

PRINCIPLES FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE DOCUMENTATION

Draft submitted for approval to GA2026

PREAMBLE

This document recognises the importance of Cultural Heritage as a unique expression of human endeavour, intertwined with nature over time. It acknowledges the ongoing risks to Cultural Heritage posed by natural and anthropogenic processes, and the importance of taking positive, ongoing action to identify, remediate, conserve, and interpret Cultural Heritage places, considering both tangible and intangible values. As first noted in the “Charter of Venice” (1964), recording is an essential activity in the identification, conservation and interpretation of Cultural Heritage.

This document sets out key principles for recording Cultural Heritage. It builds upon and revises the previous ICOMOS document “Principles for the recording of monuments, groups of buildings and sites” (1996), bearing in mind the immense changes that have occurred over the intervening quarter-century. These include an explosion in the use of digital technologies for recording, an increase in the amount of material being recorded and stored, concerns over individual privacy in the light of new recording technologies, intentional and unintentional manipulation of digital information, and the involvement of new disciplines and community stakeholders as recorders.

1. Purpose

The purpose of this document is to identify the essential principles for recording Cultural Heritage. It provides the key reasons for recording, describes the obligations of those involved in recording, and sets out strategies for acquiring existing records and creating new ones. It describes the contents of the heritage record and sets out the principles for ongoing management of heritage records.

The document is intended to cover both digital and traditional technologies for recording and is directed at the increasingly wide range of participants and disciplines involved in the recording process.

2. Definitions

The following definitions are relevant to this document:

- A Cultural Heritage place is a geographically defined area that has aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations. It may include buildings, landscapes, structures, elements, objects, spaces/places and views, and may have both tangible and intangible dimensions, movable and immovable objects, and natural and cultural elements. Its cultural significance is embodied in the place itself, its physical materials (elements, fixtures, contents, and objects), setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related locations, and related objects¹.
- A heritage record is the technical dossier that describes the physical configuration, evolution and condition of the Cultural Heritage place. It is the outcome of recording, research and investigation, conservation, use, management, remediation, maintenance and monitoring over time. It contributes to an understanding of the Cultural Heritage

¹ *The Burra Charter: the Australia ICOMOS charter for Places of Cultural Significance, 2013*

place necessary for its preservation and interpretation, and to creating a record for posterity².

- Recording is the ongoing process of acquiring, storing, and updating information about a Cultural Heritage place over time, including both tangible and intangible aspects, to create the heritage record. It can include metrics, graphics, photographs, written text, narratives, and digital and non-digital data.

3. Reasons for Recording

The recording of the existing conditions of the Cultural Heritage is an essential step in understanding its past and present, and informing conservation activities, such as rehabilitation, maintenance, monitoring, restoration and reconstruction. This is essential for preserving the Cultural Heritage site, creating a record for posterity, providing a means of education, and communicating the site's value to society. The following reasons for recording Cultural Heritage will help to determine how the recording should be carried out:

- a. Assessing values and significance: The primary goal of recording is to know and understand the values and importance of the Cultural Heritage place, historical, scientific, aesthetic, social, functional, natural, and economic. Knowledge and understanding are prerequisites for effective heritage management and for planning sensitive, appropriate conservation interventions. Recording should be able to assess the impacts of events on the tangible and intangible attributes of heritage value, incorporating the input of affected local, national and international communities.
- b. Scientific support to interventions: Recording is the foundation upon which interventions to a Cultural Heritage place can be planned, for conservation, restoration, rehabilitation, preservation, enhancement, risk preparedness and mitigation. It also provides the necessary information about a Cultural Heritage site to support ongoing monitoring and day-to-day management.
- c. Creating a record in advance of destruction: Recording creates a permanent record of the place when total or partial demolition, destruction, abandonment or relocation is imminent, or where the Cultural Heritage is under threat from natural or anthropogenic causes. It also plays a crucial role in supporting law enforcement and legal proceedings related to damage assessment. In situations of destruction, displacement, or post-disaster recovery, recording should be approached as a process that affects not only the material site but also the communities that lived through the loss. Recording may help individuals and groups process trauma, reestablish identity ties, and create meaning after rupture. Therefore, it should be undertaken with sensitivity to emotional impact and local rhythms of recovery, avoiding extractive or externally imposed approaches.
- d. Post-disaster recording: Following a disaster, it is essential to undertake recording for the purpose of documenting damages, including the extent and severity of the damage or disturbance, the type of damage, and any primary and secondary hazards.
- e. Intergenerational dialogue continuity: Recording creates a record for posterity, bridging the gap between the past, present, and future, and maintaining the intangible

