Introduction: Fabric 2015—the threads of conservation

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The Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, 2013 defines Fabric as ‘all the physical material of the place including elements, fixtures, contents and objects’ (2013: 2). As society evolves, diversifies and changes focus, is this definition still valid in Australia today? What about our social fabric and sense of place?

The 2015 Australia ICOMOS Conference Fabric 2015—The Threads of Conservation provided a forum to discuss the relevancy and future direction of cultural heritage management in Australia. The conference was held in Adelaide, South Australia from 5 to 8 November 2015. Over 250 heritage professionals from around Australia and overseas attended the conference. Two days of keynote addresses and papers were presented in the award winning National Wine Centre, adjacent the Adelaide Botanic Garden. A further day of site visits included a choice of four locations, preceded by a traditional trades fair and breakfast at Old Adelaide Gaol. Delegates had a choice of visiting post-industrial Port Adelaide, historic Adelaide CBD, hands on trades at the Gaol or the cultural landscape of the Mount Lofty Ranges (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Site visit, Old Parliament House, Adelaide (Photograph by Kevin O’Sullivan, November 2015).
Sixty-six papers were presented on the three conference themes: Conserving fabric, Fabric and place and Social fabric. Conserving fabric focused on developing skills, the use of technology and sustainable practice. Fabric and place reflected on understanding the significance embedded in places, landscapes and sites. Social fabric considered the importance of memory, intangible values and community engagement.

Fabric 2015 was popular with delegates, providing a much-needed conversation focusing on physical conservation, technological innovation and recognition of the social value of intangible heritage. The conversation has continued since the conference. The recently established Australia ICOMOS Fabric Working Group is focusing on technical conservation, education and research associated with heritage fabric. The Working Group has recommended that technical conservation papers be included as a regular feature in future Historic Environment issues, an exciting initiative starting with this issue.

Fabric 2015 keynote speakers focused on education models, cultural collaboration strategies, sustainability and the value and future of cultural heritage management. Julian Smith, Director of Willowbank School, Ontario, Canada questioned the traditional education model of master and pupil. All students at Willowbank study a shared curriculum, combining heritage theory, traditional trades knowledge and an understanding of vernacular materials. Students are a mix of designers, tradespeople and urbanists. The results are astounding. Graduates receive a holistic, grounded and balanced understanding of the value of a ‘sense of place’, where the designing and ‘making of things’ play a key role in the formation of the cultural values of a place and its community.

Dr Neale Draper, of Australian Cultural Heritage Management, Adelaide, discussed the importance of consultation in the management of heritage fabric. He focused on consultation with Aboriginal peoples, whose voice is not necessarily loud in development debates. Neale provided local examples of engagement consultation to illustrate the potential benefits of involving traditional and local peoples in heritage value discussions. Cultural heritage values were affirmed, mutual respect developed and agreement was achieved to allow conservation of fabric of value and delivery of wider project goals.
Susan Macdonald, of the Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles, presented a score-card of the current state of cultural heritage management across the world. Heritage management received a low score due to the low level of government investment, lack of traditional trade training opportunities and a poor understanding of the public value of heritage. Susan recommended a three-pronged approach to address the issue, focusing on re-establishing links between people, places and fabric.

Invited guest speaker Peter Cox explored the potential environmental sustainability of heritage fabric. Peter noted that all heritage buildings are sustainable, which should be celebrated. Heritage fabric conservation reduced construction costs through the capture of embodied energy, the recycling of existing materials and use of local materials to minimise transport costs. Planet impact is minimised and heritage value is sustained.

Richard McKay chaired a thought-provoking plenary session (Figure 3) that focused on key conference messages. It was agreed that many current problems regarding the recognition and funding of fabric conservation primarily stem from government disinterest in the subject. As a professional community, we need to re-engage with the community and re-focus our passion and relevance as facilitators, rather than commentators. If the community values heritage, governments will follow in support. Richard closed the conference reflecting on the opening address of the South Australian Governor, His Excellency the Honourable Hieu Van Le AO, inspiring delegates to ‘take your threads home and weave a great tapestry of understanding about the value of heritage in the community’.

Papers included in this issue of *Historic Environment* reflect the key themes discussed at the conference. Papers examine: *Fabric* and the future; *Fabric* and quality; *Fabric* and economic sustainability; *Fabric* and technology and *Fabric* and environmental sustainability. The papers presented in this issue represent a cross-section of conference issues debated in keynotes presentations and paper and plenary sessions with a focus on conserving fabric.
Susan Macdonald is well known to many Australian members (Figure 4). She provided an engaging keynote presentation at Fabric 2015. Susan has authored ‘Place + people = fabric: Conserving fabric and sustaining values in the 21st century’. Heritage is valued by the community, but not necessarily supported by governments. There has been a recent steady decline in the knowledge, skills and experience in practical conservation of fabric, for both contractors and professionals. The traditional values and connections between place, fabric and people have been lost. Susan asks ‘how do we engage people today in the activities needed both to conserve the fabric and retain those intangible values that connect place and fabric?’ She proposes a three-pronged approach, addressing:

- **Place**: reinforcing the connection between materials, local traditions and cultural identity
- **People**: respecting people’s wishes and cultural values, enhancing their sense of place and their desire to maintain that sense of place through the conservation of their built form accomplishments
- **Fabric**: without the knowledge and desire to conserve physical fabric, there is little hope of preserving the associated intangible and social values of any community.

