

# Managing change: the impact of the Venice Charter and the Nara Document on the Finnish building preservation legislation

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## Abstract

Finland has the youngest building stock in Europe. This is partly due to the contradictory objectives of local construction and building preservation principles, which are guided by legislation and the international discourse. This article focuses on the statements on alterations and change in protected buildings, expressed in the international declarations and Finnish laws. By comparing the declarations of Venice and Nara with the local legislation, we examine how the attitudes to change are inherited from international documents to the Finnish laws.

## Keywords

Building preservation, Architectural heritage, Change, Transformation.

## Introduction

For a long time, the architectural heritage was mainly valued for the qualities that represented the intact building phase. The acceptance, and even reverence, of the traces of change has emerged in the conservation discourse presumably late<sup>1</sup>. The admiration for pristine has prevailed also in the Finnish building preservation field. To identify one factor of influence, we focus on the statements of modification of buildings expressed in the Finnish building preservation laws. We use the close reading method to analyse the laws and compare them with the declarations of Venice and Nara.

Finland has the youngest building stock in Europe. This is, at least partly, due to the fast urbanization stage during the 20th century, which renewed the Finnish building stock on a massive scale. The prior Finnish built heritage was mostly of timber. Since wooden buildings are light, they are easy to move, change and replace, but they also need constant maintenance and are easy to demolish. The wooden buildings were replaced mainly with concrete constructions, especially in cities. Over 80% of the Finnish building stock has been built within the past 70 years<sup>2</sup> and is mainly constructed by the means and materials of modern building industry.

## The research material

The history of modern Finnish Building preservation legislation is relatively short. «The Act on the preservation



Figure 1 The first building preservation law in Finland, adopted in 1964, targeted mainly on singular buildings. Only about 40 buildings were protected by the law, the Olavinlinna Castle being one of them. Savonlinna, the Olavinlinna Castle (photo Pietinen 1936). © Finnish Heritage Agency, Helsinki.

and protection of ancient monuments» was adopted in Finland in 1883, protecting only certain unique monuments such as medieval castles and churches. A legislation that widened the scope of preservation to more recent built heritage took shape in Finland only in the second half of the 20th century. The Finnish debate on building preservation follows international models persuaded by the physical and mental damage caused by the Second World War. From the 1960s onwards, the great societal transformations of modernization generated an urgent need to formulate principles, concepts, and legislation for building conservation<sup>3</sup>.

The earliest Building preservation law in Finland, Law 572/1964 on the Preservation of Buildings of Cultural and Historical Interest, was adopted in 1964<sup>4</sup>. As a pioneer, the law not only defined the character and scope of the law but also the concept of a monument and the eligibility of a site for preservation (Figure 1). The law was influenced in particular by the Scandinavian acts on building preservation (Denmark, 1918; Norway, 1951 and Sweden, 1960)<sup>5</sup>. Adopted the same year as Venice Charter, the Finnish law could not be influenced by the Venice Charter directly. Nevertheless, Law 572/1964 and the Venice Charter have a lot in common since they both were reacting the massive global transformations and the modern perception of built heritage.

The second Finnish law entered into force in 1985, more than 20 years after Venice Charter. The novelty in the Building Preservation Act 60/1985 lay in the emphasis of local communities and the various actors involved in a conservation work<sup>6</sup>. Since 1985, the international debate on architectural heritage progressed by leaps and bounds<sup>7</sup>. The concept of authenticity was reassessed in the Nara Document on Authenticity. In Finland, the preparation of a new building heritage act followed the overall reform of the Land Use and Building Act<sup>8</sup>. The Act on the Preservation of Building Heritage 498/2010, entering into force 15 years after Nara Document, stressed

the diversity of cultural heritage and reinforced the importance of cultural sustainability<sup>9</sup>.

The Venice Charter is titled to concern «the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites». In Article 1, it defines the concept of a historic monument by stating that it «embraces 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 a historic event»<sup>10</sup>. Although the Charter was mainly targeted to ancient monuments, its view of a monument is quite broad and allows its application to more recent buildings as well.

In Article 5, the Venice Charter takes a stance on building alterations. The Charter states that social use of a monument is »desirable but it must not change the lay-out or decoration of the building. It is within these limits only that modifications demanded by a change of function should be envisaged and may be permitted.» In other words, the existing architecture is valued over its evolution. In Article 6 the Charter goes on to stress that «[n]o new construction, demolition or modification which would alter the relations of mass and colour must be allowed». Accordingly, the Article 7 states that building parts should not be relocated: «[t]he moving of all or part of a monument cannot be allowed except where the safeguarding of that monument demands it or where it is justified by national or international interest of paramount importance». It is worth noting that the relocation is stated to be disregarded even when the detachment and the reattachment are executed in a same building.

In Article 9 the Venice Charter denotes one of its best-known statements which fully expresses the attitude towards change and the priority of original materials. According to the Charter, the aim of restoration «is to preserve and reveal the aesthetic and historic value of the monument and is based on respect for original material and authentic documents.» The Charter then takes a tough stance towards new changes by stating that restoration »must stop at the point where conjecture begins, and in this case moreover any extra work which is indispensable must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp».

