Interpretation guidelines and charters, why and how? ICOMOS and the Ename charter

Sheridan Burke

This paper examines the current moves towards developing a Charter or guidelines for the interpretation of heritage places. It will develop the thesis presented to the Interpretation Australia Association conference in May 2003 in the light of current ICOMOS international developments and the NSW context and examine two case studies:

- Interpretation as Core Business: The Historic Houses Trust of NSW
- Interpretation as a Development Consent condition for heritage sites: current Council practice in City of Sydney

I briefly review the 1999 amendments to the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter which emphasised the concept of interpretation in the conservation process, as an essential part of securing the future of heritage places by informing and engaging their constituencies.

I also look at the current international initiative of the Ename Charter under development within ICOMOS as an attempt to prepare “international guidelines for authenticity, intellectual integrity and sustainable development in the public presentation of archaeological and historical sites and landscapes”.

I then examine the emerging practice of local Sydney Councils to require Interpretation Plans (sometimes via Public Art policies) for heritage developments. Just what does an Interpretation Strategy or Interpretation Plan mean? At present there are no generally accepted Interpretation Guidelines or standards with which to develop or assess heritage interpretation projects.

I conclude with principles and practices that I would like to use to form the basis for benchmark standards for heritage interpretation.

The Burra Charter 1999

The Australia ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance (the Burra Charter) across its 1979, 1981, 1998 and now 1999 editions, represents the Australian adaptation of the Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, 1964, based on our national practitioners experience and knowledge. In those very titles rests a saga of cultural emphasis and professional practice. In Australia we generally ‘conserve’, and less often ‘preserve’; we look after ‘places’ rather than ‘monuments and sites’ and we use the Burra Charter, built upon, but locally distinct from, the Venice Charter as our point of reference and definition.

The Burra Charter sets the Australian standard of practice for those who provide advice, make decisions about or undertake works to places of cultural significance, including owners, managers and custodians. The Charter can be applied to all types of places of cultural significance including natural, indigenous and historic places with cultural values. It’s been adopted as a benchmark by authorities and practitioners alike.

As this audience well knows, it’s readily downloadable from the AI website (www.icomsos.org), and is available in many languages. Its principles have been adapted and exported world-wide – to Britain in the 1990s via the UK Heritage Lottery Fund and most recently to China via the work of the Australian Heritage Commission and the US Getty Conservation Institute working with SACH to develop ‘Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China’.

Three guidelines have been adopted for the Burra Charter, and Australia ICOMOS has recently resolved to develop a fourth – on interpretation. This has arisen both from international developments and from the latest regular revision of the Burra Charter, in 1999.

The 1999 changes to the Burra Charter were the result of a two year process of exhaustive review, the key relevant changes being:

- Broadening the understanding of significance from a focus on fabric to a more clear inclusion of setting, use, association, records, related places and related objects.
- Improving the integration of social and spiritual values and the need to consult and involve people in conservation processes.
- Recognising the importance of interpretation, and that restoration and reconstruction are also aspects of interpretation, which is defined as being: “all the ways of presenting the cultural significance of a place”.

The Charter notes that interpretation may be a combination of the treatment of the fabric (e.g. maintenance, restoration, reconstruction) the use of and activities at the place, and the use of introduced explanatory material (Article 11.1.7).

Article 24.1 goes on to state “significant associations between people and a place should be respected, retained and not obscured. Opportunities for the interpretation, commemoration and celebration of these associations should be investigated and implemented”. For many places, association will be linked to use.

Article 25 continues “the cultural significance of many places is not readily apparent and should be explained by interpretation. Interpretation should enhance understanding and enjoyment and be culturally appropriate”.

Why is ICOMOS moving into this dimension of conservation practice?

Role of ICOMOS

For the benefit of those non-ICOMOS members here today, ICOMOS is the International Council of Monuments and Sites, a non-governmental professional organisation formed in 1965 with its headquarters in Paris. ICOMOS is primarily concerned with the philosophy, methodology, terminology and techniques of cultural heritage conservation. It is closely linked with UNESCO, particularly with its role under the World Heritage Convention 1972 as UNESCO’s principal heritage adviser on cultural heritage.
Today there are national Committees of ICOMOS in over 90 countries (Australia's committee is one of the largest and most active) and also over 23 active International Scientific Committees that focus on particular aspects of conservation e.g. Stone, Cultural Tourism, Education & Training, Archaeological Site Management etc.

