

Stable Relations: Earthquake Disasters and Internationalism in the Conservation Community, c. 1976

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ABSTRACT

The article studies the effects of earthquake disasters in the international community of heritage conservators in the 1970s. I claim that seismic shocks were catalysts for internationalism and professional development in the discipline. Conservators traveled to disaster sites to assess damage and propose approaches to reconstruction, thereby strengthening its international cooperation with the transfer of expertise and support in conservation projects. In the 1970s, the discipline developed a framework for risk management which employed stochastic assessments of natural hazards and engineering procedures to preserve monuments against forces of nature. Since plate tectonics are an environmental factor beyond anyone's control, conservators developed a new perspective on the responsibility of humans. They emphasized that loss of heritage was not caused by earthquakes but by the demolition of ruins afterwards. The article draws upon historical material by ICOMOS, ICCROM, and UNESCO with a focus on the 1976 earthquakes in Guatemala and Friuli (Northeast Italy).

Introduction

Natural disasters like earthquakes condense historical developments and bring them into spotlight on the world stage. In this article I argue that seismic shocks in the 1970s were catalysts for internationalism and professional development in the heritage conservation community: the community boosted its international cooperation by supplying expertise and providing support for conservation projects; institutions like ICOMOS or ICCROM attempted to gain acclaim for the profession in international relations; and the community refined its field's standards by assessing earthquake hazards and discussing options for preservation.

In the 1970s, the conservation profession had successfully consolidated international institutions such as ICOMOS with its close ties to the *corps diplomatique* at UNESCO and UN, or the Rome Centre ICCROM which sought to train and exchange knowledge between national agents of conservation. The community strived for broader attention from the global public and set up a powerful scheme for a global heritage bureaucracy with the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. In fact, strengthening international relationships after 1945 meant catching up on 19th century internationalism: While international exchange among conservators in Europe in the 19th century was flourishing, it suffered badly from nationalisms and totalitarian ideologies during the world wars.¹ World War II in particular undermined the cohesion of the community. After 1945, conservators experienced international collaboration as stepping into unknown territory.² The founding of ICCROM in 1956, the creation of the Venice Charter in 1964, the founding of ICOMOS in 1965, and the establishment of the World Heritage Program of UNESCO in 1972 were successes for internationalism and created new standards in the discipline. When earthquakes struck, the conservation community reinforced these international networks, but they were often neglected by government actors and humanitarian aid organizations.

In this article, I focus on two earthquakes in 1976, one in Guatemala and one in Friuli, Italy. I analyze their effects on the conservation community by looking at damage reports and conference proceedings by ICOMOS, ICCROM, and UNESCO. A closer look at Bernard Feilden's 1979 textbook *Introduction to Conservation of Cultural Property* shall show how conservators refined their thinking about the relationship between monuments, the natural environment, and their profession. The perception of natural disasters was shaped by a notion of risk management which rendered preservation a matter of stochastics and engineering.

Disaster Sites as Training Grounds

In 1976, two earthquake disasters received significant attention in the international heritage community. The first struck southeast Guatemala in January and could be felt all over Central America; the second hit Friuli in northeast Italy in May and was followed by further devastating tremors in September. The disasters alarmed conservators all over the world, since many buildings that were considered monuments or cultural property were damaged. UNESCO, ICOMOS, and ICCROM helped with disaster relief and began assessing the damage and drafting plans for reconstructions.³ The damage reports express sympathy with the victims of the disasters, but their focus is not on human suffering but on monuments. Conservators were aware that the fate of heritage objects was not decided in the moment of the earthquake but in the period after the tremors, when damaged buildings were torn down and ruins were removed.

