Culture is the absent presence in sustainable development endeavours. Sustainability is often measured by three indicators: social, economic and environment. Culture is not included. Nonetheless, it is a crucial indicator for sustainability. The United Nations Agenda 2030 focus on the five Ps: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. Once more, culture is not mentioned even if it is present. None of the seventeen UN Sustainable Development Goals is on culture, even if culture is present directly or indirectly in all of them. In 2020 the British Council issued its important report *The Missing Pillar. Culture’s Contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals*. As for cultural heritage, the only mention of its protection is *Target 11.4 “strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage to make our cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”*, under Goal 11 ‘sustainable cities and communities’. In 2021 ICOMOS issued the important report *Heritage and the Sustainable Development Goals: Policy Guidance for Heritage and Development Actors*. The report is based on the conviction that the role of cultural heritage in achieving the SDGs is crucial. The report proposes the slogan ‘heritage: driver and enabler of sustainability’ with an accompanying promotional graphic similar to the graphics for the seventeen SDGs, featuring elements representing culture, nature and people (Fig. 1).

HERITAGE: DRIVER & ENABLER OF SUSTAINABILITY



Fig. 1. The promotional graphic for the role of heritage in achieving the SDGs (ICOMOS, 2021)

The SDGs should be in the heart of CIAV’s work. Not only because the vernacular built heritage contributes directly and indirectly to most of the SDGs. But also because the SDGs offer a great opportunity for championing the conservation and revitalization of vernacular built heritage as living heritage that is closely connected to people and to the nature as well as the carrier of age old wisdom in responsible relationship with the environment.

3. Climate change

The declaration by the 20th ICOMOS General Assembly of Climate and Ecological Emergency brought climate action to the heart of all the work and actions of ICOMOS. The theme for ICOMOS International Day for Monuments and Sites for both 2022 and 2023 is “heritage and climate”. This is very important for CIAV. The vernacular built heritage is a living heritage that connects people with their environment and manifests their traditional wisdom in adapting to climatic and other environmental conditions. Traditional communities understood and observed sustainability well before the notion was highlighted and the term was coined in recent times.

Professionals of heritage conservation and sustainable development could learn lessons on

sustainability and mitigating the impact of climate change from the built vernacular heritage. On the other hand, professionals could assist local communities and traditional master builders in sustaining livelihood for the future and mitigating climate change adverse impact by introducing innovative methods and tools that enhance the efficiency of the vernacular built environment. The role of CIAV is to offer the platform and guidance for climate action for the conservation and management of vernacular built heritage and to facilitate cooperation and exchange of ideas and expertise on regional and international levels.

4. Natural disasters

Earthquakes, floods, droughts, heatwaves, storms and cyclon winds have left their marks on many historic buildings and settlements over time. The different historic layers and patinas of historic buildings may tell stories about natural disasters and in some cases they show evidence of traditional strategies and methods for post-disaster reconstructions. The built vernacular heritage in different parts of the world manifest techniques, materials, architectural typologies and collective communal traditions that prevent or mitigate the impact of predicted natural disasters

of the specific regions. We see, for example, tie beams applied to arches, ring beams to domes, buttresses to vaults and wooden cushions to columns in the vernacular built heritage of earthquake-prone regions. And we see elevated ground floors in regions that witness recurrent floods. These and many other methods and techniques offer useful resources for resilient new architecture.

On the other hand, modern scientific research, analysis and methods could enhance the resilience of vernacular buildings and settlements. For example, earthquake shaking table tests and seismic performance analysis could inform the implementation of protective retrofitting of vernacular buildings in earthquake-prone regions.

Today emergency preparedness, risk reduction and disaster management are most pertinent to the protection and conservation of the built vernacular heritage as climate change has caused and is expected to cause a rise in the number and intensity of natural disasters. The work of CIAV should therefore include special attention to natural disasters and their impact on the vernacular built heritage.

5. The pandemic

The Corona Virus (COVID-19) pandemic is another challenge that threatened the whole humanity and hit hard the culture sector, particularly the cultural heritage as most museums, sites and historic buildings had to close their doors for months. In some cases closure lasted more than a year. In other cases closure became permanent, with many jobs lost and development plans cancelled.

