CULTURAL VALUES AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

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In the New World, and certainly in Australia, cultural imperialism in cultural heritage management can be seen in its simplest form as an actual hang-over from imperial days: the values of white, anglo saxon settlers have been paramount, in the traditional telling of our history. In particular these values have come dangerously close to sweeping away and destroying the values and living traditions of the country’s original inhabitants.

Where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture has not been destroyed or discounted, it has often been appropriated and, by a procrustean process, has been analysed and re-worked to fit Western ideology, and Western demands of scholarship.

This treatment of Aboriginal culture has had a profound effect on Aboriginal people, on their own self image, the way they are regarded in Australia, and on the possibility of their retaining certain aspects of their culture and heritage.

Consequently the european newcomers to Australia have lost much of the richness, variety, wisdom and knowledge of an ancient people. Much has been written and said about this subject (see for instance Langford 1983, Trigger 1985 and Sullivan 1985.) and today there is increasing recognition of the necessity to de-colonize in this vital area. Hence there are moves to hand back custodianship of Aboriginal places to Aborigines; we have careful processes for significance assessment which acknowledge these issues, and we have a growing respect for and understanding of aspects of Aboriginal culture.

Aspects of culture imperialism still remain, and here we might mention questions of funding and priority for conservation, the potential exploitation of the tourism industry; and judgement about conflicting European and Aboriginal values. The current case of the “Swan Brewery” site, is a good illustration of the conflicting values a site may have, and of the priority accorded these values by our society. This site, in central Perth has undoubted significance in European historic terms, (Stapleton 1992) and as an Aboriginal sacred site (Vinnicombe 1992); but the methodology and political skills to resolve this issue are still lacking.

However, such issues have been and are being enthusiastically debated and pursued; Australia ICOMOS has long acknowledged them (Sullivan 1983) and more importantly Aboriginal views on this issue are reaching the mainstream of debate and recognition. Because of this, Aboriginal places are being reclaimed, and reintegrated into the living traditions of Aboriginal people, consequently enriching and rewarding Australian society in a way not previously possible.

What I would like to do today, therefore, is not to reiterate this theme which is so ably dealt with by indigenous speakers, but to focus on other less obvious aspects of cultural imperialism, as it might apply to our discipline and as it might effect a range of living traditions.

What is cultural imperialism? The dictionary (Shorter Oxford1964) as often provides a series of interesting and unexpected descriptions.

Imperial: Of the nature or rank of an emperor, commanding; supreme in authority; majestic, august, exalted. Domineering, imperious; of special excellence; magnificent.

(Is this beginning to sound like the Burra Charter?)

Imperialism: The role of an emperor, especially when despotic. The principle or spirit of empire; advocacy of imperial interests.

The definitions are interesting. The commonly accepted definition of cultural imperialism relates to the tendency of the colonial or post-colonial society to advocate its
own cultural values, or indeed to be incapable of seeing any other values. Related to this, and certainly in itself part of the western value system, is the linking of the concept of imperialism with magnificence, special excellence, and august authority (especially, I suggest, intellectual authority).

Good cultural resource practice rightly aspires to special excellence, and to authority; but this, in itself may have its dangers. Certainly this definition is familiar to bureaucrats; because by and large it conforms to what politicians and dignitaries perceive as the ‘best’ cultural heritage. Indeed one could argue that the idea of World Heritage itself relates to our yearning for magnificence, for special excellence and for august authority. This is not sinister; but I think it can be argued that our definition and categorisation of cultural heritage management has elements of cultural imperialism which give us problems in the conservation, and promotion of cultural values, and especially in the integration of living traditions into our cultural heritage management policy and strategies.

We all know and recognise that it is impossible, to some extent to avoid the domination of the majority views and values of society, in the practice of cultural heritage management. This is why we have so carefully built the safeguards of objectivity and intellectual rigour into our processes. However, the practices we have devised, and the charters we have written show clearly, inevitably, their cultural origins. (Byrne 1990)

Cultural heritage conservation, as we know of it, and as it appears in international conventions, is a recent, and not a universal idea. How did it arise? Henry Cleere (1989, 7) traces desire for the preservation of cultural relics in Europe, to the European Enlightenment, which led to an appreciation of material culture of the past.

