Burning Issues and Brighter Futures: A View from Australia

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SUMMARY: In many ways, the future has never been brighter for Australia’s cultural heritage. Communities everywhere are asserting the importance of their heritage in sustaining local identity and regional character. Changes in legislation and policy frameworks throughout the country, and at all levels of government strive to improve the responsiveness and efficiency of existing protective mechanisms, while expanding definitions of ‘heritage’. We are mid-way through a national Inquiry by the Productivity Commission into the operation of our ‘historic’ heritage conservation frameworks which has brought these issues into sharper focus.

However, few at this conference would agree that our heritage is always well-managed or sufficiently celebrated. So, what hinders this bright future – what are the burning issues? An Australian national ‘snapshot’ suggests that for our engineering and industrial heritage they include everything from resourcing; fashions and fads in heritage work; training and expertise; hazy definitions of technical ‘best practice’; current practice for movable and ‘place’ heritage, and managing intangible values; pressures and barriers posed by other statutory frameworks, market factors and redundancy cycles; aesthetics, scale and adaptive re-use; and significant knowledge gaps – just to name a few! This presentation will explore these issues within the dialogue of an international panel.

Thank you to Engineering Heritage Australia for the invitation to participate in this panel discussion.

1. ABOUT AUSTRALIA ICOMOS
Australia ICOMOS is a professional organisation for cultural heritage practitioners. We work to promote good heritage practice. The Burra Charter: the Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance provides guidance, and has been very influential in the shaping of statutory and non-statutory arrangements for heritage in Australia.

2. HOW TO PROVIDE A VIEW FROM AUSTRALIA AND ITS UNIQUE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE?
Our continent nation.
Our diverse and ancient land with its human history of great antiquity.
Our federation of states, our multi-cultural nation, our slowly growing sense of national identity.

The picture is diverse, and our perspectives will be different. So, in my remarks today, I’d like to comment on:

- 5 promising signs
- 6 big issues
- 5 things to do, and
- 5 new issues on the horizon that we should start to think about.

3. SOME POSITIVES…
- The concept of heritage is more inclusive and broader than ever before. In my view this is more real, and more like how heritage is experienced. It reminds us that heritage is always a contemporary construct. But, it also means that the job keeps getting bigger!
- Communities have a growing passion and awareness of heritage and are demanding good outcomes for heritage and for local environments. But, not all areas and types of heritage are well appreciated. And, communities are diverse. We sometimes lack the skills for undertaking community processes in our work.
- Some aspects of our standards of practice are world class – such as conservation management planning and systematic values-based assessment and management (as outlined by the Burra Charter).
- Statutory frameworks are generally strong and subject to frequent improvement. There are certainly plenty of registers and lists. These do not guarantee good outcomes in themselves, but can provide a good underpinning to appropriate protection and management. Some areas of recent improvements in heritage legislation in at least some parts of Australia include: moveable heritage, interpretation, public asset management, cultural landscapes, and better integration of different ‘types’ of heritage (natural/Indigenous/historic”).
- State of the Environment reporting at the Commonwealth level (and in some States and Territories) includes consideration of cultural heritage, with periodic sampling of the condition of our heritage estate. This is an area of international best practice for which Australia can be justifiably proud, despite the
shortcomings and methodological hurdles we experience.

