

INTRODUCING
CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT
The Case of the Franciscan Site of
Olinda (Brazil)

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(BRAZIL)**

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Centro de Estudos Avançados da Conservação Integrada

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INTRODUCING CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT: THE CASE OF THE FRANCISCAN SITE OF OLINDA (BRAZIL)

Sílvio Mendes Zancheti*

Abstract

Conservation management is a new field in the architectural heritage conservation of Brazil. The main conservation practice has been the restoration and the maintenance. The Franciscan Site of Olinda was the first building of the Franciscan Order in Brazil. The site is considered one of the most magnificent buildings of the country and is the symbol of Olinda as a World Heritage City. Nowadays, the state of conservation of the site is not completely satisfactory. Since 2007 the site has had a conservation and management plan to guide interventions and maintenance of the building. It has been implemented since its completion and its central feature is the management component that organizes a process to make conservation a self-sufficient activity within a period of ten years. The conservation and management plan introduced a new vision regarding the way the site is managed. It has organized long-term planning activities, especially those related to the future use of their properties and associated revenues.

Key words: heritage management, learning process, heritage maintenance

Introduction

This Franciscan site is a magnificent example of convent architecture and an outstanding representative of the Franciscan school of architecture in Brazil. It is located in the historic center of Olinda, a World Heritage Site since 1982. It was the first Franciscan Convent to be established in Brazil (1585) and, in 1938, it was included in the first list of sites of the Brazilian National Register of Historic and Artistic Properties.



Images 1 and 2: Location of Olinda and the Franciscan site

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The site comprises a large building with two properties with different owners: the Convent of Our Lady of Snows and the Venerable Third Order of Saint Francis of Olinda. Both institutions have practiced religious activities since the end of the 16th Century, which are associated with educational and social contributions to the community.

The building has three pavements, occupies over 6,000 square meters and the site covers more than 28,000 square meters. Many of its more than fifty rooms are of artistic, historical and architectural value. Its setting in the urban landscape is valuable as are the large sets of decorated tiles and painted ceilings. Its construction started at the end of the 16th century, but its main architectonic and artistic features date from the 17th and 18th centuries. It is the most visited site in Olinda, with more than 5,000 tourists per month and numerous groups of students from the schools of Olinda and Recife.



Image 3: View of the Franciscan Site in the 1970s. (Source: IPHAN)



Image 4: Aerial view of the Franciscan Site (Source: Municipality of Olinda)

Nowadays, the state of conservation of the site is not completely satisfactory. The size of the building and the number of works of art require a large and constantly available amount of resources to maintain the building. The owners have introduced new features such as providing space and facilities for weddings, funerals, receptions, social events and

business conferences. However, the revenues generated are not enough to cover the cost of the basic maintenance. In spite of the large total built area, the new social and educational activities require more built space than that which is available, owing to the fragility of the works of art in the existing rooms.

Since 2007 the site has had a conservation and management plan to guide interventions and maintenance of the building. This plan was the first of this type drawn up in Brazil. It has been implemented since its completion and its central feature is the management component that organizes a process to make conservation a self-sufficient activity within a period of ten years.

This article analyses the implementation process of the conservation plan and especially how conservation management has been introduced by the friars and the brothers of the Convent and the Third Order, with the help of institutions devoted to the promotion of heritage conservation.

1. The change in the conservation context

To understand the conservation process of the Franciscan property it is important to explain the heritage management of the site at two different periods of time.

The first period began in 1938, when the property was included in the National Heritage List and lasted till the mid 1990s. In this period, the institutional framework for controlling the conservation of the property was relatively simple. The Convent and the Third Order were responsible for the conservation work, and each owner used to follow an independent decision process. IPHAN¹, the Brazilian institution for the protection of the national heritage, was the main funding source for restoration works to the property. The Municipality of Olinda also had a mandate for monitoring and controlling conservation actions on the site, since it was responsible for enforcing the building codes and the law for the specific occupation and use of land of the historical center of Olinda. IPHAN had the real power for deciding what to do, how to do it and when to do it in relation to the conservation requirements of the property, due to its role as the main financial sponsor of the work. The owners had the simple role of maintaining the activities of basic cleaning and carrying out day-to-day repairs.

The second period, which started in the second half of the 1990s and continues up till now, is characterized by the emergence of new groups, especially private actors, in the arena of the promotion of cultural activities, including the conservation of cultural property. According to a new National Law, funds from national taxes can be used by private enterprise to finance the promotion of cultural activities and the preservation of cultural property. Also, the National Government started to finance the conservation and restoration work of listed property through competitive tender organized inside regional plans for the promotion of tourist activities and the preservation of cultural property within urban heritage areas, such as for example, the Brazilian Heritage Towns included in the list of the World Heritage Sites.

Moving from the first to the second system has been very challenging to the institutions involved in the conservation of the Franciscan Site of Olinda.

