Heritage Surveys

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In his book, Ideas for Australian Cities, Hugh Stretton has said:

Different modes of metropolitan growth are needed so that old and new buildings are less often driven to compete for the same locations. Think of it in other terms. If we ran on a limited stock of paper and recording materials, we would have to erase a bit more Beethoven from our cultural stock to make room for each new pop song. Rubbing out all the works of Shakespeare wouldn't make room for the reams written lately in favour of the horrors of 'comprehensive urban redevelopment'. But there's no need for such far-fetched analogies. If eighteenth century London had been destroyed to make way for Victorian London, then all of that pulled down to make room for Edwardian London, then all of that replaced by high-rise housing since 1945, it would now be a poorer, duller and more expensive town. Paris on the same principles would now be contemporary with Wollongong. Both would have cost about twice as much to build and the rest of English and French wealth would be poorer by that amount of diverted productivity.1

Stretton's argument for some measure of heritage conservation is clear, but just as it is unthinkable that all historic monuments and buildings should be swept away periodically to be replaced by contemporary, even temporary, structures so it is unthinkable that all old buildings, no matter how obsolete or dilapidated or insignificant they might be, should be retained. It is essential that cities and towns change to meet new pressures and requirements. However, this change, and the process of building replacement need not and indeed must not take place indiscriminately. Therein lies the argument for the Heritage Survey. Until we know what our heritage includes, we cannot take steps to ensure its conservation. Thus the Heritage Survey is fundamental to heritage conservation. Yet, to date, a great deal of money has been spent in the name of conservation which has not been preceded by responsible and thorough research or justified by defensible arguments. All these must flow from the broad Heritage Survey or, in a microcosmic sense, the detailed research and analysis of buildings.
This paper is a plea for more professionalism in the management of our heritage property, whether this be of individual items or the entire stock of heritage property: it is a plea for the professional approach to conservation which is inculcated by the Venice and Burra Charters.

It must be appreciated that heritage surveys and building analysis have a fundamental place in the strategy of heritage conservation. There can be no plan for conservation until there is an awareness of what needs to be conserved. Thus heritage surveys must be taken seriously, for it is upon them that later conservation initiatives must be based.

Numerous benefits flow from an appreciation of the fundamental place of the heritage survey in conservation strategy: all are to be found in the articles of the Burra Charter. The Burra Charter underscores the need for study, prior to any building work. Thus bricks and mortar conservation - which is the more spectacular and perhaps the most satisfying feature of heritage conservation - should logically follow the heritage survey.

Despite the many surveys that have been done, however, there remain vast areas which yet remain to be surveyed. For some time to come there must still be an emphasis on macrocosmic surveys, even though steps are being taken to restore individual heritage items which have been identified already. There must also be a greater control than has been evident hitherto, over survey work undertaken. Too frequently, in the past, surveys were undertaken with little concern for any which had been done elsewhere. Thus they bear little relationship one to another and are difficult to incorporate in a broadly based conservation plan. If future conservation strategies are to be soundly based, survey work which has already been done must be consolidated, and any work must be co-ordinated by those who will be ultimately responsible for determining conservation priorities.

Happily, in South Australia at least the Heritage Branch of the Department of Environment and Planning is taking steps to direct future surveys in South Australia, though it would seem preferable for some national initiative to ensure that all surveys throughout the country are comparable and co-ordinated.

Because they are fundamental to conservation planning, heritage surveys must be comprehensive and address themselves to the multitude of different items which make up heritage property. When new surveys are proposed, the primary concern must be to tailor budgets and time schedules to the need for comprehensiveness and thoroughness; not vice versa as often in the past. Too frequently funds have been apportioned for heritage surveys in accordance with the grantsmanship of the applicants, and with little or no regard for which might be achieved.
Another point to be made is that there must be an appreciation of the fact that heritage surveys only make sense if they are implemented. It is not sufficient simply to identify significant heritage items. Once they are identified, steps must be taken to conserve them certainly by means of local regulations - perhaps by incorporation in a State-wide conservation plan. Again, the manner in which past surveys have been funded and co-ordinated suggests that there has been little appreciation of this point.

