

VALUE OF PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION

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As I began to think about the ideas on preventive conservation I wanted to share with you at the start of these two days in Vantaa, the latest Getty Conservation Institute Newsletter arrived in the post. Its contents make interesting reading: Managing the Environment - An Update on Preventive Conservation; Preventive Conservation - A Discussion; Values and Heritage Conservation. It made me think that this issue was written especially for me and I thank GCI for its timely contribution!

It made me think about the global nature of preventive conservation, how it transcends geographical and political boundaries and how exciting it is to observe those with a common cause develop a common approach to planning and training and finding solutions to long-standing problems. There is of course the pan-European Preventive Conservation strategy that this meeting is a part, the Latin American Consortium for Training in Preventive Conservation in which GCI is working in partnership with conservation professionals and architects, ICCROM's Teamwork in Preventive Conservation and PREMA 1990-2000, which tackled preventive conservation in sub-Saharan Africa. The global reach of preventive conservation is one of 3 ideas I should like to explore.

The second is the interdisciplinarity of preventive conservation and the way it affects – and responds to - different stakeholder needs. Preventive conservation requires common solutions based on the application of science. This is achieved through collaboration based on mutual understanding between different disciplines. Preventive conservation is interdisciplinary, relying on mutual and reciprocal action between different branches of learning.

The third idea is about the value of preventive conservation and how we communicate with decision-makers. We need to make links between mainstream societal concerns, such as health and education and preventive conservation. Both health and education are key indicators of quality of life. Cultural heritage, underpinned by sound preventive conservation, is an important contributor to improvements in quality of life. It has a part to play in improving health and education of our citizens.

So – global reach, interdisciplinarity and values - in 15 minutes!

WHAT IS PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION?

Ten years ago hardly anyone would have known what preventive conservation is. Now most museum professionals have at least a basic understanding of what it covers. It is not surprising that there is no agreed definition because preventive conservation is still evolving as a concept. While its core functions have been around for a long time, it has developed in different directions. In the United Kingdom, preventive conservation is part of the overall concept of stewardship defined simply as 'the sustainable use of collections', balancing preservation and use. This changes the traditional approach to preventive conservation where professionals are solely in charge of what can and cannot be done to collections and the type of public involvement that is acceptable.

In the UK, access to collections is high on the political agenda. Public participation and social involvement with collections is setting the pace of this debate. Preventive conservation might therefore be better defined as 'the process of managing with others, the use and protection of cultural heritage for the benefit of today's audiences and future generations'.

GLOBAL REACH

The issues surrounding preventive conservation are common worldwide. The global nature of preventive conservation can be seen in the ICOM-CC Preventive Conservation Working Group with over 300 members from all over the world. At the start of this Triennium I proposed that the Group should consider as one of its objectives the potential impact of preventive conservation of cultural heritage on society and

the economy. Take two different examples, the impact of cultural heritage on urban regeneration and its relationship with the National Education Curriculum.

The benefits of cultural heritage to urban regeneration are beginning to be measured. Access to cultural life by local communities is a key element in fostering social inclusion and enhancing quality of life, particularly in urban areas. This includes access to information and services as well as physical access to cultural heritage. Museums are responding to the needs of their communities and visitors by putting people at the centre of their activities. By so doing, they help to stimulate the social and material vitality of the areas around them. For example they are opening at times when people want access - in the evenings. Evening openings by the National Gallery and the Tate Modern in London are popular. The late night opening evenings at the Royal Academy for the 1999 Monet exhibition saw huge crowds visiting the exhibition till midnight.

Preventive conservation also has a key part to play in unlocking the information contained in objects and interpreting them to the public. Some museums have targeted specific interest groups to raise awareness of the potential risk of damage to objects and loss of information caused by certain activities. The National Museums of Wales has produced a website aimed at treasure hunters to illustrate how damage and loss of information caused by metal detectors can be reduced. The National Curriculum in the UK uses collections as part of science teaching, drawing on conservation to predict, hypothesise and test material types and uses.