Initially, heritage practitioners feared the damage of age itself, of neglect and vandalism and of thoughtless or greedy exploitation, especially conjectural and non-researched “restoration”.

In turn, this appreciation, and fear of attrition, became a more urgent fear of loss, arising out of the great 20th century European upheavals, and the advancing tide of the industrial and post-industrial revolution. It is fear of loss which increases the value of those things which we have previously taken for granted. In the 20th Century the speed and scale with which change has occurred is unparalleled. I (we all, in Australia) are in grave danger of returning to our home town, our own place, in one sense of more significance than any other monument or site, and finding it simply not there. A bomb site - then a Shopping Mall.

It is therefore no accident that it has been in the 20th century that the Wests appreciation of its heritage, arising out of the Enlightenment, has developed into powerful and well supported national and international conservation Charters and conventions and supporting administrative systems. But such systems clearly show their ancestry.

Of particular significance to our concerns in this seminar is the fact that the conventions and charters were written, essentially, as a rubric for conserving the past - past civilizations, past architectural styles, monuments from the past. The whole point about the original impetus was that it was to protect the past from the present.

Seneca Bandariniaka has referred to this issue earlier this week, in his discussion of Japanese and Chinese traditions of conservation. Many non-Western cultures have a spiritual, rather than a material view of what is valuable in their past. They see individual objects and places as vehicles, they see the spiritual and physical contributions of all generations as valuable, for communicating deeper, spiritual meanings. The Western view focuses much more on the material aspects of place, and “sees heritage as deductive symbols, with an emphasis on historical legibility” (Wei and Aass, 1989:8). It is this emphasis which leads to the “freeze frame” methodology which we are presented with as ideal in such documents as the Venice Charter, but which may not suit a non-western “sense of place” which is inextricably entwined with living traditions.

Consequently, in the field of the conservation of monuments such as Qufu, the Forbidden City, or Cheng De, the allowing of continuous repairs or even rebuilding all respect this concentration on the
spirit of the original monument. Although the physical form may change, the spirit and purpose of the original is not only preserved as a continuity, but can be enhanced through the contributions of succeeding generations. (Wei and Aass 1989; p8)

In Australia with the Burra Charter, we have made some important changes to older cultural heritage management traditions; the Burra Charter is an adaptation to Australian conditions, and its assessment processes, and its ability to incorporate a wide range of meanings in the term “significance” assist us with the incorporation of living traditions, and the assessment of the cultural values of a range of groups and cultures.

Despite this, the Charter is still a Charter - it's a rather western set of rules (in itself a concept foreign to many with living cultural practices and traditions) which bizarrely, to many non-Westerners, purports to dictate how we should properly treat our own cultural heritage. We cannot do otherwise; this rule making and categorisation is after all an essential part of our own cultural heritage and, as I have said, is a necessity in the late 20th century atmosphere of rapid change and abandonment of tradition in our society. However we should recognise some of the consequences of this. At the risk of oversimplification, could I suggest that Western cultural origins, and the origins of our discipline, make us more comfortable:

- with the fabric than with the spirit of a place;
- with the dead than with the living;
- with the present than with the past;
- with the enduring rather than the ephemeral;
- with the solid rather than with the shifting;
- with the large rather than with the small;
- with the expert, rather then with the pluralist, the popular;
- with fact rather than with myth;
- with the centre rather than the edges; and
- with hierarchies and lists rather than with integration and multiple realities.

These tendencies, in a number of subtle ways impinge on our ability to deal with the conservation of living traditions, as an essential and integral part of our discipline and practice.

How do they do this? Firstly, of course, with concentration on fabric. The Burra still echoes this. It is very Western, as a number of our speakers have already mentioned.

