EDITORIAL

This issue contains edited papers selected from those given at the first national joint conference of Australia ICOMOS and the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials in Melbourne in September 1989. They reveal the curious gap between people professionally involved with the conservation of small and large cultural materials. It is the difference between working on a site (place) and working with an object (artefact) which generally constitutes the distribution between members of ICOMOS and AICCM. However the central concept of the Burra Charter, that of the assessment of cultural significance in determining conservation interventions, is as applicable to an artefact as to a place.

The case study of Entally House, Tasmania, displays this dichotomy whereby treated artefacts (framed paintings) were returned to an inadequate display environment. This highlights the need for “object” conservators to be involved in the initial planning of complex site conservation jobs. The same case study also illustrated the practice of materials conservators giving equal time and skill to every object brought for their treatment. This approach ignores the need to allocate scarce professional resources according to a criterion, such as cultural significance as defined in the Burra Charter.

Such critical approaches to conservation were expressed in papers on Rouse Hill House and Justin McCarthy’s review of problems in managing enormous artefact collections. The basis for assessments was presented by Helen Parott, who is examining philosophies about movable cultural material.

Conservation of cultural material in situ, even in extremely harsh environmental conditions was the subject of several papers: on Antarctic huts, on Aboriginal carved trees and on Aboriginal rock art.

The conference was inspired by excellent addresses from overseas speakers: Peter Burman, secretary of the UK Church of England’s Council for the Care of Churches, who stressed the importance of relating conservation inside and outside the structure; Barnes Riznik, Museum Director of the Waioli Mission House and Grove Farm Homestead at Kauai, Hawaii, who spoke on the proper balance in conserving and presenting house museums; and James Spriggs, Head of the Conservation Laboratory for the York Archaeological Trust, who discussed the problems of interpretation and conservation of cross cultural issues, a problem which will increase here in Australia.

At the concluding session, calls were made for wider discussion and understanding of the concept of cultural significance; for this to be included in the training of all conservation workers; and for a reassessment of the responsibility of materials conservators for critical input to the priorities of conservation. It was also proposed that the two organizations should make greater efforts to communicate their work in conservation and it is hoped that this issue of Historic Environment will assist that process.

Front cover: View of Mawson’s Hut, Commonwealth Bay, Antarctica, showing the extent of meltwater. (Photo: Janet Hughes)