The Municipality continues to be the main actor responsible for controlling the conservation of the historic center of Olinda but it is in charge of some tasks that previously fell to IPHAN. Depending on the scale of the intervention, the Municipality has to send

¹ Institute of the National Artistic and Historic Heritage.

projects for analysis by IPHAN. Most conservation/restoration projects come under IPHAN's remit. Some large projects, mainly those which have impact on public spaces, must be analyzed by the Conservation Council of Olinda, which is charged with the task of deciding on those cases that fall outside the scope of the law on land use in the historic center.

IPHAN is also still entitled to carry out conservation and reparation work when there are unquestionable threats to the safety of the building or to the integrity of special features such as the works of art. IPHAN may also perform some maintenance work if the owners of the properties do not have the enough resources for this, but this is very rare.

The Convent and the Third Order continue to manage the property on a day-to-day basis, but have had to introduce some planning for medium and long term tasks, especially those related to restoration and major work that involves a large budget. Their revenues are only enough to meet the costs of the day-to-day administration of the properties and to allocate resources to solve minor problems (for example: cleaning, painting and the substitution of small construction elements), which leads to more difficult problems being postponed. In the first period, this used to give rise to a cyclical process of general restoration of the site every ten or twenty years, financed and carried out directly by IPHAN. In the second period, this is no longer possible, because of the financial restrictions imposed on IPHAN due to the expansion of its conservation responsibilities given the increasing number of listed properties and the change of its institutional behavior which favors the allocation of funds through the competition or the tax exemption systems. So, to find extra income for major work, the owners have to ask for donations or to submit applications to the funding system of the national government and, consequently, to negotiate with the private actors for the transfer of the exempted taxes. This requires a strong management and communication capacity from the institutions.

2. The management challenges in the new context

Certainly, financing has become the main management challenge for conserving the Franciscan site. However, the lack of technical instruments and specialized personnel continues to play an important role. From the technical point of view, the absence of monitoring is critical because it is carried on a day-to-day basis without any systematic recording of problems and depends on the employees that clean the building. Moreover, neither IPHAN nor the Municipality has regular monitoring procedures. These institutions only inspect the buildings when there are evident and serious risks to the integrity of the site. In these cases, IPHAN tends to assume the responsibilities for solving the problem from its own resources or in cooperation with other institutions.

More critical is the absence of conservation standards and regulation based on codes of ethics (guidelines or legal structure) in which doctrinal affiliations, concepts and the principles underpinning actions are clearly stated. All interventions proposed in the sites are analyzed by IPHAN on an *ad hoc* base. This procedure generates continuous conflict between the owners and the regulatory institutions because the owners cannot maintain a permanent team of conservation specialists to prepare projects or to oversee the conservation work. They rely on temporarily contracted specialists, for the projects, and contractors, for the works. This creates a communication problem, since there are no normative documents to guide the interpretations and actions of both sides. Also, in this situation rises a mistrustful relation between the actors that, in general, prompts the owners to follow illegal procedures that bypass regulations. It is a situation aided and abetted by the lack of monitoring and inspection capabilities by IPHAN and the Municipality.

One serious consequence of this conflictive relationship between actors, associated with the fact that financing is decided outside the group directly involved with conservation procedures, is that conservation decisions and actions are limited to the short or medium terms. For the actors involved, it is very risky to carry out long term projects.

This rule applies to both the Municipality and the owners, because their decisions are dependent on the financial restrictions on projects. The themes and field of action of projects come from central government programs and plans or donors and it is very common for these institutions to have to insist that the project must be completed within one and two years, due to their financial programming. Some central government programs, such as the Monumenta Project – IDB, which is financed by an international development bank, accept medium-term projects (four to five years). The projects that tend to be implemented are those with a well-defined financial component and guaranteed flow of resources.

In the mid-1990s, the non-coordination of the decisions between the owners, the lack of good communication between them and the regulating institutions, and the difficulty of governmental financing led to the Franciscan site falling into a bad state of conservation. In 2004, the site was included in the list of the “100 Most Endangered Sites of the World Heritage Watch”². In 2006, the World Monument Fund, with the support of American Express, donated funds to draw up a conservation and management plan of the Franciscan Site. In 2007, the plan was ready and it basically consisted of three components.

The first component was a plan for enlarging the built area of the site and to change the uses of the Convent and the Third Order. One of the sources of revenue is the renting of rooms to public meetings. However, the convent lacks a large room to accommodate between 250 and 300 people seated and equipped facilities such as a kitchen to support such activities. Also, the plan proposes a new arrangement of the uses of the more than fifty rooms of the building in order to maximize the space available for visits, meetings and educational activities, which are the activities that can generate rental income for the Franciscan community. All the traditional religious uses have been maintained and the new activities made compatible with the old ones.

