How historians can keep heritage architects honest
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It is twelve years since the Hope Enquiry focused attention on the National Estate, and some 41 years since the first National Trust was formed in New South Wales. For all that, however, heritage conservation in Australia is not problem-free. Despite the numerous books and articles that have been written, many of its proponents have failed to come to grips with reality and have little clear sense of purpose.

The problem with current heritage conservation practice in Australia was highlighted by Professor David Lowenthal of University College, London. Speaking of Beechworth, long considered one of Australia's heritage towns, he observed that the National Trust highlighted the nineteenth century shops and homes of the old mining and mountaineering centre, while the town's inhabitants treasure its old gold workings and miners' lore. In doing so Lowenthal highlighted the difference between the architects' and what should be historians' attitudes to the past, and underscored the fact that the public perception of conservation of the built environment suffers because of the dominance of the former over the latter. Because of the purported rationale for conservation this seems rather anomalous.

The point has been made frequently by McConville, that the architect's preoccupation with style and form has meant that building conservation concentrates on what is nice and aesthetically pleasing, and largely overlooks what is not visually pleasing and historically significant.

It is apparent that in their view of the past, several fundamental points of opposition exist between architects and historians. Some were highlighted by Joan Kerr in her provocative paper to the 1984 Conference of Architectural Historians. When summing up she observed of architects:

Architects put creativity before context... They believe that what you see is all there is. They think facts are better than theory. They add up parts and think they have a whole. They think it is worthwhile and possible to recreate originals untouched by time. They prefer to isolate a moment rather than understand a process.

Kerr's point was that architects trained in one discipline should not write about what is essentially the preserve of others. Why, then, should they be permitted to continue to interpret the history of the nation through the built form?

In opposition to Kerr's observations of architects, it could be said that historians are primarily concerned with looking at issues within their broad context, that they are interested in explaining how and why things came about, rather than simply establishing what happened; they are concerned with exploring relationships between issues and developments and exploring reasons for these; they see great importance in original documents and items as primary source material; and they are concerned primarily with explaining change, rather than isolated incidents and issues.

In other words, architects are concerned primarily with the static, historians are concerned with the dynamic.

The points of opposition between architects and historians are marked, and they will remain so. However, heritage conservation will be much more honest and relevant to those for whom it is practised if historians can convince architects and others that there are other matters of history other than the strictly architectural that should be considered in heritage conservation.

It is not that heritage architects are dishonest, but from a historian's point of view, a great deal of philosophical debate is clearly needed on what should be conserved, and the manner in which this should be done. The definition of the National Estate as it appears in the Australian Heritage Commission Act of 1975 holds that it comprises 'places...which have aesthetic, historic, scientific or social significance or other special value, for future generations as well as for the present community'. It is evident from the Register of the National Estate, however, that the aesthetic values have received considerable - even undue - significance.

Moreover, in the interpretation of both the Venice and Burra Charters, the emphasis remains on the conservation of items as works of art rather than as historical evidence. But buildings which are first of all functional items cannot be treated even primarily as works of art, although...
Figure 1: Ebenezer Chapel, near Angle Vale. Certainly of historic interest but of little architectural significance and is not included on heritage lists.

Figure 2: The Clarendon Police Station and Court House is an evident candidate for a heritage list.
Figure 3: The Adelaide Railway Station, though of undoubted historic interest, had difficulty making the list because of architectural shortcomings in its design.

Figure 4: The interior of Old Parliament House, Adelaide. After removing the ceiling which was fixed to the bottom chords of the trusses soon after the chamber was built, for no better reason than that the trusses were very handsome, a later steel truss that was part of later extensions and previously hidden by the ceiling, had to be boxed in and made to look like the others.
architects continue to view themselves as artists and 'sculptors in space'. Leaving buildings aside, it is apparent that there are necessarily different goals in conserving items such as paintings and diaries or letters. While conservators might be justified in trying to return a painting to its original state, diaries and letters are more valuable as historical evidence if they retain later additions such as marginal notes and annotations. How different then must be the approach to building conservation! Unlike letters and diaries, buildings are functional items and they continue to exist because they have continued to provide a useful purpose, and have frequently been altered so that they might continue to do so.

