Introdution

The areas I wish to traverse in this paper are best indicated in the following propositions.

1. Heritage conservation relies largely on government action.

2. While it depends on national and state legislation, heritage conservation takes place primarily through the action of local government.

3. Heritage conservation demands systematic and objective assessments of cultural significance, and adherence to historical truth.

4. At the same time, heritage conservation is best achieved through a creative process of imaginative planning and design.

5. The organisational environment of local government is typically hostile to both scientific rigour and creative planning.

Clearly, we have a problem, or series of problems. Proposition 3 may conflict with proposition 4. If either or both of these propositions are correct, there is a direct conflict between propositions 2 and 5.

To put this another way: successful heritage conservation often requires action by local government which combines both a high level of technical accuracy and a high degree of creativity, yet the professions and the organisation conspire to prevent one or the other - or both.

Sticking to the facts?

The Burra Charter could be interpreted to reduce the scope for design almost to extinction. Conservation 'should involve the least possible physical intervention'. Specifically, preservation is limited to the protection, maintenance and (where necessary) the stabilisation of the existing fabric. Restoration is only appropriate if there is sufficient evidence of an earlier state of the building and if it actually recovers the significance of the place; otherwise reconstruction may be appropriate, but only where it is necessary for the very survival of the place, or where it reveals the cultural significance of the place as a whole. When it comes to putting the place to use, adaptation is acceptable only where the conservation of the place cannot otherwise be achieved, and any changes must be limited to those which are essential to the new use (Australia ICOMOS, 1988).

While none of this is necessarily inconsistent with creative planning and design, the Burra Charter lends itself to an interpretation that the best heritage conservation must be uncompromised by personal expression and imaginative intervention. Not only must heritage conservation be carried out in a scientific and objective manner, it must, according to some, be confined to that which is scientific and objective.

Possibly reinforcing this view is the Australian Heritage Commission's long term development of the criteria and assessment procedures used for including places on the register of the national estate. This work is being carried out because the commission 'requires rigorous, consistent and explicit assessment decisions on places nominated to the Register of the National Estate. This necessitates thorough and comprehensively documented assessment of individual places against other places of the same class' (Australian Heritage Commission, 1990, p. 13). This in turn requires the development of a library of definitive (though admittedly 'fuzzy') type profiles for every kind of place in Australia (Australian Heritage Commission, 1990, Attachment A).

Similarly, the state and national level these are highly desirable attempts to improve the consistency and usefulness of lists, to professionalise the practices of heritage conservation, and even, in the words of Graeme Davison, 'to remove some of the special pleading and political heat that tends to bedevil heritage advocacy' (Davison, 1990, p.14).

Those working to these laudable ends can overlook the importance of approaches which are more spontaneous, or which combine rigour with personal expression. Some have been known to condemn conservation work which has these qualities.

The role of design

It may be that these other approaches inspire and generate good conservation, and have more likelihood of success. In exploring popular attitudes to 'preservation' Lowenthal found its motivation in a simple and very human quality.

Congeniality remains a prime motive for preserving; most survivals are treasured for their beauty or harmony. Attractiveness, variety, and historical associations were the main reasons people in Guildford wanted old buildings conserved. Historic buildings offer 'a richer source of environmental well-being than contemporary architecture',...
concludes a large-scale study of English preferences. Surviving older buildings are found gracious and livable for good reasons: because the materials used in their construction usually exceed closely calculated modern minimum requirements, they are often stronger, roomier, warmer in winter, cooler in summer, and better insulated against noise and vibration than new buildings (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 388).

So should not such places be enjoyed for these qualities - and modified, adapted, altered in precisely the same spirit? Leo Schofield probably thinks they should. In a piece he wrote for Vogue Living the Sydney PR consultant, foodie and columnist admitted that his new apartment 'didn't look too prepossessing ... but the bones were good'.

The building in which this apartment was located was very special, a splendid example of twenties neo-Adam with a dash of Spanish mission. It was built in 1927 as three flats, one to a floor, by the distinguished Sydney firm of architects Joseland and Gilling.

