Growing-up time for conservation in Australia

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This statement is personal and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of any organisation to which I may be attached - be it womanhood, the Court, ICOMOS...

Forgive me if I speak of politics, the theory of which I know little and the practice nothing. I clarify this immediately to avoid inaccuracies. I have in the past been labelled a sociologist by determinist architecture students, a lawyer by burgeoning land developers and a senior specialist by the bureaucracy, when I was in fact no more than a middle-aged generalist. Which I continue to be. I am not a politician but nonetheless I speak of politics: the politics of division and regimentation in the world which, more importantly, are apparently now entering Australia.

In summing up the 1980 conference on 'Major Problems in Conserving the Cultural Estate in NSW' (a technical and professional conference which was startlingly transformed into a political one), I was able to write:

Legislative supports now operate at both Federal and State levels and the bodies operating those Acts have gained valuable experience... On top of that Australia may draw on international experience and has a national tradition of supportive and experienced voluntary bodies... Limited funding by way of grants or loans has not been a major stumbling block yet, but rather the allocation of priorities for its distribution. The resource which Australia does still lack, however, relative to Europe and North America, is a body of trained and experienced professionals and tradesmen.

In 1983 at the UNESCO conference on Historic Places, I changed that statement to:

Whilst most of these comments still apply, the availability of funding has been severely reduced and applications for assistance are, of necessity, being far more rigorously assessed.

In 1986 we still have the energetic voluntary groups, we have more practitioners (both enlightened and plodding) and we still have reasonably entrenched if modest funding. But in 1986 I say beware.

The dollar is falling; wealth and poverty are stretching apart; mining companies are feeling the stress; Kakadu is slipping away; multiculturalism is flowering numerically but into segregated and separated blossoms; our economic systems are not socially benign and our information systems rely on superficiality to hold them together. Our cultural identity (which the Australian cultural estate proudly purports to represent) here and now is splitting into fragments. Each individual cultural fragment hungers for power and identity as our erstwhile loving and powerful national parents and friends, themselves distraught, hurl us into the economic abyss. It is growing-up time for Australia.

Where do monuments and sites and their conservation fit into this picture?

In 1986 (thanks in extraordinarily large measure to Australia ICOMOS) the procedures for conservation are better and more widely known than was the case in either 1980 or 1983. The fruits of the Burra Charter abound in reports and projects. The purposes of conservation are not so clear, however. At the stage when almost nothing had been conserved at all and even less had been conserved well, the paramount question was 'How?'. Now it is essential to keep fresh the question of 'Why?'. What we thought of then as pilot projects (good precedents from which to draw guidelines) have provided the mindless with a box of props to serve fluttering nostalgia, to create agonised architectonic face-lifted facades, and to fortify the exclusive and excluding ghettos which ward off the invasions of change. The Federation carport and accurate colour scheme lead relentlessly to the Victorian video library and the ignominious rejection of the migrant's mini-palace or the high-tech package. (cf. the debate in Vogue Living, August 1986, between Max Kelly and James Broadbent.)

It is not particularly clever to speak of this subject here, because all ICOMOS members recognise and condemn the phenomenon - that lack of authenticity. (cf. David Lowenthal in 'Heritage and its Interpreters', Banff conference on 'Heritage Presentation and Interpretation', September 1985). We look for intellectual depth, for academic rigour, for long, labouring hours of professional experience. Now a decade after its birth, Australia ICOMOS begins to speak the jargon of specialisation which excludes the outside world, and to enjoy the
exquisite and time-consuming pleasure of mutual criticism and not-quite-lethal back-biting. It is now a self-sustaining (but potentially self-destroying), infinitely valuable ten-year-old intellectual fragment. Infinitely valuable, I repeat, amongst thousand of such valuable community fragments which swam across the great continental national estate... cultural fragments whose vocabularies differ and which eye one another with a certain amount of competitive rancour and distrust.

Let me illustrate.

In August 1986 the Total Environment Centre ran a seminar on the National Estate. During its proceedings Milo Dunphy, conservationist, proclaimed the need to erect, for the bi-centenary, a wailing wall of regret over our 200 years of developmental crime. On the other hand, Ian Wisken, Chamber of Mines, Metals and Extractive Industries, described conservationists as the economic terrorists of our society, who insert their impotent passivity into Australian history. At least they were talking.

The unfulfilled purpose of the various State conservation plans and of the Australian Heritage Commission's conservation workshops held earlier this year was to open public debate and to call upon groups such as this one to emerge from their journals and clubs, to be prepared for a bashing, to hear and to be heard. We have listed the Myall Lakes massacre site; yet to come are the first Baberfield house with aluminium windows and concrete portico or the hallowed boardrooms of the New Right.

I believe the time has come to:
- prepare and hone the professional tool
- painstakingly accumulate, weigh and catalogue data
- explain its uses
- learn the languages to understand, hear and speak to outsiders - and to enjoy the conversation
- expose and where possible respect the motives of others in this field and, if the motives are not worthy of respect, oppose them
- accept the relativities as well as the multiplicities of significance in places
- explore selectivity and be ready to set priorities
- avoid doctrine insofar as it constrains fresh thought.

To illustrate what I mean by that I shall read from Roberto Di Stefano's somewhat emotive introduction to the latest issue of ICOMOS Information Quarterly Review (N.1-1986):

...public opinion worldwide is beginning to recognise and to appreciate ICOMOS as a vital institution for the promotion of conservation and restoration techniques, which provides the international community with an irreplaceable framework for attaining social and economic development through the appropriate enhancement of the cultural heritage. It is now time to move forward... pursue the goals of ICOMOS - goals which, founded on human, age-old and profound values, are resolutely progressive and reformatory.

The fragment speaks.

I prefer the more objective conclusions of Luigi Fusco Girard in his article 'The Complex Social Value of the Architectural Heritage' in the same journal:

We would like to explicitly stress the role played by culture in the process of economic values formation and in the processes of choice.

The problem of conservation is primarily a cultural problem...

Unless clear answers can be found for a number of fundamental questions - 'What type of development do we hope to achieve?', 'In what sort of environment do we want to live?', 'What kind of living standard is desirable?', 'What are our priorities?' - no strategic view is possible.

Forgive this paper. I speak because I am afraid - of polarisation, of bureaucratisation, of the waves of superficiality and division, of the clouds of darkness.

My last quotation comes from Mr Bruce Petty, Australia's own Nostradamus and his soothsaying from almost twenty years ago (Petty's Australia - and how it works,1967, Penguin Books).

Australians regard history as being, like garlic and bagpipes, an unfortunate foreign activity, and have managed to avoid making very much. It has nevertheless occurred from time to time and is readily taught in the school room...
Having reproduced the species, efforts are made to get it employable as cheaply as possible. By wit and energy many survive these deformative years and go on to be average...

Aborigines continue to fail to be a great problem for most white Australians. It is not certain which generation is going to pay for this error...

The authorities would rather make rules than make judgements. This has produced an enormous amount of government and very little politics...

There remains a good-humoured, lean-jawed optimism in spite of the occasional isolated city of panic.

Like this one.

(This paper was delivered at the annual general meeting of Australia ICOMOS, Sydney, September 1986.)