

INTRODUCTION

Building conservation requires particular expertise and care because historic monuments are significant and invaluable heritage of our culture that once lost or damaged cannot be replaced.

Conservation of historic buildings and cultural properties is about authenticity and the principles governing conservation have taken centuries of philosophical, aesthetic and technical progress to articulate.

EVOLUTION OF CONSERVATION

In the Renaissance and Baroque periods, conservation was assigned to artists whose job, was to see objects were kept in good repairs. Unfortunately, good repairs at that time meant good looks according to the taste of the period and damage to objects resulted from alteration.

Viollet-Le-Duc (1817 – 1879) was a pioneer who undertook most of the early restoration of historic monuments in France. ‘Unite de style’ was the main principle of restoration and each building was to be restored ‘in the style which would be propel to it’¹. Restoration of a building was ‘to be re-establish it to a completed state even which may never have existed at any particular time.’²



Viollet-Le-Duc

Opposition to the French concept of restoration and unity of style began in England. In 1848, John Ruskin (1818 – 1900) criticized against restoration as ‘the most total destruction which a building can suffer.’³ The steps to ‘restoration’ he saw were to dash the original old work to pieces and ‘to put up the cheapest and basest imitation which can escape detection with conjectural supplements.’⁴

William Morris (1834 – 1896), the founder of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, was among the first individuals to develop many of the essential philosophies and principles of modern conservation. Concerned over the losses of

English artistic patrimony suffering from ‘stylistic’ restorations, he suggested the concept of ‘conservative repair’.

With the increasing consciousness of the unity of human values in heritage conservation and the common responsibility to safeguard historic monuments for the future generations, major principles laid down on an international basis guarding conservation are: -

| <u>Year</u> | <u>Charter (International Council on Monuments and Sites)</u> <u>(ICOMOS)</u> |
|-------------|--|
| 1931 | Athens Charter |
| 1964 | Venice Charter |
| 1979 | Burra Charter, Australia ICOMOS |
| 1987 | Washington Charter on Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas |
| 2002 | Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China, China ICOMOS |

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF CONSERVATION

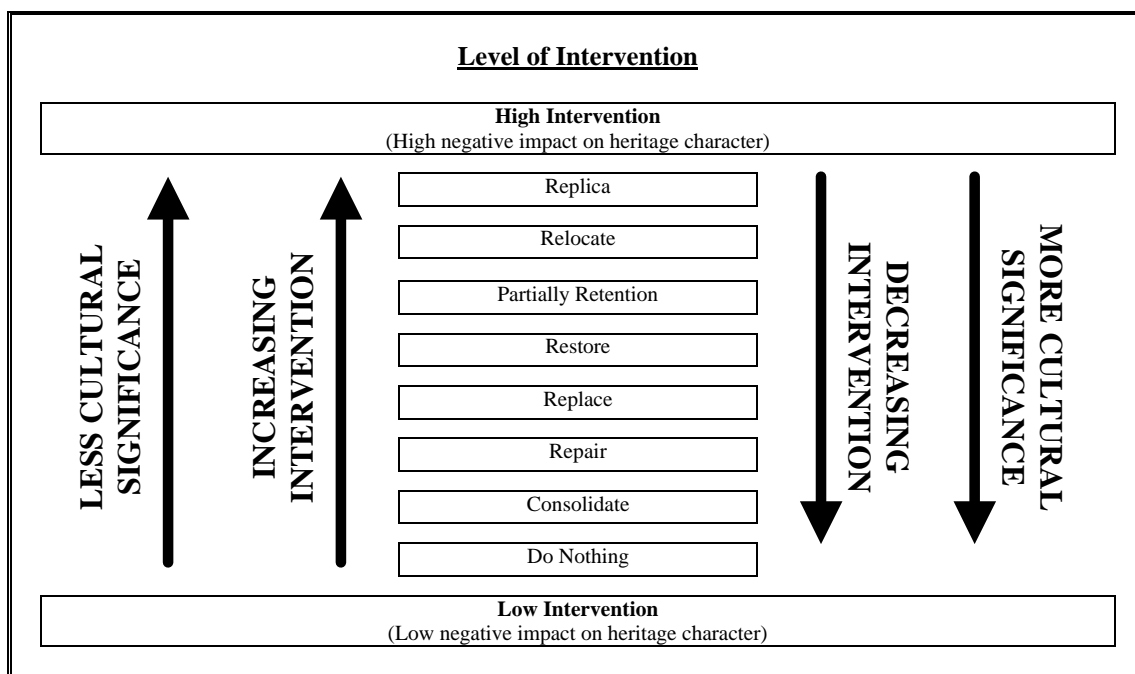
The concept of an historic monument is defined to embrace ‘not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or an historic event.’⁵ The aim of conservation is to retain and safeguard the cultural significance of a place with unswerving respect of the existing fabric: the aesthetic, historical and physical integrity of the cultural property.



Legislative Council, Central, Hong Kong

The essential principles and aims of conservation are that historic building has a special message from its creator and thus, its original structure and appearance must not be altered or falsified. The great buildings of the past ‘do not belong to us only,

they have belonged to our forefathers and will belong to our descendants unless we play them false. They are not in any sense our property, to do as we like with. We are only trustees for those who come after us.’⁶



The approach of ‘conservative repair’ respects the additions and alterations that have been made to old buildings over time and oppose speculative restoration to an earlier form. It encourages the repair rather than the replacement of original fabric. Age adds its own qualities which the repairs should not try to eliminate and old buildings should have the patina of age and not a modern replica.

