

AUTHENTICITY 30 YEARS LATER IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 1994 NARA CONFERENCE

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Abstract. The Ukrainian experience of architectural heritage losses caused by war raises a fundamental question for the professional community: what exactly should be preserved when reconstructing destroyed heritage – the material, the image, the function, or the meaning? In this context, the concept of authenticity becomes critical, going beyond a purely theoretical category and turning into an essential decision-making tool in restoration, reconstruction, and reproduction.

The aim of the study is to determine whether the Nara Document represented a paradigmatic shift in attitudes toward heritage or merely formalized an already existing plurality of interpretations. Methodologically, the research relies on contextual, discursive, and comparative analysis, as well as a meta-analysis of Michael S. Falser's text, which reconstructs the main vectors of debate at the Nara Conference.

The focus is on current challenges, analysed through materials from the 2024 conferences in Thessaloniki and Tokyo, where the tension between flexibility and the need for methodological clarity was highlighted, against the backdrop of the continued absence of a single internationally recognised methodology for assessing authenticity.

The article explores how authenticity operates not only in normative documents but also in decision-making practices, the formation of local policies, and institutional procedures that directly affect the fate of heritage sites. It is concluded that the Nara Document did not provide a fixed definition of authenticity but changed its philosophical framework: authenticity is now understood as the result of dialogue between cultures, practices, and communities – a dialogue that requires not only remembering but also rethinking in the face of contemporary challenges, ethical responsibility, and the transformative potential of heritage.

Keywords: authenticity, Nara Document, cultural heritage, reconstruction, re-creation, cultural relativism.

Introduction. In 2024, thirty years have passed since the adoption of the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) – an event that significantly reshaped approaches to understanding, assessing, and preserving cultural heritage in global practice [1]. This anniversary represents a milestone and an occasion for critical reflection on how the notion of «authenticity» has transformed in international conservation theory, and to what extent the Nara Document truly became a turning point.

The document emerged in response to growing doubts about the universality of materially oriented heritage assessment criteria embedded in the Venice Charter (1964) and UNESCO's Operational Guidelines (1977) [2, 3]. For the first time at the international level, the need for cultural diversity, respect for intangible factors, and recognition of multiple interpretations was acknowledged. However, both the text of the document and the course of the conference revealed not so much the consolidation of a new consensus as the emergence of diverse—and at times conflicting—approaches to authenticity.

These divergences were never overcome; on the contrary, they became the foundation of a long-lasting intellectual debate that continues today. This is evidenced, in particular, by two major events held on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Nara Document: the international conference «Authenticity from a European Perspective: 30 Years of the Nara Document on Authenticity» (Thessaloniki, 2024), which brought together leading scholars, practitioners, and institutional representatives for a critical reflection on European approaches to authenticity, and the «35th Seminar,

30 Years of the Nara Document in the Global Context of Heritage Conservation» (Tokyo, 2024).

Despite the global significance of authenticity, the term still lacks a stable definition in heritage theory and practice. After Nara, it ceased to function as a fixed criterion and instead became a field of multiple—sometimes incompatible—interpretations, complicating the development of unified methodological approaches. This has generated a persistent tension between the need for flexibility and the demands of normativity, especially under the pressures of today's challenges: war, loss, hybrid reconstructions, and the growing role of local communities.

For Ukraine, this issue carries particular weight. The large-scale destruction caused by war intersects with long-standing decline and institutional weakness in the heritage sector. In these circumstances, the question of authenticity acquires not only theoretical but also practical urgency—as a key reference point for decisions about restoration, reconstruction, and re-creation. Without a clear understanding of what is considered authentic—whether material substance, form, function, or collective memory—further actions risk being fragmented, contradictory, or even manipulative.

This study examines how the understanding of authenticity has evolved in the three decades since the adoption of the Nara Document—from a material criterion to a broader field of cultural, functional, and contextual interpretations. At its core lies the question of whether Nara truly inaugurated a new paradigm, or merely captured the fractures and tensions that remain unresolved to this day.

