Heritage and development: Introduction

Tim Winter

How things change. But is it not also true that the more things change the more they stay the same.

Conventional wisdoms concerning the relationship between heritage preservation and economic development have shifted dramatically over the last four to five decades. And yet at the same time, the challenges facing planners, archaeologists, architects and conservationists of decades past seem surprisingly similar to those of today. Competing agendas and disparate opinions, the lament of loss and missed opportunities, the lack of long term thinking, along with a call for approaches that balance multiple values all seem perennial concerns.

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During this period, the cultural sector grew in importance through the widespread adoption of 'human capital', as a resource for economic development and wealth generation within programmes of sustainable development, has been an important change. But as programmes proclaiming a mantra of ‘sustainability’ have been implemented from Sydney to Stockholm and from Kakadu to Kruger, the concept has become increasingly complex, unwieldy and ambiguous. Of course, such shifts have also occurred in parallel with the global transition towards post-industrial economies, and a reduced reliance on industrial, manufacturing sectors, even within the so-called developing world. In the heritage sector this has been most clearly felt through the rapid and, in many cases vast, increases in tourism that have occurred within and between countries.

Places like The Rocks in Sydney offer tangible examples of how landscapes and communities have been radically transformed by these macro, globally roaming processes. A century ago The Rocks was seen as a hotbed of vice, disease and poverty. Today it is one of Australia’s most iconic historical landscapes; a space where renewal and revival have been utterly dependent upon sectors like tourism and the cultural logics of post-industrial urban place-making. Of programmes of sustainable development, has been an important change. But as programmes proclaiming a mantra of ‘sustainability’ have been implemented from Sydney to Stockholm and from Kakadu to Kruger, the concept has become increasingly complex, unwieldy and ambiguous. Of course, such shifts have also occurred in parallel with the global transition towards post-industrial economies, and a reduced reliance on industrial, manufacturing sectors, even within the so-called developing world. In the heritage sector this has been most clearly felt through the rapid and, in many cases vast, increases in tourism that have occurred within and between countries.

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Proposals for high rise buildings in and around historic districts – Seville, London and Phnom Penh being recent notable cases – exemplify this enduring problem. However, numerous examples can also be cited where the adoption of a defensive position towards development can be counter productive. In certain instances, industries like tourism provide the only realistic economic lifeline for the preservation of fragile and endangered heritage resources.

Clearly then, if we are to consider the relationship between heritage and development in any meaningful way we must recognise and embrace the inherent complexities and myriad challenges involved. For these reasons, we felt it was worth dedicating a special issue of Historic Environment to this theme. Over the last 12 months or so a number of papers have been sourced, with writers encouraged to think about this relationship from a variety of perspectives. Four papers focusing on Australia are complemented by two papers on China. While the contrasts will be self evident, I would encourage readers to seek out points of comparison between the papers and consider the broader questions and insights shared by the authors. The issue also includes reviews of a number of recent books published in the field of conservation and heritage studies.

Heritage and Development opens with a collaborative piece by Richard Barkley, Grace John, Justin Shiner and Matthew Wrigley, focusing on the development of a management plan for the Rakkara Mine Block at Weipa, and the attempts made to incorporate the cultural heritage of the region’s Traditional Owners. Rio Tinto Alcan operates one of the world’s largest bauxite mines in Western Cape York, North Queensland. Recent plans for mine expansion threatened some of the area’s key heritage items, most notably sixty scarred trees and two shell middens. The paper presented here outlines the challenges involved, as seen from a number of perspectives. As such then, it directly embraces the idea of multi-vocality, reflecting on a series of anxieties, hopes and misunderstandings. This interesting and innovative approach reveals how both Rio Tinto and Traditional Owners brought to the conversation a series of assumptions about the other party; assumptions which, only over time, were questioned and replaced by more nuanced understandings. We see, for example, how the mining company would learn more about the ways in which Traditional Owners valued the scarred trees and what they considered as destruction or preservation. As discussions progressed, finding common ground and resolving confusions remained an ever present challenge. For the article’s authors, one of the key lessons this process showed was how heritage assessments overly reliant upon archaeological methods can fail to deliver the necessary understanding of Aboriginal religious and cultural frameworks. And more broadly, their account also indicates why innovative, untested techniques and methodologies may need to be pursued if an appropriate balance between development and conservation is to be successfully realised.

In an issue dedicated to the link between heritage and development I felt it particularly important to have some examples from China. In a country with an immensely rich cultural heritage, the Chinese government is rolling out an unprecedented programme of socio-economic development,
and in so doing profoundly transforming many of the country’s cities. Given the scale and speed of this development, numerous examples of fragile heritage resources threatened by urban regeneration could be cited. The paper by Sharif Sham Island takes us to Macau, a city that richly captures a sense of what is happening more generally across the country. The situation in Macau is particularly acute with World Heritage listing (2005) coming at a time of a rapid change in the city’s multi-billion dollar gambling industry. In response to the recent construction of mega-resorts in the city, including some built in close proximity to the boundaries of the World Heritage Site itself, the author calls for a more nuanced articulation of a sustainable development framework. This includes closer attention to visual integrity and a concern for the construction of high rise buildings which disrupt the city’s historical connection with the sea; as maintained today by certain iconic structures and monuments. But if Macau is to really be managed sustainably, attention needs to be given to the ways in which the opening of more and more casinos is transforming the social landscape and creating major economic inequalities across the city. By analytically situating Macau’s historic centre in this wider tourism-leisure economy, Sharif rightfully connects the built environment with the ‘quality of life’ of the city’s residents. A more holistic understanding of sustainable development is thus called for as a tool for evaluating the appropriateness of current changes and patterns of development.

