

# Conservation in **CRISIS**

Communicating the value of what we do



**A conversation between Anna Somers Cocks and Samuel Jones**

## DIALOGUES FOR THE NEW CENTURY

Discussions on the conservation of cultural heritage in a changing world



The International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works

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For this event the IIC wanted to step back a bit and look at the field of heritage conservation in a far more generalised way than is usual and explore why the profession appears to be especially susceptible to cutbacks and budget reductions during times of economic downturn, such as the one that is being experienced worldwide at the moment. Some would say that the profession of conservation lacks sufficient influence due to its small size relative to other fields of endeavour. Others would say that we are insular and have not made sufficient effort to reach out to other stakeholders in heritage in order to inform them of the value of what we do. Still others would say that we have been unwilling to involve others in our decision making and hence they lack both the understanding and investment that leads to support. Or is it a combination of these and other reasons? Is heritage conservation a luxury or a

necessity? How damaging will this recent economic downturn be to conservation and what lessons will we learn and apply to the next cycle of economic woes? To explore these and many other questions IIC asked **Anna Somers Cocks**, founder and Editorial Director of *the Art Newspaper*, and **Samuel Jones** of the Demos think-tank and co-author of the very influential publication *It's a Material World: Caring for the Public Realm*, to engage in a discussion about whether or not conservation is in crisis and how we can move forward in communicating the broader value of what conservation professionals do. We hope you will join the dialogue and communicate the value of heritage conservation across the world.

**Jerry Podany, President of IIC**

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## CONSERVATION IN **CRISIS** communicating the value of what we do

**A conversation between Anna Somers Cocks and Samuel Jones**

**Anna Somers Cocks (ASC):** I am going to start with explaining why *The Art Newspaper* includes conservation in its pages, because I was asked to do so. Normally, we have about two pages on conservation in every issue and we have had them right from the beginning. The reason is that the *Art Newspaper* is based on an idea originally conceived by Umberto Allemandi, a Turinese publisher with *Il Giornale dell'Arte* before there was *The Art Newspaper*, and this covered conservation because it is a very important and long standing business in Italy. There are some very distinguished institutes such as the Opificio delle Pietre Dure e Laboratori di Restauro in Florence, and conservation is part of the current thrust of the Italian art world. It is also something that has been adopted by successive Italian governments as part of their foreign policy. They send conservators to countries with which they feel an historical link. For example, they will send conservators to Armenia to help in the conservation of

buildings and frescos because the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the printing in Venice of the first ever book in Armenian script is about to take place. But they also send conservators to cement political relationships and open up trade. So it's a rather different attitude toward conservation on the part of government; they see the profession as a potential export.

When I started *The Art Newspaper* in 1990 I automatically included pages on conservation because I felt it was an essential part of the world of art and archaeology, museums and archives, history and the understanding of the world. But it was not fully explored or explained. Things have certainly changed since then. I will tell you quickly what we have had recently in *The Art Newspaper* because it is germane to our discussion. The question of communication is going to come up this evening and these stories struck our journalist Emily Sharpe as interesting in that regard because they provide an interest beyond the immediate subject of conservation and cross over between disciplines.

One report is about the use of conservation skills to show that a supposedly Byzantine codex in the University of Chicago's manuscript collection is, in fact, a 19<sup>th</sup> century forgery. Joseph Barabe from the well known McCrone Research Institute in Illinois and a manuscript conservator, Abigail Quandt from the Walters Art Museum, studied the paints that were used and were able to demonstrate, by a range of analytical tools, that the pigments used were definitely 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Photo: Gospel of Mark. *Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, Ms. 972.*

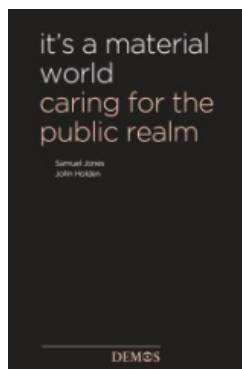
And then there is an interesting story about a civil war submarine off the coast of South Carolina in the US, where they have been studying the iron and developing sub-critical (super pressurized) alkaline solutions to devise a method for conserving iron objects quickly and in large numbers. An example of good communication is given by the head conservator on this project who said, "Iron does not like to be iron; it would like to be something else", a pithy way of describing its tendency to revert back to its naturally occurring condition, which is basically as an oxide.

