Book Reviews

Salt attack and rising damp: a guide to salt damp in historic and older buildings

By David Young, Heritage Council of NSW, Heritage Victoria, South Australian Department for Environment and Heritage, Adelaide City Council, 2008
ISBN 978-0-9805126-4-9 (print)
ISBN 978-0-9805126-5-6 (online)

This 80-page technical guide authored by heritage consultant David Young aims to help owners, consultants and contractors to understand the causes of and identify appropriate repairs for, cases of salt damp. Part 1 deals with understanding salt attack and rising damp, while Part 2 covers diagnosis, maintenance and repair. Extensive illustrations assist in understanding the terms, processes and repair methods, including simple diagrammatic drawings by Donald Ellsmore.

Anyone working in the building fabric side of heritage conservation would know that the issue of damp management is as persistent as the unpleasant odours damp can produce in an old structure. A challenge has always been to explain to property owners the causes of damp and the role played by salts. At last here is an illustrated guide that simply explains the issues and how to diagnose and address them. The guide reinforces the need to understand each damp problem on its merits and that quick solutions can often create more problems than they attempt to solve.

Salt Attack and Rising Damp is written on two tiers – a simple tier for the layperson, and more in depth explanations of causes, solutions and repair for the technical consultant. There are a few technical terms that I had to look up, including the misleadingly pleasant sounding ‘deliquescence’ – but that was easy with a comprehensive glossary included at the rear.

A quick overview of Salt Attack and Rising Damp is provided with ‘The Basics’ (chapter 2, page 4) covering common questions and answers, seven key steps to dealing with salt damp, and the ‘dos and don’ts’ of damp. One of the best aspects of the book are the ‘boxes’, which explain some of the concepts consultants struggle with when explaining to the others their misconceptions about damp. For example: building owners don’t like being told that inserting a damp proof course may in fact create more problems than it solves (Box 7); or the issue of a new slate door step showing immediate salt decay because it has replaced the old worn step in an environment that had many decades to accumulate a salt-laden environment (Box 9). Not only are problems explained in simple terms, but the possible solutions are easy to grasp. An index would be a useful addition to the next edition.

No guide is able to cover all situations. For example, the issue of falling damp caused by interior condensation is not dealt with in any detail. However, the book does cover many issues that is hard to find unbiased information on and considers the potential of some new solutions, such ‘active electro-osmosis’. This guide is a culmination of many earlier brochures on rising damp prepared by heritage organisations throughout Australia and is an example of a highly successful collective effort, producing a well considered and useful practical conservation document.

Published collaboratively in 2008 by Adelaide City Council, the Department of Environment and Heritage in South Australia, the Heritage Council of NSW and Heritage Victoria, Salt Attack and Rising Damp is available for purchase or download from the various websites of these organisations. It is hoped that this guide will be a template for future joint technical publications on aspects of building fabric conservation.

Mary Knaggs

Surface Collection: Archaeological Travels in Southeast Asia

By Denis Byrne, Alta Mira Press, 2007
ISBN-10: 0759110182

Denis Byrne is well known to many ICOMOS members and an international archaeological audience for his very significant contribution to reshaping archaeological thought in the postcolonial era. In his scholarly articles1 he discusses the often unconscious but appropriating assumption of Western cultural heritage practitioners that their conservation methodology is the only way to perceive, study and protect the past and he contrasts it with other cultural traditions about the past. Surface Collection continues some of these themes in an entertaining and provoking way. It is aptly subtitled archaeological travels, and covers the time that Denis lived, studied and traveled in the ‘landscape of others’ when he was researching his PhD Thesis, The Past of Others.

The book relates stories from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and Burma in a series of nuanced and elegant travel meditations which are full of unexpected discoveries, conundrums and ironies. Denis uses the word ‘underground’ as a motif for his book, to indicate the hidden dimension of what appears on the surface. The book is in part an examination of aspects of the less obvious and often neglected recent past of South-East Asia, the traces of which are often hard to find both for physical reasons and because of the countries’ psyches and political regimes. It is these vanished traces which he seeks, extending an archaeological way of looking at the world into this ‘underground’ history.

One essay is focused on Intramuros in the Philippines, which was the old, largely intact Spanish colonial heart of Manila. When Macarthur retook the Philippines from the Japanese, Intramuros was almost entirely destroyed and huge numbers of Filipino civilians and Japanese defenders were killed, in part to avoid a politically unacceptable American casualty rate. Denis finds significant evidence of the disaster in the remaining fabric and in the historic documentation of the invasion. At the time of

Denis’s visit, Intramuros was a ruined enclave being restored to its former colonial glory while its slum dwellers and displaced people were moved on. Yet no interpretation of the wartime tragedy was to be found in the restoration work or in official commemoration or interpretation. Denis’s observation of the ‘disappearance’ of this tragedy is ironically balanced with a vivid description of the famous commander; his 25 uniforms for the tropics so he always appeared uncrushed with no unsightly sweat patches; his flair for publicity; his famous ‘I shall return’ pronouncement; and his continual re-enactments of his mythic and at first accidental landing by wading through the water to the shore on his return to the Philippines.