Review of recent studies and publications. Despite its recognised international role, the Nara Document has not yet become the subject of comprehensive research in the Ukrainian academic and professional field. In most cases, references to it appear only sporadically—in lists of international documents alongside the Venice Charter (1964), the Riga Charter (2000), or the Burra Charter (1979–2013)—without a dedicated analysis of its content, historical context, or conceptual impact [4, 5].

In Ukrainian professional discourse, isolated attempts to engage with the notion of authenticity can be traced back to the 1990s, particularly in the pages of the journal «Pam'iatky Ukraïny: istoriia ta kul'tura» [6]. One of the first scholars in Ukrainian academic discourse to systematically address the issue of authenticity in architectural restoration was Olha Plamenytska. She emphasised the difficulty of determining the authentic state of a monument in cases of loss and stratification, stressing that authenticity is not limited to material substance but constitutes a broader category that also encompasses form, historical context, and the multi-layered nature of cultural values [7].

In recent years, the issue of authenticity in the Ukrainian context has been addressed by Oleh Rishniak, who highlights the gap between objectivist approaches to documenting the state of a monument and the need to ensure the «transmission of meaning» across generations. In his writings, authenticity appears not only as a matter of documentary identification, but also as a process of cultural presence of the past within contemporary society [8]. This line of thought has been further developed in more recent studies, particularly in theses devoted to the role of authenticity in adaptive forms of heritage recovery under the conditions of present-day destruction. The emphasis is placed on the idea that authenticity acquires special importance in processes of re-creation, where it delineates the boundary between the preservation of meaning and material loss [9].

At the same time, these individual contributions remain fragmented and have not yet formed a coherent theoretical school or a systematic rethinking of authenticity in the Ukrainian context. In recent publications, the concept is often interpreted primarily as a characteristic of the preserved material state of a monument at a given historical moment [10].

Such a narrowing of focus significantly limits the potential of authenticity as a conceptual tool. As a result, contemporary Ukrainian debate often remains at the level of intuitive awareness of change rather than a comprehensive understanding framed within a renewed methodological paradigm.

By contrast, in international scholarship authenticity has become the subject of interdisciplinary analysis – undertaken by restoration theorists, cultural historians, heritage professionals, and critics of the postcolonial order [11–13]. The Nara Document is regarded as a turning point that opened the way to a plurality of approaches, acknowledged the cultural relativity of authenticity criteria, and laid the foundation for dialogue among diverse regional traditions [14]. A number of studies explore the tension between universalism and relativism: on the one hand, the aspiration toward flexible approaches; on the other, the need to maintain consistent principles so as

to prevent authenticity from being instrumentalized for political or commercial purposes [15, 16].

A special place belongs to the work of Michael Falser, who carefully reconstructs the course of discussions at the Nara conference and analyses five key vectors associated with the notion of «authenticity» [17].

The aim of this study is to analyse how the understanding of authenticity in the field of cultural heritage conservation has transformed since the adoption of the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), and to determine whether this document constituted a genuine paradigm shift or rather recorded the plurality and tensions within approaches to heritage assessment.

Research tasks. To identify the historical and conceptual preconditions for the emergence of the Nara Document – particularly through an analysis of the content of charters, official international instruments, and UNESCO's Operational Guidelines; to examine how the concept of authenticity has evolved from a normative criterion to a dynamic and contextual approach; and to carry out a meta-analysis of Michael Falser's work «From Venice 1964 to Nara 1994 – Changing Concepts of Authenticity?» in order to reconstruct the key themes and discursive tensions of the 1994 Nara conference.