Then there is the story about a reprieve for rock art in Utah and efforts to protect them from the dust being generated by companies drilling for oil in the area.



Photo: John Catron

There is also a very nice story that connects up with musicology, about an early 18<sup>th</sup> century cembalo made in Naples which the process of conservation revealed that its upper keyboard was strung with gut while its lower keyboard was strung with metal strings. This was because musical dramas at that time required the sound quality of gut to accompany the crude rustics in the drama while the aristocrats were accompanied by the metal strings so this was, as it were, a class-ridden cembalo and one of only two in existence. It was the conservator's work that revealed this fascinating fact.



([www.demos.co.uk/publications/materialworld](http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/materialworld))

Sam, you have just come out with this book and you ask some absolutely fundamental questions about conservation, starting with: Does heritage matter? And then, if heritage matters, does the conservation and preservation of that heritage matter as well? Would you like to talk about that?

**Samuel Jones (SJ):** I think the key word in these questions is “matter”. Matter to whom, in what circumstances and why? As you know the pamphlet was written in the context of the threatened

closure of several conservation courses, like the Textile Conservation Centre which unfortunately was closed ([www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Crisis-in-conservation-programmes-as-another-UK-course-closes/18556](http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Crisis-in-conservation-programmes-as-another-UK-course-closes/18556)). The key reasons for these recent closures and cutbacks, I think, is because heritage conservation didn't fit into the economy of higher education at that time. Moreover there wasn't enough support: in particular there didn't seem to be any policy support for conservation. In terms of heritage mattering I think we have not yet got our heads around how heritage as a whole matters, or should matter, in terms of policy. A lot of the last decade has been spent showing that heritage matters in economic terms... the instrumental impact it has on societies. But too much focus on instrumental impact can distract us. When we were studying the impact of heritage I came upon an archive in the northeast of England which was being asked to justify its work in economic terms: "To get your funding this year, tell us how much you contribute to the local economy" was what they were being asked. Highly trained archivists, who were not economists, were being forced to prove their worth in economic terms. Limited to such a purely economic viewpoint all they could really prove was that the archive should be knocked down and a theme park should be built in its place because the theme park would contribute more to the economy. The point is that, valuable as instrumental gains that arise from culture are, they would not come about if the culture on offer is not appealing, and people do not respond to it.

To return to the concept of "mattering", I have been taken with a very simple formulation. You have heritage on one side of the formula and creativity on the other. Creativity is central to how we form a new view, how we progress. It must come from somewhere and I think that is from our accumulated knowledge and experiences, as individuals and as a society. Unless we take care of our heritage there will be nothing to respond to and all that comes out of the creative economy and innovation will be lost.

**ASC:** Can I challenge that? I would like to suggest that worrying so much about heritage is actually a sign of decadence. Think of New York in its rampant period of expansion, when no one thought twice about pulling down any building whatsoever, unless it was some major historic shrine. Think of Beijing today where they are demolishing old Chinese houses at great speed. You can argue about what is decadence and what is ascendancy.

**SJ :** One of the interesting things about Beijing is that quite a bit of money is being spent on restoring the Hutongs (*traditional narrow streets or alley ways typical of Beijing*) and there is a simple reason for that. If you had gone to China 15 years ago you would get a simple, plain, visually unadorned visa. Now

you get a visa with an image of the Great Wall of China printed on it. This is a significant shift. China has realized that their heritage is not only a driver for tourism but is also part of its political appeal as well. It has come to realize that heritage is important in modern terms and in the modern world. Preservation is not a sign of decadence, but a sign of wisdom.

