MEMORIES AND MEANINGS:

Keynote Address

Wendy McCarthy

Being the Year of Australia Remembers it is most appropriate to have a conference on monuments. It is also important to stress in this forum that monuments are important for the memories and meanings attached to them. The need to commemorate, to mark the significant events and people who shaped the past, appears to be a basic part of human nature. The familiar monuments, for most people, are the statues erected by nineteenth century colonists to honour explorers and politicians - the makers and preservers of Empire. Our public gardens are great repositories of such monuments. The Royal Sydney Botanic Gardens has more than eleven monuments to commemorate botanists, governors, explorers, politicians and poets. Even more familiar are the digger war memorials which, early this century, became a feature of almost every Australian country town when our nation grieved for the huge loss of young men, many of whom were buried in the battlefields of foreign lands.

Because of the intense meaning of monuments to Australians, a great many monuments of all kinds are entered in the Register of the National Estate, maintained by the Australian Heritage Commission (AHC). Recent interest inspired by an expansion of social history has refocussed our attention from the most commonly found monuments to those of political events, women’s lives, tragedies, migrations, the conservation movement, indigenous histories and spiritual places.

One place which we will be visiting today is the Aboriginal Embassy. The listing of the Embassy in the Register of the National Estate will be celebrated at an event to take place at the site later today. The Aboriginal Embassy site was nominated to the Australian Heritage Commission in 1994 by the Ngunnawal Aboriginal Land Council and the Aboriginal Embassy representatives. The first recorded Aboriginal protest took place at the site in 1927, during the opening of Parliament House. The first Aboriginal Tent Embassy was erected at the site on 26 January 1972 in response to the government decision concerning land rights. On the twentieth anniversary of the original event the Embassy was re-erected on the site to highlight the political slogan of the period, ‘Sovereignty Never Ceded’. During the protests, Old Parliament House was occupied, and the Aboriginal Declaration of Sovereignty was presented to the Federal Government. A living presence has been maintained at the site since 1992.

The embassy site is very different to traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander monuments which are most often natural landscape features designated as monuments of spiritual ancestors. These examples demonstrate that monuments are more than stone and mortar.

Other monuments erected by local communities throughout Australia record the dramatic impact of events such as bush fires and floods. In the small town of Snug in Tasmania is a park in memory of the ‘Black Tuesday’ bushfire which devastated the Snug community in 1967. The park was created to remember the horrendous disaster in which 54 lives were lost.

Former migrant community groups commemorate national heroes of their homelands - for instance, the Scottish poet Robert Burns is commemorated many times throughout Australia. There are also many other kinds of memorials recalling the richness of our migrant heritage, such as the Italian Internes Shrine at Harvey in Western Australia. Here, during World War II, up to 500 Italian prisoners of war were detained for several years. During this time one of the internees, a stonemason who had worked on church restoration projects in Europe, constructed a small roadside shrine commemorating this Italian wartime community. Today, the carefully crafted little shrine stands as the sole survivor of the wartime Harvey No 11 Camp, a single marker for the families of the internees who remain in the Harvey district.

One place embedded into our folk heroism and sense of national identity is the site of the Eureka Rebellion, which was entered in the Interim List of the Register of the National Estate in December last year. It commemorates a battle of what has become synonymous in Australia with the victory of the underdog in the face of tyranny. The historic precinct includes the Eureka Stockade Reserve and the monument to those killed in the battle, remembered as martyrs for democracy. Over the years, Ballarat citizens and visitors have flocked to the Reserve for annual community festivals and sporting events. Some groups still make pilgrimages to the Reserve to celebrate the spirit of Eureka, and others have continued to use the site for political protest. In the nation’s eyes, the Eureka battlefield is now a monument, a symbolic landscape dedicated to democratic government, the concept of fair play and equal opportunity for all.
Similarly the Shearers’ Strike Camp site at Barcaldine in Queensland is also a symbolic landscape and has become a symbol of the Australian labour movement. Though the strike failed to achieve its short-term objective of gaining more reasonable employment conditions, the event and the hardships faced by the strikers is recorded in our history and in the famous Lawson poems. The camp site is now cherished as a significant place where the labour movement began as a force in Australian politics.