Materials and methodology. The study is based on a qualitative analysis of sources, including official international documents (1964–1994), academic publications (1990s–2020s), and materials from two events held in 2024 to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the Nara Document – the JCIC international seminar in Tokyo and the ICOMOS conference in Thessaloniki. The research combines several interrelated methods: contextual analysis, aimed at identifying the historical, institutional, and cultural preconditions for the formation of the authenticity discourse; discourse analysis, applied to trace the use of concepts across different professional domains; comparative analysis, which enabled the examination of the evolution of «authenticity» across intercultural and temporal dimensions; and a meta-analysis of Michael Falser's work, designed to uncover internal tensions between universalist and relativist approaches as well as the sociocultural factors that shaped the document.

Research results. The term «authenticity», which today stands at the centre of heritage conservation, was absent from the earliest international documents and lacked a stable meaning in the first normative texts. Its emergence and subsequent institutionalisation were the outcome of a complex process of gradual conceptual elaboration, in which international charters of the 1930s–1970s played a decisive role.

In the Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments (1931), adopted at the International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, the concept of «authenticity» does not appear at all [18]. The document is formulated primarily within a technical framework, focusing on the preservation of material, structures, and stylistic integrity. Particular attention is given to the principles of restoration, especially the admissibility of analytical reconstruction and the rejection of stylistic imitation.

Of far greater significance was the Venice Charter (1964), which for a long time served as the normative foundation for international heritage policy. It was in the Venice Charter that the word «authenticity» was used for the first time, notably in the Preamble, which speaks of passing on monuments in «the full richness of their authenticity» («...in the full richness of their authenticity...»). Article 9 also stresses respect for «original material and authentic documents» («...respect for original material and authentic documents»). Yet despite this appearance, the term received no theoretical elaboration in the text – no definition, no criteria, and no tools for assessment [17].

The actual transformation of authenticity into an instrument of international evaluation took place in 1977 with the adoption of the Operational Guidelines [3]. At that point, the so-called «Test of Authenticity» was introduced – a formalised set of criteria to be applied to cultural properties nominated for World Heritage status. The approach was materially oriented, and the four criteria included design, materials, workmanship, and setting.

The criteria were formulated within the European restoration tradition and focused primarily on material, style, and construction, leaving aside functional, ritual, spiritual, and intangible dimensions that are central to the perception of heritage in many non-European cultures [14]. This materialist bias provoked strong criticism and called into question the universality of existing

approaches. In response, during the 1980s–1990s the very foundations of evaluation were gradually reconsidered – a need emerged to broaden the concept of authenticity so that it would encompass the full range of values that communities attribute to their heritage [15].

This shift unfolded against the background of a wider typological expansion of the very notion of cultural heritage. To the classical objects – historic buildings, ensembles, and architectural monuments – new categories were added: cultural landscapes, industrial and vernacular architecture, everyday heritage, and later intangible heritage. At the same time, criticism emerged of Eurocentric standards by which heritage from other regions had been measured.

As Michael Falser notes, the Venice Charter and the early UNESCO documents were the product of predominantly European specialists, oriented toward stone, monumental, and stylistically refined architecture. In 1964, of the 23 participants at the Venice conference, 20 were from Europe; the only representative from Asia was Hiroshi Daifuku, the UNESCO delegate [17].

Practices characteristic of Asia, the Pacific region, Africa, Latin America, and the Islamic world – had no voice in the global regulations. This imbalance later provoked debates on the need to «decolonise the criteria of authenticity» [11], as well as on the idea that the concept should be sensitive to context, function, ritual, and technique, and not limited solely to «original materials» [12].

In contrast to the Venice conference, whose participants were almost exclusively Europeans, the Nara conference was deliberately organised as a global forum intended to ensure broader geographical, cultural, and professional representation. Among the 45 participants, 24 represented Europe and North America, 17 came from the Asia–Pacific region (including 8 from Japan), 2 from Africa, and 2 from Latin America and the Caribbean. At the same time, there was no representation from the Arab countries, which left the structure of participation uneven.

Despite its declared novelty, the Nara Document did not reject the provisions of the Venice Charter but positioned itself as their development and complement. The Preamble explicitly states that the principles of the Charter remain fundamental, yet under the conditions of globalisation, cultural homogenization, nationalism, and the suppression of minorities, there is a need to broaden the understanding of authenticity [1, § 3].

