

AUSTRALIA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

Two centuries of European settlement have dramatically and fundamentally altered the cultural landscape of Australia. The delicate ecological balance that had been forged by its Aboriginal owners over 60,000 years has been largely swept aside. European settlers misunderstood the indigenous culture, the land and its climate – it was not an empty land of limitless opportunities.

The native title rights of Australia's indigenous people have recently been recognised by the High Court of Australia, but as a cultural minority with only 2% of the population, indigenous languages are dying out. Indigenous standards of health, education and housing are significantly less than the national average, and the loss of their land is central to their spiritual and cultural fight for the preservation of their heritage sites.

For the past 200 years, Australia's European settlers "rode on the sheep's back", developing a settlement pattern and economy based on the export of wool, and to a great degree on beef cattle, much of it produced in fragile grazing lands and semi-arid zones. Many indigenous sites were destroyed and serious environmental damage ensued from wholesale vegetation clearance, by and for stock. Resulting environmental problems such as dry-land salinity and erosion are only now being recognised and the financial commitment necessary for land rehabilitation is an enormous challenge for future generations. Mining has also been a major industry with Australia in the top five as a producer for most mineral wealth.

With a population density of only 2 persons / km² (compared to USA's 29 / km²), and global recession in the wool market and other primary industries, Australia's rural and regional heritage of pastoral buildings and rural infrastructure as well as the city wharves and port facilities which sustained this trade, are much at risk.

Heritage Management Trends

The Commonwealth of Australia is a federal system, but despite the availability of protective local, state and federal national heritage legislation since the 1970s, it has been notably less used in the past decade and its financial support reduced by government in lean economic times, with cultural heritage receiving 200 times less than the natural environment and applications for funding for heritage places exceed funding eightfold.

Over 12,000 heritage places are in the federal Register of the National Estate (RNE), but less than half of these represent the outcome of comprehensive survey work. Approximately 72% of the National Estate is "historic", 16% "natural", and only 7% of the National Estate are places identified as part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, although many are recognised as including all values. Individual National Estate places are concentrated in metropolitan areas, 91% having architectural or historic value.

In most States and Territories, heritage management legislation enacted in the 1970s was devolved to local government in the 1980s via planning legislation. For example, the New South Wales State Heritage Register lists 1450 items, but the larger state list including places in local government plans, now totals

over 20,000 items. Australian local government levels of technical support and experience with heritage issues vary greatly, particularly in rural and regional areas. A network of local heritage advisers is spreading to redress this imbalance.

In Australia's growing coastal cities, rising inner urban population densities and outer-ring suburban sprawl bring increasing development pressures on heritage places and their settings. Particularly at risk is Australia's heritage of mid-20th century, under-recognised in existing heritage registers, and with materials conservation problems requiring urgent research. Discussions on modern architecture at a national conference in 1999, *Fibro House : Opera House* (Sheridan Burke (ed) Conference Proceedings, 2000), and later at an Australia ICOMOS Conference in Adelaide in late 2001, and the formation of a national DOCOMOMO working party, will hopefully generate attention and support for these places.

As government support diminishes, community heritage activism increases, with professional and community groups heading publicity campaigns and providing technical guidance and stakeholder support to heritage places at risk. A major community group since the late 1940s is the National Trust of Australia that has some 80,000 members in the State bodies, and has lobbied fiercely for heritage issues of community concern. Australia ICOMOS with almost 400 heritage professionals, has set standards for heritage conservation ethics and practice, including its 1999 revision of the *Burra Charter* (The Charter for Places of Cultural Significance) that is recognised as a national standard for heritage conservation (www.icomos.org/australia).

Identifying Heritage at Risk in Australia

In 1998, the National Trust of Australia initiated a national Endangered Places Programme, calling for nominations from the general public of threatened places and functions of community value (not necessarily monuments). The programme aimed to focus attention on Australia's endangered places and to increase awareness of the processes required to conserve them, aiming to attract community support for their viable conservation. This report is widely promoted on the Web and in hard copy (www.austnatrust.com.au).