It is vital therefore that preventive conservation case studies, indicators and rules of thumb are gathered together so that evidence of social and economic impact can begin to form part of the wider debate on global sustainability. Another example is a recent research project on energy efficient pollution control in UK museums and galleries. Its results have helped non-airconditioned museums improve indoor air quality, but it has also made the building services industry as a whole aware of the importance of ventilation rates to reduce pollution levels in all building types, while reducing energy consumption.

The central aim of sustainability is to achieve an acceptable quality of life for the world's population, combined with economic growth of communities, without depleting or damaging the natural resources needed to sustain future generations. The same may be said of preventive conservation and its relationship with cultural heritage! This research is an example of how those involved with managing cultural heritage can look beyond their immediate problems and to be aware of the impact of preventive conservation on broader societal concerns. Governments are instructing everyone to take sustainability into account in decision-making by considering the longer-term social, economic and environmental costs and benefits of our actions at global, regional and local level. We need to ensure that the impact of our actions on cultural heritage is also included in this assessment of sustainability. Over the last decade, we have developed and used preventive conservation targets, indicators and checklists for sustainable museum buildings that demonstrate the importance of cultural heritage to the sustainability debate. I have brought some examples of these checklists (and they are on the table outside).

The impact of preventive conservation should not therefore only be measured in terms of benefits to specific collections. Its broader impact on the economy too can also be measured. The South-West Museums Council in England has published a report on 'The Economic Contribution of Museums in the South West' describing the huge impact that cultural heritage has on local communities. There is increasing evidence of the contribution that cultural heritage in general and conservation in particular, plays in creating a prosperous economy from encouraging the development of small and medium sized enterprises, to developing new technologies and markets, to encouraging tourism and inward investment. It has been estimated that 50% of all construction activity in the European Union is linked in some way to building restoration work.

There are those who take the view that if preventive conservation is to achieve and maintain status and recognition, and if collaboration with others is to be that of equal partners, Standards are necessary. There are also those who say that without training and guidelines, the risk is that Standards will be applied inappropriately. Everyone agrees that this is an issue that needs to be properly debated. To

provide a focus for this debate, a Standards Panel has been set up under the ICOM-CC Preventive Conservation Working Group, to evaluate the need for standards, to assess the options for setting up standards and achieving international agreement and to recommend ways of assessing the impact of standards. This debate will take place via the ICOM-CC Preventive Conservation Working Party egroups discussion list on the Web and will culminate in a discussion at the next ICOM-CC Triennial Meeting in Rio de Janeiro in 2002.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY OF PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION

I will now turn briefly to the matter of interdisciplinarity which has already been referred to by Nicholas Stanley -Price. There is no doubt that the greatest change to preventive conservation practice over the last decade is the extent to which it is now the product of the interaction of different professionals. I recall five years ago just before publication of 'Environmental Management Guidelines for Museums and Galleries', thinking how my opening remarks on 'the complex interdependence of influences that make up the museum environment, demonstrating the interdisciplinary nature of environmental management', might be received. This was a fairly new approach even then; it is now commonplace.

The latest GCI Newsletter predicts that 'the trend towards interdisciplinarity and collective action is likely to continue, with a wide range of allied professionals contributing to preventive conservation'. Within museums, the decisions and actions of building managers, curators, exhibition designers and directors must be informed by awareness of preventive conservation. This continuum is important because for example in the UK, the number of conservators in full time employment in museums is declining (151 in 1998 compared to 171 in 1993, with over 60% employed in national museums). The small but significant number of preventive conservator positions that have been established in Birmingham, Liverpool and Edinburgh over the last couple of years are indeed cause to cheer. The trend however all over Europe is one of conservators working independently and not in full time museum employment. This is one reason why ICCROM's project, 'Teamwork for Preventive Conservation' directed at European museums has been so important. Interdisciplinarity in this project has worked on three levels: by establishing a network that supports preventive conservation throughout a museum, by creating links among the staff of participating museums and by reaching out to involve the public in preventive conservation. It is to further stakeholder involvement that preventive conservation should now direct its efforts.

