Old Fabric, New Fabric and the Problem of Authenticity

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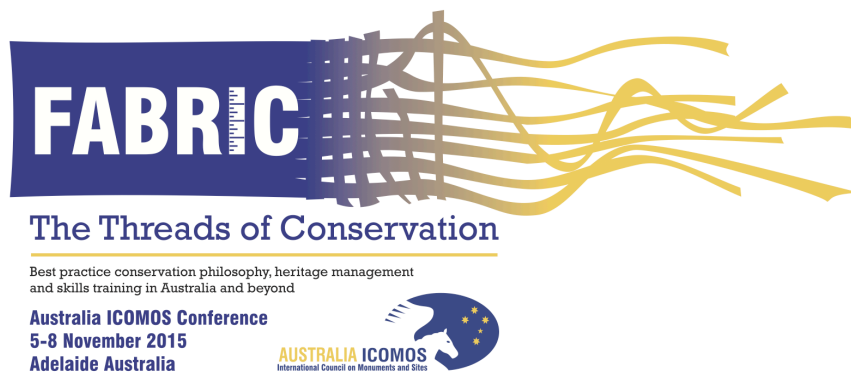
Old Fabric, New Fabric and the Problem of Authenticity

From the heritage perspective there are real challenges in achieving good design outcomes within historic environments – infill or new interventions that respond to and respect the existing character of a place. This is despite numerous guidelines produced by heritage bodies, the planning sector and urban design manuals to assist with the design of new development both within and outside areas designated for their heritage significance. The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between old fabric and new fabric within the conservation movement and to focus on the associated problem of 'authenticity'.

By way of introduction, three terms, imitative, deferential and juxtaposed, clarify the variety of design responses and contemporary architectural approaches to additions to heritage buildings or within conservation areas. These categories have been labelled alternatively the copy, the synthesis and the contrast, and at their extreme might be said to represent the processes of Disneyification, contextualism and exhibitionism (Warren 1998: p. 113). It is useful to illustrate each category with a single, well-known example.

The Harold Washington Library Centre in Chicago of 1991 by Hammond, Beeby and Babka Inc. typifies the imitative tradition. Consciously adopting the renaissance style vernacular of Chicago's nineteenth-century office buildings, it has three clearly defined registers with a rusticated ground floor that concludes in a smoother surface at the upper most level, where the material granite replaces brick. With the axial symmetry and decoration also typifying the Beaux Arts tradition, Thomas Beeby's building is both loved and hated by its audience (Bright 2013).

Hammond, Beeby and Babka Inc., Harold Washington Library Centre, Chicago, 1991.

(http://www.chicagoarchitecture.org/2013/05/30/9944/)

The façade of Gunnar Asplund's extension to the Law Courts in Gothenborg, Sweden in 1937 exemplifies the deferential category. Although the design is distinguishable from its historic host, it has been articulated with a series of careful references that acknowledge the primary presence of the seventeenth-century building. The original façade has generated the height, the floors, the repetitive modular grid, as well as the crisper paint palette. The differences lie in the subtle abstractions and change in window proportions. Asplund redesigned the scheme many times over a period of 20 years before the present solution (Ronalds 2010).
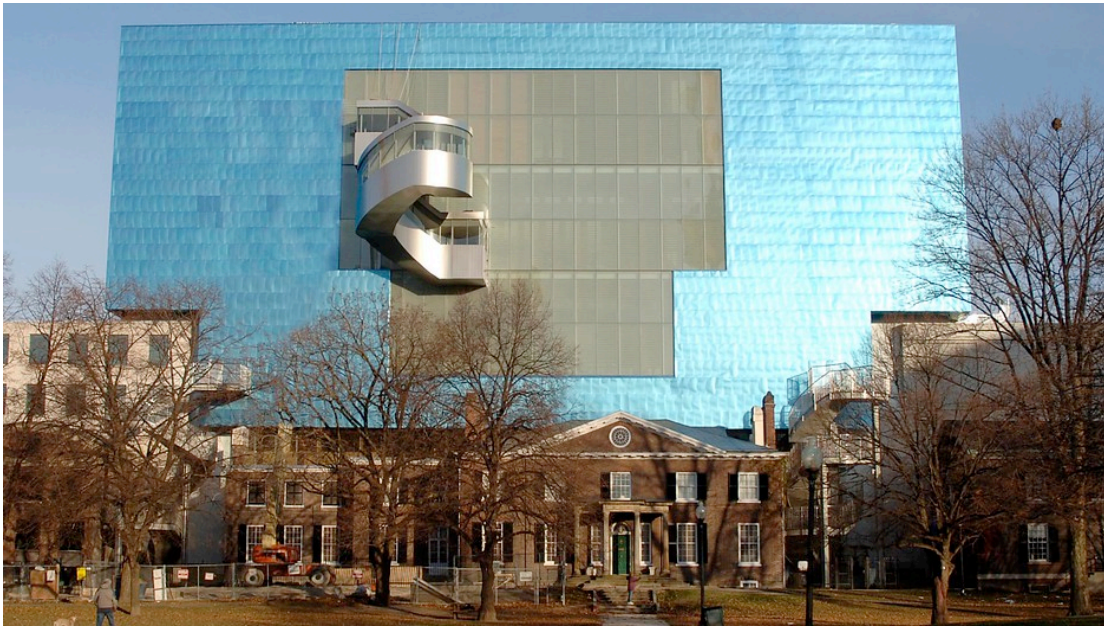
Gunnar Asplund, Extension to Law Courts, Gothenborg, Sweden, 1937.

