

*Society for the Continuity and Renewal
of Ancient Buildings*

DELIVER US FROM THE SLOW DEATH THAT IS PRESERVATION. ♦

A society coming before the public with such a name must needs explain its purpose.

This, then, is the explanation we offer...



Preamble

Once a font of community vitality, the life is being squeezed from our ancient buildings.

Conservation without cultural continuity threatens those buildings with a death called preservation.

Living traditions demand change; conservation ignores this at its peril.

The SCARAB Manifesto 

Ancient buildings exude LIFE

SCARAB sees ancient buildings as alive. Just as it is never appropriate to 'preserve' a still living person, so we should not seek to preserve a living building, but rather to sustain it in good health. Some historic structures should indeed be preserved as is; such works of art are monuments that are no longer living, and are the exception that proves the rule.

Unlike monuments, living buildings have an ongoing usefulness and purpose; the unthinking restriction of that utility is the biggest threat such buildings face.

Most living buildings have been authored by their communities across many generations; most have a purpose that points beyond themselves. With few exceptions, they are terminally incomplete, always as much about process and journey as about product and destination.

Living buildings cannot be reduced solely to art history or archaeology; they are living expressions of heritage that are nurtured by the continuity of past, present and future. A conservation based on cultural discontinuity will suppress their life, and that of the communities that use them.

Buildings of any kind have agency; they are actors in the unfolding drama of human culture. Conservation can help an ancient building to exude life or, through preservation, to exclude life. To exude or exclude: that is the question.

Ancient buildings expect CHANGE

History is the study of change through time, and is narrative in structure. A genuinely historic building is also narrative in structure, and thus as much future facing as past facing.

A building valued only for its past ceases to be historic; removed from the flow of history, its life drains away and it becomes a monument. To remain historic, ancient buildings can, should, and indeed must, be allowed to change.

Of course not all change is good. For conservation to be credible it must address a fatal omission by developing a means of judging good change from bad. Change itself should not be feared as a threat, but welcomed as evidence of life.

Ancient buildings provide a model; many have changed every generation. Change is in their nature, and has given them their character. It is their lifeblood, a lifeline that binds them to their community. Who would wish to obstruct it?

SCARAB sees ancient buildings as ICONs – Intergenerational, Communal and Ongoing Narratives. Each generation writes a chapter in the communal story; in writing ours, we have a duty to enrich the plot and move it forward, while allowing space for future generations to write their chapters.

A narrative approach opposes the privileging of one particular historic period over any other. Old is not necessarily more important than new. What is essential is to safeguard character, continuity, and the coherence of the whole. We should expect change to be subtractive as well as additive; otherwise, over time, any building will choke and die.

The alternative, to stop the narrative through the sclerosis of preservation, dishonours the past and dispossesses the future; this ahistoricism is the death of conservation, and of culture.

Ancient buildings embody TRADITION

SCARAB views ancient buildings as objects of tradition. A tradition in good health is constantly changing, but its fluidity is bounded. Tradition has little place for individual genius, but great respect for creativity in community.

Continuity of tradition should not be confused with keeping things the same; that is the task of preservation, not conservation. A continuity of sameness fixates on answers; continuity of tradition is concerned with questions, specifically with maintaining and developing the questions that sustain a culture. It is the role of tradition to keep those cultural questions alive. This can only be achieved by a radical tradition of dynamism, and not by modernity's pseudo-tradition of stasis in the service of political conservatism.

A conservation of answers literally 'has no future'. Only a conservation of the question is able to reconcile the claims of past, present and future. This 'balanced heritage' allows for creativity, making space for the uninvited guest, and for the young alongside the old.

It is not possible to deal well with the objects of tradition without a comparable pre-modern understanding of tradition. The new wine of modernity threatens to destroy the old wineskin of a living building because it does not understand the subversive vitality of dynamic tradition.

Ancient buildings form COMMUNITY

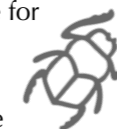
Of critical importance to the health of ancient buildings is their relationship with the local communities which created them, and which they continue to co-create. The relationship is reciprocal, the feeling mutual.

Culture starts with the most local forms of community, and works from the bottom up. Culture 'dwells', is always from somewhere. Living buildings make this dwelling manifest; they are owned by their community, and are convivial.

By contrast, high culture is by instinct 'contravivial.' It defines a canon, invests in a collection, and then defends against change through preservation. Dealing in universals, it controls from above, marginalising the local and communal.

The resulting democratic deficit is not resolved by introducing intangible as distinct from tangible forms of heritage, which offer no account for the 'co-dwelling' of people and buildings. Adding the communal to a significance of discrete values cannot resurrect the life of a heritage once it has been embalmed; preservation by any other name would smell as sick.

SCARAB stands for the continuity and renewal of living buildings. It promotes a balanced heritage of past, present and future that integrates the communal with the aesthetic and historical. It favours localism over nationalism, continuity over separation, movement over stasis and celebration over the 'contravivial'.



SCARAB

Background

This SCARAB manifesto grew from doctoral research by Nigel Walter at the University of York (“‘To live is to change’: tradition, narrative and community in the conservation of church buildings’). Written in the spirit of William Morris's 1877 SPAB *Manifesto* it uses robust polemic to argue for a heritage of cultural continuity based in a radical understanding of tradition.

Central to Morris's *Manifesto*, and an article of faith for modernity, is a belief in a radical discontinuity between the modern world and the cultures of tradition. Stemming from the Enlightenment antipathy to tradition and the 'invention of the historic monument' (Choay 2001), it is only modernity that attempts to reduce historic buildings to art or art history. Any conservation professional understands that the unthinking use of modern materials can actively destroy historic fabric, as when cementitious pointing erodes adjacent masonry; fewer acknowledge that the application of theory born of modernity to historic fabric born of tradition can be similarly toxic, destroying the very heritage it is meant to safeguard.

It has been said that one can judge the civilisation of a society by the way it treats its old people. Modern societies tend to hide the elderly away in 'care warehouses', where physical needs may be catered for but, too often, all sense of life is extinguished long before physical death. By contrast, traditional societies tend to prize the contribution of the elderly in the centre of the family, in the continuity of intergenerational community. Too often, modern conservation makes the analogous error, believing it is sufficient to cater for a building's physical preservation, while detaching it from the cultural context that gives it meaning. In this way, the living building becomes the dead monument. And that is unsustainable in every sense.

Following Morris's example, the formation of SCARAB is proposed to safeguard not only the past and present, but also the future of historic buildings. For the ancient Egyptians, the scarab (*Scarabaeus sacer*, or dung beetle) symbolised the solar deity Khepri; scarabs form balls of dung, which they roll along, much as the gods were believed to move the sun through the heavens. Furthermore, scarabs lay their eggs within these balls of dung, from which the young beetles emerge fully formed, suggestive of resurrection and new life. Drawing on this rich symbolism, amulets in the form of scarabs were widespread; they were used as seals for commercial exchange, and many survive to this day.

All references to the SPAB manifesto are intended in homage, not parody. SCARAB has no intention of challenging the national amenity societies, least of all SPAB, which does such valuable work. Rather, the purpose of this manifesto is to challenge thinking across the conservation sector; 140 years on from the publication of Morris's original it is offered as a conservation manifesto for the twenty-first century.