And yet in marked contrast to Macau, the historic urban complex of Pingyao in central-northern China is actually benefitting from an influx of tourist interest. According to Shuyi Wang, the heritage tourism, both domestic and international, has proved vital in the preservation of many of the ancient settlement’s historic houses and civic buildings. Interestingly the city continues to trade on its long history of banking, but now through the creation of a number of museums telling a story of commodity and money convey services. Wang’s article nicely conveys the importance of tourism in recent years, by reminding us of the devastating impact the cultural revolution and subsequent socialist development policies had on China’s cultural traditions. But in offering words of caution, the author also focuses on the risks of excluding local communities from the developmental process, and the associated dangers of severing the connections between people and place; connections that are essential to successful urban conservation. Notwithstanding such possible trajectories, the case of Pingyao demonstrates how economic development can act as a catalyst for the conservation of a historic urban landscape. Just from the two cases of Macau and Pingyao we can thus see how heritage and development can come together in complex and very different ways.

The role of communities and their involvement is also highlighted by Bruce Pennay, this time in the very different context of the former Bonegilla Migrant Reception Centre in Victoria. First established as an army camp, Bonegilla was turned into a migrant reception centre in 1947, taking in over 300,000 arrivals before its closure in 1971. With ownership eventually passing over to the State of Victoria, heritage listing soon followed. Nonetheless Pennay expresses a concern for the Centre’s future, and offers a series of suggestions for mobilising a better state of preservation. Particularly noteworthy to this account is the author’s call for understanding a story of migration, immigration and assimilation as a vital part of Australia’s post-war development. But to create this connection between the local and the national, Pennay suggests the site needs to feature more prominently in the minds of local residents, the local media and perhaps most importantly the local city council. Accordingly, the paper argues the historical connections between the former centre and the region’s economic growth is vital as ‘it is an understanding of the importance of the site to local development that attracts local commitment to custodianship’. Once again citing tourism as a force of potential benefit if handled appropriately, Pennay presents a picture of heritage and development that needs to be read at multiple scales.

Not surprisingly, tourism also features prominently in the proposed renaissance of Queenstown and its surrounding area, as laid out by Mario Rimini and John Merson. In this paper the authors provide a detailed argument for proposing this part of Western Tasmania as a UNESCO Geopark. The region boasts an illustrious past of mining stretching back in excess of 100 years, a history that encompasses the Mount Lyell mine with its cultural landscape, the historic town of Queenstown, a network of hydroelectric complexes, as well as a geological and natural landscape defined by a series of access routes. Crucially though, the authors claim the initial settlement of Penghana further up the valley from Queenstown also needs to be recognised as an iconic example of a history of European landscape colonisation, noteworthy for the taming of wild and spectacular rainforests and mountains. For this reason they point to the benefits of identifying the region as a ‘colonised wilderness’ and thereby branded as a Geopark.

As in other articles in this issue we see a transition from industrialised economies, in this case mining, to a post-industrial economy of tourism being a defining feature of the region. Rimini and Merson helpfully trace the rise of tourism over the years, illustrating how it has unevenly impacted communities and thus, by implication, the conservation of the landscape. To improve upon this situation, the authors draw on the idea of the Geopark, a concept defined by UNESCO as ‘an area with a geological heritage of significance, with a coherent and strong management structure, and where a sustainable economic development strategy is in place’. Much of their analysis centres on what features and attributes of the landscape could be incorporated into this sustainable development framework; a programme which, they argue, requires vision and collaboration if it is to be realised.

Finally, for Robyn Smith the link between heritage and development has been rendered particularly uneasy by a legislative process that has exposed an important heritage site in Darwin to a future of uncertainty. Smith takes up the case of the Sue Wah Chin Building, one of Darwin’s few remaining stone houses dating from the late 19th century. The paper argues that recent amendments to the Northern Territory’s Heritage Conservation Act ironically pave the way for more development on and around the protected area. Constructed around 113 years ago by a Cantonese merchant and first known as the ‘the stone houses’, the building has passed through many hands. But as Smith illustrates, although the building has been recognised as an important piece of heritage for more than a decade now, current legislation places responsibility for its preservation firmly in the hands of a private development company. The article traces this process, and provides an overview of how conservation legislation has been modified in ways that greatly increase the risks to the property. Of course the underlying concerns of this story are familiar ones, and the paper speaks of much bigger, commonly recurring challenges and issues. As Smith asks towards the
end of the article ‘is it the case that heritage and development are such difficult issues for governments to deal with?’.

Indeed, as you will see over the course of this special issue, it is not only governments that find this relationship fraught with difficulties. Seen together then, the articles offered here represent an important contribution to our understanding of the convergence between heritage and development, and the array of dilemmas and ambiguities, opportunities and challenges this relationship inevitably throws up.