From the City of Brasilia to the Architectural and Urban Work of Le Corbusier
- To the centenary of Canberra

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The great nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said: ‘The first forty years of life give us the text: the next thirty supply the commentary.’

Applying this philosophy to the history and future of the World Heritage Convention, I am going to reflect specifically on my area of personal interest – that of modern heritage. I will draw my line in the sand and say that Schopenhauer’s axiom cannot yet be transferred to the World Heritage system – for example, we do not yet have the text for modern heritage protection – and we need to be aware of the avalanche of sheer commentary that is drifting into its place!

Of the 962 listed properties in July 2012, 745 were cultural, 188 natural and 29 mixed, located in 157 countries, yet modern heritage made up less than 4% of the List.

ICOMOS has long been concerned more broadly about representivity and the credibility of the World Heritage List. In 2005 ICOMOS set up an investigative task force and then an International Scientific Committee (ISC) to champion Twentieth Century Heritage. The World Heritage Centre of UNESCO has run a series of regional conferences on modern heritage and much text has been written, but the number of listed properties has only recently evidenced some encouraging commentary (to use Schopenhauer’s word), in terms of nominations and Tentative Listings.

In the first 30 years of the Convention 1972–2002 only 14 ‘modern’ heritage listings were made – as shown in Box 1. In the decade 2002–2012, 13 more ‘modern’ properties were inscribed – an increase in numbers but very modest in comparison to other site types such as European towns and villages; and Box 2 shows that, while 167 countries had Tentative Lists in 2012, only 19 were ‘modern’ heritage properties.

A particular concern of mine is that there is a very notable omission on Australia’s current
Box 1: Modern World Heritage properties on the World Heritage List

1. 1979 Former concentration and extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland
2. 1984 The Works of Antonio Gaudi (7), Spain
3. 1987 Brasilia, 1957, Lucia Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, Brazil,
5. 1996 Bauhaus and its sites Weimar and Dessau, 1919-33, Walter Gropius and others, Germany
6. 1996 The Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Genbaku Dome), 6 August 1945, Japan
7. 1996 Defence line of Amsterdam Fortifications controlling waters, 1883-1920, Netherlands
8. 1998 Wouda steam pumping station, 1920, Netherlands
9. 1999 Robben South Africa
10. 2000 The Rietveld Schröder House, Utrecht, Netherlands
11. 2000 The Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas, built to the design of the architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva between 1940 and 1960, Venezuela
12. 2000 Victor Horta houses, Brussels, 1893-1903, Belgium
13. 2001 Tugendhat Villa, 1927-30, Mies van der Rohe, Czech Republic
14. 2001 Zollverein Coal Mine XII, Germany
15. 2003 White City of Tel Aviv, 1930s-1950s, Patrick Geddes, Israel
16. 2004 Varberg Radio station, built 1922–24, transmitter equipment and towers, Sweden
17. 2004 Luis Barragan House and Studio, 1948, Mexico
18. 2005 Le Havre the city, rebuilt by August Perret, 1945-6, France
19. 2006 Sewell Mining Town, 1905, Bradden Copper Company, Chile
20. 2007 Central University City Campus of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), 1949 to 1952, Mexico
21. 2007 Sydney Opera House, 1957-73, Jorn Utzon, Australia
22. 2007 Kaiping Diaolou and Villages, China
23. 2008 Berlin Modernism Housing Estates, 1910-1933, Bruno Taut, Martin Wagner and Walter Gropius, Germany
24. 2009 Stoclet House, 1905-11, Joseph Hoffman, Belgium
26. 2011 Fagus Factory Arfeld, Walter Gropius, 1910, Germany
27. 2012 Rabat, Morocco

Tentative List – the City of Canberra. As Australia ICOMOS is very well aware, National Listing under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act is an essential prerequisite for its nomination for World Heritage listing, yet that has not yet been finalised, despite a lengthy assessment and exhibition period by the responsible Australian Government department.

It is my view that this is a possible nomination that Australia ICOMOS should be very active in promoting! Canberra is surely one of the great planned cities of the Twentieth Century – and its Centenary will be celebrated in 2013, a great political moment for popular action. To set the Canberra opportunity in context, I would like to quickly look at three changes to World Heritage processes that have implications for the preparation of a nomination of Canberra.