In the case of Friuli, UNESCO compiled a comprehensive survey of damage to heritage objects across the region.⁴ ICCROM sent conservators to support surveying efforts by municipal authorities and to help prop up damaged structures. They flew in Donald del Sid, an architect from Guatemala who had taken part in recovery efforts for the earthquake a couple of weeks earlier in his home country, to supervise the mission in Italy.⁵ Students taking ICCROM courses also participated in the mission and received hands-on training.⁶ ICCROM also assisted with photogrammetric surveys of certain monuments, such as the Duomo of Venzone. The photogrammetry in Venzone was a way to test new equipment and methodologies. The experiences and results were shared within the community.⁷ The photogrammetry proved to be very helpful for

reconstruction; indeed, it might be what convinced residents to use anastylosis for reconstruction and restore buildings "where they were and as they were" ("dov'era e com'era").⁸ For its part, ICCROM hoped the photogrammetry mission would not only help Friulians but also foster international cooperation. The mission was carried out by engineers from Bonn, a team from Bundesdenkmalamt in Vienna, ICCROM, local conservators, and residents – all "in solidarity".⁹ The urgency of the disaster and the hardships it produced led to the creation of a strong partnership.¹⁰

In the following years, ICOMOS, ICCROM, and UNESCO hosted a series of workshops and conferences on the topic of earthquake preservation. These events covered the geophysical effects of earthquakes as well as architectural and social aspects of heritage conservation such as classification of risks and structural weaknesses, legislation and building codes, and emergency plans. Conservators called for compiling databases and catalogues of heritage sites located in regions subject to seismic activity and a larger awareness of the problem in general.¹¹ Some of these workshops and conferences were held in earthquake-prone or disaster regions and included field trips to affected buildings and examination of damages. The 1977 annual conference of the Italian chapter of ICOMOS was deliberately hosted in Udine in Friuli and focused on preservation and reconstruction in seismic zones.¹²

In the late 1970s, earthquake sites were frequent meeting points for the international heritage community. Setting aside all hardships, earthquake disasters did foster international cooperation within the conservation community. Professionals could test their methods for conservation and restoration in cases of severe destruction. The disaster sites served as training grounds for conservators.

Working on natural disasters gave the profession a sense of importance. By the 1970s, the international system of humanitarian aid organizations and processes grew and received significant attention by the international public.¹³ Conservators sought to position their profession as a relevant stakeholder in the system of humanitarian aid and disaster relief, which by the 1970s, had grown and was receiving significant attention from the public.¹⁴ Conservators demanded to be included in disaster aid campaigns and complained that there was no coordination with humanitarian aid organizations such as the Red Cross organizations, the

United Nations Disaster Relief Organization (UNDRO), or national agencies.¹⁵ They acknowledged that saving human lives was the highest priority but at the same time asserted that safeguarding monuments should equally be considered an essential part of disaster relief.¹⁶ ICOMOS proposed that an architectural conservation expert be included in relief missions who would advise in the process of relief and have authority to prohibit the unnecessary demolition of cultural property.¹⁷

The conservation community demanded a seat on the international table of humanitarian aid, but it was not very successful. Disaster relief organizations met conservation representatives with disregard and showed little interest in the topic of heritage preservation. For instance, ICCROM tried to set up a seminar on foresight and prevention of earthquake disasters with UNDRO and secure funding from the UN. UNDRO delayed responding, attempted to adjust the topic to its own interests, and declined financial support.¹⁸ ICCROM was similarly rebuffed on national level after the 1980 Campania earthquake. ICCROM called for volunteers to assist in recovery of cultural property and received dozens of applications from motivated and idealistic conservators from various countries ready to help. But the Ministero dei Beni Culturali and the municipal authorities ignored the offer and did not collaborate with ICCROM's volunteers.¹⁹ Not everyone attached the same importance to heritage as conservators did.

Humans, Monuments, and the Environment

Over the course of the 1970s, conservators questioned and refined their understanding of what a monument and what a conservator's duty were. A prime example is the textbook *An Introduction to Conservation of Cultural Property* that has been reprinted since its original publication and has been widely disseminated within the profession.