While surveys are but the first stage of continuing planning processes, it should be evident that no survey can be definitive. Building stock changes; research highlights features hitherto unappreciated. Thus heritage surveys should be a regular occurrence. Just as single sites need regular inspection and maintenance, so the stock of heritage items needs regular monitoring. In the same manner that a detailed and comprehensive examination of single item will facilitate later inspections, so subsequent monitoring of heritage items will be facilitated if the initial survey has been undertaken comprehensively.

Heritage conservation requires planning. This implies a co-ordination; as done by an individual or a group. In my own State this would normally be the Heritage Committee through the Heritage Branch. Conservation work and heritage surveys must be co-ordinated and guided from this level at least. However cognizance must also be taken of local conditions and demands and local groups should be involved wherever possible. Heritage conservation is concerned with conservation of those items which embody a sense of identity at whatever level, be it club, local, regional, state or national. Therefore, while Heritage Surveys must be co-ordinated at a State level, they must be based upon local demands and include local initiative. Local differences in approach ought not to be obliterated by the central authority, but should be encouraged, while ensuring that the important features are standardly recorded on national standards so that they are comparable on a national basis.

Heritage surveys must maintain rigid, professional standards these should be demanded by those funding and co-ordinating the survey and adhered to by those undertaking it. If conservation work is done in an unprofessional way it will be ridiculed and condemned by its critics and misunderstood even by many supporters. Too frequently in the past, untrained people or others without an appreciation of the principles which should guide conservation have been used in survey work, as in actual restoration work. It is true that there has been a lack of fully trained personnel to under-
take the work, but there has been a wealth of literature from overseas to help those who were happy to seek and accept advice. Again the problem could have been largely overcome by adequate guidance from those responsible for heritage work in Australia. Trained personnel must be used, if the survey or inspection is to be taken seriously. Only then can there be some assurance that decisions which have been made have been based upon defensible conclusions derived from thorough research. This assurance is necessary when projects are funded by public monies. Wherever possible, surveys should be undertaken by a team which includes persons with differing expertise. In traditional surveys, only historical and architectural expertise have been required. As the surveys expand to cover other features such as engineering relics and gardens, personnel with the requisite expertise are essential. All surveys can be enhanced by the use of professional photographers and if photogrammetry is to be used, professional help is essential. In the terms of the Burra Charter Conservation should make use of all the disciplines which can contribute to the study and safeguarding of a place.

Besides being fundamental to conservation planning, heritage surveys are also important in a tactical sense. Heritage conservation here and overseas has always been bedevilled by battles between developers and conservationists, all of whom believe that they are acting for the common good. The confrontation is not helped by conservationists changing the battle lines and finding 'new' historic buildings after developers have drawn up redevelopment plans, obtained approval from various regulating bodies and prepared for actual redevelopment work. Conservationists can help lessen confrontation by clearly defining what it is which must be conserved - if you like, making a pre-emptive bid for a particular property, and making it clear that attempts to take it would be stoutly resisted. Surveys permit this to be done. In a similar manner but on the microcosmic side, trouble with a builder charged with restoring an individual building will be defused if comprehensive inspections and research have been undertaken to determine as precisely as possible what it is in the building which must be conserved. No heritage survey can be definitive. There will always be skirmishes and battles between developers and conservationists but the interests of all will be served if their incidence is lessened. Thus, professional surveys with results incorporated in development plans will lessen the incidence of misunderstandings.
Given the state of heritage conservation in Australia, heritage surveys are also able to play a valuable educative role. Frequently the implementation of a heritage survey is the first time that the lay person is confronted with the concept of heritage conservation. Sympathetically undertaken, the survey can provide the means of disabusing people of their unfounded fears that conservation is going to prevent their doing what they like with their property. Many of the decisions which affect conservation are taken in the rarefied and isolated realms of government departments and committees, by people with varying degrees of commitment to the cause: the heritage surveyor in the field is the first and frequently the last contact many people have with heritage conservation. It is essential therefore that the surveyors be informed and sympathetic, and that they and their principals be aware of the valuable educative role they can fulfill.