Similarly, the federal government has identified areas of concern for Australia's heritage, including a holding a committee of review into the fate of federal-owned heritage properties, such as Post Offices and Defence sites. It found *neglect and missed opportunities to be the hallmark of heritage asset management by the Commonwealth government*. The report put forward a cohesive strategy for future management of these strategic community assets and set out principles as a framework for best practice. Future actions were set out in July 2000 in the Commonwealth Heritage List in the Commonwealth Government's Proposed New Heritage Regime of July 2000 for its heritage properties (www.environment.gov.au/heritage/policies/index).

In 1996, the federal government issued the first comprehensive assessment of the Australian environment, its *State of the Environment Report* (www.environment.gov.au/soe), devel-

oped by an independent panel of 200 scientists and experts. This report focuses on environmental sustainability, and included cultural heritage at risk. This reporting system initiates research and reviews progress on the health of Australia's environments and cultural heritage, and was supported by technical papers analysing trends and defining sustainability indicators, including the "Environmental Indicators" on natural and cultural heritage which further developed holistic indicators of heritage health based on pressure, condition and response for natural heritage places, indigenous heritage places, indigenous languages, historic places and natural and cultural objects.

Trends and Examples of Heritage at Risk in Australia

Damage and Destruction

Direct pressure on historic places through demolition or re-use of buildings and precincts and their surroundings. Many places are demolished or radically altered before they can be placed on registers...

"Most states have delegated the responsibility for conservation to local councils through heritage development and planning legislation. It is too early to assess effectiveness...No effective co-ordination exists between and with governments on decisions affecting heritage. State of the Environment Report, 1996

Walsh Bay Wharves, Millers Point, Sydney

These massive timber wharves, stores, roads and hydraulic goods handling systems below the Sydney Harbour Bridge are together a rare example of 20th century port technology. Walsh Bay has been redundant for shipping purposes since the early 1980s and despite a Permanent Conservation Order under the New South Wales Heritage Act, listing as a heritage item in the Sydney Regional Environment Plan, entry in the Register of the National Estate and classification of the site by the National Trust of Australia (NSW), the State government has recently approved demolition of several of the wharves and shore sheds.

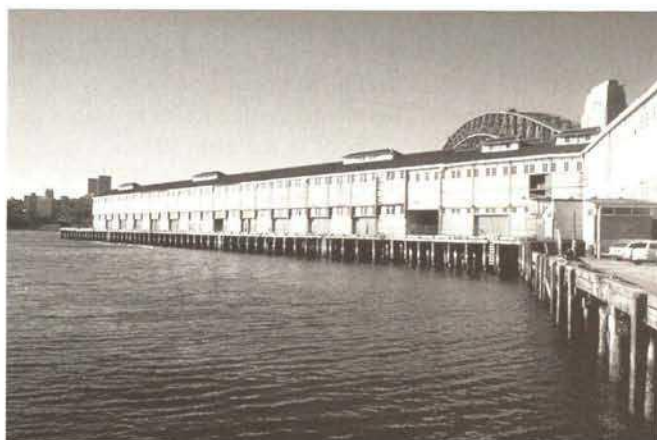
After a concentrated publicity campaign by the National Trust of Australia, the State of New South Wales sought to negotiate a commercially viable project that would secure the preservation and renewal of the area. The resulting scope of demolition in the planned Walsh Bay project was significant, and the Trust successfully fought the development in the Land and Environment Court, with the State voting to pass retrospective legislation denying any capacity to formally object to the development. Demolition and redevelopment of the Walsh Bay wharves is currently underway.