ICOMOS has over 6000 members world-wide; they meet triennially as a General Assembly to advance specific research themes which often result in International Charters or Declarations on conservation topics. Recent Charters include the ICOMOS Charter for the Protection and Management of Archaeological Heritage (1990) and the ICOMOS International Charter on Cultural Tourism (1999) and an Ethical Commitment Statement for ICOMOS Members in 2002. The next ICOMOS General Assembly will be held in October 2005 in China with the theme of ‘Settings’.

The ICOMOS Ename Charter for the Interpretation of Cultural Heritage Sites

Several years ago, ICOMOS was approached by the Ename Centre in Belgium to co-operatively develop ‘International Guidelines for authenticity, intellectual integrity and sustainable development in the public presentation of archaeological and historic sites and landscapes’. The centre’s website at www.ename974.org can be examined for their ‘timescope’ kiosk, showing computer reconstructions of successive structures on excavated foundations.

The charter project had been begun in 1995 by an international group of archaeologists and virtual reality experts based at an archaeological site and museum park in Belgium. The authors were initially concerned with scholarly authenticity in new media simulations, which has expanded to include all types of presentation infrastructure and techniques as well as community collaboration, documentation and tourism aspects.

The Ename group quickly realised that if the draft Charter were taken more broadly through a multi-disciplinary review process, it could become ‘a comprehensive guide and implementation process for community-based archaeological processes for the 21st century’. Hence, they approached the International ICOMOS Bureau. ICOMOS took an even broader view - to develop not just a charter for interpreting archaeological sites, but suitable for all types of monument and site. In July 2003 ICOMOS formally agreed to join with the Ename group to jointly develop the Charter more broadly, and eventually to submit it to an ICOMOS General Assembly for international ratification. It is proposed that this will take place at the 2005 ICOMOS General Assembly in Beijing. I was appointed to the Editorial Group to manage the process, together with Gustavo Aracez (USA) and Giora Solar (Israel).

International ICOMOS is now developing the draft document through a prescribed doctrinal circulation and comment process to all its national and international scientific committees and public comment. It is testing the possibilities of consultation and circulation via email, as unlike other ICOMOS Charters, there is no “home” base in an existing International Scientific Committee for this charter and subject matter.

The ‘Telling Tales’ conference was part of that consultation process, and we hope that it will have encouraged input from Australian members to the evolution of the international ICOMOS Ename Charter

Heritage Office NSW Initiatives

The Heritage Office of NSW often requires an interpretation strategy or plan as part of its approval process for state heritage items and many archaeological sites, but as yet has no standard Interpretation Guidelines. Meredith Walker and Lanie Lawson, well known ICOMOS stalwarts, have been commissioned to prepare such a document, and the Heritage Office held an Expert’s Workshop following the conference, inviting 20 experts to assist in honing the text and approach.

NSW Local Government Interpretation Initiatives

In part, the Heritage Office is also responding to the introduction of consent requirements by several Sydney Councils to include as a condition in development consents affecting heritage places, the preparation of an interpretation plan or strategy. There is no definition of what such a plan may include, and a wide variety of outcomes is emerging. Interpreters and historians are sometimes involved; more often project managers or design architects develop the concepts and documentation.

The City of Sydney Council has been active in this area, but the assessment of the resulting Interpretation Plans has also been patchy; sometimes City Historian Dr Shirley Fitzgerald views the document, sometimes the planner dealing with the case, sometimes PlanningNSW also has a role. Naturally, in every case the outcomes are different – and some are less than ideal.

I want to look today at the issues which arise in two very different situations in which interpreters and conservation practitioners find themselves working:

- Interpretation as ‘core business’ - the focused task of our government museum and parks agencies
- Interpretation as a development condition - the less welcome ‘impost’ on developers of heritage places.

In each case the requirements and resources will be pragmatically different. In the absence of generally accepted guidelines, will the outcomes be acceptable? In whose terms?

Developing Interpretation Guidelines: Core Business

In my ten years as senior curator at the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (HHT), the Trust went from an organisation with a small collection of elegant, authentically refurbished house museums to a bustling organisation of more than a dozen public museums and gardens, touring exhibitions, an endangered-houses scheme, a regional outreach program and an extraordinary calendar of public programs and educational activities.

There was not an Interpretation Plan in sight, and rarely an ‘interpretative sign’ per se. These special places of NSW were curated to ‘speak for themselves’. There existed conservation plans of various ages and usefulness, but the interpretation of the heritage values and significances of the HHT properties was largely in the hands of property curators, each a professional with their own passions and interests. As visitor numbers declined steadily through the early nineties in the face of increasing competition for the leisure audience and a ‘been there done that’ ennui set in, there was much soul-searching about how best to encourage re-visititation to HHT properties,

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how to increase visibility to different market segments, to market diverse venue hire opportunities, and to publicise and develop the Trust's outstanding education services.

