

Preface

For more than 50 years, the challenges of communication have been discussed within heritage conservation – primarily in terms of interdisciplinary dialogue, and the tensions that exist between the classic triangle of professional conservation domains comprising humanities, science and practice. Communication is fundamental to human interaction and lies at the heart of everything that we do collectively. It is about sharing – deriving from the Latin ‘communicare’ meaning to share – through which we build a collective understanding of concepts, knowledge and values.

Any conservation action starts with a decision. Given the natural limits of our individual knowledge, informed decision-making means accepting that the knowledge of others is valid and needed. Hence, sharing enhances awareness of other knowledge – and the limits of our own. It is fundamental to gaining trust and acceptance through shared ownership of decisions.

The practice of shared decision-making is well established in other fields, and is becoming more common in cultural heritage conservation. However, as little as fifteen years ago the thinking on this subject was distinctly different. At the time of our first ICCROM think tank on decision-making in 2000, our discourse was still very much focused on improving communication between professions, as if this was the key to good decisions. During the first Sharing Conservation Decisions course, however, participants asked “Where is the community?” Looking back, this was a significant moment for us: an indication of a paradigm shift that was taking place within conservation at that time, and which is still ongoing.

Over the years, more than 150 people have participated in the ICCROM Sharing Conservation Decisions journey. They came from diverse geographic, cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, but when confronted with the course case studies and challenges, they discovered shared patterns of understanding. Among these was the realization of hidden influencing factors, such as the very European roots of modern conservation theory, the unconscious part of us that is built on implicit knowledge and tacit understanding, and the influence of our organizational cultures.

This collection of papers is the outcome of a ten-year adventure in thinking and reflection that went to the very heart of the nature of conservation. It was an examination of divergence to find common threads in very different contexts, and an exercise in humility.