Introduction: In Practice

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Who is it all for? Who will be affected by the heritage practitioners’ research, arguments, reports and meticulous work on fabric? Each of the papers in this issue tells us that, in practice, heritage work affects local residents as much as, or even more than, those people specifically interested in the object or place. Given that most of the papers were unsolicited and the journal unthemed, it is clear that heritage thinkers and practitioners are genuinely concerned about the relationship between heritage and the community. The same concern is also evident in the dozen books we review.

World Heritage presents particular problem for local communities, as two important papers tell us. In the first, on Angkor, Tim Winter shows how an emphasis on past imperial grandeur basically devalues subsequent Cambodian history, distorts perceptions of the culture and even affects the nation’s self-image. He says that ‘a scientifically oriented language of world heritage imposes particular visions of culture memory and place; visions which ignore how a sense of cultural heritage is lived and articulated within a context of tourism practice’. His comments are confirmed by Phiong Pisith’s study of another Cambodian site, Beng Mealea, where the modern Buddhist temple, spiritual and social centre of the village, has been removed from the Angkorean temple compound, to the detriment of a community already depressed by very recent tourism.

In her paper on the Great Barrier Reef, Susan McIntyre-Tamwoy makes similar arguments, basing her comments on the results of a ‘social values’ study, similar to that used at Port Arthur by Jane Lennon (described in Historic Environment volume 16.3). McIntyre-Tamwoy points out the disparity between the social and scientific values placed upon the World Heritage Area and goes on to discuss questions of constituency, tradition and attachment. In relation to protected areas she asks: ‘What effect do the community and the adaptive process have on the evolution of the landscape and its management? Is the resultant outcome a shared landscape or do they essentially remain forever separate and contested?’.

The positive results to be gained from community consultation are presented by François Tainturier in his case study of a modern Buddhist monastery, now reinstated as an institute of learning. This success story happily parallels Michael Pickering’s account of Karukarku, where Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities reached agreement about a site which each endowed with deep but totally different spiritual values.

In contrast, two case studies from New South Wales, by Janet Fingleton, show what happens when municipal councils fail to consult their constituents: buildings disappear, places are trivialised, and the urban fabric is diminished. Warwick Mayne-Wilson’s study of Robertson Park carries the same message. These papers are a good background to Lisa Rogers’ study of Chinese heritage law. China has exactly the same problems and challenges as Australia, but magnified a hundred thousand times: 300,000 ‘cultural relics’ and 750 million potential tourists are almost beyond imagining, let alone regulating. However, Australia ICOMOS is playing a significant role, as noted by Brian Egloff in the most recent Historic Environment (volume 17.2).

The aim of our journal is to inform readers about current thought in those many fields subsumed under the notion of heritage. Book reviews are a quick and pleasant way to find out what’s happening. Our reviews editor (and logistical wizard), Linda Young, has an infallible eye for the right person and the reviews are always a joy to read. They’re also educational and this is an excellent opportunity to find out more about ‘distory’, ‘thanatourism’ or ‘lexical cartography’.

In this issue it is particularly interesting to see how the reviews intersect with the journal articles. The concerns expressed about the canonisation of Angkor are echoed not only in Miranda Morris’ review of Restoring Women’s History and Julia Clark’s of Slavery, but also in Matthew Higgins’ discussion of Hill End. The question of ‘tradition’ raised in different ways by Tainturer, Pickering and McIntyre-Tamwoy, resonates with the ideas discussed in Peter Freeman’s review of The Sulima Pagoda.

Not all of our authors are members of Australia ICOMOS — that would hardly be practicable — but all papers are refereed by appropriately qualified members. This means that, in practice, the journal can be seen as representing the views of the broader heritage community on issues of principles and practice. Readers are very cordially invited to participate and we look forward to receiving offers of papers on matters of current concern.