² Letellier, Robin, Schmid, Werner and LeBlanc, François. 2007. Recording, Documentation, and Information management for the Conservation of heritage Places: guiding Principles. Los Angeles, CA: Getty Conservation Institute. https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/recordim.html

values associated with the Cultural Heritage place. It supports the acquisition and transfer of knowledge, skills, and wisdom between generations to ensure training, continuity of interest and involvement.

- f. **Educational value:** The recording of Cultural Heritage supports the general dissemination of knowledge about the Cultural Heritage place and its history, including the creation of digital storytelling products through such means as virtual tours, virtual reality and augmented reality. By documenting the tangible place, it also documents the intangible processes and materials involved in creating the Cultural Heritage place and supports the transfer of trade knowledge. Heritage recording is also a means by which emerging professionals can be trained in the skills and techniques necessary for future recording activities.

4. Recording obligations

The responsibility for recording rests with the various persons and institutions involved at all stages of the process.

- a. **Management:** Recording is an essential component of heritage conservation and should be incorporated in the budget and workflow for the ongoing management of any Cultural Heritage place, as well as for any planned specific interventions. The managers of the Cultural Heritage place should ensure that heritage recordings are carried out at appropriate times and by qualified individuals. The managers of the Cultural Heritage place should ensure that, once they have been made, any recording of the place is kept as a permanent, accessible record and is available to support decision-making about the site and related places. Ideally, digital records should be stored in multiple national and/or international repositories to ensure data survival. File formats should be those in everyday use to protect against software and hardware obsolescence.
- b. **Experts:** Those who work on heritage recording as experts should have the appropriate type and level of training, skill, knowledge, and experience for the task they are undertaking at the Cultural Heritage place. Experts should continually seek to enhance their skills and knowledge of heritage recording techniques through education and participation in professional networks. They should support and encourage the training of emerging professionals and future experts.
- c. **Community/Society:** Members of the local community and broader society may hold different types of knowledge about a Cultural Heritage place. They should be regarded as experts whose training, skills, knowledge, and experience are appropriate to specific recording tasks.
- d. **Multidisciplinary teams:** As multiple skills and knowledge are required to record a Cultural Heritage place, an interdisciplinary team is needed. Team members should work collaboratively, with respect for each team member's strengths and expertise and attention to clear communication. Recording team members might include: surveyors, conservators, architects, landscape architects, engineers, historians, archaeologists, digital specialists, drone operators, project managers, and any other specialists appropriate to participate in such a multidisciplinary group, including local community members with knowledge of the Cultural Heritage place.
- e. **Capacity building:** Local capacity building is an essential part of heritage recording. Whenever possible, local community members and stakeholders should receive on-site

training in recording techniques, to enable them to take responsibility for future recording tasks and to acknowledge their responsibility for the Cultural Heritage place.

- f. Respect for the Cultural Heritage place and the community: Recording team members should work with respect, dignity, and sensitivity to the heritage values of the heritage place, and the needs, constraints, privacy rights and cultural expectations of the heritage place, the surrounding locality, and the associated community. Whether or not they are an active part of the recording team, the local community should be consulted and provided with informed consent for the recording activities. It is advisable to follow the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which establishes minimum international standards for the survival, dignity, and well-being of Indigenous peoples. Its core principles include self-determination, participation in decision-making, respect for culture, and equality/non-discrimination. The declaration emphasises free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) and the protection of land/resource rights.

5. Recording strategies

Recording strategies should include both the acquisition of existing records and planning for the creation of new documents.