When there is discussion of a philosophy of conservation, debate turns currently on the question of intervention in actual building work and is bound up with differentiating between conservation, preservation and reconstruction. It addresses itself to the manner in which items should be conserved rather than what should be conserved, why it should be conserved or, indeed, whether anything at all should be conserved.

There is a great deal of merit in the idea that the meaning of heritage derives from that of inheritance - those things we want to keep because they come to us from our forebears, and because of this tell us about that past which sets us apart from others. Not all are innately valuable, like jewellery, art collections and parcels of real estate; however, all have particular sentimental value because they belong to our families and reinforce our family identity. They might include items such as photographs, diaries, newspaper cuttings and war medals. The significance of these items is not immediately evident to others, though it becomes so with a minimum of explanation. We consider those items important because they identify us with the particular history that belongs to our family.

However, when it comes to the heritage of our built environment it is rare that arguments have turned around this concept. Too frequently arguments have been mounted for the retention only of the 'jewels', those items that are aesthetically pleasing or those that might be made so. Even developers acknowledge the need to conserve items, albeit only the jewels. Yet without their context even these have little relevant to their past.

In practical terms, the philosophical debate needs to be reflected in the matter of heritage lists, and what should be included on these. In 1981 while there were 6700 places on the Register of the National Estate, more than 5000 of these comprised buildings. In itself this proportion need not be a bad thing, but the buildings as listed represent a warped view of our cultural patrimony, and are but a shadow of our rich cultural heritage. A great deal of debate is needed still to determine what sort of buildings the Register should include.

Until recently many, if not most, heritage lists had an implicit end-date, as though history came to a full stop, with nothing of significance happening after that date. This implicit time-limit to lists of heritage items implies that on-going change is not considered important. It also emphasises the idea that only original or old items are considered of heritage significance.

They are correct who say that the significance of more recent items can be better judged at some future time with the benefit of a longer historical perspective. However, the danger in this is that many items not now considered aesthetically significant will be long since replaced. This has particular implications for the breadth of heritage lists. The garage was an important early visual side-effect of the profound social revolution promoted by motor cars, but few of these are to be found on heritage lists. Presumably few of the later service stations will find their way onto lists.

Even though 'experts' who sit in judgement on the suggestions from heritage consultants have accepted the validity of including more humble and industrial items on heritage lists, they still find it difficult to accept recent items for inclusion, particularly when many of these are evidently designed with a short life expectancy.

Besides giving prominence to the oldest and most original items, the present heritage lists still reflect the state of history several generations ago, the 'history from above'. Most buildings that are noted seem to be those constructed by or for the powerful and influential, the winners. The bonus for heritage administrators here is that these items have generally undergone little change, so that they can readily be returned to the appearance of an early date, except for the inclusion of modern services. But the predominance of these items gives a warped sense of history. We need lists that reflect 'history from below', giving a more comprehensive understanding of our past.
An evident problem here is that items reflecting the breadth of history remain very numerous, so that there is a problem in deciding how to choose between them. The present 'narrow architects' view' of selecting items for lists, however, primarily judges buildings on their style. This was at the heart of the celebrated confrontation in 1983 over the fate of Adelaide's Aurora Hotel. Though it had its own particular rich history, the Aurora was but one of several nineteenth century hotels in Adelaide, and because of this had not been accepted on any of the heritage lists.

In criticising the 'narrow architects' view', Norman Etherington, one of the few historians actively involved, observed that the wrong questions had been asked in trying to establish the Aurora's significance. 'We have been asking how good is this pub in comparison with other Victorian pubs in Adelaide? The right question to ask is, can we afford to let any colonial pub go?'