The decade before I moved into this apartment I had lived in St Kevin's, a sprawling, moody, historic 1892 pile nearly. Although an important building, it was closer to a house museum than a home. Because of its architectural importance, I'd felt driven to restore it to style, speculatively authentic rather than pedantically re-created, but with a palpable 19th century 'gloomy rich' atmosphere. With this new house, I've had no such albatross around my neck, no need to answer to posterity, merely to create an agreeable contemporary living space. ... If there is any perceptable influence here, it's a Roman one, signalled by warm, earth colours, bare parquet floors and a veritable Rookwood of busts and marble fragments (Schofield, 1991, pp. 66, 68).

One can sympathise with Schofield in having to defend his earlier restoration as speculative rather than pedantic, and with is sense that a slightly newer house is less of an albatross. Clearly this offends all manner of principles about cultural significance (and of course Schofield is not attempting to be a conservation professional) but it reminds us that houses of any age are to be enjoyed as dwellings. The greater the potential enjoyment, the more likely are the 'bones' to survive as 'evidence of the past', to 'pass on to future generations', precisely because the building will be more highly valued and greater effort will go into its maintenance.

These considerations apply to buildings and places other than houses. Howard Tanner was the architect for the conservation of the Sydney Town Hall. In a recent letter to the Australia ICOMOS Newsletter Tanner made the point that old architecture is not inherently better than current architecture. The qualities that make old buildings special - making them 'places we wish to keep' - can be created today. Indeed, the creation afresh of those same qualities may be important to the conservation of the old. Tanner put it this way.

I think it would be timely for ICOMOS to reflect on the practical applications of its philosophies. Having moved from academia to practice I have been made aware of the importance of design in retaining established significance while introducing new uses. In my view ICOMOS should now give special attention to the area of adaptive re-use since this will be a major areas of endeavour during the 1990s.

It is no longer relevant to hold the view that 'the only good architect is a dead architect' (Tanner, 1991, [p. 2]).

From town halls to towns
I believe that we must also refute the idea that the only good town builders are dead town builders. In Fremantle in the eighties (when I was the planner) we were many times faced with Howard Tanner's task of 'retaining established significance while introducing new uses'. Indeed, we could only maintain the qualities of the town centre - its energy, its complexity, its social relevance - by actively leading its growth and change. I found myself planning and building a wholly new street in the very heart of the historic city centre. Paddy Troy Mall is now a pedestrian and service street which immeasurably enriches the pedestrian networks and retail density of the centre, and ensures the fullest use of a whole block of old buildings. Another downtown street was one of the most difficult issues the Council had to deal with. My scheme for the extension of Parry Street took traffic out of the oldest residential street, allowed the pedestrianisation of the city square, gave much better access and visibility to a remarkable sequence of old buildings, improved the relationship between the centre and the old prison, and repaired much of the damage caused by the traffic schemes of the sixties. A vigorous and intimidatory campaign was waged against it, mainly based on the argument that it was destructive of the city's heritage, and on an unstated presumption that, in an old town centre, any intervention is wrong.

I took the view that heritage conservation in Fremantle required a high degree of historical accuracy and careful weighing of the options. This was nothing, however, without the kind of committed and passionate planning which Paul Ritter defined as 'affecting change, according to criteria, with design skill, opportunely'. I sought to follow the insights Ritter had expounded as early as 1964.

Those who plan should analyse needs and resources, create [designs] imaginatively according to the analysis, organise the execution of the design opportunely, and instigate communication to initiate its proper use (Ritter, 1964, p. 6).
Having since read Christopher Alexander’s marvellous work on *A new theory of urban design* I think that many of the ‘rules’ he derived from a San Francisco experiment were followed in Fremantle in the eighties. Alexander and his co-authors first seek to understand what distinguishes the cities of the past.

When we look at the most beautiful towns and cities of the past, we are always impressed by a feeling that they are somehow organic... Each of these towns grew as a whole, under its own laws of wholeness... and we can feel this wholeness, not only at the largest scale, but in every detail: in the restaurants, in the sidewalks, in the houses, shops, markets, roads, parks, gardens and walls. Even in the balconies and ornaments (Alexander et al., 1987, p. 2).

