The Construction of Built Heritage:
A north European perspective on policies, practices and outcomes.
Edited by Angela Phelps, G.J. Ashworth and Bengt O.H. Johansson.

A cooperative venture by the geographers and heritage experts
at the universities of Nottingham Trent, UK, Göteborg, Sweden
and Groningen in the Netherlands, this book is an attempt to
provide a text book of case studies to support academic
courses in heritage management in Europe. As such it has
considerable relevance to the Australian student; the case
studies illuminate many of the issues encountered in heritage
management here. The title is a word play on the key theme of
the book: not only does it focus on the built heritage, it also
proposes that the preserved built environment is a
‘construction’ in that it is a result of processes of identification,
selection, protection and conservation that are dependent on
the cultural context of the period, but not generally the place,
in which they occur. It is concluded that the concerns that
underpin the resultant built heritage have international currency.

The book is arranged in two parts. The first covers the
historical and legal context of heritage protection in the UK, Sweden
and the Netherlands. A common connection is identified between
the instigation of heritage legislation and consciousness of
nationhood. Conflict surrounding the concept of collective
rights over privately owned heritage was part of the history in
each case, as in Australia. The second part comprises cases
studied ordered in four themes and introduced by the various
editors. The themes are heritage, identity and urban
regeneration; the heritage site as attraction; heritage as a
strategic policy option; and heritage and the restructuring of
symbolic places. As can be expected from the titles all themes
overlap to some extent in terms of the issues covered.

The first theme raises issues of heritage identification and
definition, focusing on ‘place identity’ and how that is firstly
identified and secondly maintained through regeneration
projects which involve the balancing of the aspirations of many
key players – local councils, community groups, individual
owners private and corporate, and government institutions.
The case studies highlight the need for extensive consultation
both on establishing what is important about a place and then
in determining conservation policy.

Authenticity is a key issue. Is it acceptable to remove earlier
restorations when the heritage place is used as an attraction
involving adaptive reuse? (In this case, remove the nineteenth
century from Wollaton Hall, which dates originally from the
sixteenth century.) Is it acceptable to construct a missing wing
in accordance with the original plans and original methods?
(Here the question relates to twentieth-century construction at
an eighteenth-century villa in Sweden – we have the same
issue at Melbourne’s incomplete Parliament House.) Should
extant fabric at a town site that has survived intact due to being
ignored by development be protected to the extent that it
restricts future development? Is this fabric more important than
that of a town destroyed through war, but which has been
‘authentically’ reconstructed?

In the case studies selected to illustrate the use of heritage for
social and economic regeneration, the focus is on the fact that
conservation is perennially under-funded, and that cocktails of
funding have to be put together to enable projects to proceed.
It’s a situation that is well-known in Australia. The argument that
heritage can be a strategic policy option, making use of
redundant properties for new business or tourism purposes to
revitalise communities is also well known here. The issues raised
by the case studies in relation to the limitations of tourism again
find an echo here. So does the need to rely on local customers
for heritage tourism in more obscure sites (Bolsover Castle in
England is one case study) and the more successful outcomes
achieved through a mixture of enterprises (such as described in
the Nieuweschans case study, where the possible role of
heritage in economic regeneration is recognised as only one of
options for this former fortress town). One of the most interesting
case studies in this section is the ironworks site of Forsvik in
Sweden, where conservation is being achieved through the
re-use of the premises for new manufacturing works including
moulds for iron casting, a smithy and boatbuilding – ‘the
combined preservation of authentic work and authentic
structures’ – as Johansson approvingly remarks.

The final section contains case studies related to the question
of whose heritage is being preserved. In Australia we have
come to realise that our post-1788 heritage sites can be seen
from at least two perspectives: Indigenous and European, and
sometimes many more, such as the European and Asian
migratory experience. The Construction of Built Heritage offers
case studies covering a broader context. Neglect of the
heritage of the slave trade in Liverpool; failure of a Swedish
museum to expose the injustice of European colonial
enterprise; the generational change in the way in which
heritage places are viewed (particularly those embedded in the
nation’s psyche such as the Westminster Abbey and
Parliament precinct in London); and the issues surrounding
presentation of Holocaust heritage are analysed in turn. As
Ashurst notes in relation to the memorialised ghetto of
Groningen-Folkingestraat, ‘the Jewish Holocaust in Europe is
not the only genocide to haunt human pasts’; this case study
highlights the tensions always present to a greater or lesser
degree between users and heritage.