In 2020 ICOMOS issued a study on “the impact of COVID-19 on heritage”, which was the result of a survey of ICOMOS national committees reporting on the impact of the pandemic on the cultural heritage in their countries as well as their views on ideas for achieving resilience and recovery. The topic was also covered by many webinars, the “new normal” during the high waves of the pandemic, total lockdowns and the ban on big gatherings and meetings.

Despite its negative impact, the pandemic was a wake up call for all humanity to rethink our mode of work, study, shopping, travel and almost all aspects of modern life in the globalized world of today. The concept of “living locally” became a necessity and not a luxury during the lockdowns. We all had to live the concept of “20-minute neighborhood”, meaning a walkable neighborhood or settlement, where all basic needs of the community should be available. No travelling long distances for work, schools, shopping or any other activity was possible. The positive impact on the environment during the lockdowns was evident as the air, seas and rivers became cleaner and cities became greener and healthier.

Many lessons could be learned from the built vernacular heritage not only on how to live locally but also on how to build a home, manage a settlement locally and lead a full life locally. This is a role that CIAV should play by introducing to architects, planners and decision makers case studies, the philosophy, materials, techniques and approaches from built vernacular heritage around the world. Also, this is an opportunity for CIAV to raise awareness and pride of the guardians and local communities who live, maintain and keep alive the built vernacular heritage.

6. Wars

ICOMOS, UNESCO and many other international organizations as well as conventions, declarations and initiatives were established as a reaction to the destruction and loss caused by the two world wars of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, today and after a few decades we find ourselves in no better situation. Wars and displacements of millions of innocent civilians and the destruction of whole cities, villages and countless historic buildings and sites have become an everyday reality of our world. For some it is an unpleasant item on the news headlines. For others, it is their very lives being totally shattered.

Wars and displacements create great challenges and also opportunities for the built vernacular heritage. While the restoration or reconstruction of a historic monument may help in curing the damage caused by war, vernacular buildings are only the tip of the iceberg. A vernacular building could be restored or reconstructed, but what about the traditions of living in and maintaining such a building? Would a family who grew up in exile or a refugee camp return to their family earthen house and know how to live in it? How to maintain it? How to make their own bread using their traditional oven? What about the local culture and social structure and traditions within the village and the city? Would the local oral history, stories, songs, dances and handicrafts survive the war?

These are great challenges that are facing the built vernacular heritage not in one or two countries but unfortunately many more. It is therefore the duty and role of CIAV to address these challenges and also to identify opportunities that may arise from wars and displacements. For example, certain vernacular settlements that were deserted by the youth who have migrated to big cities in search for opportunities could be adapted for receiving displaced people from other regions. Such an opportunity would come of course with its own challenges. Which traditions and identity would prevail? That of the place or of its new community?

7. Fires

It was heart-breaking to see live on tv very important historic buildings destroyed by fire. This included the roof of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris in 2019, Shuri Castle in Japan in 2019, the National Museum of Brazil in 2018, the Glasgow School of Art in Glasgow twice in 2014 and 2018, the New Delhi National Museum of Natural History in 2016, the Duchess Anna Amalia Library in Germany in 2004 and Windsor Castle in the UK in 1992. Many other historic buildings were destroyed by fire but did not make it to the international news headlines.

All these buildings were covered by the highest level of protection and enjoyed the best care that was available on national level, and for some on international level by being designated World Heritage Sites. Nevertheless, the protection was not enough to predict, prevent, mitigate or reduce the damage by fire. Actually both Notre-Dame Cathedral and Glasgow School of Art were under restoration at the time of the fire with all conservation personnel, equipment and accessibility scaffolding in place. Yet, the fire was not put down before it caused huge irreversible losses.

For such damage to occur to these high profile historic buildings in our day and age tells us that we are not prepared enough to protect our built heritage from the threat of fire. The threat to built vernacular heritage is even much greater. As most vernacular buildings and settlements are built with flammable materials and in remote locations with poor accessibility to emergency services. CIAV should therefore address this threat by research and guidance for best practices. Traditional methods for mitigating and fighting fires should be studied and modern methods should be adapted and included in the conservation and management plans for built vernacular heritage.

