Book Reviews
Time Matter(s): Invention and re-imagination in built conservation
The unfinished drawing and building of St Peter's, the Vatican

Federica Goffi
Ashgate, 2013
ISBN: 978-1-4094-4301-8

Federica Goffi is an architect and academic at the Azrieli School of Architecture at Carleton University, Ottawa. This book aspires to challenge the orthodoxies of architectural conservation not for the way in which they are thought to restrain the modern designer’s imagination (an all-too familiar trope), but rather for the way in which the discipline captures and processes ‘memory’ through modern conventions of representation, fragmenting the fabric and isolating its phases of change to construct meaningful discourses on identity.

This book reminds us – the conservators – of certain truths about architecture: that it exists in a time-continuum that stretches from the past into the future, and therefore all buildings are in some sense ‘unfinished’; that ‘likeness’ is not ‘essence’ and we re-make buildings according to images of themselves rather than by acquiring a true sense of what the buildings are.

Goffi’s broad thesis seems to be that in the 19th and 20th centuries, as architectural practice shifted away from the transformative re-working of existing buildings, we adopted an ‘instant making’ paradigm in which construction became synonymous with the creation of new things. By the same token, our techniques for interrogating the nature of existing things were conditioned by our demand for emblematic figments of the past, arranged like artefacts in a mind-museum or snapshots in an album of fixed recollections.

The unfinished drawing of the title is a mixed-media representation of St Peter’s, executed between 1569 and 1576, by Tiberio Alfarano, a hitherto obscure clerk working in the midst of the great transformations to the basilica begun under Pope Paul III. Using this as a template, Goffi persuades us to interpret the alterations to St Peter’s made by Michelangelo, Maderno and others not as ‘demolitions’ but as ‘a complex process of built conservation entailing disassembling/assembling of body parts’ – a kind of homage borne of repeated questioning not of a one-time, empirical measure of ‘significance’ but of a building’s sempiternal identity - its imagined self. In this she detects a process of ‘mindful contemplation’, likening Alfarano’s representation of St Peter’s to an ‘effigy’ that gives material shape to a sacred presence. The suggestion is that, in our modern tendency to chop the past up into time-loops, we conceive of change as a sequence of horizons rather than imagining it as divine regeneration.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the text, drawing as it does on post-structuralist thought, neuropathology, hriptory and hermeneutics, sometimes comes over as fashionably self-conscious. The deft juxtaposition of ideas (surrealist collage with Christian iconography) is inventive, but inclined to stretch the point (Alberti’s Tempio Malatestiano of 1450 might be a fair example of conservation
by wrapping, but Christo’s Wrapped Reichstag of 1995 is surely more akin to transformation by costume). Some of the language is abstruse to the point of weirdness (Zeuxian, chiasmic, spolia-facade, and ‘to facture’ instead of ‘to make’, which sounds like something made up by Roland Barthes). When academic theses are made into books one looks to the publisher to filter out some of the rhetorical repetitions: propositions are repeated a little too insistently; the publisher, Ashgate, has shown a degree of disinterest in letting the arguments trundle along with forced determination. This detracts a little from an otherwise intriguing study that re-evaluates how the act of seeing can be used to conceptualise identity as well as form, and how drawing can represent continuity as well as change.

There is an admirable willingness to push at the boundaries of what we think we know about conservation. The value of this book lies perhaps in its power to make you think, rather than to make you believe. Goffi makes me question how far we have really moved in our attempts to represent the past. Like a latter day Ruskin, she is trying to say to architects that all architecture, including that already built, should be capable of sustaining itself through time without history as its prop; and to conservators, that conservation should be able to contemplate time itself as both an agent of change and a vector of identity. These are solid propositions with which to review our approach to shaping the existing built environment.

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**Geoarchaeology of Aboriginal Landscapes in Semi-Arid Australia**

Simon J. Holdaway and Patricia C. Fanning
CSIRO Publishing, 2014
ISBN: 9780643108943 (paperback)

This book reports in detail on a sophisticated geoarchaeological study of stone artefact assemblages and hearths at Fowlers Gap Arid Zone Research Station in western New South Wales and incorporates earlier work undertaken over many years (35 related, individual, jointly, or multi-authored publications are cited). Semi-arid Australia covers around 70% of the continent and is a zone in which archaeologists have struggled to deal with abundant stone artefact scatters and deflated hearths found there. Holdaway and Fanning go a long way to resolving a number of issues.

