

Provocation Paper
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Saved for the Nation: The Cultural Value of Conservation and Conservation Education

In autumn 2008, Demos, (an independent think tank) will publish a short publication, commissioned by the Textile Conservation Centre Foundation (TCCF), with the support of The Clothworkers' Foundation, called Saved for the Nation.

This paper summarises the current development of the publication's research findings and themes. It is intended that this paper will act as a stimulus to discussion at the conference on June 12th, and that the conference discussions will provide further input into the publication.

The terms of the TCC's commission are as follows:

Brief: To stimulate debate about the effects of closing heritage conservation courses in the UK. (Closures: Durham 2005; TCC 2009, RCA/V&A course 2012).

Problem: The loss of knowledge, skills, experience and research in a profession vital to the preservation and use of cultural heritage.

Objectives: The project will:

- Examine the impact that the loss of conservation education and research will have on cultural heritage institutions and the UK generally
- Raise awareness among policy-makers and the public of the culture industry and the place of conservation education and research
- Demonstrate the high international standing of the UK conservation sector and its role in cultural diplomacy
- Outline ideas on how to educate conservators in the future

Method: Building on issues raised at the ICON symposium held at the Tate Modern on 09.01.08, which raised the need to meet public agenda, the research has included:

- Study of the content and rhetoric of public policy documents

- Interviews conducted in the first half of 2008 with sixty representatives of education, employer institutions in both the private and public sectors, and policy-makers in the culture industry.

Outputs: The final output will be a brief publication, designed to speak to policy-makers, cultural professionals and public alike. It will be written to sit alongside a complementary publication commissioned by TCC that will address the effects on conservation education that the closure of different programmes will have.

A. Summary

1 The relationship of Conservation to the Wider World

- 1.1 Conservation professionals must recognise that they are **integral to the cultural and heritage sector**.
- 1.2 However, conservation is about caring for the material world and all that it symbolises: and therefore **plays a significant role across a range of policy areas beyond the cultural sector**.
- 1.3 The only way that the cultural heritage conservation sector can achieve its long-term aims is by **making its importance evident for public policy makers, and ensuring that the public recognise the value of heritage conservation**.
- 1.4 The future of the heritage conservation sector depends on identifying new ways of working that link conservation values with changing political and social contexts and expectations. **The question facing the conservation sector is how to make the link between ‘social capital’ and the work of cultural heritage conservation clearer to policy makers**. The fact that conservation interventions are often invisible to the general public means that conservation is overlooked and under-valued.
- 1.5 Concepts of culture and heritage provision are changing and have become more inclusive of different cultures and heritages. Emphasis has been put on **reflecting the values of the present as well as information about the past**.
- 1.6 Public attitudes to cultural and heritage provision are also becoming more participatory. In the future, cultural professionals must use their expertise both to provide information and care for objects and **enable the participative creation of meaning** around those objects in ways that reinvigorate society more widely.
- 1.7 In early 2008, Sir Brian McMaster’s review of ‘Excellence’ changed the tone of cultural policy-making. ‘Excellence’ is defined by the cultural sector itself and the people it serves. This plays to conservation’s strong suits: **expertise, professionalism and its contribution to wider political concerns in its own terms**.
- 1.8 **The closure of conservation courses will have direct and significant economic, social and political effects**. These include:

- a) the immediate loss of skills, research and innovation within the sector;
- b) direct economic effects as regards tourism and specialist suppliers of materials and services;
- c) immediate damage to the UK's position as the world leader in conservation education.
- d) A strongly adverse impact on the implementation of social cohesion policies because heritage conservation provides a means of creating and sustaining community identity and fostering community participation.