Change 1: Scope and size of dossiers

The city of Brasilia, designed by Lucia Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, was nominated to the World Heritage List in 1987. Its documentation consisted of a dossier of some 18 pages, a map, a bibliography and a dozen ektachrome slides. It was immediately inscribed by the World Heritage
**Box 2: Modern Properties on Tentative Lists – as of July 2012**

1. Argentina, Casa Curuchet, Le Corbusier serial nomination
2. Argentina, City of La Plata
3. Belgium, Le Corbusier serial nomination
4. Finland, Paimio Hospital
5. France, Le Corbusier serial nomination
6. Eritrea, Asmara Modernism
7. Germany, Le Corbusier serial nomination
8. India, City of Chandigarh
9. Japan, National Museum of Western Art, Le Corbusier serial nomination
10. Japan, Modern Industrial sites in Kyushu and Yamaguchi
11. Mexico, Van der Rohe and Candela industrial Buildings Mexico City
12. Netherlands, Van Nelle factory
13. Netherlands, Zonnestraal Sanitarium
14. New Zealand, Napier Art Deco Historic precinct
15. Norway, Rjukan/Notodden and Odda/Tyssedal Industrial Heritage Sites, Hydro Electrical Powered Heavy Industries with associated Urban Settlements (Company Towns) and Transportation System
16. Switzerland, Le Corbusier serial nomination
17. USA, Frank Lloyd Wright buildings
18. USA, Dayton Aviation sites
19. USA, Civil Rights Movement sites

Committee, despite the fact that it had no management plan and there were exponential population pressures threatening its spatial integrity and overwhelming its planning processes even then. Numerous reports about its conservation difficulties have followed.

In contrast, some thirty years later in 2007 when the six States Parties (Argentina, Belgium, France, Germany, Japan, and Switzerland) proposed the trans-boundary nomination of the ‘Urban and Architectural works of Le Corbusier’, the dossier that I reviewed as a mission expert was many hundreds of pages and included 22 separate sites. The World Heritage Committee referred back that ambitious nomination in order ‘to strengthen the justification of the OUV, to demonstrate the influence of Le Corbusier on the architecture of the Twentieth Century and the modern movement’, asking the States Parties to strengthen co-ordination, improve buffer zones and management systems, and noting that there was no need to include all 22 sites. Howls of anger followed from France and Le Corbusier fans world-wide. How could Le Corbusier, father of modernism, possibly be rejected?

The revised nomination dossier, submitted in 2011 was more than 1000 pages long. It included only 19 sites, re-titled ‘The architectural works of Le Corbusier’. The World Heritage Committee deferred this second nomination, asking the States Parties to develop with the World Heritage Centre and Advisory Bodies, a common notion of the Outstanding Universal Value of the selected sites, and commended efforts taken regarding the protection of settings, management and co-ordination. It is still a work in progress.

For Canberra, we have the text: a National listing prepared (two in fact) and a wealth of experience in drafting World Heritage dossiers. Australia has been on the World Heritage Committee and has played a host of advisory roles. So we have the commentary and we know how to do a great dossier – the recent serial sites nomination on Australia’s Convict Sites proves the point!

**Change 2: Management does matter**

Conceptualising a trans-boundary nomination of sites of diverse values linked by a single architect presents serious philosophical challenges indeed, since the World Heritage Committee...
lists properties, not people! But the increasing emphasis on getting the management details right, and functioning, is a marked change to earlier listings.

For example, when the Sydney Opera House was first nominated for World Heritage Listing – way back in 1981 (and deferred very quickly) the dossier was a dozen pages, a few photographs and a map. The dossier was seen as lacking clear evidence that the Sydney Opera House had established itself as an outstanding example of a distinctive architectural style – it was too new! But the deferral came with an unusual invitation to consider the nomination of Sydney as an important European settlement site, what we would (since 1992) call a cultural landscape.

When the Sydney Opera House was eventually successfully nominated in 2006 (after another dossier was withdrawn in 1996, and a third dossier did not proceed in 1999), it consisted of 116 pages and multiple volumes of back-up documents, plans, videos and photographic support. Australia also made it crystal clear that the Sydney Opera House was a living active building, one in which change would be ongoing, but managed so that it could continue performing as a masterpiece of human genius.