Much has happened on all those fronts, most visibly in the area of public programming. The Trust's quarterly Events Calendar usually lists no fewer than 50 public activities: festivals, music, exhibitions, tours, holiday activities, lectures, fairs, and workshops — all with interpretative underpinning.

It's a brilliant result, the products are fun, and are founded in skilful application of interpretation theory, and intuition. The recent Fifties Fair at the Rose Seidler House is an example of what can be achieved by a well-resourced government organisation dedicated to conservation, management and interpretation. This year the Rose Seidler House had 5,400 visitors to its lectures and exhibitions, but more than 4000 came on one day — to celebrate the Fifties Fair. This range of interpretation activity is the Trust's core business, implemented by an extensive professional staff and envious resources.

Implementing Guidelines: the Development Context

However, the majority of Australia's heritage places are in private hands. Conservation, let alone interpretation is not "core business" — it's an unwelcome extra condition of the development process in NSW, or the result of entanglement with the statutory heritage system — e.g. via archaeological provisions, or via a grant condition following restoration works. Special programmes such as the recent Centenary of Federation funding provide other opportunities.

In my experience, it is for private and corporate owners that interpretation guidelines are urgently needed, and for whom they would be extremely helpful. I am sure that many institutional or government owners, for whom heritage management is regrettably "incidental or accidental", would also find them useful. In my own firm, we are increasingly preparing Interpretation Plans for private and corporate owners in such a development context with a fast time frame and limited ownership intentions, rather than government proprietors with the delivery of long-term public good in their corporate plan. In the absence of published guidance documents, over the years Godden Mackay Logan has evolved its own approach to tackling Interpretation Plans which we have found useful across places as varied as the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Luna Park, churches, factories, gardens, cultural landscapes and archaeological sites.

A flow chart illustrating the current two-stage process GML uses is at Annexure A. It has been developed through field experience, research, reviewing a range of interpretation standards, and various Interpretation Plans which are in the public domain, including those developed via the Centenary of Federation funding. Our approach is founded on our strong commitment to Burra Charter principles. It's continually evolving and is different for every place and every client, but as a process it is easily understood and delivers initiatives and implementable results.

Other conservation practitioners have no doubt developed their own practical guidelines — I've found the work of Sarah Murphy for the National Trust of Western Australia to be particularly relevant. She developed guidelines in 1999 to provide the National Trust with a consistent framework when preparing interpretation plans for their historic places (Interpretation Planning Guidelines 2000 National Trust of Australia WA). The Trust's stated intention was 'to provide a model standard that can be used for planning interpretation, as opposed to a methodology for interpretation'. The WA Trust's draft document had wide circulation amongst practitioners and National Trust branches, and has since been practically used to develop briefs and projects state-wide in the west. Sarah tells me that she insists on the use of the document only as a guideline, not prescriptive dogma, and that interpreters have found them a useful springing point for the Trust's projects, not a hampering restriction. In the five years of implementation, there are no major changes that she would make as yet.

Drafting an Interpretation Charter

So just what should such a document cover? Can an international charter form a basis for national guidelines, or vice versa? My vote is for developing the national basis first and I agree strongly with the view that we are talking guidelines, not prescription. Beware the policing of checklists! A number of aspects quickly emerge as essential:

Terminology

One issue which is a perennial difficulty with the character of Charters and Declarations which emanate from Europe is the terminology. In Europe (and in the US, often) the term 'preservation' is preferred to 'conservation'; 'monument and site' used more often than 'place'; 'presentation' used more often than 'interpretation'. This will be an ongoing, but not insurmountable problem, which may be simple, involved through glossaries or dual use e.g. preservation/conservation — though this makes for a very wordy text.

Format

Because the international ICOMOS Ename document is very much at working draft stage, I'd suggest a format and content which will be familiar to users of the Burra Charter. It would consist of five sections and be encapsulated in a single-page flowchart.

1. Preamble (just one or two paragraphs)
   - Charter aims, process of development
   - Who is the Charter for? (Be inclusive)
   - How to use the charter
   - What places does it apply to? (And there I would say ALL types of heritage places)
   - Why interpret? (Understanding, communication, appreciation, respect, sustainable conservation etc.)

2. Definitions
   This will require dual glossaries or we may waste time on the 'conservation' vs 'preservation' debate; not to mention the 'monument/site vs place' discussion! I'd vote for using the definitions of the Burra Charter.

