Mentoring

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As a young person I was fortunate to learn from wise elders especially around our farm. After university I was a novelty—the first woman in the new Victorian National Parks Service working as a park planner in 1973. I also learnt a lot from canny older bushmen working as rangers, foresters who knew their trees and town planners who understood local government. Some of the latter critiqued my performance which was rehearsed before town planning tribunal appeals to good effect. It was all part of ‘learning the ropes’ or being ‘taken under the wing’ for which I was grateful. We did not call it mentoring but it was learning on the job and serving time as a master apprentice learning how to cope with an organisation. I had majored in geography for my arts degree at the University of Melbourne, but despite this knowledge, at work I now learnt about birds and their preferred habitats, bushfire and its effects, erosion, track construction, design and maintenance, visitor behaviour, neighbouring landholders and local government.

Being a foundation member of Australia ICOMOS and office bearer from 1977, I was interested to see the early issues of Historic Environment devoted to architectural surveys of types of buildings and enjoyed learning about these. Historic Environment was started by the Melbourne-based Council for the Historic Environment, and commencing with volume three, the journal was distributed to Australia ICOMOS members and featured the opening address of the 1983 ICOMOS national conference on the ‘analysis of cultural significance’ by Max Bourke. Other papers in this issue discussed the ICOMOS guidelines in relation to Aboriginal sites (Sharon Sullivan), towns and other urban areas (Meredith Walker), industrial sites (Judy Birmingham); with the president of Australia ICOMOS Miles Lewis’s paper on analysis of buildings. As rapporteur for the conference, my report on industrial sites presciently noted that Australia could only support a limited number of working museums (on industrial sites). It was exciting to realise that I had views to offer from my geographer/national park planner perspective.

However, the Lanyon Homestead seminar on cultural landscapes in November 1988 was a big event for me—the bringing together in a landscape perspective of many threads of the interests of ICOMOS committees. As John Mulvaney (1989: 2) said in his foreword to the issue of Historic Environment devoted to the conference papers: ‘The outstanding feature of this meeting has been its stress upon the need to bring a diversity of disciplines to bear on any assessment of a cultural landscape. This is heartening revisionism.’ He went on to warn against tunnel vision and the ‘reinvention of the wheel by disciplines as they discover the truth that humanity and the natural world interact and change dynamically’ (Mulvaney 1989: 2). Mulvaney (1989: 2) urged us to ‘maintain standards within each discipline but broaden our horizons to embrace other disciplines’—it is that maintenance of deep researched knowledge and not just opinion that is still needed. And it is to this task I think mentoring of those entering ICOMOS and the heritage profession should be directed.
‘Cultural landscapes’ by definition contain natural features and processes on which cultural forces interact. There should be many disciplines involved in the study of cultural landscapes if we are to achieve conservation and those landscapes are all connected to someone somewhere—local communities, academic and scientific communities. All of these people have views on their landscapes, some have inherited knowledge of landscape behaviour and change in times of drought, fire and flood. A task of mentoring is to alert the beginner to all this complexity and assist with case studies, the ‘grey literature’ of unpublished reports, contacts, photographic sources, maps and so on—to advise on what worked then and what might work now.

In the 1980s, in more generous times in the public service, my Historic Places Branch in the Victorian Department of Conservation and Environment funded a summer intern program where we offered final year university students the opportunity to undertake a project under the supervision of branch staff who always needed a few extra hands. Historical research using original archival material, combined with site visits, catalogues of photographs and maintenance and repair schedules for dilapidated structures or ruins that took into account the requirements of on-site staff, were all prepared. Extra resources meant more conservation works could be undertaken or interpretation of existing places. Standards varied, yet the program enabled us to recommend some participants for future jobs. The interns gained valuable experience of a work place, real job demands, access to materials and sites otherwise unavailable.

Many students and young professionals have approached me for information about heritage issues over the years. Some know what they are looking for, others want you to do it all for them, but the best ask for material then come back for clarification and discussion. A Chinese student, whom I worked with recently was undertaking a PhD, and asked me many questions about geology, vegetation, organisation of land, transport, products, art and depiction over time which he would not have had time to search on the internet. The personal contact was invaluable and enriching he said. In return, he reciprocated by sharing his knowledge of Chinese society and food and became a welcome friend.

In these less generous times with public liability, job hazard analysis forms required before venturing out into the actual public land and a general ‘closed shop’ attitude to sharing information (which is in fact the public’s information), plus the actual need for students to work to fund their studies—mentoring offers a real connection. Face-to-face contact is enriching for both parties. Conservation is not a one-off process; it is iterative and builds on comparative knowledge. Heritage embraces tangible and intangible elements and in this nation of many people from diverse cultures we need to encourage sharing. Mentoring offers a way of repaying those who assisted us and it is a means of passing on knowledge, wisdom and warnings in the school of hard knocks.

References