They say that this quality of ‘organicness’ could not exist at present because there is not discipline - not architecture, not planning, not urban design - which actively sets out to create it. A new approach is needed.

... We believe that the task of creating wholeness in the city can only be dealt with as a process. It cannot be solved by design alone, but only when the process by which the city gets its form if fundamentally changed.

The process will have to guarantee that each new act of construction becomes related in a deep way to what has gone before.

This can only be accomplished by a process which has the creation of wholeness as its overriding purpose, and in which every increment of construction, no matter how small, is devoted to this purpose (Alexander et al., 1987, pp. 3, 15-16).

This is not the place to describe the experiment which gave rise to this finding, or the set of rules which resulted from it. Perhaps some of the flavour and potential of the book can be conveyed by Alexander’s ‘single overriding rule’:

> *Every increment of construction must be made in such a way as to heal the city.*

This rule is restated as follows: *Every new act of construction has just one basic obligation: it must create a continuous structure of wholes around itself* (p. 22).

I follow that we must gain a deep understanding of the past, drawing on all of the conservation technology at our disposal, including type profiles, inventories, constructs of historical themes, guidelines, charters and the like. It also follows that today’s architects, planners and designers must be able to contribute to the city in precisely the same manner as those who, perhaps less selfconsciously, created what we now wish to keep. They must be able to combine rigour, commitment, passion, discipline, vision and design skill.

This sort of approach will not be for everyone. What we must try to ensure is that attempts to systematise and professionalise heritage conservation to not stifle those who can contribute in this way.

Similarly, we must seek ways to create a local government culture which can accommodate planning and design of this kind. At a minimum, the conservation planner needs either to create some safe place from which to take risks and pursue long term goals, or to enjoy the protection of those in positions of power. Thus we must try to ensure that the volatility of local government, the sense of no-one being in charge, does not preclude the kind of secure and stable environment which enables rigour to be practised and visions to be realised.

Perhaps the best contribution I can make to such an endeavour is to recount a case study of a local government heritage project which somehow escaped the usual traps and impediments, and went on to achieve a measure of the wholeness which Alexander describes.

*Case study: a historic site in Fremantle*

The development of a new public reserve and beach in the centre of Fremantle was known as the Arthur Head project, most of which was carried out from 1985 to 1988. In an article in the journal *Continuum*, in an issue entitled Space-Meaning-Politics, I wrote about ‘transforming a place so as to retain, recover, interpret and respond to its cultural and political significance’. In order to document the project I adopted an approach
involving 'structured physical description... which makes use of a limited number of photographs to "catalogue" the main elements' (Dawkins, 1990, p. 168).

Like Paddy Troy Mall and the Parry Street extension, the results of the Arthur Head project have been fully absorbed into the 'organicness' of Fremantle. Few can remember how it was before; even the new beach is thought to have always been there. I now see that all three projects - local government heritage projects at that - were carried out 'in such a way as to heal the city.' Each one created 'a continuous structure of wholes around itself.'

I conclude this paper with extracts from the Arthur Head article. The first deals with the problem of selecting from the extraordinary layers of significance and meaning of the place.

Revealing, conserving or emphasising one element may destroy or diminish another. How is the choice to be made, and by whom? To the extent that the area becomes a museum, there is the general problem of determining the ideology and message projected by the place, whether directly or by default.

More difficult is the fact that the very essence of the area - its dynamism, its continuing evolution in response to the urban change around it - will die if it becomes some kind of memorial park. In seeking to preserve the history of the place we cannot avoid, to some degree, cutting it off short (p. 178).

Strategies were adopted to deal with these and other issues. We decided that the users for whom we planned were local people; then came residents of the region and state, and then visitors. We determined to treat the project site as a seamless part of the town.

