

## **Conservation Principles.**

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A few months ago English Heritage published what I think is the most important document in our 25 year history. It is called Conservation Principles and sets out for the first time the basis upon which we make decisions about the conservation of England's historic environment.

I personally felt that this was a vital step. We increasingly live in a world of state regulation, where inspectors arrive and tell citizens what they can and cannot do in their lives. Health and Safety inspectors now insist on changes being made to people's work places and homes; Environmental officers insist on changes being made to the energy efficiency or sustainability of peoples houses; inspectors regulate what can be grown on your land or which trees can be cut down. Very few of these specialist regulators make it clear how decisions are made. Decisions tend to be inconsistent across the country and depend heavily on the reasonableness of the officer involved. Owners often are given no explanation or logical reason for the requirements frequently leaving a sense of intrusion, injustice and frustration.

Amongst this army of inspectors and regulators the heritage regulators are perhaps the longest standing. In most European countries heritage regulations are at least a hundred years old, often more. We are not newcomers in this world of regulation; we are the establishment.

However in England at least we were open to the accusation that is often levelled at the health and safety inspector, and others; many people simply do not understand why they were, or were not, allowed to put in a new window, add a conservatory or lay a new terrace. They often found that if they lived in one town they would be refused permission to do what another person was permitted to do in a nearby place with a different inspector.

This inconsistency and lack of transparency is very damaging. It in fact alienates some of the most important supporters of heritage protection. Owners of important houses who should be champions of conservation end up being cross and disaffected at decisions that they regard inexplicable or inconsistent. Indeed it spreads further than that because on occasion our decisions are challenged in the courts and at that point we do not have a consistent language to explain what we are doing and why.

It was for this reason that we decided two years ago to codify our approach to decision making in conservation; to clearly set out what the principles were which we used to come to conclusions.

What I want to do is quickly give you an idea of how our conservation principles work and for those of you who want to find out more I have brought enough copies of the finished document for everyone to have one. Unfortunately they are only in English.

So to begin with we set out six overriding principles which are the very highest level.

They start with Principle 1 which is that **The Historic Environment is a shared resource**. By this we mean that the value of heritage to people is not confined either by ownership or by time. So protected historic places are valuable to people who don't own them and who are not even born yet. It is this principle that justifies the use of law, public policy and investment to protect the wider public interest.

The second principle is that **everyone should be able to participate in sustaining the historic environment**. It is true that experts have a special and important role in determining what happens to our heritage; but it is

also important to realise that decisions that are understood, supported and sometimes argued for by the public actively increase participation in protecting the heritage.

Third is **Understanding the Significance of Places is Vital**. This is what has been called informed conservation; in other words if you understand and articulate the significance of a place you will make better decisions about its future. An obvious point, but a crucial one.

Fourthly **Significant places should be managed to sustain their values**. Again an obvious point, but one that is fundamental. It recognises that change is inevitable, that all historic places will evolve, but makes the point that change must be managed to sustain what is valued and important about a place.

Fifth, **Decisions about Change must be reasonable, transparent and consistent**. This is the point that I began with; we have to make sure people understand why we are making decisions about their property so they can understand and hopefully support them.

Lastly, **Documenting and Learning from Decisions is essential.** I

would have no problem arguing this here, but for private owners it is sometimes more difficult.

So these are our high level principles which now guide every decision that we take. But they only work if we are clear about what sort of places we protect and why. This is often a difficult area. Some buildings are self evidently important and their values can be articulated fairly easily. St. Paul's cathedral in the City of London is not difficult to argue for. But industrial buildings, twentieth century buildings and some archaeological sites are much harder for people to understand. So the next part of our conservation principles is about **Understanding heritage values.** In it we argue that there are four types of value that we might ascribe to a historic place and the type of value and the weight that we put to it should be the starting point of any consideration of what to do with it:

So there is **evidential value**, the ability of an historic place to give us evidence about past human activity. So for instance there is very high evidential value at Stonehenge and in the landscape about it. It would be highly undesirable to change anything in the landscape in case it damaged the archaeological evidence locked in the soil.

Secondly we have identified **Historical value**. This value tends to be illustrative or associative. In other words it can illustrate the way monks lived in a monastery or through association with a particular monk, the venerable Bede for instance bring out historical richness.

Thirdly we have **aesthetic value** which is obviously about the way people draw sensory or intellectual stimulation from a place. Some of these are designed by man, such as a beautiful country house, other are by chance a happy coincidence of man and nature.

Lastly we have **Communal value**. This is about what historic places mean to people. These values are often commemorative (in other words something happened there that is significant) or symbolic in that a place stands for something. Sometimes we might call them social in that a place or building is a source of identity or distinctiveness.

Now all this might sound a bit theoretical, a bit unpractical. But it isn't. The rest of our document shows how these principles and these values affect decisions that we might make. Crucially it gets to the heart of why some things are allowed and some things are not.