Susan suggests that a community led re-engagement with cultural heritage will provide a sustainable model for heritage conservation into the future, whether led by government or others.

The paper by Donald Ellsmore, ‘Designing a quality framework for sustainable heritage conservation’, provides a case for the development of a quality management tool for conservation practice in Australia. The framework could provide principles and benchmark measures for conservation practice, ensuring a minimum quality standard for both professionals and tradespeople, providing consistent, measurable and high-quality outcomes. The framework would also be linked to education practices and competency training, future accreditation of heritage professionals and as a means of ensuring ongoing development of conservation knowledge and innovation. A heritage conservation quality framework, led by Australia ICOMOS, would complement The Burra Charter, providing quality measure benchmarking for the best practice principles of the Charter.

Mary Knaggs explores the problems of funding associated with the conservation of heritage fabric in the third paper, ‘Revolving Heritage Funds’. Revolving funds are proposed as a method to ensure a sustainable, economic future for cultural heritage sites under threat. Seed funding is necessary to commence the scheme, but once results are achieved, proceeds from rent or sale of restored heritage places assist in funding additional projects. Such schemes require a procedural structure and careful management to maintain liquidity and to deliver high quality heritage outcomes. Mary notes that government is ideally placed to deliver such a scheme, as the manager of the fund, in ensuring tax-deductible status for donations, and/or as a supportive stakeholder. In addition, a revolving heritage fund may facilitate additional heritage opportunities, such as addressing the current shortage of traditional trades skills and the promotion of the sustainability of heritage conservation.

Can decayed heritage places be reborn through digital form? The paper by Kelly Greenop and Chris Landorf considers advances in three-dimensional laser scanning of archaeological or heritage places, and challenges and opportunities of this technology. Fabric can be preserved
through digital records, not only through conservation, but also as an alternative or additional means of managing the end life of heritage places. Several case studies explore the possibilities for digital presentation of heritage places as another medium for tourist interpretation. One of the limitations to the use of 3D laser scanning is the high cost for terrestrial scanners and processing of data, however as balanced against the cost for long-term conservation, it may be an alternative to manage the demise of a heritage place and provide a different medium for understanding and appreciating our cultural heritage in our ever-changing world.

The final paper in this volume from the conference by Noni Boyd explores the obvious, and rarely promoted, sustainability benefits of heritage conservation in her paper ‘Heritage and Sustainability 101’. The public value of heritage conservation is clearly argued as an environmentally sustainable activity. Building fabric is recycled, not wasted. The embodied energy of materials is re-used, not lost. The reuse of past buildings also capitalises on inherent passive design solutions before electricity and mechanical air management. Noni highlights that empirical evidence is still lacking in the debate and there is still work to be done to promote heritage conservation as an effective sustainability activity. As economic argument needs to be developed to illustrate the real costs associated with reuse, traditional repair methods and whole of building life costs. Once developed, it will become clear that heritage conservation is an economically sustainable approach of demonstrable value to the community. Further, it will enhance the current adaptive reuse debate in Australia, providing evidence proving the economic sense of reuse rather than replacement.

This Fabric volume and the ‘Fabric 2015—The Threads of Conservation’ conference sought to debate and reinvigorate the public value of heritage through a fabric-based lens, and this issue of Historic Environment reflects both practitioner and academic approaches to these issues: a key strength of the approach of the publication (Figure 5). The members of Australia ICOMOS are challenged to consider and activate this value, through the reconnection of people, place and fabric. A community led approach is recommended, through consideration of education and heritage skills training, promotion of environmentally sustainable benefits of heritage conservation, and the development of quality measures for Australian best practice heritage management. If the community understands the public value of heritage, governments will listen and subsequently provide sustainable financial and policy support for cultural heritage into the future.

Figure 5: Fabric 2015 Trades fair: Heritage Stone Restoration display (photograph by Michael Queale, November 2015).
The final section of this issue includes the 2016 Jim Kerr Address by Joseph Skrzynski AO on his long and distinguished career, entitled ‘From Griffin to Utzon and from *The Man from Snowy River* to *Go back to where you came from*’, and also a technical paper on a new heritage trade skills apprentice program for Port Arthur Historic sites by Marty Passingham.

As co-convenors of the conference, we would like to thank those involved in coordinating and volunteering their time to help make the conference so successful and memorable. Firstly, to all our sponsors, especially our elite sponsor Revolution Roofing; our Content Group and Organisation Group members, whose ideas helped mould the conference’s focus; our field trip and post-conference tour organisers; our professional conference organiser Bradley Hayden of Countrywide Conference and Event Management; our volunteers; and both the conference paper and Historic Environment article blind reviewers. We would also like to thank conference co-convener Kevin O’Sullivan and all our conference delegates and presenters. Let this be the start of a new conversation, a new focus on conserving physical fabric, developing new technologies and recognising the social value of intangible heritage fabric.