



The Planning Process: The Role of Conservation Assessments and the New Orleans Charter

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Abstract

Conservation assessments of architecture and collections have proven to be an important tool in the physical improvement of historic structures and the collections housed therein. Unfortunately, many conservators have found that a lack of follow-up (particularly as regards the continuing input of professional expertise) is a large obstacle to the appropriate use of such assessments. In short, when (and if) an institution carries out the measures recommended in an assessment report, those who wrote the report are often not contacted. There is no commonly accepted model for using an assessment as a first step in a potentially lengthy process in which the measures recommended in the New Orleans Charter can be followed. [A copy of the New Orleans Charter can be found in Section 8 of this book of preprints.]

The team process has been accepted by many preservation professionals as the best way to approach the complex problems presented by the restoration, renovation, or re-use of an historic interior, but the increasingly business-oriented professionals who supervise such projects seem less willing to accept this model (possibly because of the apparent surrender of authority to outside experts).

Introduction

A detailed and deliberate planning process is a necessary part of every historic preservation project. Such projects are very complex and every decision has consequences for many aspects of the institution's functioning; therefore no decision can have its intended outcome if it is made by one individual acting alone, no matter how expert he or she might be. When the result of a project is unsatisfactory, or when a decision has a poor outcome in one way or another, the fault seldom lies in a single bad decision but rather in the lack of a consciously crafted decision-making process. The New Orleans Charter rightly recommends a team approach for decision-making, and establishes guidelines by which projects should be judged. However, making the team approach work is seldom simple. In order to create

a reliable process, some structure is needed. This paper suggests that conservation assessments be a first step in the process, which can then be used as a model for other kinds of input into the decision-making process.

Preservation projects are exceedingly complex in two separate ways: deciding what should be done, and then deciding how to accomplish it. In other words, the fact that many individuals agree that such a project should be undertaken does not presuppose a specific goal; each concerned professional and each constituency that is to be served will judge the ultimate success of the project by different criteria. To assure that goals will be established and met, the potential uses of the restoration must be described in full. Given the number of interests to be served (the collection and the structure, visitors and staff, docents and registrars, aesthetes and maintenance workers, idealists and bean-counters), the whole will be looked at from many different points of view.

The New Orleans Charter and the team approach

The New Orleans Charter provides a model for the interaction of a number of professionals in projects involving the alteration of historic structures. Although curatorial and administrative personnel from many institutions participated in the discussions that led to the creation of the Charter, few professionals not directly involved in preservation are familiar with it. Therefore, if the Charter is to be useful in guiding deliberations, all participants must first be furnished with a copy of it.

The team approach seems to be the best way to address a complex problem and assure that the proposed project has the highest probability of serving its end users (e.g. the institution's education department, technical researchers, visitors, and staff alike). Aside from technical expertise, it takes a number of people reviewing architectural drawings and specifications to assure that errors are avoided, i.e. that light switches are within reach of the first person to walk into a dark room, that doorways are bigger than objects, that workmen do not need to traipse through storage rooms to reach shut-off valves, etc.

As anyone who has ever attended a meeting can attest, a meaningful and productive group-decision-making process is difficult to achieve and rarely occurs. There are many pitfalls. Meetings often throw together people on different organizational rungs, making it difficult to express opinions freely (e.g. how can an employee critique a proposal openly if it has been presented or approved by his or her boss). No one wants to be seen as a pest and someone who criticizes too much risks being shunned, which can make saying nothing (but complaining in private later) seem to be the best tactic. It may only take one person to make a first tentative suggestion that all is not well for others to join in, but unless someone takes that first step the tendency for everyone to want to get out of the room as quickly as possible may allow a flawed proposal to win the day. Some participants may have received little or no information on the proposal before the meeting, and therefore feel they do not understand it well enough to offer meaningful input. And finally, those who run the meeting may project the idea that it is to be a rubber stamp, making it that much more difficult for a dissenting voice. Yet only if disagreements are aired can they be discussed and resolved.

The membership in the kind of team proposed in the New Orleans Charter has been discussed elsewhere,¹ but strategies for making the process work have not, at least in this context. [Undoubtedly such matters are discussed *ad infinitum* in other fields of endeavour.] Team members must, from the start, have some assurance that some serious thought and some specific tactics will be used against these all-too-common difficulties.

