Introduction: nature, culture, heritage

Aedeen Cremin

As these pages went to press several hundred members of ICOMOS from around the world were gathering in China to debate the topic of ‘monuments and sites in their setting’. It is perhaps a matter of zeitgeist that our contributors should independently consider the same questions, through philosophical enquiry, or through specific case studies.

The environmental philosopher Thomas Heyd opens the debate by examining the distinction between culture and nature, whether they are antagonistic or complementary. I had the opportunity to hear him speak on this topic when he visited the Australian National University earlier this year and find his paper tantalisingly brief — but a hint of the riches to be found in his fuller published work. He concludes that we should work towards a ‘culture of nature’, in which human activity does ‘not overwhelm the spontaneity of nature — but plays into it’.

Sybil Jack highlights the political aspects of defining ‘nature’ in her paper on the difficulties that early British settlers had in understanding the Australian environment. Dietrich Schmidt-Vogt, on the other hand, stresses that humanity and nature can interact to mutual benefit and cites the German philosopher Safranski as saying that ‘culture is our second nature’: an intriguing thought, which Dietrich explicates with great insight, using examples from Thailand.

Jane Harrington has also been working in Thailand and gives a fascinating account of ‘elephant culture’ and its preservation through tourism. This is a melancholy paper in many ways and brings home the need for urban-dwellers to really understand how other people live with the non-urban environment; which is becoming increasingly difficult to do, as the countryside (modified nature, or ‘secondary nature’ as Schmidt-Vogt might call it) becomes increasingly dehumanised. Jane shows how the relations between elephant and their keepers transcend ordinary economic factors and how retaining the elephant maintains ‘meaning and symbolism reinforced by tradition, myth and ritual and strong association with nature’.

The loss of working animals is not confined to Asia. In the 1990s, in northern Portugal I had the opportunity to see at first hand how historical change can radically affect a lifestyle that has gone on for hundreds of years. The villagers of the Tuela valley used millennial techniques of agriculture, flour-milling and transportation: they had the most wonderful cattle, the Mirandese cow, of surpassing beauty, surely a descendant of the bull-god Serapis who had been worshipped here in Roman times. The Mirandese cow was elegant, intelligent and obliging; she was not good to eat, she did not produce huge amounts of milk, but she was good to live with. The village ‘oxcarts’ were in fact drawn by cows as were the ploughs, since an ox is a relatively useless animal compared to a productive female.

Come 1992 and Portugal’s entry into the European Union; down went the frontiers, in came the Eurocrats. The Mirandese cow was declared to be a useless animal, of no market value; she should be removed and replaced by a real cow which would produce gallons of quite unnecessary milk. Happily these decrees were ignored, as were earlier ones which had suggested that all the small landholdings (painfully created out of centuries of toil on barren slopes) be consolidated into more manageable units, worked by machines; the now-redundant population could take its chances in the cities. At one stroke both managed nature and peasant culture would have been destroyed! Fortunately, along with the Eurocrats came people who could appreciate the heritage values of these mountain top villages, many of them returning villagers, who had been forced to abandon their homes in earlier decades. Lifestyle will change, of course, and it may be that the Mirandese cow will have to be preserved like the Thai elephants, but at least she has had a stay of execution. Villages will alter, but the process will be gradual, more ‘natural’. Memories will remain and may be evoked by the physical reality of fieldwalls, animal houses and mountain-stream watermills.

Memories and their location are discussed by Olwen Beazley in a moving paper which ponders the question of intangible value, in relation to ‘places of atonement’, at Auschwitz and Robben Island. These places depend on their story being told. What happens when there is nobody left to tell it? How far can the physical fabric truly convey the sense of ‘being there’? The Swedish archaeologist G. Karlsson has recently asked why is there a material culture? (in Global Archaeological Theory, eds P.P. Funari et al. 2005). He makes the point that heritage places are not in the past, in a foreign country, but exist here and now and have a multiplicity of meaning. How shall we read them? Attempting to fossilise a meaning for any one place is probably futile. It may be, as Olwen puts it, ‘drawing a line around a shadow’.

Past or present, heritage does in fact exist and our five last authors each deal with a specific aspect of ‘sites in their setting’. Rowena Buttland discusses urbanisation around Angkor, noting the impact of its World Heritage listing, while Ken Taylor emphasises the landscape values inherent in the planning of Canberra. Canberra may seem to be more artificial than David Carment’s Darwin or Warwick Mayne-Wilson’s Birchgrove, but the case studies overlap: the creation of a sports ground at Birchgrove answered the same need for ‘a healthy mind in a healthy body’ which was so crucial to the development of Canberra, while Darwin, distant from the rest of Australia, nevertheless reflects the same imperative to order and govern which impelled the creation of Canberra. Our last paper, by Iain Stuart, is a solidly-researched analysis of the quintessential twentieth-century artefact, the prefabricated half-cylinder hut, familiar to all but hardly recorded. These are monuments without a site, or sites without a setting, since they were above all portable and many seem to have been ported once too often. Iain’s Quest for the Quonset serves to remind us, yet again, that our heritage is always at risk.

The books reviews at the end of this journal echo some of the question our authors pose; they range from the poetic (Joan Domicelj on Martin Thomas), to the practical, (Eric Martin on fire safety), and in between cover a variety of issues such as interpretation, memory and a sense of place. You will be instructed and entertained.