Guidelines to the Burra Charter: Cultural Significance

These guidelines for the establishment of cultural significance were adopted by the Australian national committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (Australia ICOMOS) on 14 April 1984 and revised on 23 April 1988. They should be read in conjunction with the Burra Charter.

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1.0 Preface

1.1 Intention of guidelines
These guidelines are intended to clarify the nature of professional work done within the terms of the Burra Charter. They recommend a methodical procedure for assessing the cultural significance of a place, for preparing a statement of cultural significance and for making such information publicly available.

1.2 Applicability
The guidelines apply to any place likely to be of cultural significance regardless of its type or size.

1.3 Need to establish cultural significance
The assessment of cultural significance and the preparation of a statement of cultural significance, embodied in a report as defined in section 4.0, are essential prerequisites to making decisions about the future of a place.

1.4 Skills required
In accordance with Article 4 of the Burra Charter, the study of a place should make use of all relevant disciplines. The professional skills required for such study are not common. It cannot be assumed that any one practitioner will have the full range of skills required to assess cultural significance and prepare a statement. Sometimes in the course of the task it will be necessary to engage additional practitioners with special expertise.

1.5 Issues not considered
The assessment of cultural significance and the preparation of a statement do not involve or take account of such issues as the necessity for conservation action, legal constraints, possible uses, structural stability or costs and returns. These issues will be dealt with in the development of a conservation policy.
2.0 The Concept of Cultural Significance

2.1 Introduction

In the Burra Charter cultural significance means “aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value for past, present or future generations”.

Cultural significance is a concept which helps in estimating the value of places. The places that are likely to be of significance are those which help an understanding of the past or enrich the present, and which will be of value to future generations.

Although there are a variety of adjectives used in definitions of cultural significance in Australia, the adjectives “aesthetic”, “historic”, “scientific” and “social”, given alphabetically in the Burra Charter, can encompass all other values.

The meaning of these terms in the context of cultural significance is discussed below. It should be noted that they are not mutually exclusive, for example, architectural style has both historic and aesthetic aspects.

2.2 Aesthetic value

Aesthetic value includes aspects of sensory perception for which criteria can and should be stated. Such criteria may include consideration of the form, scale, colour, texture and material of the fabric; the smells and sounds associated with the place and its use.

2.3 Historic value

Historic value encompasses the history of aesthetics, science and society, and therefore to a large extent underlies all of the terms set out in this section.

A place may have historic value because it has influenced, or has been influenced by, an historic figure, event, phase or activity. It may also have historic value as the site of an important event. For any given place the significance will be greater where evidence of the association or event survives in situ, or where the settings are substantially intact, than where it has been changed or evidence does not survive. However, some events or associations may be so important that the place retains significance regardless of subsequent treatment.

2.4 Scientific value

The scientific or research value of a place will depend on the importance of the data involved, on its rarity, quality or representativeness, and on the degree to which the place may contribute further substantial information.

2.5 Social value

Social value embraces the qualities for which a place has become a focus of spiritual, political, national or other cultural sentiment to a majority or minority group.

2.6 Other approaches

The categorisation into aesthetic, historic, scientific and social values is one approach to understanding the concept of cultural significance. However, more precise categories may be developed as understanding of a particular place increases.

3.0 The Establishment of Cultural Significance

3.1 Introduction

In establishing the cultural significance of a place it is necessary to assess all the information relevant to an understanding of the place and its fabric. The task includes a report comprising written material and graphic material. The contents of the report should be arranged to suit the place and the limitations on the task, but it will generally be in two sections: first, the assessment of cultural significance (see 3.2 and 3.3) and second, the statement of cultural significance (see 3.4).

3.2 Collection of information

Information relevant to the assessment of cultural significance should be collected. Such information concerns:

(a) the developmental sequence of the place and its relationship to the surviving fabric;
(b) the existence and nature of lost or obliterated fabric;
(c) the rarity and/or technical interest of all or any part of the place;
(d) the functions of the place and its parts;
(e) the relationship of the place and its parts with its setting;
(f) the cultural influences which have affected the form and fabric of the place;
(g) the significance of the place to people who use or have used the place, or descendants of such people;
(h) the historical content of the place with particular reference to the ways in which its fabric has been influenced by historical forces or has itself influenced the course of history;
(i) the scientific or research potential of the place;
(j) the relationship of the place to other places, for example in respect of design, technology, use, locality or origin;
(k) any other factor relevant to an understanding of the place.
3.3 **The assessment of cultural significance**

The assessment of cultural significance follows the collection of information.

The validity of the judgements will depend upon the care with which the data is collected and the reasoning applied to it.

In assessing cultural significance the practitioner should state conclusions. Unresolved aspects should be identified. Whatever may be considered the principal significance of a place, all other aspects of significance should be given consideration.

3.3.1 **Extent of recording**

In assessing these matters a practitioner should record the place sufficiently to provide a basis for the necessary discussion of the facts. During such recording any obviously urgent problems endangering the place, such as stability and security, should be reported to the client.

3.3.2 **Intervention in the fabric**

Intervention in, or removal of, fabric at this stage should be strictly within the terms of the Burra Charter.

3.3.3 **Hypotheses**

Hypotheses, however expert or informed, should not be presented as established fact. Feasible or possible hypotheses should be set out, with the evidence for and against them, and the line of reasoning that has been followed. Any attempt which has been made to check a hypothesis should be recorded, so as to avoid repeating fruitless research.

3.4 **Statement of cultural significance**

The practitioner should prepare a succinct statement of cultural significance, supported by, or cross referenced to, sufficient graphic material to help identify the fabric of cultural significance.

It is essential that the statement be clear and pithy, expressing simply why the place is of value but not restating the physical or documentary evidence.

4.0 **The Report**

4.1 **Content**

The report will comprise written and graphic material and will present an assessment of cultural significance and a statement of cultural significance.

In order to avoid unnecessary bulk, only material directly relevant to the process of assessing cultural significance and to making a statement of cultural significance should be included.

See also Guidelines to the Burra Charter: Procedures for Undertaking Studies and Reports.

4.2 **Written material**

The text should be clearly set out and easy to follow. In addition to the assessment and statement of cultural significance as set out in 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 it should include:

(a) name of the client;
(b) names of all the practitioners engaged in the task;
(c) authorship of the report;
(d) date;
(e) brief or outline of brief;
(f) constraints on the task, for example, time, money, expertise;
(g) sources (see 4.4).

4.3 **Graphic material**

Graphic material may include maps, plans, drawings, diagrams, sketches, photographs and tables, and should be reproduced with sufficient quality for the purposes of interpretation.

All components discussed in the report should be identified in the graphic material. Such components should be identified and described in a schedule.

Detailed drawings may not be necessary. A diagram may best assist the purpose of the report.

Graphic material which does not serve a specific purpose should not be included.

4.4 **Sources**

All sources used in the report must be cited with sufficient precision to enable others to locate them.

It is necessary for all sources consulted to be listed, even if not cited.

All major sources or collections not consulted, but believed to have potential usefulness in establishing cultural significance should be listed.

In respect of source material privately held the name and address of the owner should be given, but only with the owner’s consent.

4.5 **Exhibition and adoption**

The report should be exhibited and the statement of cultural significance adopted in accordance with Guidelines to the Burra Charter: Procedures for Undertaking Studies and Reports.