IDENTIFYING AND CONSERVING WORLD HERITAGE: AUSTRALASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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In presenting an Australasian perspective to this meeting I want to try to bring together the principal theme, “Whose Cultural Values” with the issues of identification and conservation of world heritage as they have appeared from down under. I will consider successes and failures.

In many ways the issue of “whose cultural values” lies at the core of the problems associated with the identification and conservation of any heritage object or place. Cultural values shaped by race, religion, ideology, place and structure of the community are all contributors to differences in perspective on issues associated with what constitutes one’s heritage.

Australia could certainly be regarded as a ‘laboratory’ for examining these issues. International visitors to this conference may not be aware of some of the demographic characteristics which give the diversity of perspective in this country. As you would be well aware there was a widespread indigenous population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples when first permanent settlement occurred by europeans. Their cultural perspectives on the present situation are elaborated later in the program. At present they number just over one percent of the population. The majority of the settlers in the first one hundred and fifty years from 1788 were of Anglo-Celtic background with a small minority of other European and Asian peoples. In the last fifty years this has changed dramatically with significant migration from europe and asia, as well as New Zealand. Now people of non-english speaking background number approximately 30 percent of the population.

In the conflicting world of cultural values and perspectives all of the issues from subjugation and destruction, to co-optation and appropriation and even conservation and appreciation were being worked out. On a world comparative basis Australia is dealing with some of these issues nationally rather well while others are being ignored or are too politically hard. It has been my observation that despite the very different population structure New Zealand also has some considerable successes in this area although it is possible to elaborate problems.

We have to remind ourselves that every country in the world has people who are more or less recent arrivals living in boundaries that in historical terms are mostly quite recent. The problems of changing boundaries and territorial appropriations with their attendant nationalism and issues related to how long one has occupied a piece of the earth are the core issues of dominant versus representative cultural values.

In Australia we have coped very badly in some respects in relation to the issues of cultural values between the dominant cultures (note the plurals) and the cultures of the indigenous peoples (again not the plurals). There is no longer, if there ever was, a single dominant culture in this country and the Aboriginal and Torres Straits Island people represented many “nations” by european definitions.

Nevertheless when one examines issues of “cultural values” in say contemporary Europe, much of Asia and the Americas, the conflicts and lack of recognition of cultural values are being daily highlighted on television. I do not mean to sound smug about the fact that there is not a civil war or continuous armed insurrections occurring in Australasia and therefore everything is OK, simply to observe that the issues of cultural values and their concrete manifestations in cultural heritage conservation are essentially political issues here. Indeed they might be characterised as core political issues.

There have been some very vigorous struggles over the past twenty years in Australia and New Zealand concerning the conservation of cultural and natural
heritage sites. Some of these have led to violent confrontations with police and people being jailed. Concern for some of these issues have been very significant in people's voting behaviour and governments at federal, state and local level have all lost seats or indeed elections in part over these issues. But we have not approached the example, thankfully, of Cambodia in this regard. When I was involved in an attempt twelve years ago to do something about the conservation of the extraordinary cultural heritage of what was then Kampuchea I noticed the people were dying under different flags in that country all of which had one thing in common, the silhouette of Angkor Wat. A reflection on the power of the cultural heritage of objects, rather than ideas!

Twenty years ago today the World Heritage Convention came into being. In my view it got off to a bad start and that, at least in small part, was the fault of ICOMOS as well as the membership of Unesco. The idea and the concept were great and it is possible that if the modus operandi had been any more clearly resolved before implementation, the convention may never have been subscribed to by sufficient members to enable it to come into effect.

The problem, as I see it now with the advantage of clear hindsight, is that the idea had been implemented on the run. Standards and definitions had not been clearly worked out at the start and they were made up as the years progressed. This had led to nominations of places and classes of places which, if one were being truly objective, are not of universal significance but places of powerful national significance and pride. It has led to places going on the list which are either inadequately defined or protected.

It will probably never be politically possible to fix up these early mistakes as the blocs and alliances of Unesco severely inhibit scientific or rational behaviour. While the identification of world heritage sites and their protection are scientific processes, the listing and management are political processes. These two systems frequently collide.