An additional problem is that such items have frequently undergone considerable alteration. From the currently dominant point of view, this means that their integrity has been compromised and their heritage value thereby diminished. Rarely has adequate consideration been given to the reasons for these alterations, many of which might be of considerable historical significance.

Perhaps the great problem, however, is in convincing listing authorities, and indeed the populace in general, that conserving common items is worthwhile. The fascination with the lives of the rich and famous is not simply reflected in the standard heritage lists but is also evident in the media, which depends for its survival on identifying and satisfying popular tastes. It is for this reason that the royals, movie stars and their nuptials are used to sell magazines and saturate airwaves.

However, the problem of making Australians aware of the value of those many items that reflect the richness of our past is essentially one of communication, one of teaching Australians about their history. Teaching is precisely what historians are good at (or should be).

If historians' attitudes to what constitutes our heritage are to be given more weight, it is evident that heritage lists must become much longer and more comprehensive.

But extensive lists are useless if people are convinced that everything included on the lists must be 'restored' to an appearance as near as possible to the original. Even in happier times, our country was not able to conserve even those 'few' items already on the heritage lists.

The listing of items remains a major bone of contention between conservationists and owners and developers. The fear of developers and property owners generally is that once their building is included on a heritage list they will lose the 'right' to alter it. At the same time it is precisely for this reason that many conservationists like to have items listed. This reason for the listing of items must be opposed - it simply promotes confrontation and bloody-mindedness.

Certainly there are developers who will always try for the easy way, and who will destroy rather than conserve. These must be opposed. But most developers will work within the rules, if these rules are clearly laid down. Heritage apologists need to heighten the community's awareness of the importance of its scarce stock of heritage items, so that new rules are laid down and old and familiar items are replaced only after careful consideration. Our building heritage is a finite resource that must be handled with care. Hugh Stretton highlighted the need for care when he remarked: '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 way for each new pop song.'

Perhaps confusion, and a great deal of conflict between developers and conservationists, could be minimised if the penchant for prescriptive suspended animation was resisted. Perhaps heritage agencies should do no more than highlight the significance of items and urge, rather than prescribe, that change be honest and in accordance with the significance of the item. The several lists of the National Trusts have no prescriptive power, yet they wield considerable clout.

However, besides enlivening debate on what constitutes our heritage, and whether or not it should be conserved, historians have a great many other roles to play in the field of heritage conservation, certainly far more than simply supplying dates and names for nomination forms.

Among other roles, historians are also needed to act as the conscience of heritage architects.

The natural penchant for conservation architects is to try to return a building to its appearance at a given date, as it appeared on their predecessor's drawings. Their predilection is to remove many of the additions and alterations that comprise the original design, even though these may have been made for very important reasons. There must be some alteration to a building.
Figure 5: The Bridgewater Mill, a heritage listed building, received a Civic Trust award for its refurbishment. Yet all the interior floors were taken out leaving little but the four walls. Except for its massing it bears little relationship to its original use.

Figure 6: The facade of the former Commonwealth Bank is all that will remain in a new major development. Its retention can but give a warped sense of history, though it will say a great deal about twentieth century attitudes to conservation, and the importance of visual features.
to ensure that it continues to fulfill a useful purpose, but efforts must be made to ensure that historical truth and accuracy are not sacrificed to convenience and aesthetics. Buildings are primary source documents, providing historical evidence that is not available elsewhere. Conservators must take care in removing it.

It is perhaps a measure of the lack of a firm philosophical base by many heritage architects that so much architectural conservation seems to be apologetic and tentative. It is true that any work must be done carefully to ensure that important evidence is not obliterated, but architects must also appreciate that they are contributing to the on-going history of the building. The anomaly is that most of them have little difficulty in accepting modern services, and even introducing new ones like air-conditioning and lifts. They should not be allowed to fool themselves or the public that they are returning a building to a former state when they are in fact changing it once again and giving it a new use.

There are many roles for historians in the field of heritage conservation. The more they become involved, the more honest will be the actual work of conservation.

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REFERENCES