The condition of the building before any intervention and all methods and materials used during treatment must be carefully documented. Any intervention must be the minimum necessary and reversible if technically possible. ‘The valid contributions of all periods to the building of a monument must be respected and unity of style is not the aim of conservation.’⁷ ‘Replacements of missing parts must integrate harmoniously with the whole, but the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.’⁸

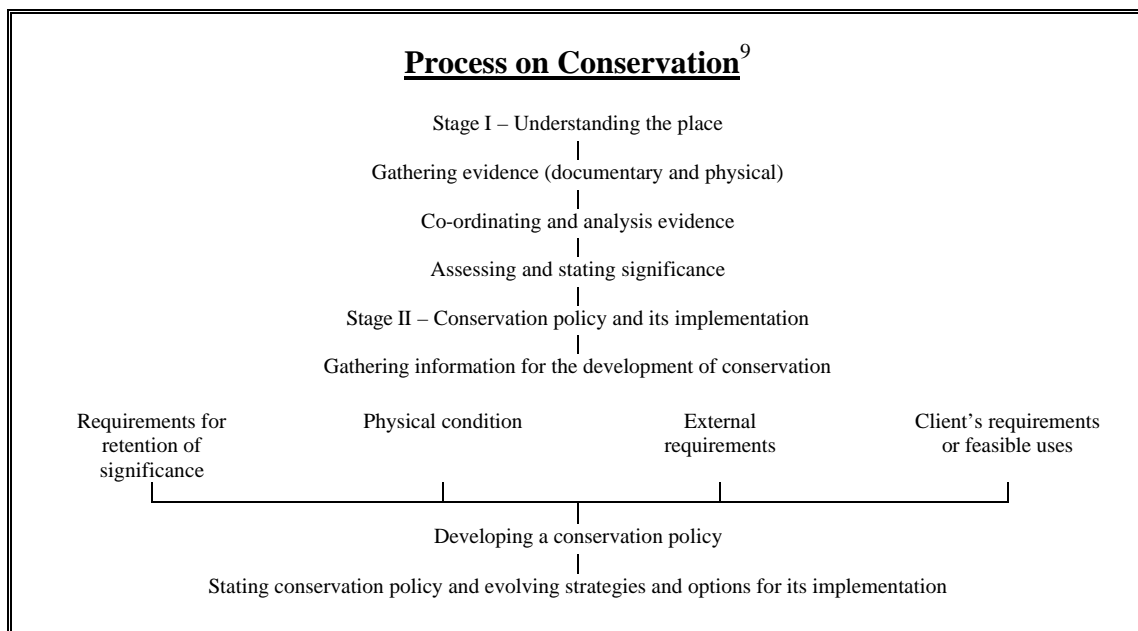


Replacement of deteriorated timber structure in Kun Ting Study Hall

CONSERVATION PLAN AND PROCESS

Conservation is about the care and continuing development of a place in such a way that its significance is retained or revealed and its future is made secure.

To enable that the significance of a historic place is to be retained, the process and approach to conservation projects according to Mr. J.S. Kerr is summarized in the following diagram: -



EXAMPLES OF CONSERVATION WORKS IN HONG KONG

These principles have generally been adopted to serve as guidelines applying within the framework of the local culture and traditions. Conservation works at Tai Fu Tai and Kun Ting Study Hall are illustrative examples of the application of these principles.



Front elevation of Kun Ting Study Hall, Ping Shan Heritage Trail

During the course of the conservation works, the historic structures were firstly stabilized to prevent further collapse and deterioration. The historic integrity of the buildings was respected and decisions had to be made on which part of the



Temporary structural supporting and working platform falsework

later additions or alterations were valid contributions and ought to be preserved.

As much as salvaged material was used in the conservation works to provide authenticity and the original method of construction was employed. Deteriorated greenish grey brickworks were carefully cut out and piece in with second hand bricks of matching size. Existing timber and door screens were repaired. Missing panels were put back on the traditional timber sockets complete with decorations traced from the existing historic building.



Salvaged timber components from roof structure of Kun Ting

Repainting to timber carvings and eaves boards etc. were carried out based on the scraping of existing painting coats and old photographs. Extreme care was put on the retention of all the original wall paintings and Chinese calligraphy.



Paintworks on timber - Kun Ting Study Hall (Left), Tai Fu Tai (Right)

Minor adaptations and improvements regarding safety, lightings and provision of caretakers office, etc. to enable the building to be opened to the public were carefully designed without compromising the buildings' historic value.

Bibliography:

- 1 *Viollet-Let-Duc, Eugene-Emanuel, Dictionnaire raisonne de l'architecture francaise (Paris 1854 – 68) vol. VIII, 1866, P. 24.*
- 2 *Ibid, P. 24*
- 3 *Ruskin, John, The Lamp of Memory, The Seven Lamps of Architecture, 1848, Aphorism 31.*
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *2nd International Congress of the Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, Venice, 1964, Article 1.*
- 6 *Morris, William, Manifesto, Society for Protection of Ancient Building, 1875*
- 7 *Ibid, Article 11.*
- 8 *Ibid, Article 12.*
- 9 *Kerr, James Semple, The Conservation Plan*