**ASC:** So the Chinese have come to realize it's a strong driver of tourism. I think we have all realized that heritage has an economic factor. But you also said it had a political resonance. Now does heritage have political resonance in the UK, in Europe, in America, the West shall we say?

**SJ:** Yes I think it does for a number of reasons. Or more precisely I think it should. A few years ago the Department of Community and Local Government released a report "Our Shared Futures". It consisted of 170 pages created by very smart people exploring how our communities can get along better and learn about other communities around them. As well as how we are to form new communities. If you do a word search of that document it mentions art, culture and heritage only a hand full of times. Surely we are missing an important point there. Our society today is one of newcomers, mixed societies, lots of different people bringing things born of their individual heritage. Unless we understand the skills and approaches by which to respond to all of those different forms of heritage we do not stand a good chance of a future and making things anew. A good example of this challenge is a project I am working on which is looking at the heritage infrastructure of the public realm. Things like canals, disused railways, and old route-ways. What is interesting is that even if these are no longer used, or even if they are not there anymore, they still govern how we think about the public realm. They may have fallen out of use, but they still influence us and communities. Why two towns are connected may have something to do with their industrial past. An example is a Bangladeshi community in Tipton, which is a very rundown area of Birmingham. It is a story of faded glory. There are abandoned factories that once backed onto the canal, but which now turn their back on the canal. This canal winds its way through the site and once connected Bilston, Tipton and Wednesbury, places that were the beating heart of industrial England. But now all these are gone or dramatically changed. People stay clear of the canal. This is a poor community, home to a lot of different groups, like the Bangladeshi community. The people told their children to stay away for the canal, it was dangerous. Nonetheless it was part of their landscape and they were curious. So they called up the Birmingham Navigational Society, a group of canal enthusiasts. The enthusiasts took the Bangladeshi elders on a boat tour of the canals and explained what the canal had to do with the connection of Wednesbury and Tipton. The canal was more

than an artifact or a lost ruin. Just the fact that it was there bound the communities together long after it had ceased to be functional for its original purpose.

**ASC:** If there is a loss of general enthusiasm for heritage is it partly because of the way history is now taught? We once learned a direct chronology of our history, but it isn't taught that way today. How would you teach the importance of heritage to a kid today?

**SJ:** When you were young, going through a history book you might have seen an illustration of a Roman sandal. And you would think "Oh it must have been hot in ancient Rome". And then you would find out that the sandal was found on Hadrian's Wall. Well, then you would think "Oh! It must have been cold!" And you would then think life must have been hard in the Roman Army. You might see the same shoe in the British Museum or elsewhere. But, when people shut the book or leave the museum and go outside and see someone in bright trainers (*athletic shoes*), how many wonder why they are wearing them? There is something about thinking about heritage, and the worldview it brings, that can carry through into how we respond to the many cultures we encounter today. If you start thinking about why the things are the way things are all around us today, you begin to realize there is a non-verbal language all around us. If we went from here at the Victoria and Albert Museum to the nearest underground station we could probably identify ten different cuisines. How are we to make sense of this? Not far from here in Shepherd Market area there is a Polish-French-Mexican restaurant. Our access to different cultures is greater than it ever has been and indeed we seek them out as we never have before. This is both thrilling and hugely confusing. This confusion is the reason that, the more cultures we have around us the more some people fall back on outdated stereotypes. They throw up defense mechanisms, and some of these mechanisms can be very threatening and destructive. People need the skills to respond to such a variety of stimuli, otherwise we are not going to progress. Heritage can help us build an approach to thinking about this and other aspects of social demands.

**ASC:** Let's get this back to something more practical. Here you all are, the audience: conservators. I asked earlier how many of you were in independent practice and how many of you were rooted in museums or institutions. I was told about 20% of you were independent and the rest rooted in institutions. However the independent ones must earn their money in the market place, and the others are dependent on public funding. How do you think that the conservation profession can improve its advocacy with the people handing out money? We are coming to the end of a funding cycle and it is likely there will be cuts, perhaps as high as 10%. How can conservators survive this threat?

