

ICOMOS INTERNATIONAL CHARTER FOR THE CONSERVATION OF EARTHEN ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

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PREAMBLE

Earthen architectural heritage is one of humankind's most universal and diverse cultural expressions, created from the earliest times as evidenced in many archaeological sites. Earthen architecture is revealed in an extensive array of built forms, construction systems and cultural landscapes, many of which continue in use.

Earthen architectural heritage has been shaped by a broad range of building cultures. This heritage embodies cultural practices, rituals, and ways of life of the communities that created, maintained, preserved, and inhabited it, providing insights into these societies, beliefs, traditions, and cultural exchanges.

Faced with natural and human threats, including climate change, earthen architectural heritage is increasingly vulnerable. Its conservation is important for safeguarding cultural identities, fostering collective cohesion, and promoting sustainable architecture. A significant aspect of this is the transmission of traditions associated with building cultures and craftsmanship to future generations. This encourages the continuity of cultural practices, resulting in the safeguarding of the tangible and intangible values associated with this heritage.

The histories and lives of artisans, local communities, and Indigenous Peoples are intrinsic to the earthen architectural heritage, and their daily practices sustain these forms of construction, sites and ways of life.

The need for a Charter to protect and conserve earthen architectural heritage was established by the ISCEAH Board in its Triennial Plan 2018-2020 and a Charter Task Force was created in 2022.

1. Who is this Charter for?

This Charter is for a broad audience including communities, practitioners, researchers, governmental and non-governmental bodies, educational institutions, and local, national, regional, and international organizations. It encourages them to work together for the protection, preservation, and enhancement of earthen architectural heritage. The Charter builds on previous conservation doctrinal texts, and the outcomes of *Terra World Congresses* and *Conferences*, held since 1972.

2. Aims of the Charter

This charter seeks to:

- Establish a definition of earthen architectural heritage.
- Acknowledge the unique values and significance of earthen building cultures.
- Emphasize a community-based approach, acknowledging the relationships with cultural and social values, and the environment.
- Establish guiding principles for the conservation of earthen architectural heritage.

3. Definition

Earthen architectural heritage consists of structures and sites constructed with earth as a primary building material and with the associated knowledge and practices it embodies. The earth used is composed of clay, silt, sand, and gravel, and often includes animal, vegetal and mineral components to improve the material's performance. Earthen construction systems can be monolithic, or masonry, or combined with other building materials and systems. This heritage is expressed through various local terminologies. It reflects the diverse earthen building cultures developed by communities over thousands of years and different historical periods.

Earthen architectural heritage is a collective cultural expression. Local knowledge, skills, crafts, and know-how are part of continuously changing practices, a creative legacy transmitted through generations, embodying the spirit of place. Understanding and conserving these qualities plays a crucial role in the safeguarding of cultural identities and local sustainable development, while contributing to preventive maintenance practices. This heritage is often poorly known, and therefore undervalued, and can lead to limited or inadequate conservation efforts or irreversible loss.

4. Values and Significance

The significance of earthen architectural heritage is determined by the range and magnitude of its values, its integrity and its authenticity. Within the local and global challenges, this charter highlights the following values:

- a) **Building Culture:**
The diversity of traditional techniques and knowledge of building, maintenance, and repair of structures, often passed down from generation to generation, is associated with local materials, know-how and cultural traditions, fostering social cohesion.
- b) **Spirit of Place:**
Earthen architectural heritage is intimately connected to associated contexts, cultural landscapes and their authenticity. It is often imbued with the accumulation of meanings, practices, and collective memories which contribute to cultural identity and sense of place.
- c) **Cultural Testimony:**
Earthen architectural heritage serves as a historical record, presenting the material and cultural narratives of the societies which created it. It reflects the environmental, social, and political contexts of its time, offering a rich repository of information about historical development, local craftsmanship, and evolving building practices.
- d) **Sustainability:**
Earthen architectural heritage embodies qualities related to environmental and social sustainability, as earth is readily available, and potentially reusable, while also having properties that support human health and comfort. The use of earth in construction often strengthens local material supply chains and reduces dependence on external products contributing to local economic resilience.

5. Principles of the Charter

The following are intended as guiding principles, based on interdisciplinary best practice approaches, acknowledging the need for future specific conservation guidelines:

- Principle 1 : Safeguard the tangible and intangible significance of earthen architectural heritage, by ensuring protection measures at local, national, regional, and international levels, through specific policies and planning frameworks.
- Principle 2 : Strengthen the ongoing use of earthen architectural heritage to ensure its cultural continuity. This requires appropriate materials, methods and techniques to enhance the safety and liveability of this heritage and its environment while preserving its significant values.
- Principle 3 : Evaluate the significance of the structures and sites through extensive research to identify all values and their attributes. Values can evolve over time with changes in form, use, and condition, resulting in new understandings of significance provided the values are critically assessed and do not compromise integrity.
- Principle 4 : Integrate community-based conservation approaches, which are essential for the long-term care and protection of earthen architectural heritage. Include local knowledge, and as appropriate, specialized expertise in the development of conservation strategies.
- Principle 5 : Document earthen architectural heritage comprehensively through collaborative methodologies at various scales, in their present and historical significance, and ensure respectful preservation and availability of the documentation.
- Principle 6 : Undertake preventive conservation of earthen architectural heritage based on comprehensive risk assessment and planning, preventive measures, continuous maintenance by local communities, and a collaborative long-term conservation strategy.
- Principle 7 : Implement conservation practices based on the principle of maximum understanding and minimal intervention, while ensuring the safety of people and the protection of cultural values. Emphasize the knowledge and practices of local building cultures, incorporating other compatible materials and methods when necessary.
- Principle 8 : Address capacity-building through the exchange of knowledge, training and practices, focusing on the specificities of local building cultures, in the face of contemporary challenges.
- Principle 9 : Prioritize the ethical dissemination of knowledge of earthen architectural heritage and its conservation practices, through awareness, interpretation, documentation, publications, and other appropriate and accessible resources. This is critical to its protection and preservation, and for sustainable building practices.

Aknoledgements

This Charter was developed from 2022 to 2026, by an ISCEAH Task force nominated by the ISCEAH Board, composed of:

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