Sites of the sort referred to by Wei and Aass above, are not unfamiliar to Australians and indeed they can be effectively assessed and conserved under the Burra Charter guidelines. The ancient and valuable cave paintings of the Kimberleys, repainted by modern Aborigines, are a good example. This was a celebrated dispute about primary significance. Was it in the original fabric - the ancient, beautiful and valuable paintings - or in the continuity of Aboriginal use of the site, and religious traditions of renewal and change that the primary significance of the site lay? In this case it became clear that the paramount value of the sites were the living, traditional processes being carried out there. (Bowdler 1988, Mowaljarlai 1988).

As the resolution of the case shows, it is perfectly possible to use Burra Charter principles to determine that the most significant element of a place is its spiritual value, and its value for the living traditions of its creators. The Burra Charter is therefore, an advance on its predecessors. We have got this far. (See also Lewis and Rose, 1988, who discuss slightly different aspects of this issue)

But I suggest that we are still not very good at this. Trying to see things other than fabric as paramount, or at least of equal importance, is for us, like a robot trying to walk naturally - very stiff and unpractised; or perhaps like someone in whom the long traditions of the West have turned to arthritis - accretions of material culture. In the case of the Kimberley paintings, and in other similar instances, our first concern was to debate whether the original fabric has been harmed, and if so, whether this was justified. In other words, in our concerns we still tend to give fabric the prime consideration, often at the expense of a proper (and enriching) consideration of cultural process. In the case of the Kimberley, we began our analysis with the paintings, rather than the people whose creations they were. The real clue to assessing the significance and ‘sense of place’ in this case was I suggest the cultural traditions of the Aboriginal community and their continuity.
Even when we acknowledge living traditions, we value most the most unchanged, and “pure”. We tend for instance to judge Aboriginal culture on the basis of how much has “survived”, since 1788, not on the basis of successful post 1788 adaptation. We tend to discount the living and instead seek for and assiduously embalm the almost-dead.

Our effort, furthermore, to record, analyse, interpret and conserve living traditions has its own dangers. If we successfully embalm the living, they aren’t living any more. The very fact of trying to “catch” some living traditions fossilizes, changes, or sometimes exaggerates or falsifies them. Certainly it makes them self conscious “traditions”. This is very clear in working with the living traditions of Aboriginal groups. Darryl Lewis and Deborah Bird Rose (1988), discussing the relationship between rock art and its “meaning” in the Victoria River district of the Northern Territory, comment:

We analysed the relationship between past and present as one in which the oldest and most knowledgeable people control the interface between Dreaming time and the present. We stated that it is precisely the flexibility and ambiguity of interpretation with respect to preserved texts such as ‘art’ which enable people to maintain an authority which is accountable to the needs of living people. If authorised versions of the Dreaming were to pass into the public domain via written records maintained by Europeans, both the authority of the senior people and the living relevance of the Dreaming could be irreparably undermined.

This is because part of the strategy for cultural continuity in this traditional society is the control which the elders exercise, from time to time over meaning and interpretation of crucial elements of the Aboriginal past.

In the same way, Margaret Somerville (Cohen and Somerville, 1990) describes her work in recording the 19th century history of the people of Ingelba.

A consequence of this [i.e. living traditions] that meanings are generated in the context in which they are constructed. Orally-held knowledge is changing all the time and expresses the continuity of a culture. Written material tends to ossify a culture at a given point in time. Written material about Aboriginal culture highlights a division between the past and the present while oral material emphasises continuity. (p xvi)

Similarly we sometimes inadvertently damage or falsify our own cultural traditions by insensitively interpreting them, or even by exaggerating their purity, antiquity or importance.

Our conservation efforts can actually sometimes be at the expense of change or development in a community. Living traditions in agriculture, in housing, in a variety of situations often don’t fit well with freeze frame heritage conservation. We all know examples of urban conservation which have disempowered and dispossessed the original owners, often of whole suburbs. Often in a number of circumstances, it is the disempowered, the poor, and the marginal who have preserved elements of the cultural heritage. In some cases conservation may be at the expense of these people - either their inheritance is valued beyond their price range; or equally commonly, they may be confined to cultural zoos against their wishes, because we wish to preserve their lifestyle, or the fabric of their places. This is not really the question of “who pays for heritage” so much as the question of how much does a centralised and regulated heritage impinge on peoples lives in an artificial and sometimes counter productive way.