There is clear evidence that significant numbers of people find conservation issues fascinating. One project in the UK has the public flocking to participate in preventive conservation activities. The National Trust Housekeeping Days' encourage members of the National Trust, ordinary visitors to historic properties to participate in seasonal housekeeping activities called 'putting the house to bed'. The media is also picking up on public interest in conservation as seen in the BBC Television programme, 'One Foot in the Past'. The most recent ICCROM publication, 'The Press and the Safeguard of Heritage' - a collection of press articles on the subject of the fragility of cultural heritage and its conservation, demonstrates the global nature of this interest.

Preventive conservation has the opportunity to tap the fascination and interest of the public in the process of protecting cultural heritage and to become a source of learning as well as enjoyment. Breaking down barriers between professionals and the public and raising public awareness strengthens the case for economic and political support for the protection of cultural heritage. Public opinion of a museum's work is now vital for some aspects of financing. User satisfaction is now a performance measure in national and local authority museums. Commercial sponsorship and private donations are likely to be founded on the donor's belief that the museum still has an informative and custodial role in contemporary society. But if the place of museums in society were challenged, how prepared are we for change?

VALUES OF PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION

Museums have only existed in their current form for less than 200 years. Is it likely that they will remain unchanged for another two hundred? In some cultures outside Europe, museums are a new or alien phenomenon. With the rapid advance of new information and communication technologies and

seemingly limitless possibilities of digitisation, questions are already being asked about the costs and benefits of storing millions of objects when they can be digitised as part of a computerised inventory and accessed at the touch of a button. The debate over the virtual versus the real experience is bound to intensify. A meeting 'Conservation Future Challenges' held in the UK two years ago heralded some of these future changes: What does society value enough to preserve? How will society use finite resources for preservation? We must use the pragmatism resulting from the interdisciplinarity of preventive conservation to engage in this debate. We are now practised at considering the needs of the whole collection rather than a single object and to risk assessments that consider acceptable levels of damage rather than analysing every damage incident. Preventive conservation values are about engaging in the debate on whether we should be caring for all objects equally or only those that are considered significant by society. Are we doing enough to target scarce resources at where they are needed? We need to set straight a record that has often perceived conservation as the dead hand which focuses on wrapping things in acid free tissue, putting them in boxes in case someone wants to use them in the future, and then repeating the whole exercise when the future becomes the present – in fact no real access at all. Can we measure the benefits of preventive conservation so that a real balance between preservation and use is achieved? UK museums are using management tools, such as cost/benefits appraisals to try to line up different values. This has persuaded people with money to take a whole range of stakeholder values into account when deciding how to spend money on conservation.

The means we choose to measure value reflects our background and attitude about what is important and what is not. At a meeting on the relationship between 'Economics and Heritage Conservation' at the Getty Conservation Institute in 1998, it emerged that a key feature of heritage institutions – such as museums – is the broad range of ways in which they are valued: economic, aesthetic, cultural, political, educational etc and that no single approach can capture the full range of these values. Preventive conservation activities must therefore take all of these issues into account because cultural heritage and its preservation is valued by individuals in society, but it is maintained primarily in order to sustain a sphere of public interest and public good. The concept of cultural capital that also emerged is one which encapsulates what preventive conservation is about. If cultural heritage – whether objects, buildings or sites - are treated as capital assets inherited from past generations, they may be used but not consumed because they are held in trust for future generations. Like natural resources, if cultural assets, whether inherited from the past or created by new investment are not maintained, they will decay and lose their value – economic, social, environmental, cultural – for our successors.

To conclude, I return briefly to the work ahead: drawing up a European Preventive Conservation Strategy. I am reminded of another European activity in which I am involved as a member of the Expert Advisory Panel of the European Commission's 5th Framework Key Action 'The City of Tomorrow and Cultural Heritage'. On this panel, we consider cultural heritage alongside construction, urban planning and transport in the context of the European city. We examine the development of cities in the US and Asia and note the differences with the European city, dominated as it is by ancient, historic or simply old buildings and infrastructure. These comparisons are relevant because they enable us to contextualise our work by looking at other social, economic and cultural influences on the European city. Europe does not exist in isolation from the rest of the world – it informs and is informed by what is happening on other continents and in other cultures. The same should apply to our deliberations over the next 2 days.