CONSERVATION PLANNING IN SMALL TOWNS OF THE CENTRAL GOLDFIELDS OF VICTORIA

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INTRODUCTION

When people who work in the field of heritage conservation discuss the relative strengths of practice in New South Wales and Victoria, there is general agreement that the best historic house museums are in N.S.W., but the best and most extensive area conservation is found in Victoria. Certainly, we have a very good record in this state of undertaking heritage studies, imposing conservation zonings, and providing expert technical advice to residents in conservation areas, and this is especially so for the small towns of the central goldfields.

However, there are a number of difficulties or problems that I perceive in this practice - problems which relate essentially to an incomplete commitment of planning for conservation - and that is the subject of this brief paper. The first part looks at the current situation in conservation planning for the small towns of the region, and the second part examines several difficulties or problems which I perceive.

PRESENT SITUATION

The central goldfields was the first in country Victoria for which a strong interest in heritage conservation arose. There has always been an acknowledgement among Victorians that the goldfields region - with its magnificent cities of Ballarat and Bendigo, the rich scatter of small mining towns and the landscapes of abandoned workings and mining artefacts, embodied something very important for the identity of the State. After all, gold, together with 'Marvellous Melbourne', have been Victorians' favourite historical themes for at least a generation.

In the mid 1960s, a group of academics from the University of Melbourne undertook studies and drew attention to the great historical importance of the town of Maldon. This they did in the face of local apathy, scepticism and even hostility. Nevertheless, recognition by the National Trust swiftly followed, with the designation of Notable Town in 1964. Despite ambiguities in the Town and Country Planning Act 1961 with respect to compensation, conservation planning controls were introduced in 1977 and last year a decade of the Maldon Conservation Scheme was celebrated since 1982 a positive avalanche of heritage conservation controls has been introduced in the region and this process has followed an almost unvarying pattern. First an area evaluative study is undertaken, generally on a municipal or even smaller scale, funded in part by the National Estate program and in part by local government. The studies are generally confined to the built environment and focus on listing culturally significant places. Then, controls over demolition and alteration of these place (whether buildings, other objects of interest or urban areas) are introduced as overlay zonings through an amendment to the planning scheme. Where the towns are covered by the Ministry for Planning and Environment's Central Goldfields Restoration Fund, grants and low interest loans, plus expert advice on buildings repair and restoration are available through the heritage advisory service.

In summary, the general form of intervention is professionalised and centralised, and combines the 'stick' of regulatory controls with the 'carrot' of a heritage advisory service, loans and grants.

DIFFICULTIES WITH THE CURRENT APPROACH

There are three obvious difficulties in this approach as outlined above and they are closely related: first, there is an absence of any regional assessment of significance or regional strategic conservation planning; secondly, there is an apparent inability to integrate conservation planning with strategies for economic development, and thirdly, the process is isolated from the cultural perceptions and aspirations of most people. Each of these points will be examined in turn.

1. No assessment of the significance of the Goldfields region as a whole, nor any overall conservation strategy making.

Surprisingly, there has been no regional heritage survey work undertaken of the goldfields region. There is in fact a lack of heritage conservation planning throughout Victoria: work is done at a local government level and never within a regional context. (A very limited exception is the identification of historic sites on public land undertaken in some Land Conservation Council Reports). Thus, although we conceive of the goldfields as a region which is nationally significant, we have little hard evidence to support this. Similarly, there is a lot of site planning, but very little strategy making.
There are several reasons for this lack. First is the background in architecture of many of the professionals involved in the field - they simply do not have an adequate training or appreciation of planning; secondly, there is the fear held by many bureaucrats that any commitment to a strategy will fetter their own 'room to manoeuvre'; thirdly, there is the unspoken fear of many conservationists that heritage conservation is an elitist activity, essentially involved in the restriction of inadequate training or appreciation of planning; fourthly, there is the unspoken fear of many conservationists that heritage conservation is a changed orientation, a major mechanism for achieving conservation in Victoria, is a phenomenon for which many conservationists feel obliged to apologise.

At the same time, most heritage conservation endeavour is at odds with other thrusts of economic activity: growth and expansion in regional centres and mining activity in old goldfield areas, with small hamlets and isolated rural buildings left to moulder.

The logic of capitalism and that of environmental care are ultimately irreconcilable, for the former must tear down and rebuild, constantly modifying the environment, while the latter seeks to preserve places for motives other than the immediately utilitarian. A reconciliation between the two orientations can ironically (and in contradictory fashion) only be fully achieved where environmental care becomes part of the commodified world, as with tourism, or where there is a transformation of the economic to accord with environmental values. An exploration of this is beyond the scope of the article, but it is perhaps important to say here that this does not mean in practice that satisfactory outcomes and reconciliation cannot be achieved in almost every case of conflict between conservation and development.

However, nothing will be achieved if conservationists cannot come to appreciate, and even exploit, the separate logics of economics and conservation. If conservationists continue simply to react against other policies such as proposals for mining, tourism and urban redevelopment, rather than confronting them head on with an alternative vision, then conservation issues will be increasingly marginalised and the concessions offered to this 'special interest' group less and less.

3. Isolation of heritage conservation from popular cultural perceptions and aspirations.

A somewhat esoteric aura has built up around heritage conservation, as professionals working in the field seek to claim an authority rooted in expertise. This can often be coupled with the apparent (though subconscious) intention of middle-class gentrifiers to use their re-capture of a decaying heritage to assert their social standing. Much of the working class and those Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds are shut out of all this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Bashfulness on the part of conservationists in making statements and expounding publicly a conservation ethos must cease. If we believe that conservation is the future, then we must say so, even when it does not appear to serve current economic priorities. We must cease being apologetic and half-hearted. The example of East Gippsland serves well here as a case where conservationists' insistence on the intrinsic value of the rainforests led to a reassessment of timber strategy for the region.

2. The process of identification and planning for heritage conservation must change so that it is community based rather than dominated entirely by professionals, and so that it is 'process' rather than merely 'output' orientated. By this I mean that we must view conservation as a changed orientation, a goal towards which a community is assisted, rather than a set of standards laid down arbitrarily from outside. Reports which merely identify 'significant' places and propose design guidelines do not constitute conservation planning strategies. Heritage conservation strategy making must directly link goal and process.

3. As long as economic, social and environmental planning goals are pursued in isolation of one another, then they will inevitably appear to be in conflict. When an attempt is made to integrate them, then integrated strategies will be able to be developed and points of conflict tackled directly and generally resolved.

In this context we could consider the way in which the problem of salinity and land degradation is at present being tackled in parts of the Wimmera. The Departments of Community Services and Agriculture and Rural Affairs are working together with community groups in regional action committees. Issues of economic viability, environmental quality and infra-structure needs are considered together, with bureaucrats acting as catalysts.

CONCLUSION

Heritage conservation must become part of the authentic life experience of people if it is to be both meaningful and viable in the longer term. This will only be
possible if local communities can participate in the development of their own futures, identify sources of cultural identity in the social life and physical fabric of their townships and promote economic activities which both meet local employment and service needs and are compatible with environmental conservation. Achieving such a community response is dependent on a significant level of consciousness raising and social empowerment. People must become aware of the pressures and opportunities their community faces and their own ability to play a constructive role in achieving a desired future such as a response will not emerge spontaneously. It is a task which requires highly motivated individuals to play a catalysing role, drawing out significant participation within the community in the planning and implementation of desired strategies for action. No better places exist in Victoria for such a pilot project than the small towns of the central goldfields.