1.9 The problem for conservation education in the UK is that **current models for providing conservation education and training are not being supported and sustained.**

2 The value of conservation

- 2.1 Making an effective case for the sector involves advocating the values of heritage conservation to the public and policy-makers. This can be done using the terms of '**cultural value**', a framework proposed in 2006 by John Holden (Head of Culture, Demos). This framework provides a means of looking at the different values that the heritage conservation sector delivers, by considering value from the perspectives of the **public, politicians** and relevant **professionals**. **The value framework recognises that conservation has value in itself, and that it has wider value.**
- 2.2 In caring for objects of importance, conservation has value in itself.
- 2.3 The current political climate favours recognition of the many values of cultural heritage and therefore of conservation. **Conservation will benefit by linking conservation work to core areas of government policy:**
- Living Together in multi-cultural Britain
 - Cultural Diplomacy (international exchange, skills transfer and demonstrating efficient and effective care for objects relative to their cultures of origin), which is high on governmental agenda in both the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Foreign Office.
 - The Tourist Economy
 - Building Cultural Literacy (in young people and adults alike)
- 2.4 Cultural heritage conservation is about **caring for the material world**. It contributes to the concept of '**social capital**' - the norms and networks that create the public realm and link the practices of the culture industry to wider social concerns, such as identity and belonging. For example, the *Icons* survey, conducted by the DCMS's 'Culture Online', showed how important objects are to senses of national identity.
- 2.5 **Public engagement is vital**. There are several examples of effective public engagement including work at the Historic Royal Palaces, the Fitzwilliam Museum, the British Library, and the National Museums of Merseyside. **Conservators must accept that communicating with the public is part of their role**, focusing particularly on the way objects manifest core public values. Conservators must **engage the public in the processes and decisions of conservation**. Examples include the *Deliberately Concealed Garments Project* at the TCC and the National Trust's conservation of Hinemihi at Clandon Park.

3 What needs to be done?

- 3.1 The sector's future will depend upon finding new ways of working that marry existing **professional** values and high standards of quality and expertise with changing contexts and expectations. Conservation education will have to build the skills by which conservators can do this.
- 3.2 The **widest possible definition of cultural heritage** should be used.
- 3.3 **An activity-based definition of conservation should be adopted.** This will acknowledge the tangible and intangible attributes of objects and sites, the past, present and future, and the active role of community groups in shaping cultural heritage.
- 3.4 Conservators must plan for the future from the perspective of '**cultural value**' and 'adding value' that is recognised by the public and politicians in the following areas:
 - a) Building skills for the future as part of the 'Skills agenda'
 - b) Encouraging community participation, e.g. volunteers
 - c) Diversifying the professional base by providing a greater range of entry points
 - d) Promoting cultural diversity
 - e) Innovation, in order to develop the wider impact of conservation and the sector's international profile
- 3.5 The above areas are linked by **public communication** and **public engagement**.
- 3.6 Professional cohesion is required to influence policy-makers.

B. The Opportunity

The 2009 Comprehensive Spending Review provides a **window of opportunity** for the conservation sector. It is the point at which cultural leaders will make their case to HM Treasury and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The conservation sector must take this opportunity to **provide the leaders of the sector with the evidence and ammunition to make a convincing public case for conservation and conservation education.**

In the long term, the closure of programmes may be viewed and used as a **catalyst for change**. Now is the time to build for the future by raising public awareness of conservation, demonstrating its centrality to our cultural and heritage sector and all that it represents. This must be supported by **public communication** and **engagement** in the sector. This will provide a platform of public interest from which to **encourage more people to train as conservators** and be the basis from which to **structure career progression in the future.**

The provocations outlined below are presented as a starting point for the discussion that will enable the sector to meet these aims. Conservation has the potential to contribute significantly to a series of policy concerns in the future and to provide people with the means to engage in the care of their heritage. **Its**

existing values and practices can help us meet challenges that face the cultural sector and wider society as a whole. The challenge will be in making those values clear, and more widely recognised.

C. Provocations towards 'Planning for the Future'

The provocations listed below, which have been drawn up in consultation with the TCC and ICON, summarise issues to be addressed in the final report. They are designed to stimulate debate on 12 June, and will feed into the final paper in the Autumn. They do **not** necessarily reflect the final conclusions of the report .