**SJ:** First of all there will be cuts, no matter what the profession. I think it is a matter of scale and that was what the pamphlet was about. No one wants to see anyone cut, but it is simply a fact of life. I think the cultural sector needs to think less about how it can widen the cultural budget and think about what it is doing to contribute to other things. Not in an instrumental way, but rather influence the situation so that more of, say, the community money goes to culture: the point isn't to take away from communities or other budgets, it is to realise the role that cultural participation can play in those areas. We should ask what we're doing to contribute to the broader public awareness. Are there any textile conservators from the V&A here? Very early on in my research I was shown around the textile conservation centre at the V&A. There was a lady working on the conservation of an 18<sup>th</sup> century dress: the kind of costume you might see in a conversation piece upstairs in the galleries. She was mounting it onto a mannequin. She had to mutilate the mannequin to get the dress to fit. Now place that story next to one of the 18<sup>th</sup> century paintings and you have got a completely new and different way of approaching the painting. It's a social layer that was missing before, a story. That's a completely different way to think about the history of art, gender, fashion, dress and social expectations. You can communicate so much through conservation.

As we asked in the pamphlet, "What is conservation about?" And we reasoned that it's about taking care of things. In the pamphlet, we focus on the concept of social capital. All the social glue that holds communities together is changing. We are not talking to each other less; we are talking to each other differently. The structure of public realm is changing. We form communities around many different things and in many new ways. This is where conservation can come in. We care about physical things. And we congregate around them. By caring for something within our locale, we can help reconnect and facilitate the formation of new geographic communities. If I went out into the community and asked what someone cared about they might say "That wall over there, I used to like the graffiti, and it bothers me that it has been painted over". The point is that in choosing what to care for and how to care for it, people make statements about what they value. By opening making that process available, and helping with it, conservators can work with the values of care and do something important for the public realm.

**ASC:** How does one get people involved in conservation? Things have changed in museums. Not that long ago conservators thought it was not their place to be involved in conservation. Some valiantly tried to get us involved in education but none of us thought it was our job. In the past labeling in museums was really off-putting. I remember one label at the V&A that said "Soltikoff situla, 11th century", but it



didn't say what a situla is (*a holy water bucket*) or who Soltikoff was. There is no comparison between then and now. There is such careful preparation of labels, even the use of focus groups before they begin to think about exhibiting things. They test the labels. To what extent does this happen in the conservation business? I have a feeling, as a journalist, that there are some very good stories out there, but we aren't getting them. Italian conservators are particularly bad communicators about conservation. At *Venice in Peril* we funded the conservation of a crucifix, the whole thing about six feet high. I went to the presentation about the conservation. They described the process in a great detail and then we were given a dull disquisition on how it was anonymous, 15<sup>th</sup> century and Tuscan. But I then learned that this crucifix was carried in front of the men who were marched from the prison near the Doge's Palace to the place between the two columns in the Piazzetta to be executed. This went on over centuries. The crucifix that had just been conserved was the last thing the condemned men looked upon. Now, on that piece of information you could hang the whole conservation and art historical story. How do you think your profession can communicate more? For example have you ever thought in your various institutions "Do any of us, do any of our objects, have a good story that we can communicate to the popular press?" Do your press officers come around for good stories that they can tell the world?

**Audience member, Jessica Wanamaker :** I am not a conservator but ICON has been looking at the whole issue around communications. The problem is that conservators are being asked by journalists "tell us about a fabulous piece you have conserved", and in a sense that is quite difficult because it is not something that conservators do naturally. In the life of a conservator they may have worked on many objects and picking one may be difficult. How do you take a member of the public beyond the fabulous, one off piece? How do you interest them after that? That's difficult.