We often do, unthinkingly, practice cultural imperialism on those who live in “heritage properties”, who do not do so by choice, and whose views of “heritage” are often very different to ours. We hold most precious the most “intact” and often the most backward from the point of view of its owner.

In 1973 I saw a good example of this tendency in north American Indian site management. The Navahoe in Canyon de Chey National Park wished to abandon their traditional summer dwellings (Hogons) for portable trailer housing with electricity and other mod cons. The Park staff felt that this would destroy an important visitor experience i.e. “traditional” Indians, in
"traditional" dwellings. This example though twenty years old, and certainly even then untypical, illustrates two tendencies which we still have to some extent - to value the "pure" or "older" tradition most, and to try to fossilize it and the fabric connected with it.

In Australia today, we are usually more sophisticated; but recent work shows that we (as heritage practitioners) are still stuck at looking at fabric and at the past. In Australian Heritage Commission (AHC) advice, this consideration comes to the fore when we are considering Commonwealth property disposals - for example, of Australian Post Offices. These are often significant and historic buildings - but often too, the ongoing service which is after all their original raison d'etre, requires their rationalization, or the actual reorganising and movement of the service. This continuity is often equal to, or more important than the original building.

We all also increasingly recognise that the views of practitioners, and the community about heritage value, often differ in significant ways. The AHC's study of Queanbeyan demonstrates that though practitioners and the public agreed, by and large about the significant elements of the town's heritage, there were some important variations. People tended to value places not so much for their architecture, or their public history, as for their part in the ongoing life in the town, and as reminders of significant events in their own lives. The river which runs through the town, was not listed as an official "heritage item" - presumably because its fabric was seen as "natural" and largely unaltered (in itself untrue) - but it was certainly of central heritage value to the citizens who have played, courted, and strolled by it - who had a lifelong association with it as a major cultural feature, and as the centre of their town.

"Passion and significance erupt in the intersection of lives and places" (Lewis and Rose p.36) Place is only one element of a dynamic process, yet our methodologies tend to single out "fabric" or "place" from the ongoing story; to remove the historical, social or cultural context. We then sometimes devote a great deal of time and energy to bringing this fabric "alive"; to artificially restoring this context. This is often the inevitable result of our having to recreate a past which no longer exists but I think its also sometimes because we separate place from context, from history and from social value. This is in part because we rigidly define place - its type, its importance, its limits, its fabric - and "inventory" our heritage in this way.

Inventories and categories as we know them today are the tools of a centralized, modern bureaucracy, where qualifications and set rules for assessment are held to be desirable. We do need such tools to manage in our modern environment; but it is easy to fall into the trap of believing that the inventory is the heritage. Inventories or even statements of significance do not represent the way people think about places or objects. Inventories almost invariably divorce places and objects from their historical and cultural context; and they ascribe an importance to places and objects which they cannot have in themselves.

In Australia managers have built up an impressive inventory of Aboriginal places, and have acted to conserve individual places, without recognition of the fact that Aboriginal sacred sites are merely pin-points or markers in a sacred and significant landscape, created by the ancestral heroes, and from which the individual places derive their significance. In the same way almost any site has a strong cultural landscape - the local regional and wider history and cultural context - and a physical landscape - and loses a great deal of its significance, richness, authenticity and depth of meaning if it is studied or conserved in isolation. To quote David Lowenthal, "everything is important, or nothing is important".