Central Provocations: *The closure of leading conservation programmes suggests that conservation education may be **unsustainable in the current Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) economy**. Ultimately, **this reflects matters of valuation and budgetary prioritisation**. Attracting support from publicly funded institutions in the cultural and heritage sector will require speaking to **public policy agenda**. The case for supporting conservation education depends on making the case for conservation as a whole:*

- *How can conservators **demonstrate their value** to justify support, and particularly the expense of public resources, in the future?*
- *What **skills** will conservation graduates of the future need to sustain that value?*
- *What role can conservation play in an emerging model of culture and heritage based on the **participatory and collaborative production of meaning**?*
- *How must conservation education, training and skills provision **change** to develop this?*

Provocation 1: How can conservators **respond to change in the cultural and heritage sector and to a more participative engagement without compromising the integrity of their work?**

Provocation 2: The sector's future will depend on reflecting the many different attitudes and outlooks of the cultures and communities around it. **How can it best reflect the agendas of interculturalism and cultural dialogue, what skills and communication will be required, and what kind of workforce might best serve this?**

Provocation 3: Conservation cares for objects considered important. It is therefore highly symbolic and strongly linked to senses of identity. **How can conservators demonstrate how their work contributes to social capital and what skills will this require?**

Provocation 4: Cultural and heritage organisations have successfully worked with volunteers to support conservators. Elsewhere, Government is looking to volunteering to encourage civic engagement and ensure that services are people-centred. **What are the values of volunteering in conservation and what role will volunteers play in the future?**

- Provocation 5: If public awareness of conservation is raised, and the public becomes more involved in conservation, how can standards of professionalism be retained without appearing elitist? **How can conservators widen awareness of the need to care for the material world, and at the same time underline the importance of professional standards?**
- Provocation 6: Politicians are struggling with the issues of community cohesion and integration. Cultural and heritage professionals can inform people of different values and cultures, and can help people build the skills to read them. **How does conservation contribute to a better ability to ‘live together’ and in what new ways might it do so?**
- Provocation 7: Cultural Diplomacy has emerged as a significant policy issue. Conservation is one of the most internationalised of cultural professions. It is responsible for caring for objects from cultures all over the world, and the UK is a centre of international repute in conservation research and training. **How can the international impact of conservation and conservation education be maximised and demonstrated, and how else can conservation contribute to cultural diplomacy?**
- Provocation 8: Cultural Diplomacy, cohesion and integration all depend on building cultural literacy. This is the need to factor into education the skills to read and adapt to the many different cultures that we encounter. The government’s pledge of funding to provide each schoolchild with five hours of cultural engagement each week provides an opportunity. **How can the values of conservation – caring for and managing the symbolism of the material world – be reflected in schools, and what implication does this have for conservation training?**
- Provocation 9: Some conservators see their role as being publicly engaged leaders of the sector and all that it represents, and others see their role as being purely object-focused. Where does the future lie? **Can a coherent statement be made at policy level about conservation?**
- Provocation 10: The standing of conservation professionals in the cultural sector and beyond is low. Pay is relatively poor, and few conservators are leaders within the wider sector of museums and heritage. This reflects neither the importance and potential of the discipline, nor the interest that the public has when it engages with conservation. **What skills will conservation graduates need in the future to fulfil their potential and sustain wider interest in the sector?**
- Provocation 11: Collaboration with cultural and heritage institutions is essential to both financial sustainability and training needs because the sector’s future will be in engaging the public. However, those institutions are under tight constraints of both budget and time. **What kinds of collaboration are needed and how can the expense of money and resources to support this be justified in publicly-funded institutions? The merits of current education options must be analysed and either taken forward, or adapted to meet changing contexts of culture and heritage.**
- Provocation 12: Some basic conservation treatments require the supervision and management of highly trained conservators, but can be fulfilled by members of the workforce with lower levels of training. ICON’s ‘Novice to Expert’ Scale and the new Technicians’

Qualification codify this, and work with volunteers in institutions like the National Trust and the National Archives demonstrate its practicality. **What advantages lie in wider participation in the sector and broadening the workforce, and how can junior conservators be developed in ways that differentiate senior conservators and encourage the uptake of graduate and post-graduate training?**

Provocation 13: The UK's conservation programmes have a distinguished track record of developing new research and innovation and leading the sector. Innovation of this sort is central to the DCMS' and Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills' (DIUS) *Creative Britain* initiative. However, as the nature of and expectations of cultural engagement change, so cultural organisations must reflect the many different values of those engaging with them. Meaning will therefore be created in the collaborative engagement of public and professionals. At the same time, if awareness of conservation is increased, the workload of conservators is likely to rise. **Is there a role for mass collaboration in the future of conservation**, engaging more people in documenting and recording objects and such large-scale issues as mapping changes in insect populations: **what skills will be needed of professional conservators to support this?**