What have been the achievements in Australasia? Can I redefine this question to Australia, as I have been involved for much of these twenty years in different guises in Australia and internationally but with only a slight knowledge of New Zealand.

By the time that Unesco had resolved to create a World Heritage Convention the issues of cultural and natural environmental conservation were the subject of much research and political action throughout Australia. There are very few countries in the world where conservation of both cultural and natural heritage have been high-ranked political issues as these have been consistently for twenty years here. I remember the stunned amazement of Unesco members and officials when the lobbying, which we regarded as standard practice in Australia, was transported to the dour precincts of Unesco itself in the struggle to have South Western Tasmania included on the World Heritage List. It was a miserable wet December day when les Amies de la Terre picketed the Place de Fontenoy and as I had just go a call from our Prime Minister anxious to have it listed in spite of the wishes of the state government, the pickets cheered me up no end!

But how did we get to this stage in Australia? The confrontation in the political system which led to the unprecedented union green bans encouraged the Whitlam government and its highly conservation-conscious Minister for the Urban and Regional development, Tom Uren, to establish a major inquiry into the National Estate in 1973. The Report of this inquiry was practical and to the point and set an agenda that has been substantially addressed nationally over the succeeding twenty years.

Australia was an early signatory to the World Heritage Convention and elected to the first World Heritage Committee. In the same year that the Convention came into force the Federal government, under a new Prime Minister, established the Australian Heritage Commission. The Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Heritage Commission, but particularly the latter, played key roles in the implementation of the Convention in Australia. Australia ICOMOS was also established in the same year and it has been among the most active national committees in the world both domestically and internationally.
Australia ICOMOS pioneered the important intellectual notion that the conservation, identification and protection, of cultural artefacts had a local methodology and lexicon which led to the Burra Charter. Although intellectually an heir and successor to the Venice Charter it was distinctly Australian. When the Australian Heritage Commission tied conservation grants to the Burra Charter then the notion of conservation standards received rapid national currency. I do not mean that they were perfectly observed, simply that the rhetoric gained widespread currency. This was an enormously important step that even most Australians do not realise. I know of no country where the principles of conservation management rhetoric are so widely known.

I well remember a day in a small gold mining town on the edge of the desert in Western Australia in the late 1970’s after proposing a particular course of action to some local government officials, being pulled up by the Shire Clerk with the query “Was I sure this conformed to the Burra Charter?” Of course to many conservation professionals the Burra Charter has been observed more in the breach than in action, nevertheless I know of no country anywhere in the world that I have visited where you could have a discussion with professionals on a site against a background of an agreed conservation methodology. It is a precious achievement of which Australia ICOMOS can be very proud.

In 1981 Australia hosted an important meeting of the World Heritage Convention in Sydney. It was important because it was the first held in the Asia Pacific region. Prior to this meeting an interesting political versus “scientific” struggle had taken place as to what constituted the national nominations of the first sites from Australia. The nominations of the natural sites caused a great public furore while the cultural sites under discussion, Sydney Harbour Bridge around the Opera House and Fremantle in Western Australia caused undercover political difficulties that have still never been resolved.

In 1983 the Unesco National Commission and Australia ICOMOS hosted an equally important regional Conference on Historic Places. This meeting brought together professionals from fourteen countries in Asia and the Pacific and set up a network which survives today. It was a crucial step because both ICOMOS and Unesco are relatively weak in their representation from this part of the world and at that time there were very few signatories to the World Heritage Convention in the region.

Eight years later the US Government, with the assistance of the Getty Institute and US ICOMOS revisited a special part of this agenda with a meeting to examine strategies for conservation in tropical environments.

So there have been plenty of meetings, conferences, resolutions and publications. Has much really happened though?

From an Australian perspective my answer would by “yes but we could have done more”. From a regional perspective, as seen by an Australian, it is critical and urgent that we do much more.