The dangers inherent in sampling or grading our history are apparent. We can legitimately type and grade the temples in Thailand, or the churches in countryside England, and decide which are the most typical, the most architecturally worthy, the most spiritually or historically significant, but these 5000 or 500 buildings and complexes have, en masse a profound effect on the landscapes of these places - in a way they define it and influence its other elements. Sampling or seeking to conserve the "best" or most outstanding will not preserve the ambience or sense of place which they give to the landscape. This pervasive heritage quality is both more important and more fragile than its parts.
The rigidity and categorisation which are part of our own cultural heritage dictate exactness, categorisation, measurement, and grading, as crucial tools in our intervention, so that our work is too often rather clinical. We split place from event or process, we compare place with landscape; we compare place with place; we emphasise analysis rather than mythology. There are good reasons for this but within this tradition we sometimes lose the ephemeral; the fabric of life; the idea of place in society. We also lose the richness and complexity which comes from integration; - the "multiple ways of knowing, explaining and being in the world" (Sullivan 1992, p42) which this brings, though these multiple ways are sometimes uncomfortable.

The place to which we are aiming is perhaps best summed up by Robert Sullivan in his interesting recent paper ‘Trouble in Paradigms’ (1992)

.... with the ubiquitous and assertive challenge to Euro American intellectual, economic, cultural and ethnographic authority in the ascendent, vertical search for truth has also gone horizontal. All truths including anthropological and scientific ones are now viewed as contingent, contextual and relative. Multiple ways of knowing, explaining, being in the world are now the expected and accepted norm.....

(p 42)

The tension between the centre and the edges is also apparent in our heritage management. Our cultural heritage empires set up conflict and tension between the centre and the edges - between the heritage bureaucrat and the ordinary person, and between the expert and the ordinary person. The “hit and run heritage study” has been evolved by an alliance between bureaucrat and expert. Models of consultation and involvement have now been incorporated into this work, enhancing its value and changing its emphasis. However, the tension between conservation bureaucracy and the ordinary citizen remains, in many instances.

The concept of “world heritage” perhaps displays this tendency best. World heritage is a Western concept; and it is intended to identify and give a special rank to places of outstanding international or universal value. Its a very prestigious, exciting and bureaucratically and politically seductive process and outcome. The concept carries to the ultimate the west’s obsession for categorisation, listing and ranking. It also has some obvious good points and desirable outcomes, the conservation of particular sites through international acclaim and/or moral and legal pressure being the most obvious. However, rarely in the Australian experience to date, has identification of and nomination of world heritage been with the involvement of, or the agreement of the local community.

The special interest groups, the experts, the bureaucrats and the politicians, in a four way split, have carried out the investigation, carried forward the nomination, and publicised the outcome. This is not necessarily wrong or sinister; but it has meant that those whose living traditions, often over a long period, have been associated with the nominated area, have often felt excluded or marginalised. Interestingly, one of the reasons for this is that the process of world heritage identification nomination and management does not take into account all the cultural/natural values which the place possesses. In this respect it does not follow good Burra Charter assessment practices. Hence we have nomination of the Tasmanian world heritage area, consideration of the Aboriginal (though prehistoric only) and natural values; but with no real consideration of the traditional European land use of the last two hundred years. This is not to say that these values alone would make the area worthy of world heritage, or indeed that they would substantially add to the argument. It is clear that in some cases there is direct potential conflict but certainly they seem to be significant enough, at least locally, to have been taken into account. This is the region chosen by the public servants of the penal system as a place of exemplary and secondary punishment; and for two hundred years it has been the background of the local farmers, stockmen, hunters and itinerants. For them it is not wilderness, but a part of their traditional living culture. There are many arguments about the genuiness of this culture; whether claims about it are exaggerated, and a widely held view in the conservation movement that the claimed practices (hunting, horse riding, etc) are trivial, and recent “recreational” rather than genuine. The point is that the assessment of these values has been neglected - with many undesirable consequences.
Richard Flanagan (1992) makes this point in a slightly different way....