- a. Acquisition of existing records: whenever feasible, existing records should be located, reviewed and digitised before starting to create new records:
 - i. Locating: Existing records might include existing surveys, drawings, photographs, published and unpublished accounts, and documents relating to the origin and history of the Cultural Heritage place. Potential repositories for existing records include public archives and libraries (both national and local), as well as private archival collections and inventories held by institutions, associations, and museums, including online repositories. Individuals and organisations who have owned, occupied, recorded, constructed, conserved, researched, or otherwise acquired knowledge of a Cultural Heritage place should be consulted to locate existing records.
 - ii. Reviewing: Existing records should be reviewed holistically, valuing both recent and older records, direct and indirect techniques, and a range of technologies and methodologies. Records should be assessed for their accuracy, completeness, and reliability in relation to the proposed risk or intervention to plan the scope and extent of any new recording activities required.
 - iii. Digitising: All existing records that are recovered should be converted to digital format and documented using a basic metadata structure that includes information about the original record (location, author(s), date of creation) as well as the digitising process (instrument, author(s) and date).
- b. Planning new recording activities: New recording activities should take into consideration the following principles:
 - i. Establish the scope and goals of recording, taking into account the planned use of the record in the immediate future; its potential uses in the more distant future; and the values and character-defining elements of the Cultural Heritage place.
 - ii. Determine the product specifications, depending on whether the record will be used as metric or semantic information; whether the end product will remain in digital form or also be printed in non-digital form; what level of accuracy and

- completeness is required; and what provisions are being made for custody, storage of and access to the record in future.
- iii. Specify the required metadata that will be used. Basic metadata for the recording activity may include the organisation and person carrying out the recording, the date of recording, and the recording method.
 - iv. Ensure that international conventions are respected and non-destructive techniques are employed whenever possible.
 - v. Consider the use of innovative techniques where these improve the recording outcomes, are appropriate to the project scope and specifications, and are consistent with the context of the Cultural Heritage place.
 - vi. Consider how the local community can be engaged in and contribute to the recording process, both to improve recording outcomes and build capacity.

6. Record contents

Every recording activity will produce a set of records whose scope and content will be determined by the goals of the intervention that justified it.

The following records are appropriate for every recording activity:

- a. Basic identification of the object: including its name, location (country, region, coordinates), the date or time period of its creation, and its typology.
- b. Basic metadata for the recording activity: including the organisation and person carrying out the recording, the date of recording, and the recording method; selection criteria; purpose; cultural context; interpretive narratives (e.g., symbolic meanings; uses; community memories; etc.); limitations or obligations in secondary use. These expand usability, traceability, and ethical approaches.
- c. A detailed description of the object: its physical properties and historic significance, and any emotional, cultural, or community-based meanings attributed to it, conveyed through text, images, video and/or audio. Special attention should be paid to elements of artistic, historical, and other significance (e.g., statues, bas-reliefs, frescoes, etc.), as they may be subject to greater natural and anthropogenic risks (e.g., theft, vandalism).
- d. An existing condition assessment: including references to existing records, a visual assessment, and a photographic survey.

Depending on the nature of the Cultural Heritage, the goals of the intervention that require it, and the extent of any existing records, new recording activities should be undertaken to update or augment them. These will produce one or more of the following records:

- a. Geometry: including both raw data (topographic and geodetic measurements, images and laser scan data) and processed data (point coordinates, orthophotos, 2D drawings and 3D models). The accuracy, completeness and reliability of these records are essential.
- b. State of conservation: including textual information accompanied by images as well as information on past conservation interventions, if any.
- c. Archaeological data: including location, heritage place type, chronology and cultural period, function, measurement, site morphology, and site environment.

- d. Risk assessment: including an outline of potential disturbances and threats, their types, likelihood and potential impacts. This might include textual information on structural, seismic, and climate change risks; Cultural Heritage vulnerabilities; threats posed by urban development; and potential risks from human-made disasters such as armed conflict, looting, and terrorism.
- e. Material conditions: including textual information, accompanying images and drawings, and the location of any laboratory samples.
- f. Intangible and affective values: including oral histories, ritual or customary uses, emotional attachments, local and alternative terminologies, meanings assigned by local or descendant communities, or written documents.
- g. Social and relational use: documenting how the site is engaged with in everyday life, including routines, commemorations, and informal social practices.
- h. Ancillary information: any relevant legal, historical or administrative information.

All records, both new and existing, should be produced in or converted to digital form in accordance with commonly accepted standards.