The book concludes with a summing up by Ashworth, who
emphasises the lack of definitive answers to the questions
posed in the case studies. He particularly notes the changing
intellectual context of heritage protection and the relative
slowness of listing criteria and hence of heritage registers to
respond to this change. His proposal that the world ‘could be
seen as being in danger of being littered with the relics
heritages of past generations much of which now mean little to
temporary societies’ is no doubt designed to stimulate
discussion but is a depresssing concept for those working at the
registration/listing coal face. Certainly there is a need for
heightened awareness of the issues raised in this book – to that
end it is to be commended.

Susan Balderstone


Understanding ‘historic buildings and their landscapes’ is a prime objective of any heritage conservation program. Informed Conservation describes various principles, processes and analytical techniques to better understand the story and management of a heritage place. Published by English Heritage, the government heritage agency in England, it was developed by Head of Historic Environment Management, Kate Clark, an archaeologist and an Australian, with the Historical Analysis and Research Team.

Informed Conservation is aimed at conservation advisers and heritage practitioners, as well as those who own or manage heritage places. It covers the role of understanding in conservation; managing change; tailoring understanding to large projects; information for statutory casework; maintenance, repair and management; conservation and management planning; techniques for understanding historic buildings and their landscapes.

Clark describes the document as a set of guidelines specifically for England, noting that they may be of general use as broad principles in the rest of the United Kingdom. How useful are these guidelines to heritage practitioners elsewhere in the world? There is much that is helpful about how to deal with a heritage structure and its place but there are two barriers and some important gaps.

Barrier 1: Informed Conservation’s structure is confusing, as it moves back and forth from one aspect of heritage conservation to another. For example, the seven sections fall into three different topics: heritage philosophy, heritage legislative processes in England and legislative processes in English heritage system and analytical techniques; but they are not grouped together. The format makes it difficult to use the document as a step-by-step guide to heritage identification and significance assessment and consequent heritage conservation.

Barrier 2: Clark devises some brand new terminology, developed for want of other expressions to describe aspects of ‘informed conservatism’ (pers. comm. K. Clark). For example:

- Historic buildings and their landscapes: This is not a statutory term, but devised to stress the need to include the surrounding and other landscape context for a particular structure or place, rather than dealing only with the building itself. A more useful concept here might be cultural landscape.

- Understanding: This key term throughout the document is explained as involving the ‘forensic, archaeological analysis of the fabric of a building and its landscape.’ (p. 8) ‘Understanding’ is used instead of ‘research, investigation and analysis’ though it means techniques such as measured survey, documentary research, paint analysis etc, in order to understand heritage significance. Unfortunately this picture of understanding is exclusively fabric-based; it does not include the investigation of community heritage significance, such as local meanings and associations, or even aesthetic value.

- CoBRA – Conservation-based Research and Analysis: This acronym comprises the investigations necessary to understand the significance of a building and its landscape. Clark sees this skill as a professional discipline in its own right. (pers. comm.) Perhaps this is why the guidelines do not emphasise the need for a team approach to ‘CoBRA’, despite the multi-disciplinary techniques necessary.

Then there are gaps. Somewhat surprising is the lack of emphasis on the significance assessment process once a heritage place has been thoroughly investigated via the battery of CoBRA techniques. Informed Conservation misses the essential message of the Burra Charter that ‘the aim of conservation is to retain the cultural significance of a place.’ (Article 2.2) True, it states that ‘all conservation depends upon a clear understanding of what matters, and why’ (p.9). However, discussion of significance is spread across several sections, and the process is not explicit, despite a diagram on p. 66 which implies the step of assessing significance.

In a similar ellipse, Informed Conservation acknowledges that social value cannot be ignored, but offers no techniques for community participation. Further, the argument that ‘[heritage] values must be tied in some way to physical fabric since it is about the fabric that decisions have to be made’ (p. 26) does not take into account heritage value related to use, as now recognised in the Burra Charter. This risks not recognising or maintaining intangible values that may impact on heritage significance.

On the plus side, the technical ‘how-to’ sections are most useful, in particular ‘Techniques for Understanding Historic Buildings and their Landscapes’. The integration of different specialities and disciplines is essential to good heritage conservation, and it is pleasing to see reference to ecological assessment and tree survey. The inclusion of archaeological technique is welcome, especially in its emphasis that archaeology is not limited to sub-surface remains, but includes building archaeology to understand the stratigraphic relationship between different standing elements of built structure. This technique was used to good effect by heritage archaeologists some 20 years ago at Port Arthur. The technical advice is substantially complemented by the many illustrations, both photographs and planned drawings with extensive captions.

In conclusion, Informed Conservation contains much that is helpful to heritage practitioners everywhere. As stated up-front, its primary application is to England; it is not a step-by-step manual to apply to heritage conservation in any country.

Marilyn Truscott

Heritage: Identification, Conservation and Management.