**ASC:** I agree that simply taking off a yellowed varnish may not be a spectacular story. But I think there is a need for some training that would help conservators recognize when there is a story that would appeal to the media and the public, and that would give greater depth to the overall effort and result of conservation. People are interested in process, but not if it's written out in chemical formulae. What I long to have is a lay-person's summary of what has been done to save works of art. As Chairperson of Venice in Peril (<http://veniceinperil.org/>) I would very much want to put up a summary, friendly to a lay-person, on the website describing every single item whose restoration has been financed by us. But the conservators we work with in Italy seem to only be able to communicate information about conservation in scientific terminology. You cannot seem to get a brief account of what happened.

Now, about the question of involving in the public...the question of volunteers. Does everyone shudder at the word "volunteers"?

**Audience Member, Eleanor McMillan:** I started my career in Baltimore and at the Walters Art Museum we have established a conservation window. It differs from the one at the Smithsonian, in that the "window" is in fact open and there is always a conservator, with an object, who speaks to the public. Sometimes there are parents with a child who is interested in getting into conservation. Sometimes it's just a series of curious questions.

**ASC:** That's interesting...it is people reacting with knowledgeable professionals

**Audience Member, Frances Halahan:** I am not employed by an institution and I want to say on behalf of the conservator and institutions, museums, in the UK that we spend a lot of time communicating to the public. Open studios, exhibitions, conservation sites with displays. The National Gallery has been doing this for a long time. There is a lot of involvement with schools and education on the part of conservation. It's not perfect, but it is effective. Sadly however that does not mean we are sufficiently valued or can be maintained. It doesn't seem to affect the budget when you are choosing between schools, hospitals and museums. It doesn't seem to make a lot of difference.

**Audience member, Sharon Cather:** I just want to underscore that. We are all doing a lot and have been for a long time to widen participation and outreach. There are a few issues that should be underlined. One is that this component of conservation has become a matter of policy for many of the funding institutions. Having completed several arts and humanities research council applications, I know that it is central to their policy that what is proposed is impactful. And they define impact as different from benefit. Benefit is related to your own community whereas impact is social, economic and so on. And you have to have a plan for that, you cannot get funding without it. You also said that the public was interested in how things are made, how they are fabricated. This was reinforced by a fascinating study carried out by the Getty Conservation Institute regarding tourism in Egypt, particularly in the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens. They did a demographic study of the visitors who turned out to be very interested in technology and much less interested in the process of conservation. The Italian government policy of supporting their conservation community internationally should be mentioned here. It is striking that in the UK there is no government support for an international conservation posture as compared to Italy.

**ASC:** That is interesting. The British Council supports the presence of artists internationally, such as at the various Biennales. Does it not pick up on conservation? Perhaps the IIC could lobby for conservation to be a potentially equal recipient for their support and interest.

But can I get back to my question of what you think about volunteers.



Anna Somers Cocks and Samuel Jones (Photo: IIC)

**Audience Member, Eve Graves:** I just wanted to say something on behalf of the teaching of conservation. I think it is all of our responsibility to build a greater political awareness in the teaching of conservation so that our students do not just understand the techniques and the various bodies of knowledge they need to do conservation, but to raise their awareness generally of how important the conservation of heritage is and build into those programs general communications skill so that they take this as second nature. It is important for them to know that they are not only talking to one another but to the outside world, constantly. Working with local museums we take material, conserve it, research it, and return it with the stories attached so they can use it with local communities. I think we can make a bigger impact at that level. The new generation of students can carry this with them.

**ASC:** Sam, I wanted to ask you about the current interest in environmental conservation, which seems to have stolen the limelight. It has meetings to which heads of state turn up; we don't have heads of state turning up for heritage discussions. Perhaps this is because even if the heritage goes to rack and ruin it is not going to cause sea-levels to rise or Armageddon. But I was wondering if we in heritage

conservation borrowed some of the ways of presenting issues to the public and politicians that have been used by the people in environmental conservation, whether we would be further along? For example, we would model what will happen to sculpture in the open air if we allow acid rain to continue to fall. This might get across the message that objects have a finite life. I remember one of the questions we were taught to consider at the V&A was: "How long do you want this object to survive? Five years or 500 or 5000?" You must have a strategy for each choice. I don't know how widespread this kind of approach is in the heritage conservation community.