The first author, having attended many unsatisfactory meetings, served on a jury in July of 1999 and found that the jury process worked exactly as a group-decision-making process is supposed to work. The specifics of this setting are instructive. A jury knows exactly what its job is, and knows that there are people in authority who expect them to succeed in doing it. All jury members are equal in status and they have no prior expectations of each other. Each person is required to assent to the final decision and no one can leave until they agree; this is a powerful incentive for each person to contribute to the arguments and to proceed as efficiently as possible. By law, each person starts with exactly the same information. They have firm rules to follow (e.g. that no deliberation be carried out unless every juror is in the room, and that each person must be willing to change their mind based on the evidence and discussion of its significance) and no distractions from their 'other' lives are allowed.

In contrast, the team process of decision-making on historic preservation projects does not begin with a set goal. The setting of goals is often mixed with discussion of how each goal might be achieved; initial plans may have been drawn up without complete input, so that many parties with

legitimate interests in the outcome are forced either to give up from the start or to force alterations in what has already been planned. No matter how constructive the comments, they can only be seen as criticism. A better process would be for each party to establish goals that can be shared with the group before further discussion is carried out. For example, a docent might set a goal of providing enough space for up to 20 adults to be accommodated in each historic space, with original material far enough out of reach that visitors do not have to be monitored. Those responsible for monitoring the condition of historic materials may request that there be a bright setting for lights that can be used for examination; the docent might be reminded by this that a bright setting would improve the quality of visits by the elderly or sight-impaired. The process of agreeing on a list of goals allows the group to see itself as united in striving to attain a full set of goals that will guide the whole rest of the deliberations.

Many employees have never been asked to consider the effects of a facility on their everyday work, but unless they do so their ability to contribute to the decision-making process will be compromised.

The conservation assessment can be used as a model for the way that each member of the team prepares for full participation in the process.

The conservation assessment

In the United States, the conservation assessment has been accepted by a wide range of cultural resource professionals as an essential step in helping institutions improve the physical preservation of historic structures and the collections housed therein. The centrality of collections to museums and historical societies makes conservation assessments a vital step in the long-range planning for all institutional activities including, specifically, the re-installation and interpretation of historic interiors.

Historic Preservation, formerly the National Institute for Conservation, has awarded about 1400 grants for assessments over the last decade, and others have been funded through other sources. Some American granting agencies require that assessment reports be submitted as part of every application related to collections management projects. However, the conservation assessment as a tool was designed not as the first step in a long process but as a stand-alone procedure.

For those who are not familiar with it, the typical assessment process is as follows: a collections conservator and (for institutions housed in historic structures) an architectural conservator visit the site, review relevant documents, interview members of the staff and governing board, and inspect all collection spaces and (just as importantly) non-collection spaces such as attics, offices, and equipment

rooms. Examination of individual collection objects by the collections conservator is commonly limited to those that have been identified by staff as being in unstable condition and to superficial examination of groups of objects. In other words, unlike collections surveys, the assessment is a top-down rather than bottom-up way of looking at an institution.

The assessment report addresses all matters that the conservator considers might affect the preservation of collections. In some cases, the conservator may limit topics to the most obvious issues such as temperature and relative humidity, lighting, pest management, and disaster planning.

More sophisticated assessments look at an institution from a wider vantage point and address some of the following items.

The mission statement—Is it a true reflection of the current activities of the institution? Is it specific enough to justify turning down gifts of objects that the staff believe will be more liability than asset? Do other policies and programs relate to it in a meaningful way?

Collections management policies—Are they an actual reflection of what is being done? Do they help guide the day-to-day operations of the institution in a consistent and helpful way? Is their level of detail established so that constant changes can be avoided?

The staff (including administrators)—Are they trained appropriately to handle and care for collections? Do they have direct access to technical expertise when they need it, and do they seem to know when they need it? Are they working well together or at odds with each other?

Exhibitions—Are individual collections objects presented in a state that reflects an accurate view of their appearance based on the institution's interpretation? Aside from the contribution of lighting to their preservation, is the existing lighting scheme appropriate to the historic interpretation and does it make a positive contribution to how the visitor sees them?

