Associative value and the Revised Burra Charter: a personal perspective

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For me, Launceston will always be associated with the cold. This is probably unfair and I know that it is a splendid city, but my first substantive experience of Launceston occurred during the 'Age of Redundancy' Australia ICOMOS Conference in May 1994. The event was held at the Railway Institute within the Launceston Railway Workshops and, whether it was the hardy Tasmanian organisers, or an unexpected blast of icy Antarctic air, it was definitely freezing and my teeth chattered the whole time. This conference was organised by an energetic team of ICOMOS members, including the late Martin Davies. A related happy memory is of the short holiday that Martin and I enjoyed with our respective partners during the same trip. He died the following year, in Antarctica, so the memories are special, the association is clear and the meaning is profound, at least in my mind.

Places have different meanings and associations for different people. Other ICOMOS members will perhaps recall the 'Burra Charter Review Breakfast' held early on a cold Saturday morning as part of the same event. The scarves, beanies, gloves and frosted breath belied an animated and even heated discussion which concluded that the Charter required a major review and a significant amount of change... but it would be more than five years before the Revised Burra Charter was adopted in November 1999.

The story of what happened to the Burra Charter between the Launceston workshop breakfast and its formal adoption in a new form, years later, provides an interesting parable about the associative value of the Charter. One of the key changes made over that period was to broaden the expressed understanding of cultural significance to overtly include concepts of 'use', 'association', and 'meaning'. This evolution reflected a maturity of understanding in the community of heritage practitioners in Australia and a move towards holistic conceptualisation of the values of place, rather than a more traditional narrow focus on fabric and history. However, during the course of the review itself, an interesting phenomenon occurred: the vision and perception of the small group charged with carriage of the review seemed to run ahead of the wider membership to the extent that some of the associative values and meaning of the Charter itself were threatened by the level of change. The delicious irony is that the process itself illustrated some of the key principles of the Charter: to identify what is significant and seek to retain it and to do as much as necessary, but as little as possible in order to achieve this!

Nearly three years passed before I attended another workshop discussion on the Charter: this time to discuss a revised draft dated July 1997 which, among other things, used the word 'caring' in some places instead of the word 'conservation'. In the intervening period much had happened. Following a meeting in Sydney in December 1994 ('Setting Social Value'), the Executive of Australia ICOMOS had appointed a working committee in early 1995 to identify key issues that would help the Charter to reflect conservation practices in the 1990s including:

- understanding and assessing social values; and
- developing and articulating the conservation planning process.

These matters were at the core of a wider list of issues discussed in Canberra in 1995 at a meeting called 'A Thorough Burra Charter: Revising the Burra Charter and its Guidelines'. Written submissions were sought, and there were ensuing discussions at other ICOMOS events, including the Conservation Planning Forum: 'Designs on the Conservation Plan' in June 1995 and the Australia ICOMOS conference: "Moving On" at Charters Towers in September 1995.

The review process was conducted under the stewardship of a small working group, guided, motivated and, at some times, compelled by David Young. The members were Jeanette Hope, Chris Johnston, Duncan Marshall, Richard Morrison, Ian Stapleton and Meredith Walker. Over 1996 and 1997, the group met at least seven times, usually devoting their entire weekend. The theme of 'cold' appears to have continued, with meetings occurring in Canberra or in unheated venues such as the Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney. Review of ICOMOS Newsletters (Volumes 15 and 16) shows that both ICOMOS Executive and membership were well-informed of the process and progress during this period.

The outcome was a highly evolved draft document, which included major new concepts and principles, such as:

- a move away from the focus on fabric as the main basis of cultural significance;
- recognition that the use of a place and the activities that occur there are part of its cultural significance;
- similar recognition that meanings and intangible qualities are part of significance;
- introduction of the term 'caring';
- clarity in explanation of the conservation planning process – including a summary flow chart;
- recognition of the co-existence of cultural values and potential for shared responsibility;
- acknowledgement of associated people and places;
- provision for interpretation based on significance; and
- a revised philosophical preamble.

Following consideration by the Australia ICOMOS Executive in July 1997 and a mail-out to members in August 1997, 75 submissions were received – many expressing concern at the extent of change – a type of concern that Australian heritage practitioners are used to expressing to developers and government! My submission, for example, cheekily noted that:

the level of change is too great. Might I suggest, somewhat facetiously, that the redrafting has itself not followed two essential principles; ie: it has not identified and retained the significant elements of the previous Charter – thereby losing its fundamental essence and, secondly, it has not followed the cautionary principle it advocates

Responses varied in their specific concerns, but a strong common theme in the submissions reflected a reluctance to adopt the term 'caring', a sense of loss at the removal of the...
definitions and, overwhelmingly, a strong desire to retain the overall design and character of the document. While not expressed in these terms at the time, the membership seems to have been concerned predominantly with the associative values of the ‘old’ Charter, rather than objecting to the proposed introduction of key new concepts, principles and processes.