(http://sixtensason.tumblr.com/post/50047095289/busywire-gothenburg-law-courts-extension-erik)

Unsurprisingly Frank Gehry's extension to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto in 2007 best exemplifies the juxtaposed style of addition to a heritage structure. Overlooking the Grange and Grange Park, Gehry added a new four-storey south wing, clad in glass and blue titanium, that required the demolition of an earlier, Post-Modern extension built in 1992. The *New York Times* architectural critic wrote:

> Rather than a tumultuous creation, this may be one of Mr. Gehry's most gentle and self-possessed designs. It….is a masterly example of how to breathe life into a staid old structure. And its interiors underscore….a supple feel for context and an ability to balance exuberance with delicious moments of restraint. Instead of tearing apart the old museum, Mr. Gehry carefully threaded new ramps, walkways and stairs through the original (Ouroussoff 2008).

Some may disagree.

Frank Gehry, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2007.

(https://images.trvl-media.com/media/content/shared/images/travelguides/destination/178314/Art-Gallery-Of-Ontario-45461.jpg)

This last example illustrates that, from an architectural point of view, the emphasis has reversed: the aim is not to incorporate new design within old buildings or conservation areas, but to incorporate old buildings within contemporary structures.

But rather than canvas the merits of these different stylistic responses, this paper focuses on understanding the evolution of the requirement to distinguish new from old fabric and what has emerged as an ancillary problem, that of authenticity. From a heritage point of view 'authenticity' might be said to be a double edged sword: while new fabric should be distinguishable from old fabric, it should not obscure the reading of the old rendering the reading of the past meaningless.

To track the origins of these concepts, it is necessary to return to the Gothic Revival movement in Britain. Before the eighteenth-century, while historical fragments were treasured, they were subjected to creative interpretation, as there was no scientific rigour concerning

their understanding and presentation. It is John Ruskin and his theory of 'anti-scrape' that was the first verbalization of the need to distinguish new from old.

But it was a concern for 'Gothic Survival' and attempts to 'restore' these buildings from the late eighteenth-century that prompted a series of outbursts from activists. James Wyatt was particularly under attack for his restoration work first on Lincoln Cathedral. It sparked responses from the *Gentleman's Magazine* and John Carter's presentation to the Royal Society of Antiquities: 'To regret the devastation continually making in our Cathedrals and other sumptuous Buildings connected with them, will in itself be of no avail, unless some efforts of laudable and animated Zeal be made for the preservation of the remaining ones' (1976 Pevsner: 38).

