REPORT: Bringing the 2020 ICOMOS Triennial General Assembly to Australia

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Abstract

Australia ICOMOS will host the Twentieth Triennial General Assembly of ICOMOS in Sydney in October 2020. As well as hosting the global ICOMOS community in Australia, Australia ICOMOS and its event partners hope to use this event to raise the profile of cultural heritage and to build greater capacity for best-practice conservation in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. The announcement of the successful Australian bid at the Closing Ceremony of the 19th Triennial ICOMOS General Assembly in New Delhi in December 2017 represented the culmination of more than two years of careful strategic work to garner government support, to inform and inspire potential partners and to plan and gather resources needed to deliver a truly inspiring program.

An ICOMOS General Assembly in the Pacific region: shared cultures – shared heritage – shared responsibility

One highlight of the ICOMOS General Assembly in New Delhi was the announcement on 15 December 2017 that Australia ICOMOS will host the next Triennial General Assembly in Sydney in October 2020. Simultaneously back in Australia, the Australian Government and NSW Government joined ICOMOS in sharing the news with the Australian community that Sydney will host 1,200 global heritage experts in 2020, at the first-ever ICOMOS General Assembly in the Pacific region.

Ian Travers, the President of Australia ICOMOS welcomed strong government backing, including $2.6 million in financial and in-kind support from the Australian and State governments, which helped Australia’s bid succeed.

Australian Minister for the Environment and Energy, the Hon Josh Frydenberg MP, welcomed the announcement that Australia would host the prestigious symposium:

This is great news, coming so soon after Australia secured a seat on the World Heritage Committee. The Australian Government is working hard to improve conservation and access to places recognised for their heritage significance to Australia and the world. Hosting the General Assembly aligns with the Australian Government’s commitment to World Heritage and national leadership under the Australian Heritage Strategy.

New South Wales Minister for Environment and Heritage, The Hon Gabrielle Upton, recognised that the 2020 ICOMOS General Assembly would highlight the State’s significant heritage conservation work:

I want our state’s extraordinary heritage to get the focus it deserves. Protecting and preserving our heritage gives people the opportunity to enjoy and value our history.
ICOMOS General Assemblies provide an exceptional opportunity to meet hundreds of heritage professionals who will converge in one place, and are unique cultural heritage events, given the quality of participants and their professional diversity: archaeologists, architects, urban planners, historians, social scientists, engineers, curators, building conservation professionals, and art historians.

The Australian General Assembly in 2020 will provide a powerful stimulus for renewed interest and activity in the conservation of our cultural heritage and enhance Australia’s reputation as a major cultural heritage player in the Asia-Pacific region. The opportunity for international experts to experience Australian cultural heritage management will promote our high standard of cultural heritage practice.

Australia was recognised as a desirable location for the General Assembly because of its fascinating heritage and its established national and international leadership. Australia is also perceived as a safe and secure country that will welcome delegates of all nationalities. Sydney is a major tourism destination for international visitors and home to a number of iconic World Heritage places and major cultural sites including the Sydney Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge, as well as Hyde Park Barracks and Cockatoo Island – both of which form part of the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage property. The Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area is nearby and Sydney is a gateway for other natural and cultural destinations all around Australia. The new International Convention Centre at Darling Harbour and the presence of many resident members of Australia ICOMOS mean that both the facilities and the human resources needed to stage a General Assembly are available.

The theme for the General Assembly and Scientific Symposium will be: Shared Cultures – Shared Heritage – Shared Responsibility. This theme reflects both the global context of heritage as part of cultural identity at a time of rapid population shift and conflict, but also the important notion of shared stewardship which resonates with a major message in the Australian Heritage Strategy. Cultural heritage is a topic of great relevance to Australia and its Pacific neighbours. The Scientific Symposium will contribute to wider discussions about Australia’s rich cultural heritage and national identity and follows logically from the World Indigenous Network gathering in Darwin in 2013 and the World Parks Congress in Sydney in 2014.

