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# The Conservation Plan Dichotomy: Can the Gap between Theory and Practise be bridged?<sup>1</sup>

by Smriti Pant

Conservation is a discipline which deals with the care and treatment of valuable artefacts both movable and immovable, and has a history that has been constantly evolving. Having its roots in stylistic restoration, the philological and scientific approach to 'restoration' in the nineteenth century gradually gave way to the 'anti-restoration' movement in the latter half of the century and this in turn paved the path for the evolution of a global approach in the field of 'conservation' in the twentieth century<sup>2</sup>.

Conservation today implies a process which primarily leads to the prolongation of the life of cultural heritage for its utilization now and in future. This may include maintenance, preservation, restoration, reconstruction and adaptation and is usually a combination of more than one of these processes.<sup>3</sup> In specific relation to material or built heritage, depending on the existing condition of the place under consideration, each of these above-mentioned processes involves a lesser or greater degree of change to the fabric of the place.

While the importance of the conservation of cultural heritage has by now gained substantial recognition, finite resources make it practically impossible to conserve everything 'old' and, indeed, everything 'old' may not need to be conserved. Therefore, before asking how to conserve, it is necessary to understand what exactly it is that has to be conserved and for whom; no conservation theory or attempt at conservation can prove effective unless sustainable uses for the place are taken into consideration.

Identifying a balance between conservation and development poses a substantial challenge. Numerous heritage protection policies and tools have been developed to meet this challenge and, in recent years,

the Conservation Plan has become a 'trend' in the field of heritage protection. But what is it that actually makes the Conservation Plan a much sought-after heritage protection tool? How did it become a buzz word in the heritage sector and does it really offer an ideal solution to the threat that development poses to cultural heritage in contemporary society?

## NEED FOR A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Despite having had a late and modest start according to European standards<sup>4</sup>, in the second half of the twentieth century heritage legislation and policies in Britain had developed greatly. By the 1970s, 'scheduling', 'listing' and 'conservation areas' had all been firmly established as distinct categories of heritage protection; the number of historic monuments, buildings and areas falling under this protective regime was constantly on the rise, and heritage protection was beginning to be considered as a shared responsibility between the owners of historic property – whether individuals or organizations, the government or the public.

Shortly before the last quarter of the twentieth century, instead of being regarded as an activity occurring in a vacuum, conservation had begun to be more consistently incorporated in various town and country planning policies. Moreover, the recognition of the importance of integrated conservation and sustainable development on an international level was also reflected in the heritage-related legislation that was passed in Britain in the 1990s. Thus, apart from attempting to counteract the ambiguities of some of the earlier related legislations, the new Acts such as Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation

Areas) Act 1990 and Planning Policy Guidance Note (PPG) 15: Planning and the Historic Environment also aimed at facilitating better integration of conservation within the planning framework<sup>5</sup>. But in spite of all good intentions, the distinctions between the conservation doctrine and the concern for development, though blurred, still remained.

Additionally, the frequent introduction of laws and measures for heritage protection, and related assistance (and technical guidance) to tackle the pitfalls of the previous ones had resulted in exponentially increasing numbers of policies and tools<sup>6</sup>, making it difficult to keep a track on them and, as Pearce puts it, to have faith in them. Sometimes, it seemed that even though the information was (all) there, what was missing was the guideline which could assist in the selection of the most appropriate guidance among the sea of documents which gave advice on heritage protection!

Under the circumstances, the need for a more integrated and holistic approach was particularly evident and it was against this backdrop that the Conservation Plan gained popularity in Britain close to the end of the twentieth century. The Conservation Plan made up for what was lacking in earlier heritage protection policies, not by setting down statutory requirements which had to be followed, but by suggesting a suitable course of action, a methodology, that took into account all the various factors affecting the site, its significance and the possibility of its future development without risking the loss of values associated with the historic property.