A.W.N. Pugin joined forces with the *Eccesiologist* in criticizing Wyatt's work. He published *Contrasts: or a parallel between the noble edifices of the Middle Ages and corresponding buildings of the present decay of taste* in 1836, which bemoaned changes to the traditional medieval townscape as a result of the industrialization of Britain. While today Pugin might be criticized for his nostalgia, the rigour of his understanding of Gothic buildings was matched by the fervor of his Catholicism and its translation into built form.

Ruskin's interest in medieval architecture was likewise pedagogic, although he was attracted more to Venetian Gothic examples than Pugin. Both were concerned about the 'deceit' of restoration, with Ruskin attacking the work of Sir George Gilbert Scott in particular. Scott spoke first in a lecture seeking to justify his actions:

> But taking the more correct view of the church as a building erected for the glory of
> God and the use of man (and which must therefore be kept in a proper state of repair)
> and finding it in such a state of dilapidation that the earlier and later parts – the

authentic and the spurious – are alike decayed and all require renovation to render the
edifice suitable for its purposes, I think we are then at liberty to exercise our best
judgement upon the subject, and if the original parts are found to be 'precious' and the
late insertions to be 'vile', I think we should be quite right in giving perpetuity to the
one and in removing the other (1976 Pevsner: 44).

Sir George Gilbert Scott, St Mary's, Staffordshire, post 1841 restoration with added gabled porches, new
window & finials on crossing tower.
(http://darkroom.ribaj.com/1200/855/e6ad0bd4723dd0015470e8cc8275f567:0f25b9e80ce2246e07eec58f031c30
5f/st-mary-s-stafford-scott-s-first-important-restoration-some-rebuilding-and-replacement-while-leaving-the-
perpendicular-clerestory-and-battlements)

Ruskin's well-known repost was published in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* in 1849.

Neither by the public nor by those who have the care of public monuments, is the true
meaning of the word restoration understood. It means the most total destruction which
a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered: a
destruction accompanied with false descriptions of the thing destroyed. Do not let us

deceive ourselves in this important matter; it is impossible, as impossible as it is to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture. (1976 Pevsner: 49)

In 1877 William Morris wrote a letter to the *Athenaeum* deploring Scott's restoration work at Tewkesbury Abbey. Cited as 'destruction' and 'acts of barbarism' under the banner of restoration, Morris called for an association to be formed that would act as a watchdog of old monuments to 'awaken a feeling that our ancient buildings are not mere ecclesiastical toys, but sacred monuments of the nation's growth and hope' (1976 Pevsner: 51). The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was formed the same year, with Morris as its Secretary.

For Pugin, Ruskin and Morris, 'improvement' and 'restoration' violated the concept of 'authenticity' that allowed old buildings to 'truthfully' represent accumulated medieval layers. Authenticity was achieved not by altering the original form with modern interventions and interpretations, but by retaining clear evidence that new work was indeed contemporary. 'Anti-scrape' required a commitment to retaining original material that was distinguishable from new material: new fabric must be identifiable as such.

Would Ruskin have approved of Frank Gehry's interpretation of his axiom? What is appropriate 'new' fabric if it is to respect the old fabric? Authenticity does not just depend on it being identifiable as such, but also on whether the new fabric alters the reading of the old fabric. Or is it more complex?

To follow the problem of new design within historic contexts further requires a journey through the conservation literature. It begins with the Athens Charter, 'the First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments', held in Athens in 1931.

Echoing the Ruskian position on 'anti-scrape' and authenticity, Article 1 noted: '…the general tendency to abandon restorations in *toto* and to avoid the attendant dangers by initiating a system of regular and permanent maintenance calculated to ensure the preservation of the buildings'. If restoration was necessary as a result of decay or destruction, 'the historic and artistic work of the past should be respected, without excluding the style of any given period' (1931 Athens: Article 1).

Athens also hosted the fourth meeting of the key Modernist group, the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) at the same time. Its published findings, largely the work of Le Corbusier, found common ground in the 'strong belief in the separation and clear expression of new and old architecture, stylistically and spatially'. Although CIAM believed in Modern architecture as the basis for future development, the Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments foresaw a future 'springing organically from the past' (Glendinning 2013: pp. 199-200).

