**editorial**

Australia has a remarkable corpus of stained glass. Installed in churches, public buildings, grand homes and domestic dwellings over the last 150 years, stained-glass windows are functional, as well as decorative. Over this time many thousands of windows have been made in Australia and imported from Europe, particularly Britain and Germany. Through them we can trace and map the religious, economic, social and cultural histories of our communities and glean insights into changing taste and architectural style.

Despite the knowledge of stained glass as an important decorative and architectural art, very little research and documentation has been undertaken to fully establish its significance in aesthetic, historical, cultural or social terms. Indeed, the tension between its importance as part of the architectural fabric of a building and its decorative function underlies many associated conservation dilemmas.

The papers published in this issue of *Historic Environment* are part of the proceedings of the highly successful seminar, 'Lights of Our Past: Australia's Stained Glass Heritage' held in Melbourne at Christ Church, St Kilda in November 1993. The setting was particularly appropriate as the church has a fine collection of 19th and 20th century stained glass from the leading local artists and makers of the time. The work of the Melbourne firm, Ferguson & Urie, can be seen in the apsidal chancel in a series of windows depicting the life of Christ, as well as several other single lancets in the nave and transepts dating from the 1870s. William Montgomery, leading artist of the early 20th century, is represented by an exceptional window, 'The Virtuous Woman', and another of 'St Simeon'. The most prolific Australian maker of this century, Brooks Robinson & Co, have a number of large multi-light and single windows in memory of local identities who were prominent in Victorian affairs. The windows of the church showed evidence of previous repair, significant paint loss, distortion and breakage, providing an excellent opportunity for discussion on conservation issues and restoration techniques.

While Christ Church, St Kilda provided an illuminated backdrop, the seminar focused on bringing together architects, clergy, artists, makers, suppliers of materials, building owners and managers, historians and researchers from throughout Australia and New Zealand. The seminar papers reflected the broad interests of the delegates seeking to provide a starting point for further discussion. Of special interest was a session lead by two of the grand men of glass, Kevin Little and Derek Pearse. Between them, they have been involved in the business of stained glass for just on a century. Their forthright presentations were packed with information and insight, as well as controversial opinion on restoring stained glass. Matters for debate included the Burra Charter and its user-friendliness to the stained-glass practitioner, protective glazing and the quality of modern lead cames. It was the kind of discussion which must be honestly and openly debated if the conservation of stained glass is to move forward and reach a high level of expertise in Australia.
Although considerable time has passed since the seminar, the issues which prompted it remain pertinent and in some cases highly contentious. Churches continue to be sold for demolition or recycled for new uses, 'repair' continues to masquerade as 'restoration' and untrained conservators continue to beguile an untrained client.

However, some achievements are apparent. The implementation of an apprenticeship in stained glass in Victoria, and interest in instigating a similar program in South Australia, are initiatives which should bring a new generation of enthusiastic young artisans to the craft. After a long period of gestation, the British Society of Master Glass-Painters has succeeded in introducing a five-level accreditation system for studios involved in stained glass restoration and conservation – a system which is now under discussion in Australia.

Monash University, College of Art and Design has established a Centre for the Conservation of Architectural Glass which will provide educational, research and consultancy opportunities through a range of programs and facilities. It will be linked to the college's contemporary architectural glass and hot glass studios and incorporate an archive of historical material, a repository for old windows and glass, a comprehensive library and database or census of Australia's stained glass. It will provide an important national focus for glass conservation.

The papers published in Historic Environment offer an opportunity to reassess the Lights of Our Past seminar and to revisit the issues surrounding the conservation of this important aspect of our heritage. The colour and light of stained glass are characteristics appropriate for this very 'visual' issue of Historical Environment, which launches the re-design of this Australia ICOMOS journal.