The book is well illustrated with 23 colour plates, 116 tables and 76 figures. A limited number of avenues are available for publication in Australia of the type of in-depth archaeological research presented by Holdaway and Fanning, and they and CSIRO Publishing are to be congratulated for opening up a new one of high quality.

Chapter 1 provides a short but succinct review of the development of global and Australian approaches to geoarchaeology – a discipline aimed at ‘deciphering the natural world and the ways in which humans interacted with it in the past’ (p. 2). At Fowlers Gap the authors investigate surface artefact scatters and hearths in order to develop chronologies across a range of landscape types to determine if variation in the formational history of the archaeological record differed significantly across space and time. The fundamental questions are: Why can we see stone artefacts in the places they are visible today? How long ago were the artefacts deposited? And what types of behavioural inferences can we make from them?

In Chapter 2 Holdaway and Fanning set out a geoarchaeological framework for artefact survey and sampling suitable for use in semi-arid regions and other parts of the world where stone artefacts are dominant. Fowlers Gap land surfaces are identified as resulting from erosion and deposition processes operating at different temporal and spatial scales, leaving a patchwork surface of different ages where ancient and more recent artefact deposits may be separated by distances of only a few kilometres or even a few hundred metres. They therefore avoid using the term ‘site’ (traditionally considered discrete in time and space and containing the record of
a near complete range of activities) referring instead to sampling locations. Sampling locations were focused on land systems, where it was possible to obtain a sample of artefacts, where the history of deposition and erosion preserved in associated sediments could be investigated and where it was possible to take account of differential surface visibility at the micro-scale.

In Chapter 3 sampling locations are systemically described. The characteristics of every artefact over 20 mm maximum dimension were recorded together with their location in three-dimensional space. A series of technological and typological variables were described for each piece and recorded into hand-held computers and transferred each day to a relational database and GIS. Data analysis focused on the degree to which artefacts were moved by erosional processes, the significance of artefact clustering, and fragmentation of artefacts as a measure of both post-depositional processes as well as occupation intensity.

Chapter 4 focuses on dating of the land surfaces and hearths at each sampling location. Optically stimulated luminescence dates (n 16) were used to date land surfaces while charcoal dates (n 51) from hearths gave direct age estimates of human activity. Key results suggest that construction of hearths was episodic rather than continuous which were able to be related to environmental changes at local, continental and even world-wide scales.

Chapter 5 is a complex but convincing attempt to describe activities undertaken at each location, what was brought to each location and left there, and what was removed for use elsewhere. People occupied many localities in the past and Holdaway and Fanning suggest that at Fowlers Gap people focused on the abundance of stone and ‘geared up’ with supplies of flakes they intended to use elsewhere.

Chapter 6 draws the many themes of the book together and discusses these in relationship to important issues in Australian Archaeology. For example, at Fowlers Gap the landscape forms a mosaic of deposits of different ages with limited relationships in space and time. It is therefore difficult to draw a link between the number of more recent sites and population size or ‘intensification’ as some archaeologists continue to do. It is also argued that visitation to places at Fowlers Gap occurred over short rather than long periods. The stone artefact assemblages are therefore considered a proxy for movement rather than an indication of wide-ranging activities at each individual ‘site’.

There is a short discussion of the implications of the study for cultural heritage management but the challenge will lie in adopting or adapting the methods developed by Holdaway and Fanning by consultants and heritage managers.

Who will find this book of value? Anyone who believes the archaeological record is in places discontinuous in time because geomorphological events have removed a record of particular time periods and that it is also discontinuous in space because it is preserved only in places that are geomorphologically relatively inactive. There are therefore lessons in this impressive and well-presented work for all archaeologists.

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**Sydney’s Hard Rock Story: The cultural heritage of trachyte**

Robert Irving, Ron Powell, Noel Irving
Heritage Publishing, 2014
ISBN 9781875891160

This book by Robert Irving, Ron Powell and Noel Irving clearly has as a major aim the promotion of a wider knowledge and understanding of a lesser-known building stone, Bowral trachyte, important in the architectural development and appearance of Sydney and more widely – ‘to explain … a truly wonderful material’. There are comprehensive descriptions of the stone (actually microsyenite not trachyte), the discovery of the deposit and its quarrying operations,
the uses of the stone, and its ultimate fall from favour. The final chapter proposes how the NSW State Heritage Register listed quarries that are now closed, might be interpreted and re-used.

