MONUMENTS

Memories, Meanings and the Recording of History

Editorial

Monuments endure and perpetuate the memories of those who erected them. They also record history. Without monuments, many significant and seemingly insignificant events would have been lost in the mists of time.

This issue of Historic Environment publishes many of the papers presented at the Australia ICOMOS Autumn 1995 Conference: Memories and Meaning: Monuments and their Context. This well-attended conference was held in a monument - the Australian War Memorial - which was especially fitting given that it was the 'Year of Australia Remembers'. While inevitably some papers focussed on war memorials, others dealt with a variety of monuments, both natural and man-made, and discussed aspects ranging from the impact of relocation on significance to the conservation of materials. All the papers were excellent and, without elevating one above others, a special mention should be made of the delightful presentation given by Shirley and Trevor McIvor, a semi-retired couple who spend almost all of their spare time searching out and recording war memorials in Queensland. At the conference they presented a lively and liberally illustrated talk reflecting their work, only a summary of which is included in this conference issue.

Most of Australia's monuments are either war memorials or gravestones - they are important social documents. The many First World War monuments and honour boards erected throughout Australia today tell a tale of the widespread involvement in the War by ordinary Australians, and record the enormous loss of life which affected almost every community. When looking at these monuments, our generation cannot but wonder how this affected our grandparents and almost every family of their generation. Through these monuments we can directly relate to a part of history, even though we were not there. While essentially commemorating an aspect of war, these monuments also tell us something else about ourselves and how our society evolved.

Other events, less world-shattering but nevertheless tragic, are also perpetuated by important monuments. A Ballarat bandstand was erected in memory those lost on the Titanic while a suburban railway collision at Windsor (Victoria) in 1887 would hardly be noticed today save for the Maskell and McNab memorial drinking fountain erected at Port Melbourne to honour the bravery of two local citizens killed in the crash. Interestingly this monument has been moved three times but it still tells the same tale and still has the same affect on those who look at it. It has not lost its significance as a result of its relocations. Neither, it could be argued, has the Burke and Wills statue, erected in memory of the explorers who died in the desert. Originally erected in the middle of the intersection of Collins and Russell Streets in Melbourne, it was removed to make way for the trams. So began Burke and Wills' wanderings through the streets of Melbourne to their penultimate resting place over a flowing stream in the City Square - black humour indeed. The statue is now at the corner of Swanston Walk and Collins Street, one block from their original location. Hopefully they will stay there.

While Burke and Wills may have not lost any appreciable significance as a result of their various peregrinations, the legendary dog on the tucker box on the road to Gundagai could hardly be anywhere else! Similarly the monument which marks the approximate spot where the official founding of Perth was commemorated would lose its significance, and its meaning, if were removed from the Town Hall site. These types of monuments and others, such as gravestones, have an intrinsic link with their place - they act as precise markers of some event which occurred on a particular spot, whether it be an event or a burial.
Gravestones are a special kind of monument, sometimes reaching great artistic heights like the Springthorpe Memorial in the Boroondara Cemetery in Kew (Victoria). Harold Desbrowe Annear, Bertram Mackennal, Sir John Longstaff and Alfred Fisher all combined to produce a monument fit to be a temple. Perhaps less artistic, but equally telling, are those eccentric monuments which quite literally portray the life of the interred. Walter Lindrum is perpetuated by a billiard table complete with balls and cues, the grave of Captain Kelly of the Prahran Fire Brigade is appropriately bedecked with fire hoses, while a pilot at Eastern Geelong is commemorated by a propeller. Perhaps Elvis’s monument should have been a guitar. Inscriptions can be equally graphic: ‘Joseph Michael O’Shea, 15th February, 1889, 7 years 5 months. “Mother’s only treasure and joy.”’ or ‘David Dibbs, seaman, drowned in the Yarra, 15th June, 1846, aged 26’ - an ignominious end after surviving the perils of the sea.

Monuments also record public spiritedness: how many grateful citizens today would erect a monument funded by public subscription to a local government official, as did the citizens of Melbourne to Edmund Gerald Fitzgibbon, Town Clerk 1856-1891. Indeed how many grateful public figures these days would pay for a monument ‘To Victoria from one of her earliest colonists in pleasant remembrance 1840-88’ as did William Westgarth, who anonymously erected a splendid drinking fountain.

While physical monuments have been the vehicle of commemoration by Europeans, the Aboriginal people have felt the spirituality of their places through attachment and association. To the Aboriginal people the landscape itself is just as much a monument evoking memory and meaning as are our statues, fountains and headstones.

Monuments mean different things to different people and they take different shapes and forms, but they all have something in common - they have a meaning to someone, somewhere, sometime.

Robyn Riddett