The book sought to classify threats and causes of damages and distinguishes between internal factors, such as humidity, dust, and mice, and external factors such as ice and precipitation, vegetation growth, and natural disasters like floods, volcanoes, and earthquakes.²⁰ But while proposing a categorization for causes of damage, Feilden concluded that "the main cause of loss and deterioration is man himself".²¹ Humans, according to Feilden, have the duty to protect heritage; if there is damage, it must owe to human failure to prevent

it. With the correct and systematic implementation of appropriate preservation measures, harm should have been prevented.

Conservators argued that forces of nature were not threats but risks that could be managed and controlled with professional methods. Managing risks required a systematic assessment of the vulnerability of a building and of the probability of natural disasters. With this approach, conservators followed in the footsteps of insurance companies, state authorities, and scientists who at the turn of the century had transformed natural hazards into manageable risks by gathering data and accounting for probabilities.²² By integrating monuments into a calculation of risks, a case of emergency was rendered a manageable contingency. Or, as Feilden put it, "Natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes cannot be prevented, but by forethought the damage can be greatly reduced".²³ In this approach, the preservation of monuments became a matter of stochastics and engineering.

Feilden also argued that humans contribute to loss of heritage through excessive intervention for the sake of preservation that can alter the character of a monument, in line with the Venice Charter's directive that physical interventions in heritage structures should be as minimal as possible. According to article 9, preservation should be based "on respect for original material and authentic documents".²⁴ For instance, fortifying a timber-framed house with reinforced concrete would without doubt increase its stability but it would compromise its historic character. As an architect at the 1992 ICOMOS New Zealand conference noted: "Earthquakes are a real threat. However, our efforts to secure [monuments] against earthquakes also involve significant risks [...]. The threat to heritage structures comes not only from the possibility of seismic shaking but also from engineering attempts to protect them against such events".²⁴ Thus components should only be replaced or added if there is no other way to preserve the object.

It was not only efforts to reconstruct buildings in such a way as to make them earthquake-proof that was harmful but also the clean-up process undertaken in the immediate aftermath of an earthquake. The seismic force of an earthquake often damages buildings, but, in most cases, does not destroy them completely. Parts of structures and the materials they are built out of remain intact, which makes it possible to reconstruct them in a

way that keeps them close to their original form. Destruction was only final once bulldozers arrived at the scene and tore down anything still standing to make way for a new building. After the 1976 earthquakes of Guatemala and Friuli, ICCROM concluded:

“The experience of the earthquakes in Guatemala and Friuli has demonstrated the importance of having an emergency procedure ready for application to protect the monuments during the period immediately following the tremor, during which they risk being completely destroyed or their remains may be scattered and lost by the inadequately supervised work of bulldozers.”²⁶

Conservators did not fear earthquakes but the bulldozers after the earthquake. A potential reconstruction was not foiled by an earthquake; it was foiled by ultimately tearing down the damaged structures and cleaning up the rubble. Even ruins could still bear the symbolic quality of heritage. Symbols for a shared past were only lost once the ruins were removed and overridden by a new building. Conservators thus called for a careful assessment and clearing of disaster sites so as not to multiply the damage that was already caused by seismic tremors. They knew that this approach often conflicted with the interests of affected residents and disaster relief measures. But any attempt of clearing the debris was a further threat to heritage. Conservators asserted that the longer a damaged building

remained standing after a disaster, the greater its chance of surviving.

Conclusion

Earthquakes posed great challenges to conservation, but they also created opportunities for international collaborations and professional development. After the 1976 earthquakes, the conservation community came together in an international setting. Professionals from different countries travelled to the disaster sites, offered relief and supported reconstructions, and shared their experiences. Amid the destruction they tried to fly the flag for cultural heritage but were not very successful. Within the system of humanitarian aid, they received little attention.

The heritage community in the 1970s constructed a triple-bind between humans, monuments, and the environment. It argued that conservators could protect monuments through risk management and that if they failed to do so, they were responsible for any damage. In this situation they faced the challenge of balancing protection of monuments through physical interventions without compromising their historic value. They maintained that if an earthquake did damage a monument, the reconstruction process needed to be carried out with utmost care and consideration. In this understanding, a monument was destroyed not by forces of nature but by humans removing the rubble.

Endnotes

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