The Mothers’ Memorial at Toowoomba is one of very few war memorials commissioned by women. It was erected on the site of military recruitment for the First World War, and from 1916 was the location for Toowoomba’s Anzac Day commemoration each year. In 1985, despite community protest culminating in the formation of a Mother’s Memorial Preservation Association, the memorial was removed from its prominent position to a less central location. At this time, the AHC removed the memorial from its Interim List, to be reassessed in its new location.

As noted before, war memorials are numerous throughout Australia and represent a major category for the Register of the National Estate. This year is an appropriate time to highlight the heritage significance of war memorials as part of the ‘Australia Remembers, 1945-1995’ commemoration organised by the Commonwealth Department of Veterans Affairs. Under a program called Operation Restoration, the Commonwealth Government will expend $10 million on the restoration and maintenance of war memorials Australia-wide. This program will involve local communities and conservation experts working together to conserve this important aspect of our heritage. It is fitting that this conference is being held in our largest and grandest monument - the Australian War Memorial.

It is now encouraging to see the impact of World War II on women being acknowledged, particularly women raped in war. The recent apology by Japanese officials to Korean Australian women who demonstrated about this issue in 1995, despite community protest culminating in the formation of a Mother’s Memorial Preservation Association, the memorial was removed from its prominent position to a less central location. At this time, the AHC removed the memorial from its Interim List, to be reassessed in its new location.

There are many issues relating to the conservation of monuments such as:

- How significant are memorials to the current community? How does significance change over time, with the passing of the generations who were directly involved in events - for example, what significance do Boer War memorials hold for the current community compared to more recent Vietnam memorials? Does this change our approach to conservation?

- How can managers take community views into account? Certainly not all monuments are valued in a community, and some are subject to neglect or even vandalism. What if there are conflicting cultural values?

- Monuments are often located on prominent hills, or placed as vista features in an avenue, or at a crossroad - highly visible locations which emphasise their symbolic importance. Many have succumbed to the imperatives of road widening or town improvements. Yet relocating monuments may diminish their cultural significance. How do we deal with this issue?

- Some monuments have lost their original context such as grave markers removed from their original locations and made into decorative walls, or carved trees in museum collections. Do these items retain any cultural significance?

- Should we try to keep all memorials present in great numbers across the landscape - such as war memorials? What level of community resources and conservation effort is appropriate?

- Although ICOMOS members may know about Burra Charter principles, others do not - how can we effectively communicate the guiding principles of the Burra Charter to the caretakers of monuments across Australia?

- Specialists in the maintenance of the fabric of monuments may have only limited appreciation of the surrounds, yet these provide a context which is often part of the cultural significance of the place - their conservation will often require a multi-disciplinary approach.

I trust many of these issues will be raised today, and the program promises a range of viewpoints.

I welcome the initiative of Australia ICOMOS in organising this conference on this important aspect of our cultural heritage. It was with great pleasure that I accepted your invitation to deliver the keynote address to such a diverse audience of conservation professionals. The AHC has co-operated closely with Australia ICOMOS to set a national standard for conservation practice, based on the philosophy and principles of the Burra Charter and its Guidelines. The great success of the more recent Illustrated Burra Charter has been a landmark for conservation education which we can build on for the future.

It is good to see conservation professionals from different backgrounds getting together to discuss common issues and alternative approaches. After all, the notion of cultural significance enshrined in the Burra Charter embraces all relevant aspects of a place which make it special - from its meanings and associations, to its fabric and setting. The conservation of monuments and their context is a diverse and challenging topic and I look forward to exploring it with you today. I also wish the SMOCM (Sculpture, Monuments and Outdoor Cultural Material) conference which is to be held early next week every success.

Wendy McCarthy has held the position of chair of the Australian Heritage Commission since February 1995. She has held many important senior and public positions and is currently Deputy Chancellor of the University of Canberra and President of Chief Executive Women.