A charter for all seasons: the Burra Charter in an Asia-Pacific context

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As time goes by, the status of the Burra Charter with its modifications as a basis for cultural heritage conservation practice in Australia has become well established as an exemplar. The Charter enjoys a high regard and is widely applied. It presents a philosophical background to the concept of heritage conservation as well as offering a *modus operandi* for the conservation management planning process. The document nicely balances the two without being heavy-handed or proselytising and it does so in language that is accessible. Of some note is the fact that the Charter was the first to be conceived and written for a specific country application, and a non-European country at that, after the Venice Charter of 1964.

Whilst building on the ideals of the Venice Charter, the Australian document from the beginning avoided the somewhat cloyingly moralistic tones of the Preamble of the Venice Charter and pre-occupation with ancient monuments, although it must be acknowledged that the Venice document did refer to the settings – urban and rural – of architectural works. Nevertheless, a down-to-earth approach has characterised the Burra Charter in its various edited forms culminating in the 1999 version and the consistent concern for places as opposed to special architectural works. This more catholic view of heritage in turn opened the way for the inclusion of ordinary places and cultural landscapes under the heritage umbrella. This has particularly suited the Australian context.

It is my view that the above factors in large measure explain why there has been a growing interest in the Australian document in the Asia-Pacific region. Acceptance of the Charter could not have taken place without the influence of Australian practitioners and academics who undertake work in the Asia-Pacific region and their reference to the charter, but it is critical to be aware that such reference is not presented in the form of the Burra Charter being the infallible document, universally applicable. Rather it is my experience that the charter is presented as a *modus operandi* particularly apt to the Australian cultural context which has some abilities to transfer to other cultures.

In particular it is the format and organisation that has transfer options as does the pivotal importance of significance. Significance as a human value is a concept that transcends cultural boundaries. It applies to tangible physical forms and to the intangible values people link with heritage places and objects through knowing about the interaction of events, people and places: that is to meanings and values of places and objects whether they be based on collective traditions and memory, personal memory, or simply knowing and feeling. What Kevin Lynch elegantly called the ‘sense of the stream of time.’

Whilst significance may sometimes be a slippery term it does have the capacity to resonate across cultural boundaries in spite of the odd claim by James Simpson, a speaker from Scotland at a recent National Trust conference in Sydney, that the weakness with the Burra Charter is its reliance on cultural significance. He suggested people may not understand the term. Contrary to this point of view is the palpable connection between significance and intangible values that is critical to interest in the Burra Charter in Asia-Pacific countries as focus on intangible values and diversity of living heritage in those countries mounts. The case of the Indonesian World Heritage site of Borobudur is just one example.

Borobudur was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1991 with the site boundary tightly drawn around Candi Borobudur. Candi Borobudur, built circa AD 800 is a magnificent stepped-pyramid building consisting of nine terraces and the largest Buddhist monument in Indonesia. It stands in the centre of the fertile and richly watered Kedu Plains in Central Java flanked to the south by the jagged Menoreh Hills and to the east and north from Mount Merapi by a series of volcanic peaks linked by an undulating ridge. The whole setting is a gigantic amphitheatre with Borobudur standing in the middle on a low hill creating a memorable and evocative effect. The landscape ensemble is a vast outdoor museum of theatrical proportions assumed to represent a mandala. The shape of Candi Borobudur itself mirrors the volcanic peaks. The sight of the monument rising out of the landscape is awe-inspiring. Its presence in this landscape suggests an association between the monument and its setting that is rich in Buddhist meaning with Hindu overtones. Since inscription it has become clear that a close relationship between the surrounding living landscape and people through time mirrors the relationship of the monument with its surrounding landscape. This has raised the issue of whether the listed boundary should be extended to include the cultural landscape within the concept of the idea of place rather than just monument; it was the focus of discussion at a UNESCO Experts’ Meeting in July 2003 at which Australia was represented.

