

## The strategy of project decision-making – design in conservation policy

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### Summary

*An accomplishment of the 20th century is the growing co-operation in the field of protection of cultural heritage as an element of sustainable development. In this paper I present a suggestion for something I call 'conservation design' – an original and creative contribution of a conservator-restorer, preceded by a model for decision-making in the field of conservation and restoration of all kinds of cultural heritage ranging from ancient to modern art. The axis of this concentric model is the well-being of an object, in the centre of which 'subject, type of object' is situated, surrounded by vectors of elements of the model – historical and cultural context, scientific research to examine objects, diagnostics, techniques, degradation, state of preservation, documentation, databases, all of which have a collective impact on the conservation diagnosis of the object. The next stage is the programme of conservation-restoration treatment (preventive, active conservation, restoration). A further threshold is the necessity of taking into account the function and future use of the object.*

### Why a new model?

Below I present a suggestion for *conservation design*, preceded by a *model for decision-making* in the field of conservation and restoration of cultural heritage, because both theory and practice had to be re-evaluated. In this time of cultural plurality, it has become apparent that it is necessary to develop a certain structure. On every occasion choices and premises of conservation decisions and proposed programmes of conservation treatments should be preceded by analysis of causes of damage, evaluation of the state of preservation, and elaboration of optimal solutions, which are tantamount to compromises among many factors.

*A model of a conservation decision* contains important basic elements of the decision-making strategy in the protection of cultural heritage. As a result, a *plan of conservation treatments* is prepared on the basis of the decision made. The axis of the model is the *well-being* of an object, in the centre of which *subject, type of object* is situated, surrounded by vectors of elements of the model and interdisciplinary premises of conservation decisions, which converge concentrically. The author of this concentric logic model is Ernst van Wetering, who supervises the work of

the Research Rembrandt Project team. The decision-making model is built around the primary aim of safeguarding the object – the well-being of culture. Therefore, inclusion of new significant premises of conservation decisions, such as function and use of the object, is indispensable, in my opinion.

The whole model is placed in the field labelled *area of mutual interactions*, which I understand as the field of discussions and possible conflict. This is an illustration of how data concerning the object, its historical and cultural context, techniques and technologies, state of preservation and documentation of damage and its causes presented above, have a collective impact on the conservation diagnosis of the object.

The next stage of the conservation design is specifying the programme of conservation-restoration treatments, which is unique in its nature and requires superior competence and experience. On the basis of earlier diagnosis, with the well-being of the object in mind, an objective and the premises of conservation should be defined. Afterwards, the work programme (in sequential order) of possible treatments should be defined with the specificity of the object taken into account: preventive/prophylactic conservation, active conservation (methodology, treatments, resources) and restoration (programme). The next threshold is the necessity of taking into account the function and future use of the object as well as conservation assumptions.

Problems with the creation of the programme may result from social and economic factors, the main threat being lack of professionalism and pressures from the owner and experts in various fields, constituting the guiding committees. The danger is brought by an insufficient influence of conservators, who are in the best position to objectively evaluate the perceived well-being of the object. An academic background in conservation is not always a guarantee of correct choices and opinions. A mistake may be the result of lack of possibilities and time for a comprehensive analysis of the object, the possibly one-sided experience of a conservator, or the lack of financial backing for necessary examinations. Incidentally, these examinations may be unhelpful in a situation where conservation authorities select the cheapest available option instead of a professional conservation programme.

The sociological aspect should not be underestimated. For the conservation of the object one should avoid the tendency to dump programme restrictions, select

the cheapest materials or have the attitude of 'better informed' and confident advocates of ready solutions. It is known that even teams of experts are appointed according to their talents, capabilities, and up-to-date expertise. The conservation programme, however, as one of elements of conservation design, should be presented completely objectively without preference concerning specific solutions. The optimal solution should be chosen taking into account all the aspects mentioned above.

In this model, the entire area of the decision-making and the conservation programme is, as I mentioned, called *the area of mutual interactions or possible conflicts of opinions*. An important stage is defining a clearly formulated conservation decision, which is the climax and a basis for the proposed programme of treatments, not just a mere calculation of results. On the other hand, the implementation of the project should, as its natural consequence, result from the decision-making model and an original conservation plan. In larger projects, in the process of multi-phase conservation-restoration treatments, there may arise concerns at meetings at different stages of advancement of work concerning existing discrepancies within the project. The conservator-restorer bears direct responsibility for the well-being of the object in these situations. In these cases an abundance of possible and feasible solutions implies the return to the decision-making model and reconsideration of its elements, as well as possible correction. There are no borders in terms of tenets and theoretical assumptions that could be universal for the entire diversification of cultural heritage. A flexible approach based on the decision-making model and on the basis of the conservation plan is ethically justified.