This is only the beginning of a long list of issues that a conservator may see as affecting the preservation of collections. Even these few preliminary inquiries show how intimately the conservator becomes involved with the institution in the process of carrying out the assessment. The days spent by the two conservators on site with the staff are very intense. The conservators are literally looking under beds while listening to a number of people talk about their problems, trying to remember the full cast of characters and the history of the institution, taking notes, and consulting together. On the first day, a rosy picture of a united staff is often presented; by the second day, as some time is spent with individuals, more complex relationships start to emerge. Physical observations are of course important, but the more knotty issues related to personalities and capabilities are just as important in judging the potential of the institution to carry out projects. The fact that two

conservators, both with substantial experience with comparable institutions, are in possession of all this information, together with that generated by contact before and after the site visit, is (or at least ought to be) an important long-term asset for an institution. Unfortunately, in many cases the conservators never hear from the institution again.

The assessment report itself includes prioritized recommendations for action in all areas seen as unsatisfactory, but usually cannot present elaborate details of the recommended actions. Some recommendations may deal with topics that are outside the conservators' expertise, and would require further advice from experts in fields like fire detection, lighting, or the treatment of individual objects. The specifics of recommended projects often depend on decisions to be made after consideration of costs, staff resources, the particular aims of the institution, future programming, and a host of other matters. The assessment report should therefore not be seen as the last word, or as all the information that a conservator is capable of providing. Although institutions commonly request more details than conservators feel they can provide, the need for integration of the institution's priorities and an honest assessment of its resources make it necessary for the decision-making process to continue long past the time that the assessment report is written. This makes it all the more unfortunate if the conservators are not kept 'in the loop'.

The fact that an institutional staff may not see why a conservator cannot tell them exactly what to do seems like an irritation, another example of a client not 'getting it'. However, seeing that this is a common reaction, perhaps conservators should take this as another opportunity for client education and address the situation directly. Perhaps assessment reports should include more detail about the future decision-making processes that will be required to assure that appropriate actions can be taken on the recommendations.

One possible reason that conservators are not called in more often to participate in a continuing process of decision-making is that many are reticent about recommending themselves as future consultants. Perhaps the lingering idea that solicitation of clients is unethical drives this; if so, conservators must get over this.

Recommendations in an assessment, no matter how sophisticated they are, must (in order to be ethical) be based on preservation needs rather than on other needs of the institution. This does not mean that every recommendation is carved in stone or that in compromising later a conservator is acting unethically or is endangering collection material. Many different courses of action can contribute to the same end; the conservator must be one part of the ongoing decision-making process in order to provide the best protection for collections while factoring in other goals. This

brings us back to the matter of complexity and multiple potentially conflicting interests, which were the original justifications for the New Orleans Charter.

Assessments of other types

In conservation assessments, a collections and an architectural conservator establish priorities that will contribute to optimal preservation as a model for the beginning of the decision-making process. Just as those conservators have looked at existing facilities and procedures from the point of view of preservation of collections and structure, and judge renovation plans from that perspective, other parties must do the same. Docents, for example, should be encouraged to note exactly what in the existing system serves their purposes well or hinders them; curators, electricians, exhibition technicians, reference librarians, and other parties must do the same. If staff are encouraged to set aside time for the study of existing conditions, they will be reassured that their input is considered valuable and they will be more likely to participate actively in the process. In addition, analysis of current facilities will increase the probability that any changes made will actually be an improvement.

It may help to refer back to the primary goals of a museum (i.e. research, collection, exhibition, interpretation, and preservation) to assure that each factor is represented by at least one member of the team. Other matters as varied as cleaning routines, community involvement, and money, money, money, must be represented as well.

The establishment of goals for the proposed project must not be a substitute for ongoing participation of all parties. A small group cannot do appropriate planning based on the perusal of a pile of reports. Every change has unforeseen consequences, and optimal solutions are always group efforts.