The management of change, indeed in some quarters even the acceptance of change to World Heritage sites, has been a controversial subject in World Heritage circles in recent years. Some more conservative Europeans staunchly reject change as even being part of the conservation process. New world practitioners tend to be more oriented toward managing change in the context of conservation processes.

In the first 40 years of the World Heritage Convention, Australia has very actively contributed to ‘writing the texts’. The Burra Charter is something we should feel extremely proud of – its influence is enormous. It has been the basis of hundreds of Conservation Management Plans across the nation. The Burra Charter is the foundation of the forthcoming version of the Sydney Opera House Conservation Plan, by Alan Croker of Design 5, and will demonstrate that managing change carefully is a central component of the conservation process, and that the careful analysis of significance attributes – form, function, fabric, location and intangible values – can provide a clear-sighted indication of any site or element’s sensitivity to change and be managed accordingly. This methodology has been developed by Godden Mackay Logan in recent years and I believe that such innovative approaches applied to an icon such as the Sydney Opera House will be a prominent case study going forward.

The ICOMOS ISC on Twentieth Century Heritage (ISC20C) is also actively contributing to this debate about managing change, specifically to twentieth-century heritage places, developing its own ‘text’, the Madrid Document: Approaches for the conservation of twentieth-century architectural heritage, which was adopted in June 2011. Currently, the Madrid Document refers only to architectural heritage and looks carefully at guiding intervention and change, but the ISC20C is considering broadening the document’s scope to encompass guidelines for all types of heritage places of the Twentieth Century. (You can download a copy from the ISC20C website: http://icomos-isc20c.org/).

Canberra as a city, as a national icon, has been exceptionally well managed and cared for since inception. It has grown, adapted to changing planning philosophies, added to the Griffin’s concepts with Sulman’s garden suburbs, Holford’s parkways and new town concepts and the National Capital Development Commission’s ‘Y’ plan. It has been well documented at every step – it now just needs the analysis, the commentary!

Schopenhauer also memorably said: ‘Change alone is eternal, perpetual, immortal’ (Platt 1989) which leads me to my third and final point.

**Change 3: Clearly conceptualising nominations is critical**

Many World Heritage commentators have commented that all the ‘obvious sites’ have been listed: the Taj Mahal, Yellowstone National Park, Uluru-Kata Tjuta, The Pyramids of Giza and Hadrian’s Wall. Some say we are now delving into ‘second drawer sites’ and we are certainly seeing many more nominations that use criterion ii – which focuses on the interchange of
values. This was the criterion used in listing the Royal Exhibition Building and Carlton Gardens in Melbourne.

Application of the World Heritage criteria demands extensive comparative synthesis and deep intellectual analysis. To assist with this, the ISC20C has been actively developing a thematic framework for assessing the heritage processes and resulting seminal places of the Twentieth Century. Initial meetings kindly funded by the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles have begun by identifying the typologies of site types we might assess. Japan is already well on the way with its current thematic research into its industrial heritage.

Such tools will help us look ahead to the sorts of nominations we might consider in the future, as well as behind, at what has been listed. The growing complexity and diversity of the implementation of the World Heritage Convention has moved us swiftly through concepts such as cultural landscapes in 1992 to increasing engagements in the interchange of cultural values, an especially relevant criterion for properties of twentieth-century heritage. The Frank Lloyd Wright sites nomination (USA) is advancing toward us already.

These methodologies, tools and concepts are of course directly relevant to our daily local and national conservation practice – we can use and adapt them every day – in Haberfield and Parramatta, Cowra and Broken Hill.

International analysis tells us that Canberra is one of the great planned cities of the twentieth century. A quick review of the century’s planned cities already on the World Heritage List offers context but few comparisons.

The World Heritage case for Canberra as an exchange of values and concepts – from City Beautiful to garden suburbs and new towns, it represents all the major international planning theories of the Twentieth Century! But where is our political will to advance such a proposal? Australia ICOMOS has a role to play in this. We can bask in the achievements of the past 40 years or we can reflect upon what we would like to see represent the Twentieth Century on the World Heritage List.

Right now the ISC20C is discussing with interested parties conceptualising a World Heritage nomination of sites in Space ... Tranquility Base. Sometimes it feels that its progression is more likely than Canberra!

I will leave the last word to Schopenhauer again: ‘Just remember, once you’re over the hill you begin to pick up speed’.

References