Explanation of the stages in the model – in short:

*Initiation of project. Prior to the conservation intervention*

- Preliminary diagnostic examination of object.
- Specifying the roles of people engaged in project.
- Preliminary documentation, allocation of a project budget.

*Context of culture and art history*

- Investigation into the original function and context.
- Placing the object in its historical context.
- People must be offered different means of understanding what message the object might convey.

*Technology*

- Historical sources.
- Description, tool marks, manufacturing process.
- Scientific examinations of the object.

*Final diagnosis*

- Investigation into the condition of the object and causes of any physical change.
- Condition report.
- A professional execution by a worker with the required qualifications in conservation-restoration.

Plan formulation, final approval and eventual steps of a conservation-restoration project:

*Preventive conservation*

- Transport.
- Storage conditions.
- Guidelines for future storage conditions.

*Active conservation*

- Results of any previous treatments.
- Investigation into past and present treatments.
- Ethics.
- Methodology.

*Restoration*

- Decision about the way it has been or has not been treated needs consideration.

*Interfaces – all procedures*

- Conservation and restoration options.
- Conflict of opinions.
- Areas of mutual interaction.

*Preparation of conservation decision*

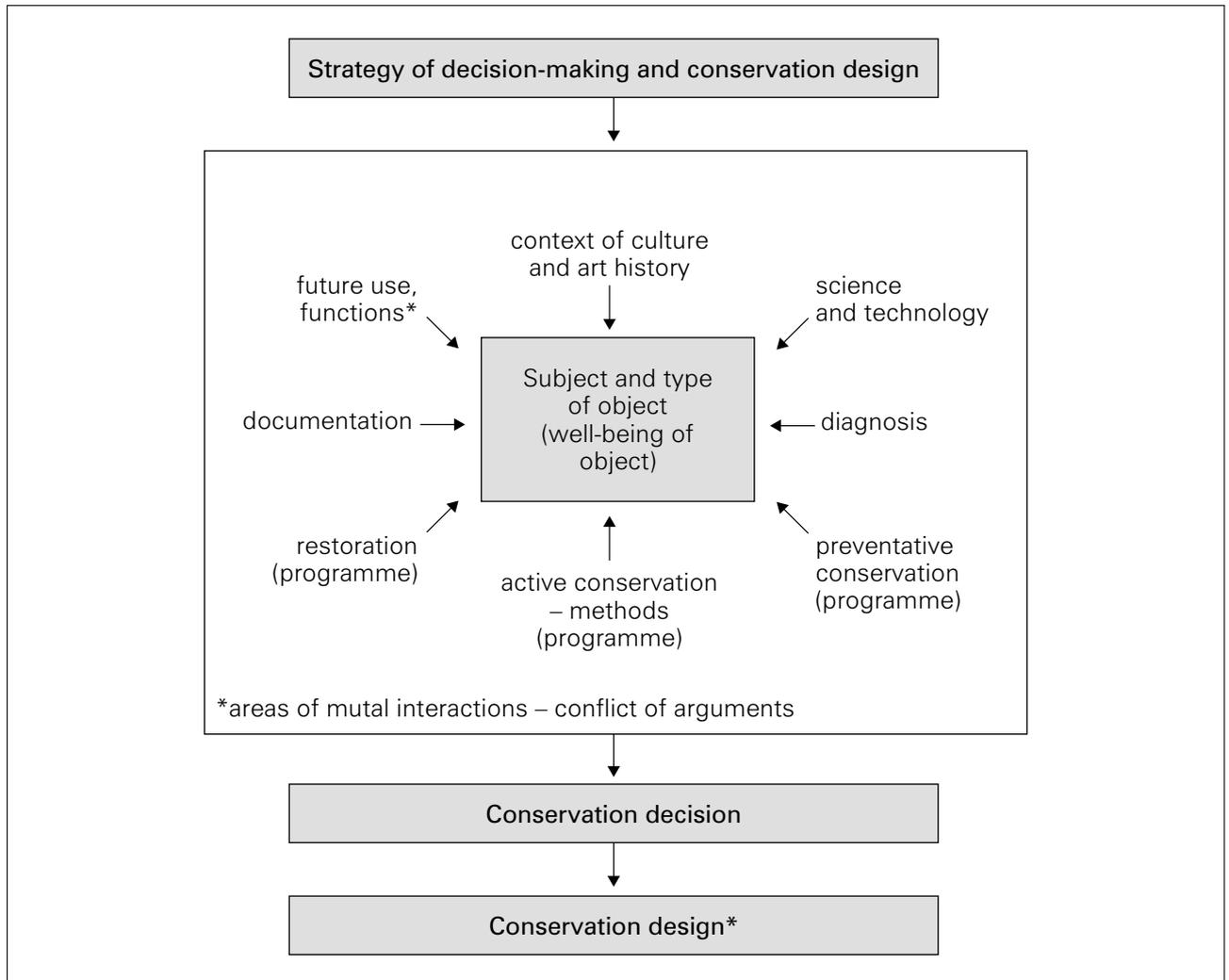
- The development of common discourse requires intellectual activity and critical thinking.