Today there is a framework of international conventions, backed by local laws in Australia that allows, subject to the pressures in the democratic process, some form of citizen involvement in what constitutes world heritage and national estate conservation. As a country with, on world terms, a high GDP we can also afford to preserve places and we are fortunate to have people with the technical skills to do so. In most instances, in my view, Australia does have the resources to adequately conserve the national estate and its world heritage sites as long as the political will to do so is present. In a democratic society like Australia the way in which listed sites are conserved or neglected reflects to some extent a continuing struggle between conflicting interests and neither National Estate listing or World Heritage listing guarantees very much if the political will is not present.

It is my observation that we are much more fortunate than almost all, even wealthy countries, in the region. There is a widespread lack of effective national legislation, still very few countries in the Pacific are signatories to the World Heritage Convention, and in many countries the cultural artefacts of minority
cultures are likely to be neglected due to either ignorance or deliberate policy by ruling elites.

Thankfully ICOMOS itself is now in a position to play, as far as its fragile condition will allow, a more active and rational role in addressing the issues of identifying and conserving the world’s cultural heritage. With the election of an Asian President I see more than a merely symbolic shift and with a competent professional administrator dealing with world heritage issues for ICOMOS the institution should be able to get the processes of the world heritage list right. Indeed it might even be possible to get more activity from Unesco generally in this region where it has been quite moribund.

Perhaps ICOMOS could take up an issue which I regard as enormously important, and again more than symbolically, and that concerns the identity of Unesco. I remember a former President of ICOMOS who found this matter to be another reason why the members of Australia ICOMOS were not to be trusted for having elected me to the executive. He had proposed that we adopt the Unesco logo as the World Heritage symbol and I objected. It is an elevation of a greek temple for those of you who might not recall it. I pointed out that for something like two thirds of the world’s cultures (the Asia Pacific region) it not only had little or no symbolic significance it might even be offensive! At that moment he knew the barbarians were at the gate and that the eurocentricity of both ICOMOS and Unesco were under threat!

Other people, both Aboriginal and Maori will tell you how well or badly Australia and New Zealand are managing the cultural sites of the indigenous people. Whatever their views, the fact that there are indigenous professional people involved in the process seems to me of great significance and should not be overlooked in this region or in others.

We still have much to do in the identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands sites and places and in my view that will not have a proper framework until some form of treaty of reconciliation gives it authenticity. But you may hear more of that tomorrow.

However we certainly still have much to do to preserve the cultural heritage of Australia that is not just of interest to the Anglo-Celtic peoples of this country but also to the thirty percent of people not from that background. This I suggest is the domestic version of a conundrum that throws up an intellectual issue which should be grappled with at this conference.

In essence I pose the question: ‘Does an Australian professional body have a role, and what are the limits of that role in assisting any other nation to identify and conserve their cultural heritage? To what extend does any outside “help”, well-meaning or otherwise, constitute a new form of cultural imperialism?’

These thoughts came home to me a few months ago when I was in far western China. I was in a city I had always wanted to visit, Kashgar, the entry point of the Silk Road into China. Walking through the markets full of uighur, uzbeck, kazakh, tajik people with a very light sprinkling of han people from the east, I kept thinking what I call residual ICOMOS thoughts. Here in the snow and mud was to me an extraordinarily beautiful and exotic environment. Certainly Robbie Collins and the ICOMOS Cultural Tourism Committee could have had a field day! Here and there new concrete block buildings of very indifferent architecture were replacing the mud brick flat roofed buildings of central asia. How awful I thought and even became engaged in a vigorous discussion with the head of the local cultural organisation. I put the case for “maintaining cultural diversity” as vigorously as any ICOMOS committee member would.

But then I caught myself wondering about my cultural imperialist/tourist oriented views and thinking “but if they lose these buildings to international architecture and their own cultural heritage disappears in favour of plumbing, drainage and electricity, isn’t that their choice?” It is easy sometimes for us to dress up our ideas of cultural preservations as good for tourism or good for the local economy, but we must be continually self-critical in this regard.

So the perspective from this Australian on the topic of the World Heritage and “Whose Cultural Values”, while
optimistic in general is now tinged with a certain self-doubt. Perhaps it is a new syndrome called 'ICOMOS mid-life crises!' Still halfway through Unesco's Decade for Cultural Development perhaps this is an appropriate thing to have.

References