Particular attention at the Nara conference was devoted to Japanese practices of preserving wooden architecture, which challenged the European tradition's dominant understanding of authenticity as the conservation of original material. Japan served not only as the organiser but also as a symbolic stage for a conceptual confrontation – between material fixation and ritual continuity. The example of the Ise Jingū shrine complex, which is entirely rebuilt every 20 years as part of a sacred ritual, illustrated this tension [19]. Despite the loss of the primary material, the form, technique, location, and ritual are preserved – that is, what sustains function, meaning, and intergenerational connection (Fig. 1). This approach demonstrates that authenticity may reside not in substance but in action, continuity, and significance – and it has no direct counterpart in European restoration models.



Fig. 1. The Ise Jingū shrine complex, Japan

The Nara Document consists of 13 paragraphs that can be provisionally divided into three parts. Preamble (§1–4). It proclaims respect for cultural diversity and calls for the application of the criterion of authenticity with reference to local values. The Document is presented as a continuation of the Venice Charter, responding to the challenges of globalisation, ideologies, and shifts in collective memory. Cultural diversity (§5–8). Authenticity is considered in relation to different forms of heritage

expression – both tangible and intangible. Responsibility for safeguarding this diversity is emphasised as lying with local communities as well as with the international community. Values and authenticity (§9–13). Authenticity is recognised as a key criterion for assessing the value of heritage. For the first time, a broader spectrum of its aspects is listed – ranging from material to «spirit and feeling». The contextual and interpretative nature of authenticity is underlined.

Based on an analysis of the Nara conference materials, Michael Falser identifies five central themes around which the presentations and debates were organised. Taken together, they mark a transition from material to sociocultural authenticity.

1. Pluralism, respect, public access. This theme concerns the recognition of the plurality of heritage forms and the typological expansion from monumental to vernacular, industrial, commercial, and intangible heritage. Conference participants emphasised the need for respect toward diverse materials (not only stone, but also wood, earth, straw), the inclusion of traditional knowledge, rituals, languages, techniques, and the guarantee of access to heritage not only for experts but also for citizens.

2. Process, dynamics, living heritage. Authenticity in this theme is approached not as a property of the object but as an ongoing process of community interaction with memory, function, and use. The notion of «living heritage» was introduced, highlighting the dynamic character of meaning, its continuous transformation, and heritage as a «living structure» that responds to change.

3. Postcolonialism and indigenous identities. The focus here is on the critique of Eurocentric transmission of conservation standards to the postcolonial world. Participants from Latin America, Africa, and Oceania pointed to the mismatch between «universal» norms and local values, the need to recognise indigenous practices and rituals, and the critique of colonial narratives as forms of «historical falsification». Japanese experience was especially discussed as an alternative system – reconstruction that is documented yet ritualised, preserving not the material but the function and tradition.

4. Cultural relativism and strategic risks. This theme highlights the tension between the aspiration to inclusivity and the threat of disorder. On the one hand, it was acknowledged that authenticity cannot be unified; on the other – concerns were expressed that the boundaries of authenticity risk becoming blurred and that the very possibility of expert evaluation could disappear.

5. Essence, message, reconstruction in the postmodern era. This theme focuses on the most contentious issue of the conference – the admissibility of reconstructions and their authenticity. The debate revealed two opposing positions: on the one hand, reconstruction is considered acceptable if it can preserve and transmit the cultural or symbolic meaning of a site; on the other – it is seen as a threat to authenticity, since it creates the illusion of historical credibility and blurs the line between fact and interpretation.