4. SOME BIG ISSUES...
- **Research**: Do we know (understand) what we’ve got? We need to put more value on research – it is core business in our industry. Of course, targeting the effort is essential, particularly on a national scale. We particularly lament the demise of the National Estate Grants program without an equivalent new program to replace it.
- **Money**: There is a lot of recent analysis and literature about this question, including the submissions to the current Inquiry by the Productivity Commission. Generally, I believe we do a lot with a little, but are very dependent on public and political support. In short, instead of working out how to cut the cake into ever thinner slices, we need a bigger cake!
  - Clever use of many tools is important. We can’t continue to rely entirely on the year-to-year government allocations, and need to remove the disincentives (such as the lack of tax deductibility for heritage work OR for donations to cultural heritage NGOs).
  - Grants and loans will always be important, especially for community-based heritage work, and for supporting private owners of heritage properties.
- **Roles for Governments – 3 important aspects.**
  - Stewardship of heritage properties and collections.
  - Statutory frameworks for protection and management – and, importantly, the consistent and genuine commitment to make the systems work well.
  - Provision/facilitation of access to expertise, assistance, resources (in transparent, accountable, effective ways).
- **The relationship between planning and heritage.** A great deal has been said about this issue throughout the conference already. The picture is varied - are we expecting too much or too little from this relationship?
- **Skills – are they sustainable?** There is room for improvement in tertiary training for the trades and the professions – at both the ‘baseline’ and ‘specialised’ levels. Accreditation is a hot topic in many areas of the industry, and regulatory bodies have an important role in specifying what skills are required. It is our view that in many areas of the trades, traditional techniques are not being taught, leading to a decline in the standards of repair and maintenance of historic structures.
- **Adaptive Re-use.** We can’t turn all heritage places into museums, and continuing use is often the key to retaining important places. But, do current approaches to adaptation remove too much meaning (particularly for industrial heritage)? There is a need for good examples and guidelines in this area to avoid this kind of separation between the values of the built form and the historical meanings of a place.

5. SOME THINGS TO DO...
- **Identification**: We need to identify the things we really want to keep, especially when it comes to industrial and engineering heritage. These should be considered for the National Heritage List in some cases, and I encourage engineering and industrial heritage specialists to look at which places might meet that very high threshold.
- **Value Heritage Expertise** and find ways to provide it where it is needed. We need more specialist advisers available to owners and to heritage agencies (including local government), and we need to ensure that the people who work in heritage agencies have relevant heritage training and knowledge. In the view of Australia ICOMOS, the current trend in many places to devalue heritage expertise and to favour generalist managers or administrators is regrettable.
- **Documentation** of heritage and access to heritage information are areas needing major improvement. Access to existing research and studies is inadequate, and wastes our limited resources. The Australian Heritage Bibliography was established to address this problem, but receives minimal support and has fallen behind in its essential task – we should all be supporting its resourcing and contributing to it regularly. Similarly, the collection and archiving of oral history in Australia is so-so (despite a number of wonderful initiatives), and we have nothing to approximate the amazing HABS and HAER programs in the USA (as described by others at this conference).
- **Intergovernmental Cooperation** is still lacking in some important areas. NGOs have been calling for a National Heritage Strategy for well over a decade. *It is time that this happened!* We need a responsive, integrated and coherent system throughout Australia.
- **Best Practice.** We need to develop and apply best practice to explain, experience and celebrate our many histories and their contributions to community life. Excellent design is a key in many cases.
6. A FEW INTERESTING THINGS ON THE HORIZON …

- **Intangible Heritage.** There is a new UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Heritage which has already increasing awareness of many aspects of culture, including traditional skills.

- **Heritage Interpretation** both on and off site is a growing area of our work. Interpretation needs to provide understanding and to tell the story – it can be serious and intelligent, but never boring!

- **Risk Preparedness** is an urgent and pressing priority. Sadly, we have had many recent reminders of this – such as the looting of the Baghdad Museum, the destruction of our alpine landscapes through wildfire, and the massive damage caused by the Indian Ocean tsunami and Hurricane Katrina – just to name a few. Important work has been done by museums and galleries in Australia. This needs to be extended to heritage properties. We are currently working with our counterpart organisations for museums, archives and libraries to establish an Australian National Committee for the Blue Shield, and will need the active engagement of many specialists and site managers.

- **Community-based heritage identification and management** is now a priority and growing avenue of action. This trend presents some changing roles for heritage professionals.

- Finally, the ‘National Conversation’ about Australia’s Heritage. This is something that Dr David Kemp, the former Federal Minister for the Environment and Heritage promised when negotiating the package of heritage amendments at the national level. We found this a very compelling incentive – so, let’s have it!