*Conservation design*

- Trajectory of decision making.
- Definitive treatment plan with a founded motivation.
- Possibilities for treatment.
- Reasoned treatment proposal.
- Conservation or more – restoration.
- Debate on value highlights.
- Ethics, the need for authenticity, identity, care for cultural heritage.
- Ability to adapt to changing circumstances – different places, work conditions, cultural context.

*Next aspects – functions, future use*

- Functional plurality.
- Recognition of differences.
- Arrangement and exposition of object.
- Exhibition methods.



*Documentation from all stages of project*

- Documentation – in pictures and words.
- Keeping of a diary.
- Archiving of database.
- Written proposal and visualisation.
- Copyrights.

**Monitoring of realisation of project**

*Recommendations, maintenance and preventive conservation after treatment*

This is an attempt to systematise definitions of the roles of different fields of protection of cultural heritage conservation-restoration. According to the old saying *ars sine scientia nihil est*, this discipline consists of interdisciplinary humanities, technical examination and conclusions based on practice. Definitions in conservation-restoration and the precise meanings of numerous terms used in the practice of the protection of cultural heritage can be ordered according to the

degree of intervention of individual treatments in the sphere of works of art.

The guidelines for professional protection of cultural heritage and current recommendations include:

- Obligation to conduct diagnostic and identifying examinations of an object.
- Interdisciplinary nature of the art of conservation-restoration, which consists of different disciplines of science, technology and art.
- Necessity to perform a scientific analysis of the premises of conservation decisions.
- Respect for the authentic substance, preferences for the programme of preservative conservation and the restriction of creative interventions of conservators.
- Marking conservation interventions; separation of the scope of conservation treatments in an object or in its conservation documentation.
- Postulated reversibility of conservation treatments performed.
- Integrity of an object and its surroundings.

The preservation of 100% authenticity implies a limitation of conservation treatments to:

- Prophylactic conservation.
- Protection.
- Exposure.
- Re-composition (anastylosis).
- Protective conservation.

One should be careful with the fluid border of intervention, e.g. every active conservation treatment can be categorised as purism and aestheticism. Even cleaning a surface of secondary accretions is stigmatised by aesthetic choices, so what can be said about impregnation or strengthening?

Conservation intervention with an increasing range of work causes the natural reduction of the authenticity of objects. An extended range of work includes:

- Restoration.
- Restoration with moving.
- Restoration of reconstruction.

Methods of historic reconstruction or use of modern forms:

- Reintegration – supplementation with restoration.
- Integration – completion.
- Restitution – reinstatement.

An additional and different conservation problem is *the approach to modern art*, which sometimes eludes the theoretical recommendations presented above. The phenomenon of modern art, which is separate from traditional disciplines, and the meaning of art, with *ready-made* elements, conceptualism, etc. justifies our controversial questions about the possibilities of departure from conservation theories and tenets. Premature aging of artistic media and their self-destruction pose not only technical difficulties, but also those of an aesthetic nature.

The issue is raised of a departure from the criterion of the necessity to preserve the authenticity of the substance in degenerated fragments of objects whose expression is entirely different from the message and code created by the artist. It is then that the cyclical history of art theory, beginning with Aristotle, who appreciated the idea as opposed to the object of art, becomes visible. This is a brave, even iconoclastic, statement in the context of current conservation doctrines.

In the conservation/restoration of modern art, as in the heritage of traditional art, compliance with the strategy of decision-making and conservation design discussed above constitutes a guarantee of professional correctness. Analysis of further premises in the decision model will prevent us from premature conclusions and will ensure respect not only for conservation principles but, above all, for the well-being of the object as the highest value.

Based on results of theoretical and practical studies in the field of conservation and restoration of contemporary art within a national project KBN 1HO1E 03014 and as partner in the RAPHAEL Project EU, X DG EC, Action I in the field Conservation, Safeguarding and Development of the European Movable Cultural Heritage through European Co-operation 1996–1997, 1999–2002.

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Art conservator, scientist and teacher. Graduated in conservation/restoration (MA) from Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland. Since 1981, academic teacher at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, received subsequent academic degrees as a result of several projects in the field of methodology of the conservation/restoration of easel paintings, modern art, theory of preservation of cultural heritage. Professor since 1994. Main current research interest is in the science and technology of modern art.