Neglect or Abandonment

No national programmes are currently in place to monitor the physical condition of Australia's heritage places or objects, increasing the difficulty of assessing the effectiveness of responses in conserving heritage resource... State of the Environment Report, 1996



Coombie Station Homestead Complex



Walsh Bay Wharves, Sydney Harbour

North Head Quarantine Station, Sydney Harbour National Park



Rural heritage

Australia's pastoral industry, once the engine of the Australian economy, has become increasingly redundant during the 1990s, as major export markets for Australian wool disappeared with the fall of the Eastern Block. Two centuries of European settlement in Australia has left a legacy of homesteads, wool-sheds and rural infrastructure which is struggling to find alternative economic uses to underpin its maintenance and conservation, and is increasingly being abandoned.

In 1996 an initial survey of seven homestead complexes in the district of Inverell in north western New South Wales found that one third had become redundant. Some had been abandoned, as property amalgamations were forced by the realities of contemporary pastoral and agricultural production. Such a redundancy rate is probably nationally typical.

Government rationalisation programs are having a significant impact on heritage; railways, hospitals, education facilities, fire stations and health Centres throughout Australia. The rationalisation of the railway infrastructure in rural Western Australia is having serious impact on the heritage of the wheat-belt area through loss of lines, vacant buildings, removal of infrastructure etc. The major banks are also making a mass exodus from regional Western Australia (a situation which is occurring throughout Australia) and leaving a string of vacant buildings, due to the general decline in population in many of the smaller regional towns. This means a reduction of available services and inevitably empty shops in the main streets, which in turn threatens public facilities such as the community town halls (especially in more remote towns).

In Western Australia where buildings in Outback towns are abandoned, and their owners walk off the land, the sites revert to local Shire Council ownership. In many cases the Shires are carrying out systematic demolition of the sites rather than incur maintenance costs regardless of heritage significance, as in the historic gold mining town of Cue.

Typical of the losses through abandonment is the Kulki Vineyard house, Inverell, part of a property acquired by Alward Wyndham of Dalwood in 1869, the 11,360 acre Kulki station ran sheep until 1881, when five acres were set to vine. The stone and pisé vineyard house was built in stages as the winery prospered, its products being premiated in Agricultural Shows. Its success was short-lived, however, and the vineyard house has now been fenced off from stock and vacant for many years, whilst scarce maintenance resources are focused on the main Kulki homestead, which remains the operational headquarters of the property.

Solutions

– Identifying and promoting good examples of innovative, sustainable management and businesses, which are effectively conserving heritage places through sound economic management. In 1998, the Historic Houses Trust of NSW initiated a celebratory project *Bush Lives: Bush Futures* - a touring exhibition, video, web site and schools education project. It documents the remarkable lives of eight bush families who have taken innovative approaches to conserving their heritage properties by radically altering their land management regimes to favour the environment. The exhibition is now on a national three-year tour, accompanied by public forums in

regional centres which encourage landholders to discuss these issues and to evolve solutions to their own problems and can be visited at www.hht.nsw.gov.au.

- Promoting, publicising the effects of such heritage losses. The National Trust of Australia (Queensland) has developed a web page to accompany the *Vanishing Queensland* exhibition currently touring nationally. The web pages are at and feature photographs and stories of the range of Queensland places that have disappeared in the last 30 years. Viewers are invited to add their reminiscences of these vanishing places, and a local component is added to the exhibition and the web page at each tour venue.
- Developing Conservation Maintenance Plans, as in Victoria with the 2,500 non-indigenous places in National Parks (www.parkweb.vic.gov.au) that include conditions under the joint federal-state Regional Forest Agreements (www.rfa.gov.au).
- Expanding the local heritage adviser network systems and Internet chat-line, very effective tools for identifying heritage at risk and assisting owners and caretakers of these sites how to access funding or expert advice on conservation management methods, and communication and research tool for heritage advisers and practitioners, especially in distant locations, proposed to become national service (www.heritage.nsw.gov.au, and www.alga.com.au)
- Developing the HeritageCare concept (based on Landcare Australia, a widespread Australian community self-help land repair initiative, supported by all levels of government to assist the owners to conserve rural heritage places (www.landcareaustralia.com.au).

