Introduction

Challenge and change in ports their towns and cities

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In November 2006 the Australia ICOMOS National Conference, with the theme of Challenge and Change in Ports Their Towns and Cities, was held in the historic port city of Fremantle, Western Australia.

Fremantle was an ideal location to explore the changing face of ports and their impact on associated cities and towns. At the mouth of the Swan River, the area is of cultural significance to indigenous people. Since settlement of the colony in 1829 Fremantle has also been a centre for commerce, culture and community life as well as a transport hub for the state and nation. It is internationally significant as an entry point for hundreds of thousands of migrants to Australia.

The built environment of Fremantle illustrates waves of growth of the port city – including early settlement, 18 years of convict transportation, a late 19th century gold boom and the America’s Cup in 1987 – and provides the context within which the major elements of its significance can be read and understood. Commerce and trade from a vibrant maritime industry continues into the 21st century and tourism now plays a major part in the city’s social and economic life.

Ports have served Australia as gateways not only for the import and export of goods but for the exchange of ideas, the migration of people both willing and unwilling, the introduction of pests and diseases, and the arrival of invaders and allies. Ports can be found on our coasts and our inland waterways. The towns and cities that have grown up around them have been shaped and coloured by each port’s activities, population and fortunes.

Over time, ports have witnessed dramatic change. Australia’s inland ports have been superseded by different forms of transport. Now, economic imperatives as well as increasing demands for safety and security and the changing modes of servicing have seen some maritime ports upgraded and others abandoned. Ports have become sites of conflict and confrontation as change has put enormous pressure on the conservation of their built and social fabric.

The port city of Fremantle has witnessed many of these challenges. The streets and pubs are no longer filled with wharfies and sailors but with tourists and university students. Cranes, lifts and gantries have replaced the muscle and sweat of the lumpers. A migrant’s first view of their new land is now an airport tarmac rather than the sheds and wharves of the harbour.

The conference aimed to explore a range of issues and challenges facing historic ports and port cities in the 21st century and to constructively consider options for their respective futures. The change in traditional port operations has been dramatic in recent decades and has resulted in a number of Australian ports declining and/or ceasing operation with facilities moved elsewhere, causing equally dramatic change in the associated port city or town. The parallels existing between Australian and international ports provided opportunities to examine the challenge of how to conserve the heritage of port cities under these circumstances both in an Australian and in a wider global context.

To this end the conference organising committee, with the guidance and suggestions of members of the National Executive of Australia ICOMOS, invited one local and two international speakers to present keynote addresses at the conference. The task of devising a stimulating and successful conference program from the number and diversity of abstracts received through the more widely circulated call for papers proved challenging for the organising committee.

The result was a conference which comprised a two day lecture program with a one day post-conference workshop and was attended by over 160 participants, primarily from Australia but also attracting international participation from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, South Africa and Poland. A forum discussion introduced some of the diverse themes of the conference which were further explored in the presentations from the keynote speakers and some forty concurrent lecture sessions. The formal part of the conference program was supplemented and enriched by social activities and tours in and around the port city.

This volume of Historic Environment contains papers which explore some of the issues debated at the conference. The three keynote papers were presented by Dr Brian Shaw, from the School of Earth and Geographical Sciences at the University of Western Australia; Jonathon Coad, an historian, archaeologist and recently retired Inspector of Ancient Monuments for English Heritage; and Dr Jacek Dominiczak, an architect and educator affiliated with the Academy of fine Arts in Gdansk, Poland.

Their range of topics was diverse with Brian Shaw considering the various ways in which economic, political and cultural forces have interacted to (re)define elements of the past – giving specific reference to selected port cities in Southeast Asia and Australia. Jonathon Coad provided an overview of the historic importance of the buildings and engineering works of the Royal Navy, looking specifically at the conservation, adaptation and re-use undertaken on naval bases in the United Kingdom in the later half of the 20th century. Jacek Dominiczak outlined a theoretical and practical model used to analyse hidden identity data encapsulated in the spatial organisation of historic cities. He also presented the post-conference workshop demonstrating his methodology and its practical applications. The attending architects and planners at the workshop learnt to identify, process and apply local identity
issues relevant for producing positive urban transformations. The workshop was met with such interest that Dominiczak was subsequently invited to return to Western Australia and was commissioned by the City of Fremantle to prepare the Local Identity and Design Codes for central Fremantle. He was also invited to contribute to the design programmes at the School of Architecture at Curtin University in Western Australia. While Dominiczak’s paper was stimulating and challenging, the highly visual nature of his presentation proved unsuitable for inclusion in this volume.

Amongst the concurrent sessions presented at the conference, the following have been selected for inclusion in this journal because of their diversity of themes.

Like Dominiczak, Peter van Dun’s paper was also concerned with the identity and analysis of an historic city, specifically referring to Jakarta Kota, the former colonial trading town once known as Batavia and its place in contemporary Indonesian Society. Peter de Tolly also provided an international perspective focussing on Capetown’s highly successful Victoria & Alfred Waterfront, describing the measures that allowed it to be planned and developed to become the international success it is today.

Leigh Woolley poetically compared and contrasted the common themes apparent in three topographically diverse port cities – Genoa, Oslo and Hobart while Peter Lovell and Marika Calfas respectively provided case studies of Melbourne’s Dockland redevelopment, and the contested landscapes within Sydney Harbour – outlining some of the challenges of maintaining a working harbour amongst urban encroachment and commercial development.

A little closer to home, Nerida Moredoundt described the community consultation process in managing change in the historic town of Cossack, the first port in north-west Australia. And Bradley Pettitt explored the tensions between sustainability and heritage in the host city of Fremantle.

The editorial committee have been mindful of the need to accurately represent the conference proceedings as well as provide an informative and stimulating journal. As always, the task of adapting what was intended as a primarily verbal message, although often illustrated with photographs, diagrams and the like, to the print medium has had some limitations, and readers are encouraged to be cognisant that some of the author’s original message may have been lost through this translation.

The editorial committee would like to thank the many individuals and organisations who contributed to a very successful conference. We also thank those who have contributed papers for this edition of *Historic Environment* and the generous efforts of referees who have provided assiduous care and attention to reviewing and commenting on the papers presented here. In particular we would like to thank Tim Winter for his patience and guidance through the somewhat lengthy editorial process and long awaited publication of this edition.