"Of the World Heritage Area, of Tasmanian wilderness, and of the south west in particular, there are a number of mythic projections of long standing and considerable power. These projections impose upon these areas a gag of preconceptions that leave the region mute, unable to give tongue to its own story. And if a region is denied its true history, how can such things as the values of the area be honestly discussed: But is not enough to identify these myths: we must examine them and seek to understand how they have come to obtain such power. Could it be that by concentrating on what is internationally significant we only focus on what is ubiquitous in global history, and not upon what is valuable and unique in our own experience?" (pp 104 - 105)

The growing expertise and professionalism of the heritage movement is also relevant to the question of centre and edges. There is a sometimes worrying gap between the expert and the ordinary interested person. Neither has the "truth" or the answer, but the problem seems to be that the expert increasingly strives for methodological purity, while popular culture claims the emotion and the mythology.

I think that the popularity of Robert Hughes' book *The Fatal Shore* (1987) illustrates this point. The book has a sweeping scope and gives us an integrated and moving vision of the convict experience. It captured and explained for many people one of the essential mythic elements of the Australian past and has played a very important part in people's understanding of the convict experience in Australia. It is certainly one of the foundations for an international understanding of the significance of convictism as a colonial theme. Yet many reviews of it criticise it for being "regrettably" populist. Indeed the book may be unscholarly, or present an over simplified view of a complex issue; but on the other hand I detect in some of these reviews, and among some heritage practitioners, an unhealthy tendency to value peer approval above all.

Against the accessibility, mass appeal and possible inaccuracy and over simplification of Robert Hughes version of the past we could set many articles, displays, or restorations which illustrate the esotericism of professional practice and point up that the "performance" of the places or objects we display is often aimed not at the community but at our peers. This aspect of our work - its orientation towards a select, elite group - brings us back to the subject of cultural imperialism and to its association with magnificence and august authority.

As practitioners, we seem still to neglect the middle ground - the place where scholarship enlightens and tempers the popular mythology - for the enrichment and improvement of both. One of the dangers of this trend is a desertion of the popular; a severing of the essential continuity between an intellectual cultural critique and commentary, and the actual, now, "unrestored" culture as we find it. Ian McShane (1992) makes a similar point in his paper on Old Parliament House. His is not perhaps a totally objective view, considering his affiliations and the particular case he is discussing, but the point he makes is powerful and well put....

Knowledge is produced and valorised within a field of power. The *Burra Charter* rests on assumptions that alternative histories can find a voice within the institutionalised processes of the heritage industry. Guided by its objectivist claims, the Charter assumes that plural accounts of the past can be encouraged through adherence to its guidelines. But it ignores the fact that a hierarchy of power and knowledge strongly influence participation in the process.

What is the effect of this? Heritage practitioners become the gatekeepers of 'public' history, privileging histories that have been produced within the discourse, marginalising those that have not. (p37)

Perhaps the ultimate irony in all this is that we have an almost inevitable tendency to place more value on our processes and analyses than on the place as an integral and inseparable part of the human experience.
However, despite its dangers, I believe analysis to be an essential step in the Western tradition of cultural resource management. It is important for us to take things apart; to argue and categorise, but the danger is that we sell this fragmented vision to decision makers, and to ourselves.

We really need now, to develop methods of putting our vision of the past, back together, or we will lose the long traditions we seek to conserve, or conserve fragments of the past at the expense of the living.

The physical, cultural landscape which we seek to conserve also has an intimate connection with the landscape of the mind. In fact in one sense the whole landscape (rather than individual places) is the essential fabric for living traditions; and though it may be our job to analyse or fossilize some parts of it, this is not the essential issue. The essential issue, which we must always be conscious of, is how to move our physical and cultural landscape into the future in a way which may adapt, but which does not fossilize or destroy the intimate connection between the present and the past which is the boundary at which we intervene.

There are good signs that we are moving in this direction. This paper is inspired by three recent publications which, each in their own way, contribute, in the Australian context, to an integrated and balanced view of the past and its interweaving with the present - Denis Byrne’s review article, Western Hegemony in Archaeological Heritage Management (1990) various articles in the Public History Review (1992); and, as a wonderful example of an integrated and enriching view of the past, the place, and the present Cohen and Somerville’s Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs - all of which I commend to you.

References


