Book Reviews
Running Out? Water in Western Australia

Ruth A. Morgan
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It is telling that we are in our longest election campaign in decades and there is nary a word (or a policy!) on water security, drought or climate change: are these not core for Australia’s future—growing population, feeding and ‘watering’ us? CSIRO research shows water is our ninth most pressing community concern. Yet Charlie’s research company survey1 on the most critical future concerns—water supply was number one (with health, prices, the environment, crime, economy and education all behind it). A 2016 World Bank report2 warns demand for water is increasing with populations, but changing climate means supply is becoming more erratic, uncertain. Supply is finite: the challenge clear!

This is a cautionary tale on environmental un-consciousness or if you prefer, wilful disregard. This slim (208 pages, 60 more of notes), well-written tale has a sting. We seem to have learnt little on the limits of supply, preferring to dam another river, or drill bores, than face up to where, or how we live. And if Western Australia is the canary in our coal-mine (apt analogy?), the country might wake up, listen and learn...

This is part-story on isolation and distance. Within a state and between that and the rest of the country. Poorly linked weather forecasting systems, siloed agencies. Mental distance too: urban dwellers may be less-and-less aware where food, fibre or water supplies come from—less inclined to look much beyond their (withered) garden, think beyond themselves.

Western Australia’s water supplies are most evident at extremities: the Kimberley and North’s abundance; and the South-West (‘green’ W.A.) where tall karri trees chart the rain. Perth, its largest conurbation, some 90 kilometres long, hogs the water. Quickly running out of local supplies, schemes were hatched to deliver water. Pipes, dams in the Darling Ranges. And tap ground springs—unregulated bore-drilling. Governments turn a blind eye to the amount. At risk of electoral backlash.

Is this the driest state in the world’s driest continent? A good place for a growing city of sprinkler-prone residents? State governments seem to have wavered on populist or punitive agri-/or horticultural policies, subsidies, schemes for expansion into marginal ‘wheat belt’ country, beyond the ‘rainfall’ line.

Ruth Morgan did her PhD on a history of Western Australia’s water supply (or lack of) and has turned it into a readable, fluidly-written tome. You do not need to be a local to enjoy it, or get the gist. Her focus is the south-west, where most of the state’s population lives. That does not ignore madcap schemes to pipe water from the north. Amazingly, they are still alive.
Morgan writes well, converting scientific and bureaucratic jargon into easily-understood prose. A good deal of the book charts episodic lobbying (farmers, irrigators, residents, industry) for constructing more dams, schemes to control and use stormwater runoff. A fascinating time line charts the rise in consumption (ground and surface water) post-1900, with marked growth late 1980s, only tapering slightly since 2005 as the population neared 2.5 million. And desalination plants at Southern Seawater and Kwinana opened, and recycled waste-water was added to water supplies.

With consumption doubling 1911-21 the press argued that as ‘people [paid] for water, and [paid] dearly’, they should be able to use their scheme water when, where and how they wished’ (p.57)...

1923 Premier James Mitchell said:

‘It is not the desire of the Government in any way to hamper the laudable desire of the people to beautify their surroundings’ (p.62).

By 1945 nearly all Perth houses had running water: in southwest agricultural areas, less than half had a cold water tap. Mitchell governments expanded agricultural settlement throughout the heavily-timbered south-west into the increasingly marginal eastern wheat belt, with group and soldier settlement schemes.

Chapters track the rise and reign of ‘Big Water’ post Second World War, stimulating economic and industrial development. Key agents, the engineers of the state’s public works department were backed with finance and support from state and federal governments. Minister of Works, David Brand, later the longest-serving Western Australian Premier (1959-71) were two dominant players.

I recommend this book as useful warning: proof that only in understanding history can we learn lessons for a shared future.

1 Harold Mitchell, ‘Water may rain on pollies’ parade’, Business Opinion, The Sydney Morning Herald, Friday 13th May 2016 (Charlie’s surname was not provided)

2, ibid, Mitchell does not cite the report’s title.

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The Conservation Movement: A History of Architectural Preservation

Miles Glendinning
Routledge, Taylor & Francis

The Conservation Movement: A History of Architectural Preservation, by Miles Glendinning, has won the 2016 Downing Award for excellence in a published work devoted to historical topics in preservation. It deservedly received accolades by the Society of Architectural Historians jury for being a ‘magisterial survey’ that places conservation and preservation into broad historical perspective. The book ambitiously spans antiquity to the present and moves across international contexts with ease. Although attention to Western Europe predominates, there is comprehensive comparative reference to America and Eastern Europe. Australia receives more than a passing mention, with discussion in particular on the formative and influential Burra Charter. However another survey volume devoted to the story of conservation in Australia and the Asian-Pacific region really still needs to be written. Similarly the preservation of landscapes is not singled out for special attention.