Every intervention for conservation, remediation, restoration, or valorisation of Cultural Heritage must be recorded, and the resulting records must be included in the ongoing record for the Cultural Heritage place. Detailed guidelines on specific recording activities (geometry, risk assessment, material condition, intangible values) should be published and deposited in the PUBLICOMOS in compliance with the copyright of the information.

7. Management of records

The following principles apply to the ongoing management of records, to ensure their longevity, accuracy, reliability, usability and accessibility.

- a. Archiving: Records should be preserved by the manager of the Cultural Heritage place and shared and published where possible in a cloud repository under the control of the owner(s) of the Cultural Heritage place and also made accessible through other national and international cultural and educational entities, as privacy, security, and copyright issues permit, to ensure data survival. File formats should be those in everyday use to protect against software and hardware obsolescence. FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) and CARE (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, Ethics) principles should be consulted to balance technical openness with ethical, people-centred, and indigenous-focused data governance.
- b. Certifying: Each record should be certified by the author of the record itself in terms of quality, including its accuracy, completeness, extension, date of production, and origin.
- c. Linking: Updated records should be linked to earlier records using indexed references. Each record should include a direct link to the primary data used to produce it (images, technical measurements of physical properties, and references).
- d. Accessibility: While respecting intellectual property and privacy rights, all records should be made generally accessible to the public. Records should be retained in digital format using open-source software, so that they are available to the public without restrictions

that would impede their re-use and future readability.

- e. Communication: Records that are being disseminated for management, information or education purposes should be shared in a way that accurately and holistically portrays the Cultural Heritage and its tangible and intangible values, and reflects the multiple narratives associated with it. This can include a combination of both traditional and digital approaches, encompassing technologies such as building information modelling, virtual reality, augmented reality, and other digitally assisted storytelling techniques. All disseminated products must include links or references to the source records on which they rely.

8. Acknowledgements

The initial proposal and the subsequent versions developed at the end of the four consultation phases among the ICOMOS community were managed thanks to the collaboration of the following CIPA Expert Members:

- Michelle Duong
- Andreas Georgopoulos
- Pieter Jan De Vos
- Fulvio Rinaudo
- Mario Santana Quintero
- Laurie Smith
- Stratos Stylianidis
- Alex Ya-Ning Yen

EN-FR-ES trilingual alignment check

This annex aims to verify and document the conceptual and terminological alignment, article by article, between the English (EN), French (FR), and Spanish (ES) versions of the document "Principles for Cultural Heritage Documentation." It serves as a tool for transparency and linguistic consistency in the circulation and adoption of the text.

Vérification de l'alignement trilingue EN-FR-ES

La présente annexe vise à vérifier et documenter l'alignement conceptuel et terminologique article par article entre les versions anglaise (EN), française (FR) et espagnole (ES) du document « Principes for Cultural Heritage Documentation ». Elle constitue un outil de transparence et de cohérence linguistique pour la circulation et l'adoption du texte.

Comprobación de alineación trilingüe EN-FR-ES

Este anexo tiene como objetivo verificar y documentar la coherencia conceptual y terminológica, artículo por artículo, entre las versiones en inglés (EN), francés (FR) y español (ES) del documento "Principios para la Documentación del Patrimonio Cultural". Sirve como herramienta para la transparencia y la coherencia lingüística en la difusión y adopción del texto.

Anglais (EN)	Français (FR)	Espagnol (ES)
Principles for Cultural Heritage Documentation	Principes pour la documentation du patrimoine culturel	Principios para la documentación del patrimonio cultural
Recording	Documentation	Documentación
Heritage record	Dossier patrimonial	Registro patrimonial
Cultural Heritage place	Lieu de patrimoine culturel	Lugar de Patrimonio Cultural
Intangible values	Valeurs immatérielles	Valores inmateriales
Outstanding Universal Value	Valeur universelle exceptionnelle	Valor Universal Excepcional
Capacity building	Renforcement des capacités	Fortalecimiento de capacidades
Digitising	Numérisation	Digitalización
State of conservation	État de conservation	Estado de conservación
Accessibility	Accessibilité	Accesibilidad
Archiving	Archivage	Archivado
Linking	Mise en relation	Vinculación