Introduction - World Heritage at 40 – The view from Australia

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This volume of Historic Environment was prepared at the request of participants of the Australia ICOMOS National World Heritage Symposium held in Sydney in November 2012 to mark the 40th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention. The Symposium aimed to contribute to the global reflection on the future of the Convention that accompanied the anniversary and responded to a component initiated by ICOMOS through its identification of the ‘World Heritage’ theme for the International Day for Monuments and Sites that year. ICOMOS requested its global network of National Committees and International Scientific Committees to hold discussions and events around this theme. The Sydney symposium concluded a year of activities held around the country by Australia ICOMOS members to reflect on Australia’s World Heritage and to consider Australian perspectives on the global and regional experiences.

The last time this theme was a focus of a volume of Historic Environment was at another important milestone. In the year 2000 the World Heritage Committee met in Cairns, Australia, bringing many international colleagues to Canberra beforehand for the Australia ICOMOS symposium, held at Old Parliament House. This enabled a very rich dialogue that involved Australia ICOMOS members, site managers and Traditional Owners as well as some eminent international colleagues.

Today, the 2000 session of the World Heritage Committee in Cairns is remembered as a turning point in World Heritage operational processes, and a time when the number of sites inscribed on an annual basis was at its peak (61 sites were inscribed in that single session in 2000). It was also a time of contestation in World Heritage, highlighted especially in relation to the proposal for the Jabiluka uranium mine and the impacts on the natural and cultural heritage of Kakadu National Park in Australia’s north. It was a time when Indigenous peoples met to discuss their concerns and proposed a new consultative mechanism (the unimplemented proposal for the WHIPCOE or World Heritage Indigenous Peoples Committee of Experts). At that time, Australia’s World Heritage properties consisted of a number of mixed and natural heritage properties, but none associated with its post-contact histories.

Although to many the Cairns meeting may now seem long ago, many of the same themes, issues and contestations in World Heritage are still in play in Australia and internationally. The 40th anniversary of the Convention in 2012 therefore provided a useful moment to take another look, and re-engage at the national level about the experiences of World Heritage in our part of the world.

This volume of Historic Environment provides a broad portrait of these activities, and the state of play in 2012. The contributions published here include a number that were presented to the national symposium, along with some additional contributions from the events held in capital cities earlier in 2012 that offer a sample of the dialogue, looking back, and looking ahead.
The journal is structured to enable as many perspectives as possible to be represented.

Part 1 is titled *Australia and the Global Dialogue in 2012* and consists of four papers that explore the current operation of the World Heritage system and its points of tension. The view from Australia is presented and new work on the aesthetic values of the Great Barrier Reef is shared.

The larger part of this volume is found in Part 2 – *Commentaries and Vignettes* – and provides a broad array of shorter commentaries about the overall state of play, promotes some of the many possible new cases for World Heritage nomination, and provides several progress reports on the ways in which World Heritage properties are cared for in Australia.

We have worked on this issue of Historic Environment with an awareness of capturing the conversations of 2012, knowing that they will be of interest to others returning to look anew in the future. Our thanks are due to the Editor of Historic Environment, Professor Tim Winter, for assisting us to bend the format to fit our ideas; and of course to all the contributors in this volume. We acknowledge and thank the many people who attended the events held throughout Australia in 2012, supporting a diverse, honest and empassioned reflection.