There are all sorts of surveys; all are valuable. There are inventories which are basically concerned with identifying significant items in a particular region. This type of survey is necessary before conservation strategies can be drawn up. Then there can be surveys which are primarily concerned with recording items — by means of photographs and/or measured drawings. As yet in Australia we have nothing to approach the recording programme of the Historic American Building Survey, which is concerned with providing measured drawings of historic buildings, or the photogrammetric studies undertaken in America and Europe, and this is our loss. Of course all sorts of pilot programmes have been undertaken, but no coordinating body has determined what, if any, recording programme should be implemented. Decisive, co-ordinated action should be taken here, for there is much yet to be done in simply recording adequately what is on our National Register.

As indicated earlier, all manner of items can be the subject of heritage surveys. Buildings have been the objects of most study, but more recently, engineering relics and even gardens have been surveyed. Others have been undertaken to determine the sorts of items which demonstrate themes such as transport and postal services. All reflect man’s past endeavours and achievements and the most significant of these are rightfully deemed to be part of our heritage.

All surveys must include some measure of assessment of the merit of individual items. There will never be sufficient funds to conserve all items which might be deemed to be significant. Thus, efforts must ensure the conservation of the most significant items.
In the past, many items have been set aside for preservation simply because they have come readily to hand. While such situations occur conservation will not be taken seriously. It must be evident why particular items are deemed to be worthy of conservation.

Of the many heritage surveys so far undertaken in South Australia, - perhaps in Australia, that of the City of Unley stands alone for the emphasis it laid on the assessment of items. There are evident shortcomings in this survey, but it demonstrated a method of assessment which is unsurpassed in the manner in which it makes clear the basis upon which the assessment was made. Others might disagree with the assessment of individual items, but they are able to determine precisely why they do so. This feature is evident in few surveys. The Unley survey was based upon the numerical evaluation of selected criteria which are considered to contribute to the significance of the item such as its historic or architectural qualities or, its contribution to the landscape. It was influenced largely by the system developed in Canada by H. Kalman and that employed in the Fremantle Survey of 1971. Generally systems of assessment based upon such numerical evaluation have been dismissed out of hand as being too contrived and subjective. However, such critics fail to appreciate that assessing numerically the significance of an item makes the assessor think carefully about the value which is to be given, and therefore makes the assessment all the more valuable, and thus makes any survey credible. All assessments are largely subjective and contrived; this method at least highlights the precise aspects which were considered when the assessment was made and allowances can be made for any bias. This is not a feature of the many traditional surveys.

Emphasis has been given to this form of assessment not only because it is deemed to be valuable but also because it itself has been the subject of evaluation by Mr. Donald Johnson of Flinders University. His recommendation to the Australian Heritage Commission which commissioned his study, is that a form of numerical evaluation should be used for the assessment of Australia's heritage items. Too often in the past the results or recommendations of various projects have been quietly forgotten. The question of the assessment of heritage items must not share this fate. It must be discussed and considered, and adopted generally, unless it is shown to be inappropriate.

Many points can be made about the heritage survey, only a few have been touched on here. In conclusion, though, it is necessary to reiterate only two, for they include the rest. Firstly, the heritage survey -
including the building analysis - is fundamental to conservation. Secondly, the heritage survey and the building analysis, like conservation generally, must be undertaken in a professional manner. Heritage conservation is still regarded by many as little more than a fad. There are internationally accepted principles which should infuse every aspect of heritage conservation. These principles must be championed and practised so that conservation can shed its dilettantish image.

NOTES:


5. Donald Johnson, *Assessment of Twentieth Century Architecture: Notes for Conservationists* (Flinders University of South Australia, 1980).