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This is the book on Australian heritage management that a Martian might have written, had he arrived to observe and record the specialised practices of earthlings. But it is not by an anthropologist from Mars. An anthropologist would
employed some kind of ethnographic theory to structure his observations. Aplin (a geographer who teaches in environmental studies) can probably be described as a participant-observer of the functionalist school, being active in the NSW National Trust. He analyses his findings in systems of his own devising, while noting specimens of the natives’ own construction of their reality but making little connection between the two. The consequence of framing his study in his own terms is that they don’t connect very much to the professional experience of managing heritage. An example is Aplin’s exposition on the fundamental ‘dimensions of heritage evaluation’, which practitioners would call the criteria of significance. In a nomenclature of his own, he identifies these dimensions as scale (local-to-global), character (unique or representative), and degree of importance, adding further specific criteria for natural, cultural and Indigenous heritage items. In the cultural heritage trade, the first three issues would be regarded as comparative qualifiers of the substantial criteria, and the criteria themselves are very deliberately more complex than simple ‘architectural’ and ‘associational’ fields (pp.18-21, 115-119). In what can only be called an antiquarian mode, Aplin quotes, in a box, the NSW Heritage Council criteria of significance (without noting that they are based on and essentially the same as the older criteria of the Register of the National Estate). Yet he doesn’t comment on the absence of connection between the natives’ ideas and his own system. This is a shame, because the nature of the comparative qualifications is not well explicated in professional heritage theory. The Martian observer sees, but doesn’t recognise, a gap.

If he had, Aplin might have produced an account of heritage management as understood by its practitioners (this is a challenging study still be undertaken). But to criticise an author’s perspective for not being something else would be pointless if there was not an obvious alternative framework available. And in the case of (cultural) heritage management, there is: the one articulated by Australia ICOMOS. The Burra Charter and its associated documents are the reason why Australian heritage practice has an international profile for advanced thinking. Why write a textbook about Australian heritage today if it doesn’t speak the language of the profession?

Aplin is not so out of the loop as to ignore the Burra Charter. Unfortunately, it is evident in his careful listing of definitions (pp. 67-74, 131-132) that he analyses the version which was superseded in 1999. Since he manages to quote other documents of twenty-first-century date, this can’t be explained as a limitation of publication deadlines. It suggests that he is unaware of the nature of professional argument over principles and practice since the Burra Charter was adopted in 1979— all of which motivated the revision. Since these issues address a critical shift from the focus on original fabric and its attendant conundrums about authenticity, to the focus on the meanings of heritage places and objects and ways to identify and conserve the intangible as well as the material, his account is badly lacking. From the ICOMOS point of view, it is very frustrating that changes to our framework are ignored, but Aplin also ignores the history of the development of Jim Kerr’s The Conservation Plan, further evidence of his distance from the work-face of heritage management.

Despite such criticisms, there are insights to be had from studying an outsider’s view of one’s world. Aplin introduces the economics of heritage management early in the book, rapidly concluding that the commercialisation of heritage, especially via tourism, is the major vehicle for making it sustainable. There follows a characteristic survey of topics: the eco- and cultural tourism movements, pros and cons of tourism, marketing heritage. This material represents the strategic direction of heritage management today, yet without engaging the problem of the limits of the market: how can every failing country town/redundant industry/old building be transformed into a marketable experience? Aplin, in common with most advocates of the tourism route, avoids the brutal conclusion that the market has a limited capacity to sustain heritage.

A dimension which local practitioners don’t often think about is the differences between Australian and European approaches to heritage. Aplin suggests these turn on quantity and more continuity between ancient and recent history. This seems like common sense until one deconstructs the real nature of most European cityscapes and considers contemporary struggles over national identity. Europe’s built fabric is overwhelmingly nineteenth – and twentieth – century, though admittedly studded with older items – an analogous view could well be applied to the Indigenous palimpsest of Australian heritage. And while European prehistoric indigenous cultures have been thoroughly appropriated, marginal traditional cultures such as Saami and Celt presently rumble with separatist assertions of identity. Yes, the forms of Australian heritage look different from Europe’s, but analysis of the social construction of heritage shows that it is motivated by the same politics. The similarity is much more important than the difference.

Three of twelve chapters are devoted to international manifestations of heritage: world heritage, heritage frameworks in five nations of Europe plus the EU and in five further nations. They are the longest chapters in the book, swollen by pages of World Heritage sites, and one has to wonder why. While it is something of a triumph to understand the regulatory system of heritage in Italy, the detail Aplin gives is descriptive rather than explanatory, and comprises no hint of turmoils such as the recent Italian government proposal to lease out the management of heritage properties. The tendency to list names of agencies and sites demonstrates the diversity of administrative systems but it blinds the reader to the possibility of comparison.