In a second revealing essay Denis contrasts the tropical lushness, the tourist luxury and the legendary serenity and gentleness of the people of Bali with his discovery of the horrors of its recent past namely the massacre of perhaps 100,000 suspected communists in 1965-66 at the beginning of the Suharto regime. Denis found that the killings were publicly unmentionable, families were forbidden to mourn and no mention of this tragedy was made in the school textbooks. He tried, as an archaeologist to physically trace the massacres and found it hard to do so as an outsider, even with his skills. He reflects how quickly the traces of this horror have faded, but also how immanent they must be to the people who live in the landscape and for whom the horror forms part of living memory.

These dark stories are leavened with Denis’s entertaining and ironically self-deprecating account of his travels and his meetings with a range of locals and with stories such as his investigations of the perfume used by Sukarno, Shalimar de Geurlain, traces of which remain for Denis in his senses as well as his intellect. Denis also illuminates the attitude of local owners and custodians to heritage places. He takes us with him into the rice terraces of the Philippines. While the nation’s elite and the heritage industry work to put the site on the World Heritage List and hence protect it, the farmers who created and maintained these massive and astounding terraces grow weary of the backbreaking work needed to maintain them. They turn to other ways of making a living, including making tourism souvenirs for the increasing number of visitors flocking to see the rice terraces which they formerly tended. Denis quotes a local newspaper columnist complaining that the ‘eighth wonder of the world’ was dying due to uncontrolled woodcarving. The contradictions and conundrums which heritage conservation practices pose are gently enjoyed.

After interesting experiences in postwar Vietnam, Denis travels to Burma where the vividly described myriads Stupas, so much a part of the physical and spiritual landscape, vibrate with the power of the sacred. The treatment of the Stupas in Burmese society shows us how, in traditional societies, the past is always immanent in and working upon the present, not seen as separate from it and therefore differently valued and conserved. The continual renewal of the fabric of the Stupas and the excavation and use by devotees of the essence of the vibrating power contained within them is clearly in contrast to the precepts of the Venice Charter, but is essentially in line with the values-based conservation which the Burra Charter espouses. Any hint of heritage didacticism in this review however, stems from the reviewer and not the writer.

Surface Collection is a feast for anyone who values an intelligent and sensitive travel narrative, full of self revelation and the grace of discovery of the other. It is an elegant and vivid travel story infused with a deeply perceptive understanding of the complexities, false leads, contradictions and joys of discovering the past of others and seeing it through new eyes. Denis points out that bearing witness to the past includes bearing witness with our bodies and our emotions as well as our intellect. In doing so on his travels, he gives is a range of extraordinary insights into the hidden and subtle past and present of Southeast Asia.

Sharon Sullivan

endnotes

The Brickmasters 1788–2008


Sitting on top of the hill at Sydney Park in St Peters, I began what I thought would be the daunting task of reviewing *The Brickmasters 1788–2008*. At first glance the red book, roughly the size of three bricks, looks like a text book but as you turn through the illustrated glossy pages you soon realise that it is not just a book about bricks. Part corporate history part social history, the book is about how brickmaking has influenced our nation and the people who have played a vital role in the development of the industry.

Structured in twenty chapters, the book is written in chronological order. Beginning with the arrival of the First Fleet in January 1788, the book tells the story of how brickmaking began in Sydney, from the first discovery of clay to the establishment of Brickfield Hill (near present day Haymarket).

The first chapter provides an alternative history of Sydney in its early days and is followed by more technical chapters describing early brick manufacturing processes and traditional methods as well as the various transformations within the brickmaking industry. The impact of the arrival of the gold rush and the rapid population growth throughout the Colony on the industry is also described together with the new technologies that were developed to make brickmaking less labour intensive. By chapter six, the book begins to touch on the influence that brickmaking has had on architecture. Various aspects are discussed including public infrastructure and buildings and the development of various architectural styles and detailing such as polychromatic brickwork, terracotta tiles the use of tuck pointing and various bonds.

Chapter seven sees the beginning of the emphasis of the book on the Austral Brick Company Limited. It is worth noting here that the book was produced to pay tribute to Austral Bricks, which celebrated 100 years of brickmaking with the launch of the book in 2008. This chapter describes in detail the life of William King Dawes, who according to the book, took on the mantle of leadership in the Sydney brick industry. In the next chapters, the book continues to describe the changes to the brickmaking industry, including the impacts of World War II and the introduction of new competing building materials such as...
fibro and cement. The final chapters of the book celebrate the contribution that Austral Bricks has made to the construction industry over the past century, dealing mainly with the issues of changes in technology, and the mass production of bricks.

In summary, The Brickmasters 1788–2008 is a carefully researched book set within the context of Sydney and Australia, which tells the story of Austral Brick Company Limited and how bricks have shaped our built environment. Ultimately, as a book that documents the role of bricks in the building of the colony, The Brickmasters 1788–2008 does an admirable job. The author of the book, Roy Ringer (a social and economic historian) provides an easy to read narrative accompanied by some evocative photographs and illustrations. Looking across Sydney Park towards the Princes Highway from where I was reading, I could easily appreciate the imagery evoked in Ringer’s descriptions – brickworks, kilns and clay pits, boiler houses and offices stretched along the Princes Highway.

For those involved with materials conservation, or seeking a technical perspective on early brickmaking and the brick industry, you will be disappointed. The book discusses early colonial architecture and the subsequent styles without going into any great depth. Although, there is some discussion about traditional brick making and the brick industry, the information provided is rather general and for this reason, I believe that the book is designed more for the general reader, who either has some interest in the brick industry or some association with Austral Brick Company Limited. The book would also be enjoyed by those seeking an alternative history of Sydney.

Amy Nahm