PART 2
Commentaries
and Vignettes

40 Years of the World Heritage Convention – Heritage in crisis?

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In 2012, Australia ICOMOS held a series of workshops across Australia, to celebrate the fortieth birthday of the World Heritage Convention. Members met in a variety of locations across the country to discuss the relevance of the World Heritage Convention in today’s world, and in particular, its importance to the affected local communities.

The Australian World Heritage Reference Group developed three questions for the workshops, to encourage discussion. The questions were:

- Is the UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage still a *convention for conservation*? If it isn’t, what is it now?

- What has Australia contributed to the international endeavour of World Heritage in the last 40 years? What could we offer the world in the next 10 years?

- Does the World Heritage Convention support communities in their endeavour to protect their heritage? Does the Convention and its operations provide benefits for communities?

A final one-day symposium was convened in Sydney on Friday, 16th of November 2012, as a forum to discuss these questions and develop a collective ‘Australian’ view on the topic. Approximately 100 ICOMOS members from across Australia attended the event. Facilitated by Olwen Beazley, papers were presented and the issues debated through vigorous audience participation.

ICOMOS International Vice-President, Kristal Buckley, proposed that the World Heritage Convention was still relevant, but perhaps was having a mid-life crisis. An annual check-up was required, to ensure its sustainable health and relevance for communities into the future. Several speakers questioned why heritage was no longer seen as important to government and parts of the community in Australia. It was agreed that there was a perception that heritage had been ‘sorted’ and therefore the Convention had ‘done its job’. Most agreed that despite this, many heritage places still needed to be recognised and cultural heritage values managed. The Convention had failed to adapt to suit the priorities of 21st century society. Richard MacKay considered that Australia needed to address climate change, Indigenous rights and mining pressures as a part of putting its ‘heritage house’ in order. Government leadership was required to promote best practice cultural heritage management.

The ‘heritage in crisis’ debate continued and Sheridan Burke noted that the Convention should focus on the inscription and also *protection* of places of Outstanding Universal Value. This may have been forgotten at the international level in recent times, in the rush to populate the World Heritage list. The Convention needed to be strengthened to actively encourage management of inscribed places – through Conservation Management Plans, realistic resources, community engagement and government agreement. Fewer listed places may then become the future ‘heritage at risk’.
The final question posed on the day focused on the community impact of World Heritage listing. Current ICOMOS Australia President, Liz Vines, opened the discussion, arguing that cultural sustainability is more important than fabric authenticity in some societies. Examples in Pingyao and Kaiping, China and Penang, Malaysia were used to illustrate the local community’s perception of heritage value, where the on-going renewal of a heritage place was necessary for cultural reasons.

It was agreed by many that ‘grass-roots’ style community campaigns were the most sustainable in the journey towards heritage listing, giving the community ownership of World Heritage Convention nominations and post-inscription management of sites. If the community leads the nomination, they were in the best position to benefit from listing, as they stand as an intrinsic part of the Outstanding Universal Value of the place. This may also be the key to the reinvigoration of the heritage debate in Australia. If cultural value is reinforced at a community level, governments may then also engage in the debate.

In his summary of the 2012 Symposium, Steve Brown noted that we should ‘never waste a good crisis’! If the World Heritage Convention was not as relevant today as it was 40 years ago, Australia should refocus the intent of the Convention at the community level and offer regional support, encourage community engagement and promote the approach on the international stage as a way forward for the next 40 years.