



Conservation as a Practice of Heritage and Planning

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The most familiar history of the practice of architectural conservation is rooted in nineteenth century efforts to save monumental heritage in Europe. The practical campaigning of this era was paralleled by the development of ideological approaches to how this heritage should be managed. These have been further developed and become a pervasively embedded orthodoxy through the formal instruments of bodies such as ICOMOS. The canonical origins of orthodox conservation in nineteenth century thinking are still evident in conservation practice today, but have become over-layered with a multiplicity of different readings of heritage and how it should be valued. In the process such ideas have become global and in many countries increasingly all-encompassing in the parts of the built environment they embrace.

One consequence of this is that in many countries the way decisions over the historic environment are mediated is principally through the process of town planning, a practice which has, of course, its own histories. From a British perspective, the origins of modern town planning are generally located in the same historical period as the conservation movement and are based around technical and spatially-articulated political visions of improving and transforming people's lives. From these beginnings planning has become a deeply embedded governance process, constantly struggling and debating its role and purpose but an inescapable process nevertheless. Over the course of the twentieth century conservation of the historic environment became an important objective within this system, latterly with little explicit challenge in the British context at least, although in practice this often conceals competition with other planning objectives and goals.

Using critical historical perspectives of both the conservation of architectural conservation and of town planning, and drawing principally on UK examples, this paper will discuss these parallel systems and ideologies and how they come together. It will focus on key narratives embedded within the practices of architectural conservation and planning; narratives which wax and wane over time. These will include, on the one hand, material authenticity, visual appearance and ontological security and, on the other, functional modernity, obsolescence, amenity and character. From this, the paper will aim to develop an understanding over the role of the conservation of the historic environment as a situated practice within a wider programme of town planning.

KEY WORDS: Conservation, heritage, planning.