An interlude: the seeding of Burra

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To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die.
Ecclesiastes iii.1

It began in April 1978, amongst the gold dust of Beechworth and Yackandandah. A murmur of separate voices, that grew to a resounding chorale. Earlier really, on Sydney’s Observatory Hill, where I met Australia’s brand new ICOMOS committee, brimming with professional energy and experience. Mine was different, straight from work in strife-torn Chile, so David Yencken’s invitation to convene the first national conference was unexpected – but captivating.

The essence of the brief was that Australia’s cultural estate was ‘downgraded, disregarded and neglected’, and suffering from inappropriate restoration. It was time to summon experienced conservation elders, from across disciplines and distance, to confer. We wanted to bridge professional fields, physical domains and layers of time and we reviewed the expertise across the country. We were looking for a common language and professional standards. I invented the topic: The Tide of Australian Settlement – conserving the physical evidence.

The rally call went out. Every bed in Beechworth was filled. Dr Ernest Connally, Secretary-General of ICOMOS, opened the conference and, in closing, interestingly chose to address the question of the Venice Charter and debate over its revision. Working sessions concentrated on research needs and conservation policies. Introductory speakers were academics, case studies spanned all states, and we all went out and explored the countryside – ours being a tactile, as well as intellectual, field.

The Conference report contains several jewels, the foremost being recommendations to prepare an interpretive statement on a comprehensive, inter-disciplinary approach to heritage conservation, with a staged process for the work. These recommendations conceived what was, after much labour, to become the Burra Charter. David Saunders’ opening words were less serious. For more than twenty years we have lived with that fine Charter – conceived in Beechworth 1978 and Goulburn 1979 and born in Burra – and lived with its wide application, its amendments and guidelines too. It is blessed with clarity of process. Like Jim Kerr’s Conservation Plan, the Burra Charter sets a foundation that is readily updated. The system is in place; the base work complete.

Can we now move on? Australia is almost overburdened with heritage legislation, bureaucracies, refined codes. Is it a conservation Paradise? Far from it; this country has profound environmental and cultural problems. Can we identify them? The professions within ICOMOS are aware of custodial responsibilities and continue to hold exploratory Beechworth-like conferences. And we know the limits to applied doctrinal regulation in an imperfect world. What skills must we add? How are we to nurture, more effectively, the cultural significance of this land? New thoughts, beginning now.

Endnotes
3 ‘I have been called many things before but I have not been called a rapporteur, so I looked at a French dictionary and found it means sneak or telltale… The second or alternative meaning is a reporter or stenographer.’