The ideology of the separation of old and new fabric is consistent throughout both international and national charters from this date onwards. It applies equally to historic buildings and historic landscapes: contemporary work and insertions must be clearly visible and represent the present age. Importantly the 2013 edition of the Burra Charter adds a clause to Article 22.2 of the 1999 edition: 'New work should be readily identifiable as such, but must respect and have minimal impact on the *cultural significance* of the *place*': it issued a separate Practice Note to highlight the point (2013 Burra-1: Article 22.2, 2103 Burra-2).

Regarding the historic urban landscape, the Vienna Memorandum of 2005 notes that it:

> ….should avoid all forms of pseudo-historical design, as they constitute a denial of both the historical and the contemporary alike. One historical view should not

supplant others, as history must remain readable, while continuity of culture through quality interventions is the ultimate goal (Bandarin 2013: p. 206).

There is also continuity throughout the conservation literature concerning the type of new fabric, infill or interventions appropriate within the historic environment. The word 'harmony' is most frequently cited, with the word 'quality' on occasion being adopted as a substitute. A series of charters resulting from meetings in the 1970s, beginning with a meeting in Budapest in 1972, Laussane in 1973, Kazimieerz Dolny in 1974, Bruges and Rothenberg in 1975, each call for the harmonious introduction of new elements within the historic town.

These documents all anticipate the European Architectural Heritage Year, held in 1975 at the instigation of the Council of Europe, the European Union, UNESCO and ICOMOS. Advocating a process of integrated conservation, the European Charter of Architectural Heritage was accompanied by the Amsterdam Declaration in October 1975. This document made an urgent request for 'legislation subjecting new building to certain restrictions with regard to volume and dimensions….that will make for harmony with its surroundings' (1975 Amsterdam).

The following year, the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas, drafted in Nairobi, warned more specifically that 'modern urbanization' was leading to 'a considerable increase in the scale and density of buildings'. It identified a 'real danger' in both 'newly developed areas' ruining 'the environment and character of adjoining historic areas', as well as the 'growing universality of building techniques and architectural forms' (1976 Nairobi: Article II, 5).

The importance of contemporary interventions being integrated harmoniously within their historic urban settings is reiterated in ICOMOS's 1987 Washington Charter on the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas; CIVVIH's updated document, the Valletta Principles of 2011; and again in UNESCO's Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape of the same year. The Valletta Principles nominate 'heritage as an essential resource…that….must be strictly respected in order to ensure harmonious development of historic towns and their settings' (2011 Valletta: Preamble).

Finally there is agreement within the conservation literature about the method for achieving harmonious new development within the historic environment. The Venice Charter had first called for new additions that did not detract from the historic building or their setting; they should preserve the balance of composition, the scale, and maintain a relationship with the surroundings through mass and colour. And the series of 1970s charters reiterates the importance of respecting, variously, the mass, scale, rhythm, materials, colour, building lines and patterns of the original buildings.

As well as the physical structure, the Kazimieerz Dolny Charter nominates the retention of spatial arrangements and relationships, and respect for aesthetic, historic and social qualities, as well as the local vernacular (1974 Kazimieerz Dolny). The Washington Charter similarly lists the urban patterns, relationships between buildings and spaces, the formal appearance of buildings (scale, style, construction, materials, colour and decoration), the relationship between town and setting, but also identifies 'the various functions that the town or urban area has acquired over time' (1987 Washington: Article 2).

While physical analysis of the components contributing to historic areas continues in later documents, there is growing recognition that non physical attributes should be respected

equally, for example, the retention of vistas and views, cultural values and function or use, all of which are less tangible aspects. The Valletta Principles are the most comprehensive:

> The introduction of contemporary architectural elements must respect the values of the site and its setting. It can contribute to the enrichment of the town, bringing alive the value of urban continuity.
>
> The basis of appropriate architectural interventions in spatial, visual, intangible and functional terms should be respect for historical values, patterns and layers.
>
> New architecture must be consistent with the spatial organisation of the historic area and respectful of its traditional morphology while at the same time being a valid expression of the architectural trends of its time and place. Regardless of style and expression, all new architecture should avoid the negative effects of drastic or excessive contrasts and of fragmentation and interruptions in the continuity of the urban fabric and space.
>
> Priority must be given to a continuity of composition that does not adversely affect the existing architecture but at the same time allows a discerning creativity that embraces the spirit of the place (2011 Valletta: Article 2, b).