**SJ** : The ideas, principles and values behind environmental conservation and heritage conservation are definitely connected. But first I want to come back to something that was said earlier. The choice one might consider of whether to fund a conservator, a nurse, or a hospital or whatever. If it has got to that point, then you will fund the nurse or the hospital. This question reminds me of headlines a few years ago in the newspaper, "£30,000 pounds for one statue, for that you could pay the salaries of one and a half nurses". . . , the point is really about how you invest in the statue beforehand. How many nurses do you not have to employ if you fund preventive health care using techniques involving cultural participation in some way. I don't want to detract from nurses at all, but instead point to the different ways in which people's participation in culture can bring benefit. This argument was put very forcefully by somebody who said that if you took a fraction of 1% of the health care budget of the UK and transferred it to fund culture, you would effectively double the culture budget...and this would make great savings in the health care budget by doing so. This did not come from Neil McGregor, it didn't come from the Secretary of State for Culture, it didn't even come from a think tank. It came from the editor of the *British Medical Journal*. This isn't to say we need to focus on the instrumental, far from it: rather, it's realising the different benefits that people's relationship to and enjoyment of cultural forms for what they are can bring. What we are talking about is a long-term thing. And the point of skills and training is important. Yes there will be cuts. And now is the time to start thinking about how we could handle this situation better in the future. The point you made about environmentalism is an important one. When we were writing the pamphlet we asked ourselves "What is the polar bear on the iceberg for heritage conservation." What is that single image that would get everyone thinking about heritage conservation? With the Textile Conservation Center issue *The Telegraph* newspaper was not reporting the loss of textile conservation or of the loss of conservators; they were reporting on Bagpuss and how sad that story was. Now for those who are not familiar with Bagpuss, he (or it) is a children's character, a puppet and is a fond memory for a generation. Bagpuss needed conservation; we would have lost

this icon otherwise. So he got taken to the Textile Conservation Center. That image got the public thinking. What were the skills that were needed to save this icon? The story was not about saving the TCC, it was about saving the icon. This is the way things work and there are lots of these stories. The point is that it is a route into thinking about the profession itself.

**ASC :** I notice that still no one has picked up on my question about the use of volunteers.

**Audience Member, Hazel Newey:** I used to work at the Science Museum. A lot of the collections depend very much on volunteers. This is true particularly in the areas of conservation of technology, heavy machinery, transport at the Science Museum, partially because most conservators are not trained to conserve large heavy objects. We rely on people who used to build these objects to preserve them. The same is true with computers. So in fact what people who worked on these kinds of collections do is to preserve a craft or a technical skill needed to replace missing parts. They are preserving objects that mean something to people. People get really excited about historic cars or planes, whether you can actually drive or fly them is a moot point. I think this is an area where we can bring a lot of issues to the front about the importance of conservation to preserve skills. A simple example is that those preserving computers are finding it hard to find people who can solder, because you just don't do it anymore, you program micro chips, and this is an interesting story for the public which involves a huge part of society. An example of using outside expertise can be found in the reconstruction of the XRT- X-ray telescope for display in the Space Gallery at the Science Museum in London. It had been damaged and the team to repair and reconstruct it consisted of a conservator, conservation intern and the original engineers from Birmingham University who designed the space telescope. The engineers had the expertise the conservators needed and were successfully incorporated into our activity.