These themes, first articulated in Nara, have not lost their relevance thirty years later – on the contrary, they have become the foundation for new debates. The international conference «Authenticity from a European Perspective: 30 Years of the Nara Document on Authenticity» was held on 28–29 November 2024 in Thessaloniki (Greece), in the multicultural venue «Islahane» [20]. The event was organised by the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Theory and Philosophy of Conservation and Restoration (TheoPhilos ISC), in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture of Greece and with the support of the Hellenic National Committee of ICOMOS. The conference brought together participants from more than ten countries – including Poland, Greece, Slovenia, China, Italy, France, Belgium, Ukraine, Germany, Austria, Norway, and the United Kingdom – representing a wide spectrum of research and practical approaches to heritage.

The themes of the conference ranged from a historical analysis of the impact of the Nara Document to the new challenges facing heritage conservation – particularly in the context of loss, reconstruction, climate change, political transformations, and digital technologies. The event represented the first large-scale attempt to critically reassess the legacy of the Nara Declaration thirty years after its adoption.

The conference materials showed that the key contradictions revealed by the Document have not only remained unresolved but in some respects have become even more acute. In his opening address, Bogusław Szmygin – president of the Theophilos office – observed: «we still do not have a methodology for assessing authenticity» [21]. Despite numerous declarations and conceptual

frameworks, tools for balanced analysis are still lacking – what exactly is authentic, to what extent, by which parameters, and how these assessments relate to one another. What we are left with are formal «statements of authenticity», but without a verifiable procedure of analysis.

Against this background, the presentation by Łukasz Sadowski on the Polish experience of castle reconstructions serves as an illustration of how the absence of clear ethical and methodological criteria allows historical fictions to be masked as heritage preservation. He remarked: «if you have money and political connections – you can build whatever you want», while at the same time acknowledging the growing critical resistance from professionals and the public [22]. He pointed to the Royal Castle in Poznań as a case in point – a fantasy construction stylised as a sixteenth-century castle (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The Royal Castle in Poznań. Before and after reconstruction

The presentations at the conference also demonstrated that the departure from universalist approaches initiated in Nara, while necessary, did not provide a new stable foundation. Authenticity is increasingly perceived not as a fixed property of an object, but as a contextual agreement – the outcome of negotiations among experts, communities, policymakers, and institutions. In this regard, the paper by Jolka Pirković is illustrative: she proposes not to search for a single definition of authenticity but to recognise its plural nature, manifested in different dimensions – documentary, social, artistic, and others [23].

Liu Siyuan suggested distinguishing between several forms of «truth» – expressive, historical, and structural – and emphasised honesty as the principal professional value in reconstruction. In this context, he outlined the notion of viable interpretation – one that acknowledges changeability while avoiding falsification [24].

Ioannis Poullos, in his presentation, drew on the logic of strategic thinking, criticizing the divide between material and intangible approaches. In his view, overcoming this separation is a prerequisite for a new paradigm of heritage – one that is more holistic, flexible, and responsive to real challenges [25]. Within this new field, authenticity is no longer sought in the past – it is constructed in the present as a form of critical responsibility.

Despite the diversity of positions and attempts to overcome methodological vagueness, the conference in Thessaloniki demonstrated that authenticity remains a complex concept.

These very questions – but viewed from a different, non-European perspective – were raised at the seminar «Authenticity Revisited: The Nara Document Thirty Years After», held in Tokyo on 28 November 2024 [26]. Organised by the Japan Consortium for International Cooperation in Cultural Heritage (JCIC-Heritage) in cooperation with the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, the event brought together experts from Asia, Africa, and Europe to critically reassess the legacy of the Nara Document in a global perspective (Fig. 3).

The central issue was the relevance of the Nara Document under conditions of political transformations, technological change, and intercultural tensions. Among the leading themes were the tension between the universality of standards and local sensitivity, the impact of digital technologies on understandings of authenticity, the growing role of communities in shaping heritage policies, and the critique of professional approaches that reduce authenticity to an object-based characteristic. A distinctive feature of the seminar was the strong presence of Asian voices: they

emphasised that the Nara Document not only opened the way to intangible and contextual thinking about heritage, but also itself requires reconsideration – whether it still retains transformative power or has already become part of a new orthodoxy.