Refereeing the process

With everyone coming to the process armed with their own opinions, members of the team begin on a more equal level. A group of well-prepared participants will help to assure full participation in the process, but the process itself also needs to be defined. Someone has to act as the judge, setting rules for engagement and for the circulation of information, and someone needs to chair the individual meetings. Relevant information must be circulated to each person with a role in the process, and the means for their reply should be established (e.g. should comments on a particular plan be written and forwarded to one person, should they be copied to everyone on the team, or should they be telephoned to one person who collects them and circulates the whole list). Agendas for meetings should be circulated so that everyone can be prepared, and the chair

can confine discussion to the topic at hand. Either at meetings or in writing, every participant should be asked for a response so that positive responses will be included as well as negative ones. Although dissenting voices must be heard, they should not be allowed to overwhelm the process; this is one reason that supporting voices must also be heard.

Most importantly, a positive open atmosphere where everyone feels free to speak up must be established from the start. Rules must be repeated and reinforced, and the idea that there is no foregone conclusion must be reiterated. The result of a proper group-decision-making process is something that no single person could have created, and that each participant can take credit for. With some thought in advance, and with a certain amount of applied psychology, the quality of interactions in the team process can be improved; this can only lead to an improved output.

Paying for planning

There is one other entirely different reason that the decision-making process is often slighted: money. One of the reasons that an institution may want details in the recommendations of an assessment is that details will be necessary for the grant request that will fund the project. In order to produce a budget, someone must know how many sheets of light-reducing Plexiglas will be required, and of what type, and the model number of the vacuum cleaner they should buy. But whose money can be used to bring in consultants for the planning process? In order to apply for grant money, detailed plans are required, but how is it possible to pay for the experts that are needed to provide those details?

A growing number of granting agencies will pay for planning grants, but money can be raised in other ways. Business-oriented board members and other donors should be able to understand that sound planning is as important to historic preservation as it is to business.

As a simple example of the way consultation can be used to assure that the planned project fills the specific needs of the institution, the authors were recently consulted by an engineer being asked to design an environmental control system for a new museum located in an existing structure. He had asked that a conservator be consulted because, as he explained, working alone he would have to plan for the most stringent requirements for every environmental factor. Working with a conservator he could focus his efforts on the specific needs of the collection at hand and therefore could possibly save a great deal of money. It is vital to note that a thorough planning process does not necessarily add to the cost of a project; it can just as easily save money, both in the short term and in the long term, helping to avoid expensive mitigation of mistakes and overbuilding.

Conclusions

The soundness of historic preservation projects depends on the soundness of the decision-making process. Assuring the engagement of a variety of professionals in such a process can be difficult, and a great deal of thought must go into the creation of the team, the choice of the professions to be represented and the individuals to represent them, the preparation of each of its members, and the conduct of the team's business once it is convened. The New Orleans Charter sets some valuable guidelines for decision-making and the conservation assessment provides a model for the way various facets of the institution's responsibilities can be integrated into the process.

Endnotes

1. Himmelstein, P., and B. Appelbaum. "The Process of Compromise: A Team Approach to Conservation Environments." *APT Bulletin* XXVII, 3 (1996), pp. 8-11.

Résumé

Le processus de planification : Le rôle des évaluations de conservation et la Charte de la Nouvelle-Orléans

Les évaluations de conservation d'ouvrages d'architecture et de collections se sont avérées un outil important pour l'amélioration physique des structures historiques et des collections qui y sont logées. Malheureusement, de nombreux restaurateurs ont constaté que l'absence d'un suivi (particulièrement en ce qui concerne l'apport continu d'expertise professionnelle) est un obstacle considérable à l'utilisation appropriée de ces évaluations. En bref, lorsque (et dans le cas où) un établissement met en application les mesures recommandées dans un rapport d'évaluation, les auteurs du rapport n'en sont bien souvent pas informés. Il n'existe pas de modèle généralement accepté pour utiliser une évaluation comme première étape d'un processus vraisemblablement de longue durée dans le cadre duquel les mesures recommandées dans la Charte de la Nouvelle-Orléans peuvent être appliquées. [On trouvera à la Section 8 du présent ouvrage une copie de la Charte de la Nouvelle-Orléans.]

Le processus d'équipe a été accepté par de nombreux professionnels de la conservation comme la meilleure façon d'aborder les problèmes complexes que présentent la restauration, la rénovation ou la réutilisation d'un intérieur historique, mais les professionnels de plus en plus axés sur les affaires qui supervisent de tels projets semblent de moins en moins prêts à accepter ce modèle (peut-être à cause de l'apparent abandon de leur autorité à des experts de l'extérieur).