Nevertheless, in Article 11 the Charter says that «[t]he valid contributions of all periods to the building of a monument must be respected, since unity of style is not the aim of a restoration.» In Article 12 it continues: «Replacements of missing parts must integrate harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.» Accordingly, in Article 13 it states: «Additions cannot be allowed except in so far as they do not detract from the interesting parts of the building, its traditional setting, the balance of its composition and its relation with its surroundings.» In other words, according to the Charter, there is a remarkable difference between past and present since old modifications are acceptable but newer ones should be avoided or if not, then distinguishable.

The Nara Document on Authenticity considers change as a factor of diversity<sup>11</sup>. It stresses, as in article 6, that »[c]ultural heritage diversity exists in time and space, and demands respect for other cultures and all aspects of their belief systems.» In article 8 it recalls local expertise by stating that «[r]esponsibility for cultural heritage and the management of it belongs, in the first place, to the cultural community that has generated it, and subsequently to that which cares for it». Accordingly, in article 11, it says that: «heritage properties must be considered and judged within the cultural contexts to which they belong.» This leaves the definition of values to local specialists. In article 12 the Nara Document continues with examples: «Depending on the nature of the cultural heritage



Figure 2. The office building of the Helsinki Central Railway station by Eliel Saarinen was protected by the first building preservation law, in 1980. When the national railway company intended to sell the building to be transformed into a hotel in the 2010s, the protection was renewed and specified according to the new Act on the Preservation of Architectural Heritage 498/2010 in 2018. Helsinki, the Railway station building with the office wing on the right (photo A. Faltin, 1919). © Finnish Heritage Agency, Helsinki.

[...] authenticity judgements may be linked to [...] form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors.»

We may notice that the Document pays attention to use, function, tradition and techniques.

The Nara Document still bows in two directions. In the appendix 1 it encourages all «efforts to update authenticity assessments in light of changing values and circumstances.» Here the Document acknowledges the diversity of the heritage. Meanwhile in appendix 2 it defines conservation in a conventional way as «all efforts designed to understand cultural heritage, know its history and meaning, ensure its material safeguard and, as required, its presentation, restoration and enhancement.» Concerning that conservation includes «all efforts designed to understand cultural heritage», it cannot automatically «ensure its material safeguard».

### **The expressions of change in the Finnish laws**

In the first phase of this study, we compare the Finnish Law 572/1964 on the Preservation of Buildings of Cultural and Historical Interest (later: Law 572/1964) to the concurrent Venice Charter. When defining the object of preservation, the Law 572/1964 states in § 1 that a building must be remarkable either by its building history, use, or a connection with a historical event. Accordingly, the Law 572/1964 and the Venice Charter interpret the essence of an object in a similar way allowing structural modifications to safeguard the continuation of the usage. In the § 7 the Law 572/1964 states that preservation regulations should comprise four aspects: 1) where the building may not be altered, 2) how it may be used, 3) the quality of the work planned and 4) how the building

owner should take care of the building. It is noteworthy that while use, workmanship, and maintenance are regarded with a neutral stance, the alterations are approached in a restrictive manner. In comparison with the Venice Charter, the law is less distinct but it has negative presumption about the effects of alterations alike.

In the second phase we compare the Finnish Building Preservation Act 60/1985 (later: Law 60/1985) to the Venice Charter, published twenty years earlier. Unlike the previous law, the Law 60/1985 defines its objectives. In § 1 it states that preservation concerns built areas relating to cultural development or history in order to preserve the national cultural heritage. It is noteworthy that both «cultural development» and «history» relate to continuums, a concept which involves transformation in time. Thus, the law acknowledges development.

In the § 6 of the Law 60/1985 is stated that the preservation regulations may concern: 1) the preservation of the site in the condition required; 2) the use of the building in such a way that its cultural and historical values are not compromised; and 3) the restoration and the limitation of alterations and additions of the building. Thus, it is precisely restoration, alterations and additions that the law identifies as a threat to such an extent that there must be a tool to restrict. In addition, the paragraph 1 mentions preservation of the site in particular, not improvement of it, for example. In this sense, the Law 60/1985 reiterates the idea of the Law 572/1964 and the Venice Charter on the harmfulness of change.

In the third phase we compare the Finnish Act on the Preservation of Architectural Heritage 498/2010 (later: Law 498/2010) to the Nara Document on Authenticity. In § 1 the Law 498/2010 defines its aim with three aspects: the ability 1) to safeguard the temporal and spatial diversity of the built heritage, 2) to preserve the character and specific features of it and 3) to promote the culturally sustainable management and use of the built heritage. In the first point, the interest lies in the preservation of temporal diversity. It inherently assumes that recent phenomena are also part of the continuum of heritage. The third point is remarkable because of the introduction of cultural sustainability. Since the future dimension is built into the idea of sustainable culture, the third paragraph recognizes change as an integral part of building preservation (Figure 2).