In looking at the transfer of a way of working between countries it is necessary to consider the question of whose values are we addressing and whose heritage is it? In the Asia-Pacific context it is critical that western conservation canons are not imposed imperiously on these cultures. The tendency of the practices of international organisations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, ICOM, ICCROM to lay down global approaches is a powerful one. As Logan suggests they have introduced ‘international standards for professional practice’ – “world best practice” – in the cultural heritage field as well as influencing thinking in those fields in less direct ways’. But they also, as he indicates, stand accused of ‘imposing a common stamp on culture across the world and their policies creating a logic of global cultural uniformity [by seeking] to impose standards of “good behaviour” onto Member States and other states’.

One outcome that universality of practice and imposition of standards can cause is that local values may be overwhelmed. This may be exacerbated by the education of practitioners outside Asian countries returning with western-inculcated information systems. In this connection the expansion of heritage education programs in the Asia-Pacific region is
welcome. There is a need to ensure that a move to uniformity is questioned on these programs and that students are challenged to think locally as well as being aware of global trends and practice. The latter is important because standards set by international agencies have improved professional standing of cultural heritage management. Nevertheless some authors over the past ten years have criticised cultural globalisation paralleled with a view that cultural relativism privileging local communities is more equitable than global standardisation. Edward Said was influential in building an intellectual framework for such ideas and the postmodern/cultural relativism critique of the high art/high aesthetics approach to heritage conservation. Documents such as the Australian Burra Charter try to avoid such an approach, but the inclusion of aesthetic value leaves lingering doubts for me. 7

Under ‘aesthetic value’ the Charter refers to criteria to do with sensory perception: form, scale, colour, texture and material of the fabric. In this connection it may be confused with the western history of aesthetics, particularly the eighteenth-century notion of aesthetic being equated with beauty and good taste thereby maintaining a high art/high aesthetic architectural imperative. It is claimed that the 1999 version deals better with intangible values and place meaning. The charter may certainly be used to address these matters, but it takes skill and determination to adapt it.

Aesthetic concerns for me are equally those dealing with experience and this can and does cover the ordinary everyday places that we may not usually refer to as beautiful. They are the places imbued for many through experience with a sense of belonging and sense of place, where knowledge of ways of doing things is critical. This sense of aesthetic value has a resonance in Asia where traditional skills and ways of doing things as well as the work itself are valued equally with fabric. Conversely aesthetic value can be significant where it is expressed in architectural or landscape design terms as an achievement of a recognised high order of excellence: examples would include parts of the Grand Palace complex in Bangkok or the Taj Mahal in India.

Sullivan and Pearson similarly indicate concerns that the Burra Charter, after earlier revisions to the 1988 version, still encouraged undue focus on maintaining historic fabric, particularly in relation to its description of conservation practice. The 1999 version of the Charter partially maintains this emphasis, reflecting its parent in the Venice Charter and the western dogma of authenticity of historic fabric. Nevertheless the Burra Charter has shown itself capable of, and suitable for, reference to developing heritage planning and management approaches in Asia-Pacific countries. It has been a major reference point for the Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China (China ICOMOS), for the emerging Hoi An Protocols and most recently as a tool to assist in assembling a charter in India.

The China Principles were drawn up in co-operation with the Australian Heritage Commission and the Getty Conservation Institute (California, USA). They take the Burra Charter approach of identification and conservation of values and American experience to create a coherent set of guidelines specifically for China, meeting the needs of an Asian culture. This is recognised in the way heritage values are described. Of particular note is that the Chinese document is presented as professional guidelines which sit firmly within the existing framework of laws and regulations relating to the conservation of heritage sites. They therefore are seen as providing guidance for conservation practice as well as the main criteria for evaluating results. The Principles document is in two parts. The first part consists of 38 Articles. The second part is a Commentary on the Principles under 16 headings covering such matters as what conditions must be fulfilled for a site to be designated as a heritage site; retention of historic condition; social and economic benefits; assessment; conservation management plans; conservation processes; management, maintenance, and interpretation; restoration; reconstruction; treatment of setting; archaeological sites; commemorative sites.