“At its simplest a conservation plan is a document which sets out what is significant in a place and, consequently, what policies are appropriate to enable the significance to be retained in its future use and development.”<sup>7</sup> By providing guidelines for managing change in the historic context, it provided the much-needed means for creating a balancing act between conservation and (new) development. Moreover, as highlighted by the guidance published by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF)<sup>8</sup> in March 1998 – ‘Conservation Plans for Historic Places’,

the Conservation Plan’s potential as a dynamic “one stop shop,<sup>9</sup>” also contributed to its popularity. But the question was whether it could live up to these expectations in the long run or would it end up being just another mechanism, among others, that had failed to overcome the problems which were becoming increasingly evident in the British heritage protection system?

## THE CONSERVATION PLAN DICHOTOMY

Even though statutory tools such as scheduled monument consent, listed building consent and conservation area consent, along with guidance documents for the protection of built heritage such as Conservation Area Appraisals, Local Plan Policies, World Heritage Management Plans, Listed Building management plans, etc., had already been introduced before the Conservation Plan gained prominence in Britain, few of them adopted an approach as comprehensive as that of the Conservation Plan. Whereas the former were more biased, reactive and segregated in outlook, the Conservation Plan advocated a more flexible, pro-active and integrated methodology.

While a broader scope of application and a more transparent commitment to the protection of heritage set the Conservation Plan ideology apart from other instruments, in practice it is far from being perfect and, with the passage of time, an obvious rift between the theory and practice of making Conservation Plans can be seen. In fact, ironically, the biggest step in popularizing the conservation plan process in Britain in the late 1990s, which came in the form of the publication of the HLF guidance for the preparation of Conservation Plans for grant-aid applications, also contributed to this dichotomy.

Obviously, when publishing the guidance it was hoped that the possibility of getting funding would act as the motivation for displaying an adequate level of “commitment to the care of the site.<sup>10</sup>” Although this was successful to a great extent, there still existed an inherent

problem with this approach – if the Conservation Plan is written only with the aim of getting the financial back-up necessary for the writing and implementation of the Plan, there may be a tendency to “distort the development of an understanding of cultural significance (...) if it is known that its implication for conservation and future management of the site will be difficult.”<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, a multi-disciplinary and participatory approach is essential in the conservation plan process, and apart from the collaboration between specialists with relevant skills and cross-disciplinary education, to a great extent the success of the Conservation Plan is linked to the involvement of and consultation with other parties genuinely interested in and dependent on the survival of the historic site. Not only is this important at the initial stage of understanding heritage significance, but it should be “a continuing process throughout ... (the) stewardship of any site.”<sup>12</sup>

However, it is also true that the fewer the number of people involved in making the Plan, the lesser would be the sum of money required for doing the job, making the entire procedure cost-effective and a more feasible option for a greater number of owners of historic properties. This may result in the Conservation Plan being ‘produced’ mechanically rather than being ‘developed’, and the new millennium has already witnessed the emergence of the ‘Conservation Plan industry’<sup>13</sup>. This reiterates the dichotomy between the theory and practice of Conservation Plans and also represents the failure of the Conservation Plan as a heritage protection tool.

Moreover, as “Conservation Plans must be comprehended by a range of people if they are to be successful,<sup>14</sup>” it is important that the Plan is written in a manner that it can be easily read and understood by the layman and professionals alike. However, often it ends up becoming a bulky and complex document in which disciplinary demarcation overshadows the need for coordination, clarity and simplicity. This restricts the flexibility of the Plan by virtue of limited or no possibility

of regular monitoring and reviewing; and, instead of exemplifying a collaborative approach, the conservation plan process ends up providing imposed solutions which mark the victory of the ‘Conservation Plan industry’ over the Conservation Plan ideology.

## BRIDGING THE GAP

Even though the Conservation Plan has the potential for functioning as an ideal tool for ensuring the survival of a wide range of heritage assets, the problems resulting from the misuse of its power, improper implementation of the conservation plan process and the growing dichotomy between the theory and practice of Conservation Plans tend to undermine its overall effectiveness.