Included are excellent and fittingly illustrated potted histories of the prominent Sydney buildings selected for description and discussion; indeed, one might buy the book for these alone as a quick reference for the architectural styles and construction techniques in the late 19th – early 20th centuries. The authors enlighten us with elegant scholarly descriptions of entire façades, mostly sandstone and trachyte. In a similar style, an entire chapter is devoted to memorials and monuments throughout Sydney and beyond – Canberra, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, even Scotland.

In Sydney, where Bowral trachyte was most widely used, hard dense impervious stones were increasingly utilised from the 1860s onwards as dimension stone in public works (kerbs, gutters, steps, paving) and in the ground level courses of important public and commercial buildings, typically for bases, plinths and pedestals. This need was largely filled by Melbourne bluestone (a basalt). Where a polished finish was required, for example on columns, imported and local granites were typically used; the Sydney GPO with its Moruya granite columns is but one example. During the 1880s the cost to the NSW economy of imported stones, including Victorian bluestone, was progressively of concern to some elected officials. The discovery and availability of Bowral trachyte changed this approach; the stone could be polished and it could be specified as a cost-equivalent alternate to Melbourne bluestone. The book describes and illustrates this situation well.

Contemporary writers extol the ‘artistic’, ‘sparkling’ colours of Bowral trachyte compared to the ‘sombre’, ‘funereal’ appearance of Melbourne bluestone. The authors consider Bowral trachyte to be a ‘beautiful stone, notable for its colour’; however the range of colours is not studied in the otherwise excellent and wide-ranging compilation of trachyte memorials and monuments. For a book about stone, two of whose authors are architects, the opportunity to highlight the variety of colours available has been overlooked. For example, both the Richard Johnson Memorial and the North Sydney War Memorial use yellow coloured stone. In particular, the latter memorial has the appearance from a distance of Sydney sandstone – even close-up the lay observer might mistake this stone for sandstone. Could it be conjectured that the architect, Frank Thorp, chose trachyte for its timeless durability appropriate for a memorial but selected the colour for its complementarity with the Sydney landscape?

A description of its technical characteristics is largely omitted, in particular its engineering performance compared to bluestone and granite. Contemporary writers including James Nangle highlighted the tendency for occasional serious cracking and cautioned that it would be ‘unwise to use it for piers carrying critical loads’. Evidence for this unexplained behaviour is seen on one of the columns at 39 Hunter Street (formerly the Perpetual Trustee building).

The reasons for Bowral trachyte’s short life as a dimension stone are not fully explored. The 40 year period, from the late 1880s when it largely superseded bluestone through its hey-day up to the Great Depression, are thoroughly discussed. However, its subsequent decline into the 1960s when Modernist architecture found it difficult to incorporate into designs, is less well considered. Why did it fall out of favour? Was it the cost of quarrying and working a hard stone, or aesthetics? A cost comparison with say local granites might shed some light on this question. Moreover, the reasons for the closure of the quarry on Mount Gibraltar are not clearly elaborated. Was it the cost of the stone? Changing architectural fashions? Community opposition? Or a combination of all three? Perhaps there is a lesson here for other currently operating dimension stone quarries.

In Building and Ornamental Stones of Australia (1915), Baker nominates Mt Canobolas near Orange as another source of trachyte ‘in great repute amongst local builders’. Whilst a different stone (a true trachyte) for the sake of completeness, it is a minor pity that the opportunity was not taken to discuss and compare.

Despite its marginal omissions the authors are to be congratulated – this book is a mandatory addition to the library of anyone with more than a passing interest in the history of the quarrying
and use of a distinctive dimension stone; and made the more so because of its informative appendices. For those wanting a close-up view of Bowral trachyte and a focused description of the architecture of which the stone forms a part, the 'Trachyte walk in central Sydney', illustrated with a map in the inimitable, clear Bob Irving style, is an invaluable contribution to the promotion of the importance of this stone.

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