This growth in the understanding of the factors that contribute to a harmonious new intervention within a heritage context corresponds to the growth in understanding as to what actually constitutes heritage: conservationists are no longer concerned exclusively with the physical fabric - an equally important component of the discipline now embraces the preservation of social fabric.

The Venice Charter of 1964 makes specific reference to the historic monument that 'embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting' (1964 Venice: Article 1). From this date there also emerges an acknowledgement of minor, as well as major,

historic buildings: the Rothenburg Resolution, for example, warns 'to avoid the destruction of historic elements which at first sight, might seem to be of minor importance but whose cumulative loss would be irretrievable (1975 Rothenburg: Article 5. See also 1975 Strasbourg: Article 1).

In 1976 the Nairobi Recommendation treats historic areas as a totality, they exist not just as physical fabric, the buildings, but also in the human activities, the spatial organization, the surroundings and include both the cultural and use values (See also 1987 Washington: Article 1). Drafted specifically to protect historic gardens, the Florence Charter in 1981 introduces the idea of a living environment, an environment that is subject to change (1981 Florence: Article 2). And the Declaration of San Antonio makes explicit the distinction between 'static' and 'dynamic' cultural sites, recommending appropriate conservation practices for each (1996 San Antonio: Article 5).

The objective of the INTACH Charter, endorsed in New Delhi in 2004, is to establish a set of conservation values that are relevant for a non-Western culture. By identifying 'unprotected' heritage the Charter highlights the importance of a 'living' heritage that includes knowledge systems and the cultural landscape. 'The objective of conserving unprotected heritage and site is not so much to reveal the authentic quality of the past or preserve its original integrity, but rather to mediate its evolving cultural significance to achieve beneficial results' (2004 New Delhi: Article 3.6.1).

The concept of cultural heritage is made more explicit in the Xi'an Declaration of 2005. Designed to protect the settings of historic sites, it acknowledges that the context does not comprise just the physical forms, but also intangible components. This is developed with greater clarity in the Declaration in Quebec in 2008. The heritage context comprises the

physical, visual and natural aspects, the social and the spiritual practices, the customs, the traditional knowledge and other intangible forms and expressions: '..the indivisible nature of tangible and intangible heritage and the meanings, values and context intangible heritage gives to objects and places…' (2008 Quebec: Preamble). Concerned for preserving the 'spirit of the place', the Declaration allows that cultural heritage is both dynamic and plural in character.

The complexity of the present understanding of cultural heritage is illustrated in the definition of the historic urban landscape, included first in the Vienna Memorandum of 2005 and then in the UNESCO Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscapes in 2011. It is an urban area that is 'the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes, extending beyond the notion of "historic centre" or "ensemble" to include the broader urban context and its geographical setting'.

Of much greater breadth and depth to the 'monument and setting' in the Venice Charter, the term 'landscape' is consciously utilised, benefiting from the development of the concept of the cultural landscape from the classification of rural areas (2011 HUL: Articles 8 & 9). The dynamic nature of living cities is acknowledged: physical fabric is but a component and 'authenticity' is, as a consequence, much harder to define. A shift in the understanding of 'authenticity' as merely 'anti-scrape' has occurred.

The Venice Charter spoke clearly that 'It is our duty to hand (the historic monuments) on in the full richness of their authenticity', and thereby equated original physical fabric with the authentic document. The converse, of course, is that inauthenticity is the result of imitations of the original fabric (1972 Budapest: Article 3) and inappropriate or insensitive new fabric will impair authenticity: 'Historic areas and their surroundings should be actively protected

against damage from….unnecessary additions and misguided or insensitive changes such as will impair their authenticity' (1976 Nairobi: Article II, 4). The 1999 and 2013 versions of the Burra Charter also warn that changes to a place should not distort the physical evidence and should not be based on conjecture (1999 Burra 3.1 & 3.2 & 2013 Burra: 3.1 & 3.2).