The most famous excerpt of the Law 498/2010 is the § 8 that states that there are six criteria to assess the cultural significance of a building. The first three ones being rarity, typicality and representativeness, the list then grows more precise. The fourth point states that the significance may lay in originality expressed in the presence and continuity of use, building method, architecture, or style. Thus, originality is liberated from materiality. While the fifth point refers only to the significance of a historical phenomenon, the sixth point focuses on temporality. According to the last aspect, the significance may lay in «the presence of visible structures, materials, and stylistic features from different periods that reflect the history and continuity of construction, maintenance, and use (historic stratification)». The last point highlights the value of stratification, that is, the traces of past modifications, and by doing so it celebrates not only past but also future modifications.

## Conclusions

Based on this analysis, we see that the same ethos is present in both international declarations and Finnish laws. The texts of the 1960s reflect how the Western conservation principles are linked to the European stone building

tradition. Stone buildings last for long even when abandoned and are practically eternal if maintained, and structural material replacements are seldom needed. Accordingly, the values of built heritage were thought to be safeguarded along with original materials. However, already the Venice Charter left the definition of a historic monument quite open. It also allowed alterations, albeit reluctantly, and stressed the importance of recognizable stratification by insisting that new structures should be distinct from the existing ones. Like the Venice Charter, the first Finnish building preservation law (572/1964) has a negative stance to future modifications. The second law (60/1985), adopted twenty years later, reiterates the idea of change as threat, but new voices can be heard in the objectives which stress continuums. However, at this stage, the methods of continuity were not yet specified. The Nara Document on Authenticity was published after a manifold discussion on heritage. One of the most prominent debates concerned wooden buildings, the preservation of which requires replacement of building parts. In response, Nara Document stressed the importance of local definition of values. The third Finnish law (498/2010), adopted 15 years after the Nara Document and currently in force, highlights the continuums in many ways by referring to the temporal diversity, cultural sustainability and historic stratification. It also specifies authentic use and building methods as value criteria, detaching authenticity from materiality. Accordingly, the law, like the Nara Document, recognizes the diversity of heritage and leaves its definitions as open as possible. Nevertheless, it is difficult to prove a causal link between the declaration and the laws based on these five documents. There is a distinct consistency in the development of the documents but it can also merge from a correlation with other social changes. It is certain that both the declarations and the laws reflect the ideas of their own time. In addition, they have long-lasting effects. The older documents, produced in a more constrained world, are easy to understand and site, because of their clear message. However, they do not meet the needs of today's diversifying world and widening scope of heritage<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, the recent laws leave the definitions so open that they have little guidance effect. Thus, building preservation decisions should be taken at a lower level of authority, closer to the site and with the expertise of local specialists. Ideally, this is very much in line with the spirit of Nara.

<sup>1</sup> JOKILEHTO, JUUKA, *A History of Architectural Conservation*, Routledge 1999 (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Finnish Heritage Agency. <<https://www.rakennettuhyvinvointi.fi/fi/hyvinvointi-suomen-rakennuskulttuuri-vuodesta-1945>> (5.3.2024)

<sup>3</sup> KAIRAMO, MAIJA, *Kansainväliset julistukset*, Helsinki, ICOMOS 1992. <https://icomos.fi/kansainvaellinen/julistukset-ja-suositukset/venetsian-julistus/> (11.2.2024); KALAKOSKI ET ALII, *From obscurity to heritage: Canonisation of the Nordic Wooden Town*, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 26:8 2020, pp. 790–805.

<sup>4</sup> Law 572/1964 on the Preservation of Buildings of Cultural and Historical Interest (laki kulttuurihistoriallisesti huomattavien rakennusten suojelusta) in Suomen asetuskokoelma 1964.

<sup>5</sup> KÄRKI, PEKKA, *Rakennussuojelu museotoimen tehtäväkentässä*, in SUSANNA PETTERSSON & PAULIINA KINANEN (eds.), *Suomen museohistoria*, Helsinki, Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seura 2010, pp. 47–61.

<sup>6</sup> Building Preservation Act (rakennussuojelulaki) 60/1985, in Finlex.

<sup>7</sup> Report on the Conference on authenticity in relation to the World Heritage Convention, WHC-94/CONF.003/INF.8, UNESCO 1994. <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/734>>.

<sup>8</sup> Land Use and Building Act (MRL), Finland 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Act on the Preservation of Architectural Heritage (laki rakennusperinnön suojelemisesta) 498/2010, in Finlex, § 3.

<sup>10</sup> Venice Charter, ICOMOS 1965.

<sup>11</sup> The Nara Document on Authenticity, ICOMOS 1994; Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, Council of Europe Treaty Series – vol. 199, Faro 27.10.2005.

<sup>12</sup> KALAKOSKI, IIDA 2023, *Too Much to Handle: Architectural conservation in the widening scope of heritage*, Tampere, Tampere university.