Given recent academic preoccupations with broadening critical discussions around the production and particularly the consumption of cultural heritage, this account returns to
a resolutely and refreshingly architectural focus. Glendinning discusses the formation of architectural conservation, heritage and preservation movements across place and time, including copious exemplars of individual writers, architects, buildings and urban ensembles. Key figures like Viollet-le-Duc, Ruskin and Riegl are discussed in fresh terms, alongside many other less well-trodden territories. That is not to suggest that the book lacks sharp interrogation into the shifting political, national and ideological motivations driving heritage and preservation practice. However, the primary focus remains the tangible physical environment, not the intangible or the social. As an architectural historian, Glendinning interweaves the story of Western conservation into broader fundamental architectural narratives including its roots in antiquarianism, romanticism and historicism of the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

Yet the restoration and conservation project is seen fundamentally as a modern one, and inseparably intertwined with progress and Modernism. Glendinning writes: ‘Conservation is, and has always been, an integral part of modern society, and its environments, like all modern environments, did not just happen. They were ‘made’, chiefly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and sometimes also remade, or destroyed, several times over’. Indeed at least half of the book—and perhaps the most original half—is devoted to the twentieth century. This is not surprising given Miles Glendinning’s long time engagement in the history and conservation of Modernism, and his involvement in international organisations like Docomomo – devoted to the documentation and conservation of modern sites and neighbourhoods.

The final chapter ‘Heritage in the age of globalisation’ brings critical discussion up to the present. Here Glendinning contends that we are confronting another paradigm-shift in the histories and values of heritage. He traces the professionalisation of international heritage networks and globalisation (‘Heritage without borders’); postmodernism’s symptoms of simulation, pastiche and commercialisation; and the dissolution of former definitions of ‘authenticity’. The final Epilogue deliberately poses more questions than it answers, and is certainly more openly contentious and polemical in tone than the rest of the book.

The Conservation Movement represents many years of meticulous research, with copious notes and a very useful bibliography. It is well illustrated, within the somewhat limited formatting confines of a Routledge scholarly imprint, and is an invaluable resource for researchers, students and practitioners interested in architectural conservation.

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an update to the traditional ‘heritage walk’ brochures. Invariably these tools are linked to revitalisation of small towns, boosting cultural capital and tourism. This can be seen in the funding models of these initiatives; indeed TimeCapsule is supported by the Ballarat Council, boosted by a Government run Hack competition. The project states the tool was developed in a way that “helps us better understand the things that people value about their places,” aligning it with the recent UNESCO Report, *New life for historic cities: The historic urban landscape approach explained*, (2013) calling for increased engagement and innovation in the preservation and celebration of urban historic landscapes.

But does this app deliver on its aim for engagement through better understanding of this city’s urban landscape? Whilst the app certainly provides a useful and flexible platform for the community and visitors, it has so far shown difficulty in attracting an active audience. Since its launch in late February 2016, the site has attracted a little over 20 photo submission, and slightly more comments, covering a disparate set of places, but mostly focussed on local milk bars. Without any seeded content to begin with, TimeCapsule seems to be missing the prompt to interact and submit. The lack of engagement so far demonstrates the difficulty in attracting an active user group, and highlights the need to embed projects like these within a community.

In contrast to the open approach of TimeCapsule, a Tasmanian smartphone app, An/Other Time, presents a closed approach to heritage engagement. Produced in association with the local Moonah Arts Council, and supported by Regional Arts Fund Tasmania, the aims of both tools are similar, but the delivery is radically different. Rather than providing an interactive map, An/Other Time presents a series of local resident portraits, which respond to a series of physical markers in the town. When a physical marker is encountered, the app reveals a series of personal vignettes, provided by the person featured. The information revealed is delightfully intimate; it feels genuinely special to be let into this world. You can hear a short audio clip from a Latvian immigrant, or watch a short home movie from someone’s childhood. Whilst the app provides no opportunity for traditional interaction, via comments or contributions; it does provide a new way of interacting with the heritage landscape, allowing users to conflate the stories and place themselves.

These two recent digital heritage experiments provide a neat summary of the current fascination for new methods of heritage consumption, and expose the difficulties in engaging a community digitally. As communities like Ballarat and Moonah invest in new ways to engage with their heritage fabric, digital tools can provide an invaluable resource. But as these two examples show, the nature of interaction and the level of content curation can significantly impact their success as a community tool.

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