Fig. 3. Participants of the seminar
«Authenticity Revisited: The Nara Document Thirty Years After». Tokio, 2024

In the three decades since the adoption of the Nara Document, the global community has not achieved either a stable understanding of authenticity or an agreed methodology for its assessment. Despite the declarative recognition of multiple approaches, the equilibrium points between context and criterion, between flexibility and responsibility, have not yet been found. Authenticity remains an unresolved concept, an open field of tension – between professional standards and political demands, between collective memory and institutional norm, between reconstruction and simulation. What in 1994 was named a challenge reappears in 2024 as an unresolved question, one that calls not only for reflection but also for new conceptual frameworks.

Conclusions. Thirty years after its adoption, the Nara Document on Authenticity demonstrates that it did not close the debate – it opened it. Nara did not provide a final definition of authenticity, but redefined the very logic by which authenticity should be assessed. For the first time at the international level, it was formally recognised that authenticity is culturally contextual; those multiple interpretations are legitimate; and that no single universal criterion can be equally valid across all cultures.

The Document legitimised a shift from the material object to the social process – from authenticity as a «state of things» to authenticity as an effect of interpretation, memory, ritual, use, and function. Since its adoption, a new type of heritage discourse has emerged: pluralist, flexible, and dialogic. Intangible dimensions have received institutional recognition; local communities have gained greater influence in processes of interpretation and conservation; and the universality of the previously «neutral» European norm of preservation has been called into question.

Yet Nara did not resolve internal contradictions. As recent conferences have shown, the ideals of plurality and flexibility often collide with the need for methodological and practical criteria. Paradoxically, the very document intended to free heritage from normative pressure has itself become a new framework – one to which subsequent international declarations and institutional practices must now relate.

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АВТЕНТИЧНІСТЬ 30 РОКІВ ПОТОМУ У КОНТЕКСТІ НАРСЬКОЇ КОНФЕРЕНЦІЇ 1994

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Анотація. Український досвід втрат архітектурної спадщини, спричинених війною, висуває перед фаховою спільнотою принципове питання: що саме ми маємо зберігати, відтворюючи зруйновану спадщину – матеріал, образ, функцію чи сенс? У цьому контексті поняття автентичності набуває критичного значення, виходячи за межі суто теоретичної категорії й перетворюючись на необхідний інструмент ухвалення рішень у сфері реставрації, реконструкції та відтворення.

Стаття аналізує трансформацію уявлень про автентичність у міжнародній охоронній практиці після ухвалення міжнародного Документа Нара (1994) про автентичність, що започаткував перехід від матеріального критерію до ширшого, культурно чутливого, між суб'єктивного розуміння.

Метою дослідження є з'ясувати, чи справді Документ Нара став парадигмальним зсувом у ставленні до спадщини, чи радше закріпив вже наявну множинність трактувань. Методологічно дослідження спирається на контекстуальний, дискурсивний і порівняльний аналіз, а також метааналіз тексту Міхаеля Фальзера, що реконструює основні вектори дебатів конференції в Нарі.

У фокусі – сучасні виклики, проаналізовані через матеріали конференцій у Салоніках і Токіо (2024), де окреслено конфлікт між гнучкістю і потребою у методологічній визначеності, на тлі тривалої відсутності єдиної міжнародно визнаної методики оцінки автентичності.

Розглянуто, як автентичність функціонує не лише у нормативних документах, а й у практиках прийняття рішень, формуванні локальних політик та інституційних процедур, що впливають на реальну долю об'єктів спадщини.

У підсумку показано, що Нара не дала стабільного визначення автентичності, але змінила її філософську рамку: відтепер автентичність трактується як результат діалогу між культурами, практиками та спільнотами, що вимагає не лише пам'ятати, а й переосмислювати з огляду на сучасні виклики, етичну відповідальність і трансформативний потенціал спадщини.

Ключові слова: автентичність, Документ Нара, культурна спадщина, реконструкція, відтворення, культурний релятивізм.

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