3. Interpretation PRINCIPLES
   Ten or a dozen short basic statements of principle that will mention:
   - Respecting authenticity of places and associated communities
   - Incorporating accessibility and understanding of heritage values
   - Integrating multidisciplinary knowledge/skills to develop interpretation
• Acknowledging the ethical coexistence of diverse cultural values
• Telling many tales: through many players
• Including intangible values and spiritual traditions (intellectual property)
• Acknowledging wider context/setting of places and knowledge gaps
• Referring to sources (including living traditions) and research documentation
• Ensuring sustainability of interpretation initiatives through site use, management plans, maintenance provision, monitoring/evaluation, training, financing etc.

4. Interpretation PROCESSES

To maximise understanding I would have a one page flow chart that outlines the typical issues/processes to be considered when developing interpretation strategies and plans that would include

• audience analysis: target and incidental
• defining significance of place and
• transforming it into key messages and themes to be interpreted
• including community and social values – perhaps stimulating discussion about contemporary issues
• meaningful community consultation – including the right not to be interpreted
• resource realities, the need for review and evaluation etc
• tourism opportunities and challenges
• on and offsite interpretation; direct (eg tours, signs) and indirect techniques (eg management of a cultural landscape)
• I'm not sure how far to go with developing technical PRACTICE standards in a Charter, but I want to ensure that encouraging partnerships, educational linkages and the sustainable use of new information technology for interpretation get mentioned

Of particular relevance will be the outcomes of discussion on the Iga Warta principles, articulated in the 2002 IAA Charter of Best Practice for Interpreting Aboriginal Culture and Country, which states as a major principle for interpreters that 'Aboriginal Australians should control the representation and interpretation of their culture and country'.

Do we need an Interpretation Charter?

The first, and primary, question last. There will be many who groan 'not another suite of rules', 'every site is different', 'we do it differently here' etc. Believe me, the drafters of the Burra Charter heard these pleadings too. It's my experience, over thirty years of national practice, and twenty years internationally, that identifying practice standards helps us all: the practitioner, regulator, manager, government and private owners alike but most deserving of all, visitors. Not as prescriptions, but as a framework of practice principles.

Of course, I am biased, as I've seen the immense value which the Burra Charter has been in defining conservation principles and processes simply and logically for heritage places. Its impact has been profound and broad. It's my view that interpretation guidelines, setting out a broad policy framework, with agreed terminology and identifying interpretation principles and processes would be of similar value, both nationally and internationally.

To me, interpretation is fundamental to the success of the conservation process – not only of the place to which it pertains, but also to the audience, which visits and becomes the constituent supporter for other heritage places. And also to the politicians: just think of the photo opportunities!

Interpretation is an advocacy tool par excellence.
ANNEXURE A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE 1: Interpretation Strategy: Context and Concepts</th>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction – Why interpret?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Review Context, location, place ownership, management, cultural protocols</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpretation Principles: Place, Visitor, Client</td>
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<tr>
<td>Statement of Significance – What’s the Story?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analysis of historic development of place and its context</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identification of key historic themes and linkages</td>
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<td>Interpretation concepts arising from significance of place</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audience – Who needs to know?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Existing and target visitation</td>
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<td>Visitor Experience Objectives</td>
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<td>Community consultation</td>
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<td>Education curricula linkages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inventory of Place – What’s there already?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-visit information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buildings, public domain and cultural landscape</td>
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<td>Associated collections, movable and archaeological heritage</td>
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<td>Existing interpretation</td>
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<td>Existing wayfinding</td>
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<td>Arrival/exit points</td>
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<td>Lighting and security</td>
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<td>Site circulation patterns</td>
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<td>Improving accessibility</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Draft Interpretation Strategy – What’s proposed?</td>
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<td>Interpretation opportunities and constraints arising from the significance of the place</td>
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<td>Draft Interpretation Policy statement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Key themes/messages/perspectives</td>
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<td>Interpretation resources, methods (active and passive), locations</td>
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<td>Collections management issues</td>
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<td>Stakeholder/client review</td>
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<tr>
<th>STAGE 2: Interpretation Plan: Content &amp; Implementation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Implementation of Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Review client/stakeholder/community comments on strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Key texts and illustrations (including copyright clearances)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staged summary of activities, installation tasks, timing and responsibilities</td>
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<td>Fabrication/design overview of installations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategy for maintenance of installations</td>
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<td>Evaluation and review process</td>
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Sheridan Burke, Godden Mackay Logan, July 2003
Reference: National Trust of WA Interpretation Guidelines, 2000