Aplin is punctilious in asserting the subjective and ideologically-determined character of heritage, especially in Indigenous culture and in the construction of histories. It is an honourable concern, but bloodless because of the fundamentally descriptive take of the whole book. The only theorised approach to the concept of (cultural) heritage is Geoffrey Ashworth’s notion of heritage as a product based on history, created through interpretation, which is not a bad idea, though Aplin’s exegesis on the interpretive character of history itself is naïve (p. 15). Again, the inadequacy is a function of the lack of discussion about how the theories, formalities and structures of heritage management actually work in practice: how the very concept of ‘heritage’ is teased (sometimes mauled) back and forth among interest groups. The struggle is not just subjective; it is actively political.

I write as a teacher as well as an active member of ICOMOS, which means that my interests in and purposes for Heritage: Identification, Conservation and Management occur in a fairly specialised atmosphere. But I will be waiting for the new edition of the illustrated Burra Charter rather than recommending Aplin’s book.

Linda Young
Unearthing Gotham: The Archaeology of New York City.

It is significant, not to mention ironic, that I am writing this review on 11 September 2002, the anniversary of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. The publication of Unearthing Gotham was put on hold on 11 September 2001 when it was realised that the dust jacket bore an image of the World Trade Center; hence the publisher eventually opted for a 1949 view predating the structures.

The World Trade Center figures prominently in the text, however. The site was part of the territory of Native Americans from at least 10,000 years ago. It was there, too, on what was once the foreshore of the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam, that the timbers of a seventeenth-century European ship were uncovered during a subway excavation in 1916. The WTC served as the store for human remains exhumed from the 1991 excavation of the nearby eighteenth-century African Burial Ground. That project revealed hundreds of burials dating before slave emancipation and induced public consultation leading to changes for the proposed building. Subsequently some 200 graves were retained in-situ and the site declared a National Monument. Also stored at the WTC were the artefacts and records of the Five Points excavation, one of the largest early-to-mid-nineteenth century sites yet investigated, and comparable in size and nature to the Cumberland/Gloucester Street site in Sydney’s Rocks district, and the Little Lonedale/Castleton Place excavations in Melbourne. When I last spoke with Diana Wall, one of the authors, the fate of the collections stored in the World Trade Centre was unknown.

It is, of course, misleading to dwell on the World Trade Center – this is not a central theme of Unearthing Gotham, and the tragedy does not figure in the text. But it does serve to illustrate that, as in any city, there is a continuum of human activity, and whatever happens to the site in the future, ‘September 11’ is now part of the archaeological record of New York City.

The archaeology of place is the central theme of Unearthing Gotham. The well-known Wall Street, for example, takes its name from the line of the seventeenth-century fortification wall, once the northern limit of the town. Successive land reclamations on the southern shore of Manhattan Island have preserved the former timber wharves and sea walls. Information such as this builds a picture of New York’s past that often can’t be gleaned from historical records. The sad reality of the matter is that the majority of the work detailed in the book was conducted as salvage archaeology, part of extensive site redevelopment works. Given the hard-nosed business character of the place, this type of development often leaves little room for in-situ preservation, and it would be interesting to know to what extent the new developments interpret past site usage. The preservation of part, at least, of the African Burial Ground is an interesting point for debate on the preservation of places considered to be of cultural significance to different groups in modern societies.

In bringing together such a diverse range of studies, Unearthing Gotham highlights the fields of thematic research undertaken in the past. In doing so the reader may be struck by the shortfalls. It is only in relatively recent years that American heritage has been recognised as an important theme, clearly illustrated by the declaration of the African Burial Ground as a National Site. Absent from the work is any discussion of twentieth-century history, such as the major impact on the city made by European migration (otherwise celebrated so well at Ellis Island). Nor does industrial archaeology figure. The reader may be left with the impression that archaeology in New York is the study of domestic, commercial and administrative life prior to 1900. This gives an insight into what New Yorkers have felt is worth recording as the old is swept away for the new. Chapter 1 states:

New York rarely uses its history in constructing its identity or in stimulating its economy. Perhaps because the city has always been a place where people have come to build new lives, New York and its citizens have rarely wanted to look back... archaeology and the past are things that happen elsewhere; the present and the future are in New York.

Cantwell and Wall synthesize more than two centuries of information relating to the study of New York’s tangible heritage. From antiquarians’ studies in the eighteenth century through to the development of modern archaeological methodology in the twentieth century, the authors incorporate lifetimes-worth of information to present a chronological odyssey through the development of the entity today called New York. Yet Unearthing Gotham is a tantalizing taste of the bigger picture of the archaeology of New York. With 21 pages of references (about 17% of the book) the work is an excellent starting point for further research, attempting an holistic approach to changes in the landscape. It is pitched at a general audience; the public will enjoy it, as well as heritage practitioners and academics.

Wayne Johnson