HISTORIC CONSERVATION NOW NEEDS RE-EXAMINATION OF ITS BASIC CONCEPTS

Naomi Okawa *

1. Introduction

The period from the Venice Charter of 1964 to Nara Conference on Authenticity of 1994 saw many increases and enlargements of concepts in historic conservation, which corresponded to wider spread of the idea of historic conservation around the world.

Yet, the period from Nara Conference till now witnessed rather clashes of ideas concerning historic conservation. Contrary to our expectation, the concept of authenticity secured no firm foundation even after the conference. The debates on intangible heritage, the original theme for the scientific symposium in 2002, also showed a deep conceptual rift among ICOMOS executives. Now at many conferences on historic conservation we frequently see such conceptual clashes. What is the cause of these clashes?

There is probably more than one answer to this question. In my view, one answer is that many of the basic concepts for historic conservation are now unable to fit present-day social realities. If so, the question demands re-thinking the relation between historic conservation and society as a whole. I would like to shortly introduce main points at issue here.

A. The relation between historic conservation and the public

The participation of the public in historic conservation now became very important. Yet, most of the international charters, inclusive of the Venice Charter, have no reference to the roll of groups of people except experts.

B. The value of historic heritage

It seems to me that concerning the value of historic heritage there are two contrastive views. The one thinks the value exists intrinsically in heritage itself and is found by experts. The other maintains that the value of heritage is recognized by the people concerned, hence there can be plural values according to viewpoints.

C. The relation between memory and historic heritage

The notion that memory is a foundation of arts and history existed since ancient times. This relation recently became a very acute problem in historic conservation. But it is not scrutinized enough and needs re-examination.

D. The relation between region and historic conservation

Despite the globalization of economy and communications, the roll of region is increasing, especially in cultural spheres. Historic heritage is an indispensable element of strong regional bonds. From such viewpoint we have to re-examine the roll of conservation in region.

It is ironical that very popular concepts in historic conservation such as the public, value, memory, and region need re-examination. But the concepts popular in a period are often the ones accepted with little examination. I would like to examine these points at issue in detail. And in conclusion I will present my comments for resolving the conflicts of concepts.

2. The relation between historic conservation and the public

Around a historic heritage as material object there are many groups of people who have own relation to the heritage in question. According to common knowledge, these groups can be classified as Diagram 1.

Until recently, our attentions were mostly focused on the roll of experts who guide decision-making for historic conservation. By contrast, there were few references to the roll of the public in historic conservation. When the public was mentioned, the public was just the subject of education for the respect of monuments. (1).

Even at the general assembly of ICOMOS in 1996, there were few doubts on such a way of thinking. But reflecting changing realities, some reports pointed out situations that demanded re-thinking the domination by experts. The report by Gregory Young from Australia, Deconstructing authenticity, said that “Cultural mapping is a powerful tool to establish what communities value as their culture (including cultural heritage) and their ideas about authenticity.” Another report by Marilyn Truscott from Australia described the debates in Australia about “the right to make decisions about places.

Also in Japan, after the midst of the 1990s, some examples of historic conservation by owners and residents themselves appeared. Those conservation projects were not only planned and realized by owners and residents, but also found new kinds of value in historic heritage overlooked by experts up to that time. (2)