Aboriginal sites and the Burra Charter

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People working in Australian Aboriginal studies were active in the drafting of the Burra Charter though, significantly, this did not initially include Aboriginal people. There is no doubt that sites relating to the living Aboriginal occupation of Australia were intended to be included in the initial definition of cultural heritage but the emphasis in the conservation of these sites was initially on their scientific (research) and/or aesthetic, and historic significance rather than their social value to contemporary Aboriginal society. Gradually of course this attitude has changed. The revised Burra Charter is much more sympathetic to social values including spiritual values, associations and meanings. The 2004 edition of the Illustrated Burra Charter emphasises this, as does the Australia ICOMOS Statement on Indigenous Cultural Heritage. Today Australia ICOMOS has Aboriginal membership and the social significance of Aboriginal sites and their value to their traditional custodians has almost universal primacy within cultural heritage conservation circles.

However along with these welcome changes of emphasis there has been an ongoing debate about to what extent the Burra Charter or Burra Charter processes are appropriate and adequate instruments or methodologies for assessing the significance and conserving the values of Aboriginal sites.

Some members of Australia ICOMOS have argued over the years that the Burra Charter was not designed to deal with the full suite of indigenous values and that its application should be limited to sites which are connected in some way with Western traditions of significance. Other commentators, including members of the Aboriginal community, have argued that the application of the Burra Charter to Aboriginal heritage places and culture is a form of cultural imperialism, or at least a form of postcolonial imperitence or insensitivity and an attempt to co-opt Aboriginal heritage as part of the construction of an Australian national identity.

As I have discussed in more detail elsewhere the concept of heritage conservation, and our heritage practice, as reflected in the Venice and the Burra Charter are inevitably a product of Western culture and arise from Western thought and tradition (Sullivan in press). The processes are essentially artificial, a product of the West’s attempts to conserve those things and places which the massive disruptions, themselves a product of modern Western society have created. Decisions about the conservation of elements of the past were ‘in traditional society’ more organic, more integrated and less self-conscious.

Though the first version of the Burra Charter began with the definition of cultural significance which we know so well, the rest of it read as though the primary significance resided in the fabric, and at least initially the emphasis of most practitioners was on fabric conservation—a necessary emphasis at the time but also a concern of the materialist West not necessarily shared by other cultures. In these circumstances a good fit with traditional Aboriginal society and its ways of dealing with its heritage was not so readily apparent. Some of these issues were discussed in Historic Environment in 1983 (Sullivan 1983).

But the processes of the Burra Charter subvert the notions of western cultural hegemony which we see clearly in the Venice Charter. The most revolutionary aspect of the Burra Charter – the way in which it differs most radically from the Venice Charter – is the fact that all its prescribed actions derive from and depend upon our assessment of significance (Sullivan 2003). Its framers inserted the concept of cultural significance and Australian practitioners have gradually developed and deepened this concept, so that it is no longer fabric-bound. This makes it eminently suitable for dealing with a range of cultural places, cultural attitudes and values. It is the reason why the Chinese are able to use Burra Charter processes to make culturally appropriate decisions about ways of conserving Chinese heritage. Their methods of conservation may vary markedly from our own – and this is appropriate in that notions of the significance of place may also so vary (Sullivan in press).

With respect to Aboriginal sites and the process of significance assessment there are two aspects which I would like to pursue further. Firstly, it seems to me that our experience in using Burra Charter methodology to assess Aboriginal places in the context of Aboriginal culture has influenced our conservation practice more generally. Secondly, I think we can now see more clearly when use of the Burra Charter might be appropriate in dealing with Aboriginal sites.

Our understanding of the importance of non-tangible values, made possible by the concept of significance assessment, has taken some time to develop (and indeed is far from adequate in many aspects of our practice). There are quite a few early examples of practitioners wrestling with the assessment of values at Aboriginal sites and Aboriginal values at sites with historic European significance which have contributed to this process. The celebrated case of the Kimberley Rock Art repainting raised starkly the question of aesthetic and historic versus social and spiritual value for the contemporary Aboriginal community as well as bringing sharply into play the question of legal versus moral and traditional custodianship. The hotly debated issue was whether the Australian Heritage Commission should object to a Commonwealth grant to enable repainting of the sites by traditional owners on the grounds that such repainting jeopardised the aesthetically and scientifically important original Rock Art (see Bowdler 1988 and Sale 1992). Later the Swan Brewery gave us another example of the contrast between the European historic and the Aboriginal spiritual values of a site which was iconic in both cultures. Conservation of the Brewery would preserve important historic heritage values but further damage and desecrate an Aboriginal sacred site consisting of a spring and its associated ancestral beings. Consideration of the issues surrounding this site led to the development of the Australia ICOMOS Code of Ethics of Coexistence in the Conservation of Significant Places (1998).