8. Human rights

In 2007 ICOMOS started an initiative with the aim of “building awareness of rights issue in World Heritage and heritage management in general”, which led in 2011 to the establishing of “Our Common Dignity” Rights-Based Approaches Working Group (OCD-RBA). This is an important milestone in the decolonization and the freeing of the international conservation movement from its Eurocentric attitudes. Earlier milestones include Burra Charter that was initially issued by ICOMOS Australia in 1979 acknowledging the value system and worldview of the indigenous peoples in the field of cultural heritage and its conservation. Another milestone is the Nara Document on Authenticity in 1994, acknowledging that the European notion of authenticity is not universally valid and that authenticity is a

culture-specific concept. There is still a long way to go as the establishment of the OCD-RBA indicates.

More recently the Black Lives Matter movement and Rhodes Must Fall movement highlighted the centuries-long oppression of people based on the colour of their skin and the insensitivity of the current views on cultural heritage with regards to racism, slavery and their legacy that continue to undermine black people and the people of color implicitly and explicitly. The anger and the violence that these movements showed towards the establishment and towards monuments, some of which, were listed as national heritage indicate that there is a lot of work to be done regarding human rights and human dignity.

The built vernacular heritage is produced, maintained and lived in by local communities many of whose dignity and rights are not always respected. In many cases, the conservation, interpretation and presentation of their own cultural heritage are imposed by outsiders without their full participation and collaboration. Human rights must therefore be explicitly in the heart of CIAV's work.

9. Integration and synergy

The above mentioned issues, challenges and opportunities should be integrated into CIAV's work. CIAV members should discuss a possible update that could be made to the "Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage (1999)". The Charter is organized under four headings: "Introduction", "General Issues", "Principles of Conservation" and "Guidelines of Practice".

The "Introduction" states that "Due to the homogenization of culture and of global socio-economic transformation, vernacular structures all around the world are extremely vulnerable, facing serious problems of obsolescence, internal equilibrium and integration." A paragraph could be added on the escalating challenges of wars, fires and natural disasters. And another paragraph on the challenges and opportunities by the SDGs, climate change and the pandemic.

The issue of human rights is well covered under "General Issues", article 3:

"Governments and responsible authorities must recognize the right of all communities to maintain their living traditions, to protect these through all available legislative, administrative and financial means and to hand them down to future generations."

Separate articles could be added under both "Principles of Conservation" and "Guidelines in Practice" on SDGs and climate change as well as the mitigation and management of the threats of wars, fires and natural disasters. What is more important than including these issues in the Charter is to effectively include them in CIAV's work.

Another level of integration and synergy should be aimed at bridging the gaps created by institutional structures and mandates, such as:

- Cultural and natural heritage
- Tangible and intangible heritage
- Movable and immovable heritage

CIAV should endeavor to collaborate with the relevant institutions and other ICOMOS international scientific committees and working groups to bridge these gaps and to ensure a holistic and balanced approach to the built vernacular heritage.

10. Balanced representation

A balanced representation of members and also topics of research and discussions on the cultural heritage from different regions of the world is a difficult objective that ICOMOS aims to reach. The majority of members and thus studies and discussions are from Europe, North America and Australia.

For CIAV, the importance of a balanced representation cannot be overemphasized. Some of the most significant built vernacular heritage sites in the world are located in the least represented regions by CIAV members, such as Africa and also Asia and Latin America. This is the reason that the present CIAV Bureau endeavors to hold 2024 CIAV conference and annual meeting in

Africa, hoping to create opportunities of collaboration with African colleagues and relevant institutions.

11. Conclusion

As the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Vernacular Architecture, CIAV is in a position to address the escalating challenges that face the protection and conservation of the built vernacular heritage and to capture the opportunities to influence the design and building of new more resilient buildings and settlements. However, in order for CIAV to assume such a role, there is a need to develop an articulate vision that identifies the following priorities and integrates them into its work:

- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- Climate change
- Natural disasters
- The Covid-19 pandemic
- Wars and displacements
- Fires
- Human rights

To do so, there is a need to work towards a balanced representation in CIAV's membership, to collaborate with the relevant entities within ICOMOS and beyond and to revisit the "Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage (1999)".

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