Australia ICOMOS has previously endeavoured to bring the global ICOMOS community to Australia, but had been challenged to assemble the necessary network of partners and supporters to make hosting a General Assembly possible. Learning from previous experience, the Australia ICOMOS National Executive proceeded slowly and strategically during 2016, appointing a small Bid Working Party and commencing with direct approaches to the most senior levels of government. The rationale behind this strategy was...
founded in recognition that, in order to deliver an economically viable bid, Australia ICOMOS would require substantial commitment from all levels of government as well as the private sector and community organisations. Government support – from the outset – would therefore be the initial critical success factor.

The time was right; in the wake of the *Australian Heritage Strategy and 2016 State of the Environment Report*, there was recognition of the need for more active leadership and improved resourcing for cultural heritage. The Commonwealth was keen to express commitment to cultural heritage in practical ways. The NSW Government was aligned with this approach, but also sought to enrich the event through inclusion of a public programme and additional community opportunities. Through a series of meetings with both politicians and officials, the program took shape, a business plan was developed and, with support from Business Events Sydney, the budget and bid document were progressively prepared.

As planning proceeded, further meetings and liaison were needed to bring the City of Sydney and major institutions such as Sydney Living Museums, the NSW Parks Service, and the Sydney Opera House into the bid process as partners. As expressions of support arrived, the Working Group reached out to the commercial sector, to provide both ICOMOS international and the government agencies involved with assurances that the sponsorship and ‘in kind’ support needed to make the General Assembly not only viable – but a truly special experience for all – would be forthcoming. Successful approaches were made to Sydney Airport, the Department of Immigration, The Heritage Council of NSW and the Australian Heritage Council.

As momentum built at home, members of the Australia ICOMOS Bid Working Party were also active at the 41st Session of the World Heritage Committee in Krakow, Poland – liaising with the senior Australian Government officials regarding government requirements and the business case, but also distributing brochures to colleagues and delegates – to spread the word that Australia was in the race.

By late July 2017, the future of the bid for the 2020 General Assembly was at a critical stage: planning and budgeting was complete; interest had been registered with the Secretariat in Paris, and supporters were on board, but neither the Australian nor NSW governments had fully committed. In response to the Australia ICOMOS representations, planning and response to government feedback, high level discussions occurred between the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment and Energy, the Foreign Minister, and with the NSW Minister for the Environment and Heritage. The Australia ICOMOS National Executive prudently approved the lodgement of the bid contingent on necessary government funding. The deals were struck and the formal letters of commitment arrived – with National and State Governments to contribute equally; the Commonwealth in cash and NSW in cash and kind, with both governments also sharing the underwriting obligations. Following confirmation of this support, the Australia ICOMOS bid to host the 20th Triennial General Assembly of ICOMOS in Sydney in October 2020 was lodged with ICOMOS Paris on 25 August 2017.

Then… the nail biting began. There were a few clarifying questions to be answered, but it was not until 23 November 2017 that Australia ICOMOS was advised that the Sydney bid was successful and had been accepted. In the few short days remaining before travel to India, the bid team was quickly redeployed to produce promotional material and a welcome video. During more than a week of events in Delhi, members of the Australian delegation distributed...
hundreds of leaflets promoting Sydney; presented 1,400 clip-on koalas; collected hundreds of business cards; and handed out 2,000 diary placeholder postcards.

At the Delhi Closing Ceremony it was formally announced that the 20th General Assembly would be held in Sydney in October 2020. Deputy Australian High Commissioner, Chris Elstoft, spoke briefly, emphasising the great honour and noting Australian and NSW Government involvement. Ian Travers, (after first clipping a koala to the microphone), congratulated India, welcomed delegates to Sydney, and acknowledged government support. A short welcome video was played delivering clear messages and stunning visuals and, as formalities concluded with sharing the news that the Opening Ceremony would be at the Sydney Opera House, the hall thundered with enthusiastic applause.