A perhaps less well-known but excellent example is the analysis carried out into the mid-1980s by Lewis and Rose of the Rock Art of the Victoria River district in the Northern Territory. This survey arose from Rose’s anthropological Ph.D. work and Lewis’s survey, documentation and assessment of the rock art of the region. The rock art is part of the living culture of the people of the Victoria River area. The rock art province lies between the Kimberley to the West and Arnhem...
Land to the east and contains spectacular artistic elements with cultural and stylistic relationships to both its neighbours. The art is of great aesthetic, historic and research value. Concern for the art had led to initial suggestions about and attempts at its physical conservation, threatened as it was by natural processes, European incursion and the disruption of Aboriginal society. Lewis and Rose, responding to these issues, analysed the art, worked with the traditional custodians, and produced a report which remains a model of Burra Charter process (Lewis and Rose 1998).

Their work revealed and explicated a number of issues which have become crucial to our present increasingly sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the Burra Charter processes. Firstly, the gathering of knowledge and information prior to assessment is shown to be a complex and many-layered process. Questions which arose for Lewis and Rose include the manner of consultation, the ambiguity of responses, the issue of rights to knowledge, and most profoundly the potential effect of consultation and recording of knowledge on the significance of the place and the lives of its custodians.

In Dreaming sites (many of which are also art sites) numerous factors of cultural significance converge. Past present and future converge: most of the images are construed as the very presence of the Dreaming Beings. Many sites are controlled through gender restrictions which apply to physical access, or to access to information, or to both categories. Local groups and the links between groups and countries converge, as the Dreaming of a particular place is always linked with Dreamings from other places. Categories of custodian and stranger converge as information about the place is in the hands of a set of people who are broader than the group of custodians defined on the basis of affiliation to country. Generations converge as the sites are focal points for instructing new generations of people (1998: 65).

Lewis and Rose also discuss the potential results of consultation and recording of knowledge. In a living culture such as that of the people of the Victoria River district, the elders use and vary the 'meanings' of the site to interpret them in ways relevant to present needs and to changing Aboriginal society. Any attempt to record the 'true' version could have profound consequences for the cultural significance of the sites:

We analysed the relationship between past and present as one in which the oldest and most knowledgeable people controlled the interface between Dreaming time and the present. We stated that it is precisely the flexibility and ambiguity of interpretation with respect to preserved texts such as 'art' which enable people to maintain an authority which is accountable to the needs of living people. If authorised versions of the dreaming were to pass into the public domain via written records maintained by Europeans both the authority of the senior people and the living relevance of the Dreaming could be irreparably undermined (1998: 68). These important issues will resonate with contemporary Burra Charter practitioners. While there are particular complexities involved in consultation with Aboriginal communities many of the issues outlined above often arise in significance consultation processes in mainstream communities.

Secondly, our growing understanding of heritage as a physical, intellectual and emotional landscape, rather than the pinpoints on the landscape which constitute particular sites or particular fabric within those sites, has been deeply influenced by our learnings of Aboriginal perceptions of 'Country':

As the Dreaming Beings walked, they left marks of their travels and their activities on the earth... for the most part the shape of the earth was made by the actions of Dreaming Beings. In the bed of the Victoria River at Pigeon Hole there are long troughs in the bedrock which are defined as the marks made by the dreaming women who danced there. These marks are similar in shape (but not in size) to the marks women now make as they dance. The earth can be seen as a living record of the past; she bears on her 'body' the evidence of what has happened (1998: 46, my emphasis).

There is no necessary distinction between what Westerners referred to as art and all the other marks and things which are Dreaming presence (1998: 49).