The original project engineers from Birmingham University join the conservation team in 2006 to repair, reconstruct, and clean the XRT- X-ray space telescope at the Science Museum in London. (Photo: Trustees of the Science Museum, London)

**SJ:** I think you are very right and if I were a politician I would have picked up on the issue of who was interested, an older segment of the population. Lots of people are looking for something to do. It speaks to an aging population which is very active. And this relates to volunteerism, if you follow the logic of our pamphlet. The work of the conservation profession is attractive. There are, of course, many things that conservators do that require high levels of training and require special skills. But there are also things that can be done by the public. The distinction can be made clearer to all so as to encourage volunteerism. The health service for example stands as a symbol for taking care of ourselves. If we have a minor cold we can look after ourselves. But we reach a certain point at which we need help. We do not operate on our own brains. But that creates a spectrum. Where can we use volunteers? By making the links between the top and the bottom ends of the spectrum known people will come to value the whole. And if we include volunteers in some of our heritage conservation work they will make that link and they will discover the importance of conservation. A few years ago the Natural History Museum launched a project to catalogue lichen. The small team couldn't go out and find all the kinds of lichen in the UK. Not only did they not have the manpower but they didn't always know where to look. They needed more sources, some kind of skills base to draw from. Amateur botanists in, say, Devon might know what they needed. So they empowered a network of volunteers. And this can be done in terms of conservation of heritage to determine what needs work and where it is.

**ASC:** I agree. And you cite in your publication the Djenné mosque in Mali It is a mud brick structure and the people gather together when it needs re-mudding; it's a ritual activity that results in preservation and continuity. That act doesn't need conservators...that act needs the community.



**Ceremonial repair of the temple at Djenné**

Source: [www.visitgaomail.com/DienneRemudding4.JPG](http://www.visitgaomail.com/DienneRemudding4.JPG)

I think the Turquoise Mountain Foundation in Kabul is doing more good than most other NGO's out there. ([www.turquoisemountain.org](http://www.turquoisemountain.org)) They have taken what remains of old Kabul and cleared out many meters of rubbish from the alleyways and, more importantly, have been giving the people, the craftsmen who had not been able to practice their craft, the means to get going again. A market for the things that the craftsmen are producing is emerging. Similarly, I have been impressed by the Aga Khan Foundation's project in Cairo ([www.akdn.org/Content/525](http://www.akdn.org/Content/525)) which was not only focused on the restoration of the medieval walls but also on the tracking down of the pre-Nasser owners of the buildings in the Islamic quarter next to those walls. These buildings had been abandoned because the government had frozen the rents, which made them uneconomic. As a result they became slums. So the Aga Khan Foundation went back to the old colonial-period land registers and discovered who owned these houses before 1952-54. They bought the houses from them, set them up as cooperatives and invited in craftsmen to restore them and work in them. So they did not just restore a dead monument but brought life back into the community. They also did a survey of the area that showed the Egyptian government that this was not an area of recent immigrants from the country or a hot bed of criminality, but that many of the people there had been there for a long time, in some cases 60 years or more, and



the community was very cohesive. The government had intended to demolish a great deal of that area because they had thought it was a blot, “unmodern” and likely to produce civil unrest. That project was a perfect example of productive conservation because there was the manual skill and knowledge, the architectural history, the sociological intervention, the lateral thinking, the economic planning all contributing to this goal.

Sam, do you think the public should have a vote, a say, in what gets conserved? Not necessarily by setting up, say, three objects and choosing between them, but by inviting choices that may have economic implications for a neighborhood.

**SJ:** There are two ways of answering that. The first is to see what people really do value. That should be a factor. The second consideration is that conservators working for public institutions are responsible for the expenditure of public money. And it is a deeply undemocratic thing if you do this without asking people what they want done with that money or in this case what they want conserved. Now that does not rule out professional judgment. Let’s say that we have £30,000, if you go and spend it in an opaque way, its problematic and will create ill will for the sector. Asking the public, involving them, is also a way to get the public to think about their responsibilities toward heritage. One of the things we did to accompany the pamphlet was a video ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c\\_0eMSBX1k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c_0eMSBX1k)). We interviewed some conservators at the British Library about what they were working on and we also interviewed a graffiti artist. Now graffiti, I know, is controversial. But it was interesting to hear the graffiti artist talking about walls that were being painted over by the local council. He slowly began to talk in exactly the same way as the conservators. He was saying how sad it was to watch the work of someone he had “learned” from be painted out. An entire history blocked out. Now the immediate tendency is to dismiss that. You might think its graffiti is a social nuisance, but it might be worth thinking about what is being lost.

