Conservation illiteracy – or conservation education?
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Conservation is ailing. According to my ICOMOS medical dictionary there is a propensity to the recovery of lost significance!

Politicians, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs – in fact, most Australians – know of no conservation process other than the fairytale process of restoration. Even within the conservation professions there is a disturbingly shallow understanding of the art and the science of conservation. In short, there is widespread conservation illiteracy.

Even more disturbing is the way in which conservation is promoted, especially the current attitude of conservation bodies such as the National Trust of Australia. In New South Wales the Trust is involved in several widely promoted projects like Juniper Hall (Figure 1) which will demonstrate, most regrettabley, how Cinderella-like, dowdy old piles can be transformed by the touch of a magic wand (and just a few million dollars).

Visitors to Juniper Hall in 1988 will not be able to relate the impressive restoration (and there is no doubt it will be outstanding) to their everyday lives, any more than they can now experience tangible links with our convict history through visits to Port Arthur or to the Hyde Park Barracks. 'Restoration' is still confused with 'conservation'.

The dangers of restoration have been highlighted by many authors, but none more forthright than Osbert Lancaster, who wrote fifteen years ago:

One cannot and should never attempt to put the hands back or even to stop the clock by arbitrarily selecting one stage of this process and crying 'halt'.

Most frequently such attempts are made on the specious plea of restoring a building to its original state. Quite apart from the virtual impossibility of ever achieving this goal, in striving to do so we risk in almost all cases the total destruction of its existing contemporary value.

Yet, despite widely acknowledged views like these, it is still necessary today to warn against both dangers of restoration and the use of this term to describe legitimate conservation. Four fresh publications illustrate this point:

Conservation should be a vehicle for maintaining everyday contact with the authentic physical evidence of our history but in the way it is practised and promoted today, it is elitist, expensive and generally beyond the reach and comprehension of most Australians.

Community interest in the historic environment will reach a climax in 1988. The future of conservation will hinge on the way the community reacts. If conservation can be successfully promoted like oral hygiene or contraception – as something to help us in our daily lives and save us money – then the future is secure. Obviously ICOMOS has a major role to play.

When ICOMOS was established in Australia the future was bright. The Burra Charter won valuable ground for the organisation. This was consolidated with the drafting of the guidelines to conservation analysis and planning. When government agencies accepted these documents, to me at least, the position seemed impregnable.

However, reflecting today on the state of conservation I reluctantly conclude that the position is far from secure and that this organisation must act decisively to overcome serious fundamental problems in six key areas:

- legislation and funding
- conservation analysis and planning
- traditional crafts and trades
- training and conservators
- scientific research
- education.

Undoubtedly, the last mentioned is the most important.

Legislation and funding

Current legislation is patently not adequate to protect buildings and sites. Aboriginal sites and industrial and historic sites continue to be vandalised. Valuable historic buildings continue to be demolished, or sometimes destroyed by fire despite legislative protection.

Official neglect is evident in the buildings and sites of New South Wales Government departments and statutory authorities such

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as the State Rail Authority, the Electricity Commission, the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority, the Maritime Services Board and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, to mention a few. In many cases there have been repeated pleas from private individuals to gain permission to rescue buildings from the neglect of officialdom but the buildings still languish (or collapse in ruin) while the bureaucracies deliberate.

Facadism is the hideous end result of weak and inadequate planning regulations. The only examples of the architectural gymnastics of facadism which can claim success are indeed situations where the facades have very strong architecture, and were once attached to buildings of quality which merited complete retention.

Funding is a perennial problem. Of course, there is never enough funding for conservation. In New South Wales, the bicentennial program offered the potential for a funding bonanza. However, of the $78.5 million available, only $8.3 million, or just a little more than 10% is going towards conservation projects. I believe a 50/50 split-up would have been more equitable.

The burden of funding could be eased by simple changes to tax laws, such as apply in the United States. There should be available here the same incentives for the retention and conservation of significant (say National Trust-listed) buildings.

There should be tax deductability also for donations to appeals for conservation of churches, National Parks and all other legitimate projects. At present only the National Trust is eligible; this is a source of concern to the Trust and the Australian Council of Churches in particular.

Figure 1: Artist's impression, Juniper Hall, Paddington (restored)
(Photograph: National Trust of Australia (New South Wales))
Conservation analysis and planning

Australia ICOMOS has infiltrated bureaucracies to a degree whereby it is now more likely than not that significant buildings and sites will be the subject of analysis and a conservation plan before work is undertaken. However many shortcomings remain to be overcome.