But the concept of authenticity has simultaneously become amorphous. As early as 1981 the Florence Charter notes: 'The authenticity….depends as much on the design and scale of its various parts as on its decorative features and on the choice of plant or inorganic materials adopted for each of its parts' (1981 Florence: Article 9). The original design or 'intent' of the garden is more important than the original 'fabric', the plants: and reconstruction is recommended in certain circumstances.

In 1994 the Nara Document specifically readdressed the idea of authenticity. In order to accommodate the diversity of cultures and heritage, different belief systems and the legitimacy of alternate approaches, the Document identifies heritage values, rather than original fabric, as determining authenticity, maintaining that the information upon which those values are based determines their authenticity (1994 Nara: Article 9).

Prepared in response to the Nara Document, the Declaration of San Antonio develops and analyses authenticity from multiple perspectives. It links authenticity to cultural identity, the languages, societal structures, economic means and spiritual beliefs of an autochthonous heritage. It links authenticity to history, the different meanings a site may have had to different people over time without one group dominating the historical narrative. While it links authenticity to materials in the 'anti-scrape' sense, it simultaneously extends this to include replacement of fabric in accordance with traditional crafts to ensure continued use. It links authenticity and social value, encompassing the spiritual meaning manifest in traditional

customs, settlement patterns, land use practices, as well as religious beliefs. It links authenticity to both dynamic and static sites. It links authenticity to stewardship, the responsibility of original inhabitants and communities to care for their historic sites. Finally it links authenticity with economics, granting also to tourists an interest in the meaning and conservation of heritage (1996 San Antonio: Articles B, 1-7).

Complex but clear, the Declaration concords with the INTACH Charter that questions the relevance of Western conservation philosophy. Rather than 'fabric' it is the traditional knowledge systems, 'particularly if these are "living"', that define authenticity. Conjecture becomes acceptable if it answers the needs of a community and is based on traditional crafts. Integrity allows for the introduction of new elements where local traditions are unavailable. Patina may be considered a sacrificial layer and should not compel a historic fabric to remain frozen in time. The rights of an indigenous community and respect for the contributions of all periods should take precedence over the identification of a major narrative. 'The objective of conserving the unprotected architectural heritage and site is not so much to reveal the authentic quality of the past or preserve its original integrity, but rather to mediate its evolving cultural significance to achieve beneficial results' (2004 New Dehli: Article 3.6.1).

The Charter goes further to reinterpret notions of reversibility, legibility and demolition whereby reversibility of new work and legibility are unnecessary if the process of intervention contributes to conserving either the traditional context or traditional customs and crafts. Demolition may be reinterpreted as regeneration: 'historic ways of building must be valued more than the imperative to put a contemporary stamp on any intervention in a historic building' (2004 New Dehli: Article 3.11.1). Authenticity has been placed under a new light.

The term 'anti-scrape' is no longer adequate in terms of understanding the meaning of authenticity in conservation practice. 'It is through interactive communication and the participation of the concerned communities that the spirit of place is most efficiently safeguarded, used and enhanced' (2008 Quebec: Article 9). Does this mean, however, that the spirit of the place takes precedence in terms of conservation to the detriment of the remaining evidence of physical fabric?

Frank Gehry's addition to the Art Gallery of Ontario is unlikely to be acceptable on any test on the basis that it does not demonstrate traditional knowledge and crafts. Gilbert Scott, on the other hand, could successfully argue for much of his restoration of Gothic religious architecture in Britain to ensure continued use.

It is difficult, however, to define the limits of the amount of acceptable invention or creative adaptation in the application of traditional knowledge. It is even more difficult to prescribe what is 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' when defining the spirit of a place, as opposed to a physical object or environment: 'Interpretation is not controllable, but the record is' (1996 San Antonio: Article B, 5).

The evolution of the discipline of conservation gives rise to problems of which practitioners must be wary. With the growth of understanding of authenticity and an acceptance that it does not relate just to physical fabric, and with broadening the matter of heritage to include 'soft' as well as 'hard' forms, there is a real risk that the importance of the material past is devalued and inadvertently allowed to be substituted and destroyed.

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