The Charter focuses on establishment of significance through historical value, artistic value, and scientific value, once again underscoring the universal understanding of significance. Given my comments above on aesthetic value, notable in the Chinese document is the use instead of ‘artistic value’. This is seen as deriving from architectural arts including spatial composition, decoration, aesthetic form; landscape arts of cultural, urban, and garden landscapes, as well as vistas comprising ruins; sculptural and decorative arts; immovable sculptural works; creative processes and means of expression. The latter concept of processes and means of expression is well suited to an Asian way of thinking in that it acknowledges not just the work traditionally undertaken but also the skills involved as part of intangible values attached to places and objects. It is more satisfying in its scope than the word ‘aesthetic’. Two words expressing inherent fundamental cultural heritage values are ‘authenticity’ and ‘setting’. In particular, authenticity may have different nuances in Asian cultures to western-based cultures, hence its notable inclusion in the China Principles. In the glossary authentic/authenticity literally mean true + fact/real. Article 23 proposes that artistic value derives from historic authenticity and section 2.3.1 that historical value derives inter alia from how a site authentically reflects historical reality. A synonym for setting in the glossary is landscape. It presumably embraces the notion of cultural landscape reflecting how and why people have shaped their landscape or environment according to their ideologies. Article 24 directs that the setting—reflecting significant events and activities—of a heritage site must be conserved. Here there are comparisons with the Burra Charter where setting means the area around a place and may include the visual catchment (Article 1.12). A guide to Treatment of the Setting is set out in Section 14 of the Principles and forms the basis for good site planning at heritage sites.

The import of authenticity connects with the Asian approach to renewal of physical fabric. This is where replacement of fabric is acceptable because the significance of the place resides primarily in its continued spiritual meaning and symbolic value related to everyday use rather than pre-eminence of the fabric itself. It is expressed by Wei and Aass in the following commentary:

Consequently, in the field of conservation of monuments such as Qufu, the Forbidden City or Cheng De, the allowing of continuous repairs or even rebuilding all respect this concentration on the spirit of the original monument. Although the physical form may change, the spirit and purpose of the original is not only preserved as a continuity, but can be enhanced through contributions of succeeding generations.

The concern for fabric and conflicting cultural views was evident in a recent visit (March 2004) to New Delhi by an AusHeritage group holding a workshop with INTACH to
discuss options for a charter applicable to India. On a site visit to the Qutub Minar, the group was shown how current restoration work on the tower has seen some of the sandstone blocks replaced either for reasons of cracking and damage or for cosmetic reasons. The latter caused considerable discussion and dissenting views amongst Indian participants on the acceptability of replacing stone that is not damaged. Replacement for visual reasons raises the contesting arguments of whether fabric should be replaced for such a reason or whether this is part of the non-western tradition of treating places. One view is that the spirit of the place lives on regardless of fabric change and that the input of traditional skills in the replacement is itself part of that spirit.

At Borobudur a similar dilemma presents itself with the cracking and deterioration of some of the bas-reliefs. Cracks are injected with a mix of epoxy resin and sand to maintain the original fabric. Yet around the region there are traditional stone masons carving stone images in the timeless tradition. Should the approach be to allow new bas-reliefs to be carved and inserted in the way Wei and Aass outline is the traditional eastern approach?

Such dilemmas are bound inextricably with notions of authenticity and this is where UNESCO's _Hoi An Protocols for Best Conservation Practice in Asia_, currently being finalised, are relevant. The Protocols follow _The Nara Document on Authenticity_ (International ICOMOS 1994) which aimed to challenge conventional thinking in the conservation field. It acknowledges the framework provided by the World Heritage Committee's desire to apply the test of authenticity in ways which accord full respect to the social and cultural values of all societies in relation to cultural properties proposed for the World Heritage List. The Nara Document is a tacit acknowledgement of the plurality of approaches to the issue of authenticity and that it does not reside primarily in Western notions of intact fabric. It is an attempt to explore an ethos that acknowledges local traditions and intangible values.

The Nara Document acknowledges the need to respect cultural diversity and all aspects of belief systems. It proposes that authenticity judgements may be linked to a variety of information sources. These may include _form and design_, _materials and substance_; _use and function_; _traditions and techniques_; _location and setting_; _spirit and feeling_. The Document points out that use of these sources permits elaboration of specific artistic, historic, social, and scientific dimensions of a cultural heritage place. Nevertheless it has been misused within Asia to suit nationalist ideals (which are just as imperial as earlier Eurocentric or Americanised ones) possibly because of its generalised nature. It made a virtue of being non-specific.