**ASC:** If I can add to that something I well know about as chairperson of Venice in Peril (<http://veniceinperil.org/>). Venice is suffering a very bad damp problem. It is rising and destroying brickwork and marble. This is because the water is chronically too high and at the upper edge of, or above, the stone bases of the buildings.





**Water levels are constantly too high in Venice and there is chronic damage to the brickwork and masonry**

(Photo: Katherine Hardy © Venice in Peril used by permission of the Venice in Peril Fund)

Venice is subsiding and the water has risen because the lagoon is degrading. The lagoon is being turned into open sea rather than a shallow, well buffered, body of water. This degradation is partly due to a deep channel that was dug in the lagoon in the 1960s so that huge petrol tankers could be brought to the factories on the mainland side of the lagoon. This causes huge quantities of silt to be washed out of the lagoon at each low tide, and the force of the current is such that it does not come back again at high tide. It is known that this disastrous phenomenon is taking place, but the head of the port authority has just come up with a plan to build an enormous commercial port on the site that the petrol tankers have served. This will not only consolidate the need to continue to deep dredge this channel but will require them to dig it even deeper, from 12 to 16 meters. The reason there is no opposition in the city to this yet is because there is no understanding of the conservation issues involved. The scientists have explained why the lagoon degrades but they have not explained, in any accessible way, the chronic effect it has on the buildings of Venice. And nobody has said that the rising damp problem in Venice, which has got to the point in the Basilica of St Mark's that the tesserae are falling off, is going to be one of the great heritage problems in the very near future. This is what happens when conservation does not link up with science and with the public. The professions are working separately, and Venice in Peril is going to try to bring them together, because there are people who will doubt the validity of any scientific study if it is economically convenient for them to do so.

**Audience member, Velson Horie:** I think this is one of the most important points to come out. These are initiatives not coming from within the conservation community. They are coming from without...from you. The Demos report did not come from conservators. Conservators are, or should be, part of the wider effort. If we try to do it on our own we will not be successful because we do not have the skills. We need to take a wider view because taking a narrow view is ultimately unproductive.

**ASC:** That is probably the summing up of this discussion. Do you want to add anything Sam?

**SJ:** Yes. If you go to Pizza Express here in London, you can order a meal that will include a donation by the restaurant to the *Venice in Peril Fund*. The choice of a specific pizza is, in itself, an act of conservation. Venice in Peril has found a way of getting the issue thought about in different contexts and giving people the chance to make an active choice. Does the public at large even know that Venice is in peril? Does the initiative bring it to their attention?

**ASC:** I think people know about the past floods, but the rising water level and damp are a new one and we must get that across. And here I will criticize myself and the journalistic profession. We are very unoriginal. We report on a small number of topics and we have consolidated topics. To introduce a new topic into the repertoire is not easy. So that is a challenge for all of you. You must find ways to communicate and position conservation as one of the subject areas that the media will go to for new stories. With that, let me say thank you very much for this stimulating discussion, and thank you, IIC, for the invitation to take part.

**Jerry Podany, IIC:** The IIC would like to thank Anna Somers Cocks and Samuel Jones for their generosity, insightful comments and this most thought provoking discussion. There is no doubt that the profession of conservation needs to expand its influence and efforts beyond the containment of its own immediate concerns and issues. Both Anna Somers Cocks and Samuel Jones have provided numerous ideas for conduits and efforts to begin this process. The dialogue has begun and it is now an appropriate time to expand both the scope and the number of voices.