The stage was set for an engaging and enthralling discussion at the ‘Managing Heritage in the Next Millennium’ conference, arranged in Burra for November 1997 with the hope and expectation of the Revised Charter (July 1997 version) being adopted. This discussion, too, was memorable – the members of the working party each bedecked in a T-shirt proclaiming ‘actually, I’m rather fond of fabric...’; each T-shirt becoming customised during the event with amusing or thought-provoking graffiti reflecting the wearer’s particular interest or perspective. Those T-shirts and the sense of single purpose and camaraderie that they conveyed remain a strong memory of the Burra event, as does the animated, emotional and stimulating Burra Charter discussion. It was fantastic!

If it did nothing else, the circulation of the July 1997 draft caused ICOMOS members to stop, reflect and think about what they value, what they do and how they do it. The debate was challenging, thought-provoking and highly productive, even if disappointing for those who had come to it in the hope of a final outcome on the day. Despite the disparate opinions in the room, the acceptance of major philosophical change was strongly expressed, as was the desire to retain the ‘familiar look and feel’ including the definitions and the term ‘conservation’, used again as it had been used before.

The newly elected Executive Committee and working group returned from the meeting with substantial (and sometimes contradictory) feedback, a commitment to the need for change, but a clear message that the membership was fond of the fundamental structure and language of the existing Charter. The members of the working group indicated a willingness to continue to serve and recommended to the Executive Committee, in January 1998, that the review process should be continued. The Executive endorsed a new brief and provided a significant allocation from its scarce budgetary resources. The process resumed, the working party augmented by the addition of Ray Tonkin and Richard Mackay (perhaps as a reward for being so vocal at the Burra workshop discussion) with Australia ICOMOS Vice President David Logan also participating, to provide a direct link between working party and Executive.

The routine of weekend meetings recommenced and efforts focused on four key tasks:

- summarising and analysing the submissions received to make them accessible to Executive and membership;
- thoughtful identification of the target audience and ‘pitch’ for the revised document;
- preparation of a detailed critique of the existing Burra Charter on an article by article basis; and
- commencement of a process for involvement of Indigenous people.

This process too embodies a number of the principles from both original and revised Burra Charter. A more cautious approach was adopted, seeking to retain more and change less. The decisions were predicated on a thorough understanding and rigorous assessment of what was valuable. Mechanisms were established for involving associated people and a concept of considering multiple cultural values in a structural manner was included. Australia ICOMOS was applying its own wisdom to the change process for its arguably most important piece of cultural (intellectual) property.

Following completion of the submissions analysis, audience identification, critique and commencement of Indigenous consultation during the first part of 1998, the final stage of the Burra Charter review was completed during 1998 and 1999. The process for the final stage included circulation of the critique to the membership, providing a structured opportunity for both general and specific feedback and contributions, more weekends spent drafting, redrafting and fine-tuning both the structure and content of the Charter, separate State workshop discussions, ongoing reporting to both the Executive Committee and membership and, finally, circulation of a new draft Revised Burra Charter prior to the Australia ICOMOS Annual General Meeting held during the ‘Rural Heritage’ conference at Tocal in November 1999.

The working party contribution during this period was, as before, substantial, spurred on by the ever-energetic leadership of David Young and prolific and prodigious output of Duncan Marshall (not that it wasn’t a team effort). This time, the ‘look and feel’ were retained – to the point where individual members of the working party would insist that particular articles retain their same number in the new version. The definitions were back. ‘Caring’ was gone – although all those involved still cared a lot! A revised preamble was provided including an argument for conservation itself (‘Why Conserve?’). The addition of Article 1.2 provided for the first time an overarching obligation to conserve heritage places and recognition that conservation is part of good management. The title of the document was changed to reflect its application to all cultural heritage places, not only those that are being actively conserved.

But it was the same Charter. It looked the same – the column format, inclusion of definitions and explanatory notes and even the choice of fonts meant that it ‘felt’ like the much-loved version we had all embraced and used since its original adoption in 1979. For those who needed further convincing, the final page was a ‘conversion table’ providing comforting reassurance that long-favoured principles and special clauses were still there.

The adoption of the Charter at the Australia ICOMOS Annual General Meeting in November 1999 is now itself part of the history of Australia ICOMOS and heritage management in Australia. While the passage of further time is required for a reasonable, semi-objective measure of the success of the undertaking, all of the early indications are good. The Burra Charter continues to be widely accepted and used by both public and private sector throughout Australia.

With the evolution of heritage management practice in Australia and the advances in thinking and processes apparent in the 1990s, it was critical that the Charter undergo the major revisions foreshadowed over breakfast in that cold railway workshop in Launceston a decade ago. However, the imperative for change alone was not enough to convince the ICOMOS membership to accept the vision originally promoted by the Burra Charter working party – acceptance required less dramatic change: doing as much as necessary but as little as possible.