AUSTRALIA

Heritage at Risk

Australia is a country of climatic extremes – it is highly prone to wildfires in the southern part of the continent and to flooding in the north. In the past two years it has seen massive bushfires in the state of Victoria, which devastated many rural towns. We have also experienced widespread flooding in Queensland and more recently earthquake damage in Western Australia. In the face of climate change, extreme events such as these are expected to continue to increase in frequency and intensity. The impacts on heritage can be immense, ranging from the devastation of rural and semi-urban heritage features, to museum and archival collections, to the implications for the less tangible heritage associated with memory, community and sense of place.

While the collections and archives sector has developed disaster plans and disaster response protocols and resources, and frequent disaster response training sessions are held for employees of this sector, the same cannot be said for heritage places. In the face of events such as the 2009 bushfires in Victoria and flooding in the north, there is limited concern for safeguarding heritage places in the initial and later response phases. This leads to unnecessary demolition of structures and a lack of documentation prior to the impacts of physical amelioration activities. And even when there is identification and attempts to preserve places of heritage value that have been impacted by a disaster, there is frequently a lack of understanding of the best way to do this. This can result in secondary damage or loss of significant fabric and values without documentation.

In light of these combined problems of increasingly frequent and extreme disasters, and a lack of public knowledge of the importance of safeguarding heritage post-disaster in an appropriate way, Australia ICOMOS is preparing guidelines for managing cultural heritage places affected by disasters. These guidelines are an outgrowth of guidelines prepared by Australia ICOMOS members following the 2003 bushfires in Canberra, Australia's capital. The current guidelines are being finalised by a small working group of Australia ICOMOS members with expertise in disaster response. The current document has been broadened to cover appropriate response to a broad range of events, from hurricanes, to earthquakes, mudslides, floods and fires (urban and rural), and will be applicable to the entire country. Once the guidelines have been completed, they will be distributed as widely as possible; to government departments at all levels engaged in heritage management as well as disaster response, heritage place managers, and – of course – heritage professionals. It is hoped one of the medium-term outcomes of this project will also be seminars in disaster response for heritage places, informed by the guidelines.

The listing and mapping of heritage places throughout Australia varies and there are many places of heritage value that have not been formally assessed or documented. This does not mean that they have no heritage value. We are endorsing that places with potential heritage significance should be assessed by an appropriately qualified heritage practitioner (such as a specialist consultant, architect, structural engineer, curator, custodian, and tradesman), together with a building surveyor when building and structural safety and adequacy are being assessed. Assessments should factor in the principles of the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter. Many heritage buildings and structures are ultimately repairable and demolition, in whole or in part, is frequently not necessary. Ideally such a heritage practitioner would be a member of Australia ICOMOS.

Bushfires in Australia

Of all natural hazards, bushfires are the most terrifying and possibly pose the greatest threat to life and property in Australia, and for this reason much attention of governments has gone into risk reduction and prevention strategies.

In Australia bushfires have been recorded prior to European settlement and have continued since, often with extremely devastating consequences for life, property and landscape. The Aborigines carried firesticks and burnt the main travelling routes and areas of bush to flush out prey. Campfires often escaped with sparks and coals causing a conflagration of the surrounding bush. In the 19th century European settlers in the bush were acutely aware of the risk of fire and often located domestic kitchens in detached brick buildings as a strategy to reduce the risk of fire spreading to the main house, in addition to reducing the effect of cooking odours. Many fire-prone areas such as the Blue Mountains (New South Wales); Canberra environs (Australian Capital Territory); the Dandenongs, Macedon Ranges and large tracts of Victoria; the Eyre Peninsula and Adelaide Hills (South Australia) and parts of Western Australia contain significant heritage buildings, many a legacy of the hill stations created in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Cultural heritage places located in fire-prone areas are there as a consequence of history and are clearly at considerable and increasing risk. More recently, however, as cities expand the bush is increasingly being settled. One result is that the border regions between fire-prone, fire-adapted environments and urban settlement continue to expand, with a concomitant increase in risk from bushfire events.

This incipient threat has most recently been manifest in the 'Black Saturday' bushfires, a series of bushfires that ignited or were burning across Victoria on and around Saturday, 7 February 2009 during extreme bushfire-weather conditions. They resulted in Australia's highest ever loss of life from a bushfire, with 173 deaths and 414 injured. Before Black Saturday, the worst fire season in terms of affected area was in 1974–75, when 117 million hectares, or 15.2 % of the continent, was burnt. The Ash Wednesday fires (1982–83) in Victoria were the worst natural disaster in Australia up to that time and took more lives and destroyed more property value in scattered semi-rural communities than did Cyclone Tracy in the centre of Darwin in 1974.

While bushfires cannot be prevented, preparation can assist in assuaging the effects, through actions such as the development and rehearsal of preparedness plans and strategies and removal of fuel through controlled burning. However, in terms of our natural heritage, this may also have an unintended effect on forest biota, where regular burning has caused a change in the species character of bushland.

Fire poses one of the most serious threats to cultural heritage and a stringent preparedness regime needs to be implemented to mitigate as much as possible against the consequences. In some instances, one may have to consider loss, as a consequence of fire, as an acceptable risk. While there are standards for building in bushfire-prone areas, recently revised in Victoria, these do not apply to heritage buildings. Nevertheless there are precautions which can be applied without compromising the architectural integrity of

such structures. In addition, some planning schemes have bushfire protection overlays which are of some assistance with regard to vegetation clearing.

Fire is just one of the threats that is addressed in the new Australia ICOMOS guidelines. The guidelines have been prepared for all types of places of cultural heritage significance at all levels and which may contain individual items or collections of cultural heritage significance and/or monetary value. While initial disaster response procedures are necessarily focussed on safety and humanitarian needs, it is also critical that cultural heritage receives the same attention at the earliest possible moment. Cultural heritage is the underlying glue which binds communities together. It provides meaning and belonging, which is so important for disaster recovery, and a sense of the past for the future. While cultural heritage may be overlooked immediately after a disaster, its rehabilitation is critical for the longer-term recovery of affected people and civil society.

References

Australia ICOMOS Draft Guidelines for Cultural Heritage Places Damaged by the January 2003 Bushfires in South East Australia

Australia ICOMOS Guidelines for Managing Cultural Heritage in Disasters Draft 2010

Australia ICOMOS

Destruction from the 'Black Saturday' bushfires in Victoria 2009
(photos: Natica Schmeder)