CONSERVING MONUMENTS IN AUSTRALIA:
Commonwealth Policies and Programs

Alex Marsden

The Australian Heritage Commission (AHC) is a Commonwealth Government statutory authority set up in 1975 to help Australians identify and appreciate Australia’s National Estate, and to promote the conservation of places entered in the Register of the National Estate.

The Register is a national inventory, embracing our historic, Aboriginal and natural heritage places. To date, the Register lists nearly 11,000 places throughout Australia and many of these places are monuments of enormous significance to different groups in the Australian community. The Register includes the more traditional and familiar monuments, such as cemetery memorials, statues, shrines and cairns, as well as living memorials such as avenues of honour, individual tree plantings, and gardens. There are also many buildings that represent community monuments, such as memorial halls, memorial swimming pools, and archways.

The Commission is currently assessing war memorials in Queensland, as a result of the work done by Shirley and Trevor McIvor. A quick glance at the places nominated, reveals a surprisingly diverse range of war memorials, including bridges, clocktowers, numerous statues of World War I diggers, fountains, gates, mausoleums, obelisks, pavilions, and seats.

One rare type of memorial currently being assessed by the Commission is Anzac Cottage at Mt Hawthorn in Western Australia. It is a simple brick cottage, built in 1916 as a practical monument to commemorate the landing at Anzac Cove on 25 April 1915. Amazingly, the cottage was mostly built in just one day, on 12 February 1916! The construction involved some 200 workmen in the local building trade, and about 4,000 members of the community helping out or simply watching the proceedings.

Monuments are very much about communities and their sense of their own history. Indeed, if you look at monuments in their broadest context, whole towns have become memorials to particular events or periods in history, to ways of interacting with environment, even to commemorating particular ways of life. This strong community feeling for monuments to their past, the importance of the social value of these places, has been acknowledged by the Commonwealth Government in a number of ways. There is, of course, the recognition of heritage significance in the Register of the National Estate, and we are increasingly looking at these types of places now.

The National Estate Grants Program allocates funding for conservation works each year. Whilst the amount of money available is small, and competition for funds high, the Commonwealth Government always receives a large number of applications for funding to conserve and restore monuments and memorials.

The Commonwealth Government is responsible for the care and management of many monuments on behalf of the people of Australia. The AHC has a role in providing heritage advice to Commonwealth Departments and agencies to ensure that conservation practices are followed in accordance with the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter principles. Recently, the Commonwealth Government has announced Operation Restoration in this, the year Australia Remembers. I do want to say, here, that the AHC has become involved in this project by proposing a set of guidelines for the work to be undertaken, and linking the Department of Employment, Education and Training to the expertise of local heritage advisers.

Alex Marsden is Director of the Historic Environment Section at the Australian Heritage Commission.