The second component was a conservation plan, which included an inspection and maintenance program, and sets of terms of reference for preservation and restoration projects for the building and for its integrated artistic features.

The third component was a management plan for coordination decisions on financing, investment, maintenance of the building and communication with the community. It was based on a new institution, formed by the Convent and the Third Order, which would be responsible for administering a conservation fund, devoted to supporting conservation activities, especially the maintenance of the site. The fund would receive revenues from new activities introduced into the site as well as donations and transfers from public and private institutions and individuals.

The plan was drawn up taking into consideration an analysis of the significance of the site. In spite of the importance of the Franciscan site for the cultural heritage of Brazil, up till the moment of preparing the plan, there was no statement of the significance of the site that could guide the development of intervention plans and projects. The analysis and the statement of significance were prepared using the traditional methodologies for assessing cultural values and in consultation with experts, public officials, residents and the Franciscan community.

² See: http://www.wmf.org/pdf/Watch_List_2004.pdf

The plan was drawn up by the Center of Advanced Studies in Integrated Conservation (CECI) with the intense participation of the members of the Convent and the Third Order, and reflects the objectives, expectations and foreseen limitations of both institutions. The development of the plan was an essential activity to convince the owners that a more cooperative system was needed through which these players, at least, would negotiate and plan their actions. Since 2008, the plan has been implemented.

3. Learning how to manage a conservation plan

The most challenging part of the Franciscan plan is the management component. In the Northeast of Brazil, where the site is, there is a strong tradition of individualism and mistrust in cooperative work among institutions. A clear example of this tradition is the Franciscan site, where the owners of the institutions have cohabited the same building for more than four hundred years and have never organized a joint work to run and maintain their magnificent site.

The plan was the trigger of a new situation. In the last two years (2007 – 2008), there has been some coordination of maintenance decisions subsequent to the completion of the conservation and management plan of the Franciscan site. The plan suggested the organization of a management institution formed by the two owners with the participation of the Municipality and IPHAN. However, to date, this institution has not been completely set up. The owners created the common conservation fund and are sharing decisions on very important subjects such as the promotion of new activities and the maintenance of the building. This coordination was important for the development of the conservation work in the Third Order, which was the part of the building in the worst state of conservation. Since 2008, CECI with the financial support of the World Monument Fund has been able to change the electrical fittings of that part of the building, and restore important religious and artistic spaces of the Third Order: the Sacristy and the Novice Chapel and the altarpiece of the Saint Roque Chapel.

Also the management plan was the instrument that introduced conservation concepts and ethical principles as part of the owners' decision process. This was due to their attempt to understand and follow the schedule and the conservation guidelines provided by the plan. The owners have asked for specialized recommendations after the completion of the conservation and management plan of the site. They wanted to know the opinion of the CECI team of specialists, and also hired CECI to design projects and plans for the conservation of some other Franciscan sites in the Northeast of Brazil. On the other hand, they still are very skeptical in relation to the participation of other actors, such as IPHAN and the Municipality, in their decision-making process. Friars and brothers follow lengthy processes of debate, when discussing their projects and the implementation of the plan. They are used to following a traditional and established way of administering their properties and any change must be discussed and experimented with for a long time before it is adopted. However, this process is not easily extended beyond the Franciscan community.

Conclusions

Sustainability is a major issue for the Franciscan community. They manage a large set of heritage properties scattered over the Northeast region of Brazil, and this means increasing financial costs. Due to the drastic reduction in the number of their members, all properties are underused. The strategy of the Convent and the Third Order to adapt themselves to this new context is to look for alternative uses for their convents that may be carried out in conjunction with the traditional religious activities.

The friars and the brothers understand that their properties are culturally very important. However, they think that their resources are better used when fulfilling their mission, that is, the evangelization of the poor.

The conservation and management plan introduced a new vision regarding the way the friars and brothers conceive of management. They are trying to develop long-term planning activities, especially those related to the future use of their properties and associated revenues. Their strategy is to generate, in each property, sufficient revenues to maintain the site in good condition. Following this line, they think that restorations and major interventions would have to be paid for from extra-budgetary resources (special projects and donations).

This strategy leads to extending the area of the properties open to visitors. Tourists and students are the main targets of this strategy when the site is located in places accessible to visitors. Also, in this strategy there is the risk of renting parts of the properties for activities that pay large rents but are not conducive to conservation.

In spite of the risks associated with the sustainability strategy, there are important benefits for the maintenance practice of the sites and for the urban areas around them. The diversification and intensification of activities may give rise to positive external effects on the local economy and on the social environment. The members of the Franciscan community are aware of these effects and have asked for their identification and assessment in the plans for new uses of their properties.

This way of managing the Franciscan properties is very new. Therefore, it is impossible to establish whether there is clear tendency at work. Certainly, there are signs that a target-oriented form of management has been pursued by the institutions.

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