Redevelopment Pressures

Direct pressure on historic places through demolition or re-use of buildings and precincts and their surroundings. Many places are demolished or radically altered before they can be placed on registers. Source State of the Environment Report, 1996

Setting / Curtilage Threats

As the most urbanised society in the world, Australian cities experience great pressures in all directions, including in its suburban expansion. In doing so, they swamp former rural homesteads, settlements and farms with urban sprawl. The delineation of appropriate settings or curtilages for historic place, such as in Sydney with churches such as St Paul's, Cobbitty, and public properties such as the former federal Quarantine Station at North Head at Manly, are proving exceptionally difficult to manage.

Solutions

Design guidelines for residential rural/subdivision which favour the prior assessment of historical and visual significance to delineate an appropriate curtilage and setting for heritage places, and promote the ability of the public to appreciate and read the landscape

Regional historic cinemas

Cinemas and theatres were identified for the National Estate some years ago as an important element of 20th century community heritage, but increasing commercial pressure on such places has increased the risk to their conservation. The National Trust (NSW) is maintaining a campaign for the long-term conservation of regional heritage cinemas. There are only 11 single-screen intact heritage cinemas of high significance still operating in New South Wales. Many of these are under imminent threat, of closure and ultimately redevelopment or demolition. The major problem facing these theatres is the imposition by film distribution companies of onerous, impractical and inappropriate film exhibition policies, that are impossible to maintain in small country regions. Heritage cinemas in country towns are often the only venue for films and live theatre and form a vital component of country social life, and operators of these theatres need support from the community and the film industry.

Solutions

The National Trust is urging distributors to relax their stringent policy (which is better suited to multiplex cinemas) in order to save these significant heritage cinemas.

Indigenous Cultural Heritage

The cultural heritage of Aboriginals is most fully expressed within the most relevant traditional languages. Speakers of languages strongly believe that they are the best vehicle for traditional knowledge and therefore knowledge of indigenous places. Of the 250 languages thought to be spoken at the time of European settlement, only 90 are still spoken today.

The continued loss of languages of indigenous Australians is being exacerbated by the death of remaining speakers or by other languages replacing them in daily use. All of the traditional languages being used as the primary means of communication could be lost within a generation.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities wish to assume control of their own cultural material.

Over the past decade the Commonwealth government has supported the return of significant cultural objects to indigenous control. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission implemented a national Heritage Program in 1993-94 for indigenous communities to establish keeping places.

State of the Environment Report, 1996

Documentation

It is sometimes difficult for indigenous communities to seek financial assistance for identifying and recording their sites of significance from the 19th and 20th century. This process is made more precarious as the average life expectancy of community members is 20 years less than the general Australian population, and the younger generation is sometimes not as interested. Many Elders in their late 40s-50s are dying and hope of documenting their history of the mid 20th century is diminishing.

In early 1999 there were 28 languages in Australia with only one speaker remaining (*Ethnologue*, February 1999). Despite



Kakadu National Park

intensive recording and documentation of indigenous languages and associated song, dance and Dreaming, by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Islander Studies and some 20 years of funding and special schools and classes to both teach current indigenous languages and revitalise dead ones, current Government cuts to funding threaten the viability of this precious link to the intangible values of Australia's indigenous heritage landscapes and Dreaming Tracks.

Solutions

Increase Government funding and commitment and funding from previous levels rather than the current cuts.