This was not the time to set the headland apart from the city and landscape of which it had been such a integral part. This was not the time to precondition a response to the area as some sort of heritage park, where voices were lowered and steps were slowed. On the contrary, it was a place for the mundane things of life: lunch, swimming, sun bathing, climbing rocks, playing chasey, watching the sun go down over the ocean... It was the deliberate intention of the design that you could go there, and respond to the place in any number of ways, and not be aware of its underlying historical significance (p. 179).

A number of other principles guided the planning, design and conservation work.

Everything we did was to add or draw out complexity, rather than to simplify or order. We endeavoured to reflect the natural characteristic of the headland and the ways it had been used and modified. We tried to base the decisions on the best information available to us, and in this to adhere to the principles of the Burra Charter. Rigorous data gathering, analysis and policy making preceded the development of designs (p. 182).

Objectively and rigour were very important, but not enough. We needed the freedom to respond to the place that Scholfield exercised in his newer house, and the ability to creatively introduce new uses in the manner advocated by Tanner. We needed to express the personal commitment, imagination and opportunism of Ritter's style of planning. And we needed (without then fully knowing it) to fulfill Christopher Alexander's Rule 3: 'Every project must first be experienced, and then expressed, as a vision which can be seen in the inner eye (literally). It must have this quality so strongly that it can also be communicated to others, and felt by others, as a vision' (Alexander et al, 1987, p. 50)

The Round House, Fremantle

I had tried to keep at bay, or at least defer, arbitrary self-expression and 'design'. The place itself was the fact. It belonged to everybody. The truth of its history was what mattered. In the end, personal statements became more important. After all, I had initiated the project because of the significance of the place and what it could say about us as a society. The planning, from the outset, was based on a vision of the area, and sought to be evocative. The research, the policy making and the actual construction reflected the often intense responses to the area of those doing the work, as well as their historical and political perspectives. The detailed designs grew out of the interaction of all that with the artistic imagination (Dawkins, 1990, p. 182).

A specific style of planning was required for the project, which I characterised as making decisions only when necessary. This style of planning must be guided by a real sense of purpose and a clear set of directions or
objectives. It also depends upon the planner having a high degree of authority and autonomy - not the norm in local government. This approach (I now know) embodies Alexander’s rule 1: ‘The piecemeal character of growth is a necessary precondition of wholeness’ (Alexander et al, 1987, p. 32).

Importantly, making decisions only when necessary also means that designs are deliberately left unfinished. The planning concentrates on those elements which meet essential needs and which establish underlying structures and patterns. The rest is better left to others. They will come to see the area in a new light, and they will respond to the new ways in which the public use the place. They too, should leave their own plans and designs unfinished (dawkins, 1990, p. 183).

How can local government become a more congenial home to such activity? While I do not know the answer to the question I can report that the Arthur Head project demonstrates that it sometimes happens.

All of this has important implications for the design and construction of public spaces, especially those with layers of significance and potentially powerful meanings. Many of these places are - and should remain - public places managed by a government agency. Often this agency is - and should be - the local council. Yet city councils do not normally take risks to achieve complex objectives, or to pursue a vision, or to allow places to evolve in an open-ended way: they are best at compromise, ‘balance’, simplification, and the implementation of a finite, static plan. On the other hand, when they hand a project over to one person they usually do get the project built but its objectives are often idiosyncratic and the design arbitrary.

Fortunately in Fremantle the circumstances were more propitious. We were able to practice confident planning; we had the confidence of the city council. I acknowledge here the support and encouragement of Gerry MacGill and the Planning and Development Committee which he chaired; and the passionate commitment and skills of those who worked on the project. We had time (just) to allow ideas and information to mature, and were able to leave decisions until they were necessary.

In short, we had time to read the place, and to add our writing to it. The place was transformed in a manner which recovered and responded to its cultural and political significance, and which created the possibility of its continuing to evolve in directions consistent with this significance.

The place must now be experienced on the spot (Dawkins, 1990, pp. 185-6).

References


Australia ICOMOS. 1988. The Australia ICOMOS charter for the conservation of places of cultural significance (the Burra Charter). Sydney: Australia ICOMOS.