In New South Wales, half a dozen very competent planners set the standard but there are many who lag well behind. The most serious flaws relate to inept or inadequate analysis. Perhaps this is because planners lack the skills to identify and evaluate authentic fabric. Even the most basic scientific procedures (such as the analysis of paints and finishes) are omitted from the researcher's repertoire.

Often conservation analyses have an historic bias, or at least an overemphasis on historic detail. Sometimes the analyses reach the wrong conclusions. Far too many buildings end up being used as museums; a use which is rarely compatible.

Client participation is fundamental to the conservation planning process but it is surprising how often this fact is overlooked. It seems pointless to go through the exercise without the full cooperation and participation of the client. But when government authorities are the clients this is not unusual. Too often these authorities consider that the conservation process ends with the tabling of the document.

Probably the greatest problem to overcome is the ignorance which causes many studies to stop at the end of the analysis stage. Projects still proceed without reference to a conservation plan.

Traditional crafts and trades

The rate of disappearance of craft and trade skills is alarming. Standards are now well below pre-War levels and in some crafts (shingling, wattling and daubing, slating, stonemasonry, tuckpointing) there remain so few skilled tradesmen that it is possible to predict the demise of these crafts in a decade or two. Even in the trades of plastering, painting, plumbing and bricklaying the situation is becoming desperate.

To take the example of stonemasonry, one of the noblest of building crafts. One mastermason is still working in this country. About 30 banker masons remain, and a healthy number of rubble masons (semi-skilled masons). No training course for stonemasons exists in Australia, and even stone suppliers are dwindling as the last remaining dimension stone quarries are worked out.

Attempts have been made recently in Sydney to re-establish training courses but the individuals making this rescue attempt are finding it an extremely difficult task.

Australia ICOMOS should lend weight to these efforts to improve training opportunities.

Training of conservators

A good number of skilled conservators work in Australian galleries, museums and large institutions. Most have overseas training, and their ranks today are topped up by graduates of the relatively new training course at the Canberra College of Advanced Education.

However there are very few conservators in the field of building and site conservation. One stone conservator, two wall painting conservators and one furniture conservator have arrived recently from England, and they are probably the first. As yet there are no plaster, wallpaper or stained glass conservators and no site conservators.

The situation is not good for conservation in the area of buildings and sites, but it can possibly be improved. ICOMOS members can also join ICCM, a sister organisation, which groups together materials conservators throughout the country. Furthermore, ICOMOS should work to ensure that archaeologists, architects and technicians receive formal full-time or occasional training in conservation science.

A great deal of very good literature published by ICCM and the parent body IIC is relevant to buildings and sites and hence should not be overlooked.

Scientific research

Conservation cannot advance without scientific support. It is pleasing to have a small number of scientists in the conservation profession and in ICOMOS. But recent retirements and professional transfers have greatly reduced this number of participating scientists, and there is no evidence to suggest that their ranks will be swelled by new recruits.

ICOMOS and its members must reach out therefore to the scientists working in the related fields and invite them to participate in conservation.

Conservation science can be promoted through publications (perhaps in Historic Environment) and local A.P.T. members could group together to share information and participate in research.
The foregoing discussion has encompassed the need for better education, but it is necessary to restate the point.

Education in conservation should be improved, and it should start with the community at large. It is not good enough to aim at reaching only the decision makers. Future decision-makers should be the main target of an education campaign.

At present there exists a small number of specialist courses, which are well attended. In Sydney the Universities of Sydney and NSW offer post-graduate courses in conservation in the schools of architecture. As well, the Sydney University department of archaeology has a course in historical archaeology, but there is no integrated degree or diploma course in this subject.

Training courses for craftsmen and conservators, as discussed previously, are sadly limited. There is nothing at all in infants', primary or high school curricula, although the National Trust makes lukewarm efforts to reach school children through its school education kits. There is a great deal of potential for development of this initiative by the National Trust.

So to return to the theme of this discussion paper; in order to stamp out conservation illiteracy, a major effort to educate the broad community must be undertaken without delay, and it should be spearheaded by Australia ICOMOS. The first goal should be the eradication by 1988 of all misleading information about conservation. In the case of the house 'Vienna' at Hunter's Hill in Sydney, (see Figure 2) a project which will be undertaken to the highest standards, the National Trust must immediately cease making sloppy claims like 'Vienna at Hunter's Hill will be completely restored as part of the Trust's Gift to the Nation.' It is only being conserved!

REFERENCES:


    (iii) ICCROM Newsletter No. 12 - on p.2. Philippon refers to the miraculous event.
    (iv) 'Avoiding Compromise', APT Bulletin, XVIII, 1 and 2 1986, p.11