Thirdly, Lewis and Rose clearly demonstrate the necessary link between their assessment of cultural significance and the appropriate conservation strategies for the rock art in its cultural landscape.

Under the heading of 'cultural significance' in the Guidelines to the Burra Charter (1984) the following statement appears: 'the assessment of cultural significance and the preparation of a statement of cultural significance,... are essential prerequisites to making decisions about the future of a place' (1.3).

In this report we have examined the cultural significance of Victoria River District rock art to the Aboriginal custodians. We have concluded that the significance of most of the 'art' lies in the fact that it is understood to be living Dreaming presence. Most of the art is believed to be alive, conscious and self-sustaining. It is a living presence, in ordinary time, of the Dreaming Beings who created the moral order which constitutes the cosmos as a living system. We have shown that Aboriginal people's relationship to the dreaming presence encompasses the social values listed in the Guidelines to the Burra Charter... as spiritual, political, national or other cultural sentiment.

In assessing this significance we have indicated that in Victoria River Aboriginal societies information is managed so as to preserve the integrity of country and people as living units, and enable a philosophy of immutable Dreaming Law to be kept accountable to the needs of living people. We had indicated that actions which breach the integrity of the relationship between people and country have the potential to become matters of life and death. We have also indicated that physical intervention in the preservation of rock art by Europeans, unless specifically and voluntarily requested by the custodians, has the potential to undermine the living significance of the art both in the present and in the future (1998: 74).

Lewis and Rose's concern is to point out that the initial instinct of researchers and heritage workers - to intervene to protect the physical fabric of this beautiful and important corpus of art does not reflect its full significance and can in fact be counterproductive. They suggest that, instead, crucial to the ongoing significance of this cultural landscape is the provision of access to traditional custodians to enable them to keep the sites alive within the culture and to continue enriching, changing and mediating their sacred and political meanings. Once again, this assessment has many parallels in a modern heritage practice in which we seek to conserve traditional use...
and association rather than or in addition to fabric or form.

This example of significance assessment clearly shows that the significance assessment process can be very powerful in both assisting us to understand a wide range of cultural values and to make appropriate conservation choices based on this. It also illustrates the way in which our understanding of Aboriginal cultural processes has immensely enriched and deepened our own practice in a number of ways.

This discussion however does not really deal with the question as to when or whether it is appropriate to apply the Burra Charter to Aboriginal sites. As I have said above, Aboriginal people have often objected to the use of the Burra Charter as a form of patronage or cultural imperialism which is unnecessary. For example it could be argued that the analysis of significance carried out by Lewis and Rose was not required by the custodians or the Aboriginal community to whom of the significance of the cultural landscape was manifest, and in this sense can be seen to be impeccable but redundant. However here it is necessary to look at the reason why the assessment was carried out - it was not carried out to explain the site to Aboriginal people, but to convince well-meaning European researchers and heritage workers that the demonstrated significance of the site required a different response to the one which was initially planned. An explanation of cultural significance in terms which Europeans can appreciate assists heritage practitioners generally to understand the variety and complexity of concepts of Aboriginal cultural heritage and to interpret these values to the wider community. Since Aboriginal people and European who work with them to conserve their culture need to operate effectively at the nexus between Aboriginal and European culture, Burra Charter processes can be seen as an effective tool in their repertoire and have been used as such by Aboriginal site officers throughout Australia. Recently, Aboriginal rangers working with the traditional custodians developed a cultural heritage conservation plan for Uluru - Kata Tjuta National Park using the Burra Charter methodology (Uluru-Kata Tjuta Board of Management and Parks Australia 2002).

Additionally the Burra Charter methodology is also very useful and perhaps essential in situations where the site has European as well as Aboriginal values - in these instances the Burra Charter processes have been used to validate and then explain both types of values and have helped in the development of a conservation policy which respects both.

A final example and probably the most common use of the Burra Charter for Aboriginal sites is its widespread use in the assessment of sites of historic significance to Aboriginal people and to the wider community - the missions, settlements and town border camps, the institutions and bureaucratic centres, the sites which commemorate important political milestones, such as the Wave Hill Walk-Off Site and the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. All of which make up an important part of the tragic, rich and well-remembered post-European settlement history of Aboriginal Australians and are an important part of the heritage of all Australians.

References
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