Kakadu National Park and Indigenous Values

Deep concerns are expressed regarding the ongoing threats from mining activities to the cultural and natural world heritage values of Kakadu National Park, which some of its traditional owners believe places the site as World Heritage in Danger. This issue exemplifies an ongoing concern about mining in indigenous spiritual landscapes that frequently takes place in remote parts of Australia, which gains much of its resource based income from mining. This is despite of the recognition of Native Title, and pressures continue on indigenous people in remote, sparsely populated areas to negotiate, often in culturally alien situations, to allow such mineral exploitation to take place. Otherwise indigenous heritage, including some 100,000 recorded heritage sites, are particularly at risk from coastal and urban development. Support for the indigenous concerns from other Australians in urban centres of population along the coast, may occur if the proposed development proposed also offends them and often particularly when the natural environment is also threatened.

This is primarily the case for Kakadu, where concerns regarding the ecological fragility of the Kakadu heritage landscape were exacerbated earlier this year when contamination spilled from a mine dam into the National Park. The development however of a cultural plan for the area as required by the World Heritage Committee has not progressed. Effective consultation with the traditional landowners has not proved possi-

ble. The Australian government has strongly opposed such a listing in the World Heritage Committee.

Solutions

- Action at international level to add pressure to national and local initiatives
- Application of national standards for indigenous heritage places based on the Australia ICOMOS *Burra Charter* to ensure appropriate consultation and cultural mapping take place and decisions are based on agreed wishes of indigenous owners of heritage places

Objects and Collections

Most state, regional and local museums are unable to provide suitable care of their material culture collections in 1991. Deterioration of many collections of heritage objects is likely to continue.

State of the Environment Report, 1996

The *National Preservation and Conservation Policy for Movable Cultural Heritage* includes criteria for assessing significance, which are currently being trialled and work-shopped. The national strategy, *Recollections* has been widely distributed and placed on the Australian Museums and Art Galleries On-Line website (www.amol.gov.au).

Solution

- Although there are many specific solutions that can be made regarding movable heritage, from an ICOMOS perspective closer interaction between heritage place and museum professionals and officials and would result in a stronger force for the protection of this aspect of Australia's heritage and its continued relevance to Australia's heritage places.

Natural and Man Made Disasters

Australia, as an island continent, probably has more than its shares of floods and fires, mud slides and tropical cyclones. Civil unrest and warfare are thankfully absent from the nation. The increasing dramatic effects of global warming and El Niño on Australian weather patterns have led to a re-assessment and amendment by some museums of traditional Disaster Preparedness Plans.

Disaster response co-ordination has been seriously reviewed in Sydney recently, with the forthcoming Olympics, but throughout the nation Emergency Services are extensively

trained for disaster management, particularly in rural areas, where bushfire fighting organisations have been operating for many decades. However, when a disaster occurs at a heritage site, usual Emergency Services methods may not be appropriate. Much was learned of the co-ordination problems of securing special access and methods needed on historic sites during recent summer bushfires in New South Wales.

Solutions

- Use Disaster Management Plans

In New South Wales, the Historic Houses Trust, which manages thirteen of the states most significant heritage properties have evolved Disaster Management Plans in-house since 1993, customising the basic framework for each property, working from thorough risk assessment to presenting an action plan for human safety, priorities for collection evacuation (snatch lists), telephone trees, emergency procedures, recovery procedures etc. In other states, similar plans are developing. References such as *Be Prepared: Guidelines for Small Museums for Writing a Disaster Preparedness Plan*, published by the national Heritage Collections Council in 2000 provide model advice.

Conclusions

Other than the universal threat of natural disaster, the major risks which heritage faces in Australia are damage or loss through the direct pressures of economic restructuring, which presently takes a higher political priority than indigenous or non-indigenous cultural conservation.

Whilst Australia has developed excellent models for identifying heritage places, and established benchmark philosophical principles for guiding their conservation, and schemes for supporting conservation works, it has not resolved underlying environmental problems which are also leading to the neglect and abandonment of some heritage places. Nor has Australian society generally reached a reconciliation with indigenous cultural needs.

Until a more holistic approach evolves at community and governmental level to commit to support cultural conservation, the promotion of individual exemplars, public education and community action provide the major avenues for conservation solutions to develop.

Australia ICOMOS