Since 1945 there has been a tendency to regard every part of a historic building, complex or landscape as being equally important. What this has led to is a lot of restriction on any type of change in protected places whether it was good or bad. The principles, we believe, are helping people to determine why a place is protected and thereby to protect those reasons only. Let me give you a simple example:

Two churches in two neighbouring villages. Externally both look wonderful, both have high aesthetic value. They are both listed buildings at grade I. They both actually happen to have high historical value to as encapsulating the history of the village. However they are very different buildings. Inside one has a very high evidential value. It has magnificent medieval fittings, woodwork, tiles and stained glass. It has wonderful tombs and some wall paintings. The other has low evidential value as in the nineteenth century the interior was refitted with not particularly good Victorian fittings.

The diocese wants to convert one to house a nursery school. They are both protected at grade I but one of them has low evidential value and it would be perfectly possible to make quite significant changes in the church without damaging its aesthetic and historic values. So our officer can set aside the presumption that change is not permitted in grade I

buildings because he can be secure in the knowledge that he is protecting the important values of the church which are external, historic and aesthetic.

This is a simple example, but the same analysis works on complex issues too. Take the owner of a country house. He has just inherited from his father who is now eighty years old. The house is in desperate need of modernisation. How do we decide whether is it permissible to take out a nineteenth century drawing room and convert it into a family kitchen?

With our new principles we need to understand the house fully and determine its heritage values. Why is it protected which values are those which we are trying to sustain?

In my example it may be that the principle value of the house is in the fact that it is the best example of Victorian planning in the county and the evidential value of the rooms being a drawing room is where the value of the house lies. In which case we would encourage the owner to try and find another solution. On the other hand the value of the house may be in its historical value; it may have belonged to a famous eighteenth century painter and the Victorian drawing room was added after his death. In which case converting the room into a kitchen does not erode the principle historical value of the house. So you see asking WHY was this

place protected, for what value? And then concentrating on protecting the value leads us to two different conclusions.

The most complex set of issues are raised when we are not dealing with alteration to an existing protected building but the addition of a new one in its the grounds or to a protected townscape. The question often is - is it possible to capture the values of a complex multi-layered place? a place that might cover quite a large part of a town or even a city. Well we believe it is possible to do it in specific locations. Here is an example of part of the centre of Birmingham,. It is an important industrial quarter where the manufacture of small scale metal objects was pioneered in the nineteenth century. The buildings have a distinct character and are generally small scale. We tried to capture the heritage values of this place, its aesthetic qualities, scale, colour, materials, its historical associations and the like. The new building in the middle of the picture we feel fits in well. It is also possible to do it in smaller historic towns with a rich character, its much harder to do it in London.

In London we have faced, until recently, a battle with the mayor who wanted to promote as many tall buildings as possible. He publicly called English Heritage an ‘obscure monastic order’ and accused us of doing more damage to London than the wartime bombing blitz! Our values

based approach has been much harder to apply here, although we have tried to use it. The difficulty is that great cities like London cannot be easily characterised, there is no one value or even set of values that really work. We are therefore working on a new methodology to solve this problem. There is no time to go into this today, but if anyone is interested I will certainly tell them about it over lunch.

Let me come back to the level of an individual building or a place. The principles document uses the values based analysis to deal with the big issues of conservation. It addresses Restoration, Reconstruction, Repair, Periodic renewal and seeks to establish a common language and methodology for people trying to make decisions on these issues. Crucially, and I want to emphasise this, Conservation principles does not lead people to the right answer, or even to a single answer, it leads them to a justifiable and explicable answer, which is obviously a different thing. It is quite possible for two people using the principles to come to different solutions for a conservation dilemma but both people would have got there using the same method and so it would be possible to defend and explain their conclusions.

Now for this to work at its best we need another ingredient: I have said that we now try to look at each issue on the basis of a values led analysis.

This is where it all becomes a bit complicated. There are over 500,000 protected places in England, mostly buildings, but many archaeological sites, landscapes and even wrecks on the sea bed. Each has what we call a list description which literally describes the protected place. Some of these are very short and many were now done up to fifty years ago.

Canterbury cathedral, for instance, has only twenty lines! But it is not the length or accuracy that is the problem; it is that the list description fails to explain what the heritage values of the place actually are. They give no sense of, for instance a high historical value and a low evidential value.

The owner therefore does not know why his house was protected and for what reason. What we need is to make sure the list descriptions are converted into the values-based language so people understand why their protected building is protected in the first place. This will crucially help them understand the degree of adaptability that their place has.

Adaptability is the key to all this. Most people are content that their place is protected if they are clear what degree of adaptability is permitted.

So what we need to do is re-write all half million list descriptions to make it clear what values are protected and therefore how adaptable, if at all, their buildings are. Now it is clear that re-writing all these would be a crazily large job. Hugely time consuming and expensive. But it is not as bad as it sounds. Many sites like telephone boxes and mile stones So what

we are proposing to do is re-write them as people apply to get consent for change. We deal with about 16,000 applications for change a year, and the idea would be to re-write the descriptions as they come in for consent. Over the first few years this will take a huge amount of time, but after about 7 or 8 years we will have done most of the commonly altered buildings.

We believe that all this put together will make it easier to explain why we do what we do. Even without the vast task of re-writing all our lists the principles document you have in front of you will make a big difference. Already our staff are using it and the carefully defined language in it to explain our decisions. We are running training courses to get local government to use it and it will not be long I guess before it will be used in the courts.