The draft _Hoi An Protocols_ document promulgated in 2000 by UNESCO is an attempt to rectify the woolly nature of the Nara Document. The sub-title of the protocols "Professional guidelines for assuring and preserving the authenticity of heritage sites in the context of the cultures of Asia" is an important statement of the recognition of diverse and enduring cultural identities in Asian countries. The protocols recognise the impact of tourism in Asia and effects on restoration and presentation of heritage places for tourism purposes. The document includes a series of definitions which draw considerably on the Burra Charter. The inclusion of a section on Asian Issues is welcome, particularly in the mention of indigenous and minority cultures and the need to find ways of interpreting sites within an appropriate context as a way of engaging visitors.

The protocols are an attempt to ‘underscore the inter-relatedness of practices for the conservation of the physical heritage sites, the intangible heritage and cultural landscapes’. Whilst they have potential to be a valuable guide, the separation of cultural landscapes from archaeological sites, historic urban sites/heritage groups; and monuments, buildings and structures in the section ‘Site Specific Methodologies for Asia’ is confusing. Indeed it seems misleading to me, in that cultural landscapes are the overall umbrella under which everything else sits. Nevertheless the efficacy of the Burra Charter and the availability of its cross reference to Asia-Pacific needs is clear in the formation of the Protocols.

In March 2004 AusHeritage and INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) held a joint workshop in New Delhi to exchange experiences, concepts and practice in heritage conservation and to explore preparing an outline for a draft charter for use in India. Professor Menon for INTACH indicated that there is a need to evolve a charter that takes into account Indian conditions. And it is also important to look not only at monumental heritage, but also cultural, intangible and civic heritage. The Chairman of INTACH, S.K. Mishra, indicated that there would be discussions on the format of the Burra Charter and how it is applied within consideration of the need for an Indian document, conservation categories and methodologies, conservation legislation and conservation management plans.

Following presentations on the role of charters internationally and that of the Burra Charter within an Australian context, and presentations on the comprehensive approach to heritage conservation and planning in India, a draft document outlining an approach for an Indian charter was prepared. It follows headings which have connections with the format of the Burra Charter:

- **Heritage Conservation Challenges facing Indian practice.**
- **Structure of the Charter:**
  - Preamble
  - Context including defining cultural significance/knowledge systems
  - Conservation principles
  - Conservation processes and process
  - Implementation mechanisms and methods

Under the context there is recognition that Indian society is the product of a complex history which has created a variety of heritages including historical monuments; landscapes and sites, vernacular heritage and sacred forest; sacred cultural districts; traditional building knowledge systems; traditional water systems; Sufi pilgrimage networks; tribal and rural territorial identities; traditional building technologies etc. Values informing cultural significance, which is regarded as central to the concept and practice of conservation management, are preliminarily noted as historic(al), associational, scientific, social.

The spirit of collaborative initiatives such as the ones helping to define the China Principles and the forthcoming Indian document are important steps in building regional co-operation in the burgeoning cultural heritage services industry. It is to be hoped also that this assists in building stronger ties between Australia and its Asia-Pacific neighbours and cross-cultural understanding. There is little doubt that the Burra Charter has played, and continues to play, a significant role.

In conclusion it is important to point out that good practice in conservation management depends in the end on more than definitions and outlines for conservation management plan.
formulation found in charters. An essential aspect for successful comprehensive management of heritage resources, visitors, circulation, parking, interpretative facilities is sound site planning. It should not be seen as separate from the conservation management process. However, site planning is a process often not well understood in heritage management practice; it calls for expertise able to respond to the _genius loci_ of a site or place as well as understanding cultural heritage management issues. Many sites around Asia, for example Borobudur quoted above, are compromised by poor site planning and over-use by visitors. Ancillary facilities as car parks, visitor centres and facilities are often poorly sited and there is abrupt visual and physical intrusion from adjacent land-uses distracting to the setting and enjoyment of the heritage place.

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**Endnotes**