Introducing a new tool to take care of the loopholes evident in the previous one often serves only to increase the overall number of partially effective heritage protection tools. Therefore, instead of replacing the Conservation Plan with yet another policy, what is needed is an attempt to induce a higher level of commitment to the basic principles of the conservation plan process and finding an alternative way of structuring the existing tool in order to maximize its performance. Can this be achieved by developing a layered structure for writing and implementing the Conservation Plan?

Clearly, outlining the methodology used to gather the data for different layers of the Conservation Plan will help in making the process easier to understand, especially for the lay person. In addition, the collection and selection of the information for each layer will inevitably require a certain degree of involvement from all the people associated with the process thereby resulting in a higher level of transparency and accountability. Moreover, all the required details can then be archived in a manner such that they are readily available at short notice making it obsolete for all the gathered information to be piled up in one document, thus reducing the risk of the Plan becoming bulky, incomprehensible and irrelevant. In this

manner, not only does the layered structure ensure due respect for the conservation plan methodology, it also meets the challenge of providing as little and as much relevant information as necessary within the same document.

However, it has to be kept in mind that just as a dynamic methodology characterizes the conservation plan process, the strength of the suggested structure for the Conservation Plan will also lie in its flexibility to adapt to the varying needs of the historic property and the people associated with it. The proposed hierarchical structure has been developed “to assist (...) and not to restrict action,<sup>15</sup>” and the moment it starts overpowering the real purpose of the whole exercise, it becomes futile and needs to be re-structured or replaced.

In order to demonstrate in a practical way the potential of the Conservation Plan as the means for creating a balance between conservation and development, as well as the feasibility of the proposed layered structure, the master thesis also outlines a methodology for developing the initial layer of the Conservation Plan for Toddington Manor, a Gothic Revival country house located in the village of Toddington (Gloucestershire) in south-west England. Built by an amateur architect, Charles Hanbury-Tracy, for himself between 1819-1840<sup>16</sup>, Toddington Manor is a Grade I listed building which had changed hands multiple times since the beginning of the twentieth century until the British artist, Damien Hirst, bought it in 2005. As the current owner is not dependent on external resources to provide the financial back-up for commissioning and putting the Conservation Plan into practice<sup>17</sup>, the case study presents an ideal context for developing an example of best practice in writing and implementing Conservation Plans.

## NOTES

1 This article provides a synopsis of the thesis submitted by the author in January 2009 for the partial fulfilment of the requirements of

the degree of Master of Arts (M.A.) in World Heritage Studies at BTU Cottbus. As heritage protection strategies vary from country to country due to the differences in historical, social, political and economic backgrounds, tracing the development of different tools and strategies employed for heritage protection worldwide was beyond the scope of this thesis and the research focuses specifically on England. (The names “Britain”, “United Kingdom”, “UK” have also been mentioned in the context of statements where making a generalization, which is applicable to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, is possible.) Moreover, even though Conservation Plans are equally applicable and useful in the context of natural and cultural heritage, this thesis focuses mainly on the applicability of the Plan within the context of built cultural heritage.

- 2 Jokilehto 1999.
- 3 See Articles 1.4 and 14 respectively of the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter. (Burra Charter 1999)
- 4 The first heritage protection legislation to be passed in Britain was the Ancient Monuments Protection Act of 1882. (AMA 1882)
- 5 Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990/ Planning Policy Guidance (PPG 15): Planning and the Historic Environment 1994.
- 6 Pearce 1989, p. 5.
- 7 Kerr 2000, p. 1.
- 8 The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF ) was established by the UK Parliament in 1994 as the body responsible for giving grants to a large variety of projects associated with the local, regional and national heritage of Britain. (HLF – Who are we? 2008)
- 9 Clark 1998.
- 10 Clark 1999a, p. xxii.
- 11 Worthing/Bond 2008, p. 109.
- 12 Clark 1999b, p. 27.
- 13 Inskip 2008.
- 14 Kerr 2000, p. 3.
- 15 Marquis-Kyle/Walker 2004, p. 11.
- 16 Hussey 1955, p. 161.
- 17 As per the magazine ArtReview, after a recent sale of works which made £111 million, Damien Hirst is “the most powerful figure in the world of contemporary art.” (BBC 2008)

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