Life on this huge land, anchored in the Asian South, linked state by state to the outside world by ports such as Fremantle, webbed with rich and ancient stories and overlaid with a new mix of imported tales, is now inextricably enmeshed in the swirling confusion of identities and economic ferocity of the ‘New World Order’.

Are we as described above? Where do we appear to be going, economically and socially? Where would we prefer to go? What part does our environment play? How should it best be managed?

In Australia by 1991, most governments had created, or intended to create, heritage legislation with some protective powers and with mechanisms to establish comprehensive, computerised registers of significant places hopefully compatible with one another through sophisticated information technology. Western Australia and Queensland have launched theirs; Tasmania is retreating. Most have, however, perpetuated the statutory division (present also, it must be said, under the World Heritage Convention) of the environment into two - into places of Natural Significance and places of Cultural Significance. Frequently, the latter is further split into Prehistoric and Historic sites.

What does that mean? Are we capable of weaving the parts together again so as to conserve the essence of the extraordinary stories of land and people interacting over time?

Hopes and fears for Australian conservation practice may become clearer if seen -

- first, in its international context over the last two decades
- second, set against a sort of caricatured version of its own evolution over the same last two decades.

**First, the international context**

1970’s - 90’s

(the International Council of Monuments and Sites) emerged in 1965 in response to principles already asserted by specialist conservators in the 1930’s but interrupted by World War II. These included respect for the work of the past ‘without excluding the style of any period’; the use of buildings ‘for a purpose which respects their historic or artistic character’; regular maintenance.

In recent years there have been rumblings. Administratively and conceptually, the ICOMOS membership has, as in similar bodies, sought a less European-centred and less monument-inspired organisation, broadened beyond the Americas to incorporate all regions of the world and the sites important to them. Its General Assembly in Lausanne in August 1990 elected a Srlankan president and will meet in that country in August 1993. In November of this year, the advisory and executive committees will meet here in Australia - their second meeting outside Europe.

These matters, although to some extent formalities, reflect conceptual changes which are sympathetic to Australian practice. A new international focus also links physical fabric with living traditions and emphasises the relationship, mentioned earlier, between the natural environment and humanity's layered adaptation to it.

Issues raised in Australia ICOMOS 1990 conference on Cultural Tourism appear in Mexico's Declaration of Oaxaca on Cultural Heritage in Daily Life and its Conservation through Community Support. In each case, respect is to be paid to the community's role in the initial creation of the cultural significance of a place, in the continued maintenance of that significance and in its infusion with life and cultural meaning. The importance of traditional, as well as specialist, knowledge in conserving the meaning of the place and its fabric is at last acknowledged.

In its consideration of the cultural and natural values of properties, the World Heritage Committee is, as are we, grappling with the concept of cultural landscapes - their definition, their boundaries, their patterns of change and the economic and management implications of conserving them.

- Second, the evolution of Australian practice 1970's - 90's

By the 1970's, the principal players in Australian conservation practice were still non-government enthusiasts acting through the National Trust or the wider conservation movement in each State, resident action groups battling over specific issues, academics in related fields and new specialised committees within professional institutions.

Australia signed the new World Heritage Convention of 1972 (twice chairing the World Heritage Committee) and, in the second half of the 1970's, the Hope Inquiry into the National Estate gave birth, inter alia, to:
- the Australian Heritage Commission, its Register of the National Estate and the National Estate Grants Program;
- Australia ICOMOS with its later Burra Charter, defining terms and establishing conservation principles and procedures.

By the early 1980's, the principal players could be found within both government and non-government bodies. With the growth in state and local bureaucracies and funding to match, a new species of specialist and administrator had evolved.

The economic, social and visual consequences of this, together with the spectacular property speculation and collapse over the decade, were dramatic. On one hand conservation standards applied on major works reached an extraordinarily sophisticated level, whilst on the other the aberrations of facadism, mimicry, hyper-restoration, huge infill and pseudo-history flourished.

The realities of the 1990's: How do we view ourselves now? As discussed earlier, by now most governments in Australia have created, or have in train, protective heritage legislation, related to planning rather than arts portfolios, and mechanisms to establish registers of their significant cultural places.

In 1992, Tasmania has a new government which may choose to abandon this task and Victoria, the first state in Australia to introduce statutory protection for historic buildings, is preoccupied with resolving deep economic problems. In this it is of course not alone. My state of New South Wales has launched a massive advertising campaign to support the urgent sale of its assets, many of which are historic properties. The Premier has conceded that the immediate benefits will be a reduced fiscal deficit, not more of the attentive police shown on billboards.
Economic times are tough in the world at large and very much so, here. Between 1985 and 1991 Australia is said to have fallen from 8th to 15th richest nation (it was 4th in the 1940’s). The slowed economy has given scope to a burgeoning “heritage industry” - with the potential to enhance or disturb the cultural significance of the places it touches. It refurbishes rather than redevelops; it ‘recycles’ old buildings into new uses; it displays or re-creates history for tourists and it ‘main-streets’ our country towns and ‘suburbs’ our suburbs.

“Cultural identity is the fragrance of the earth, the myths we live on and the legends that sustain us…”
- Moonis Raza, Canberra, 1989

As a further Australia Day commentator, Fred Love, teacher of Turramurra High School, liked Australia’s “cultural diversity... with the tolerance and maturity we have developed over the past two decades” but disliked “our preoccupation with quick-fix responses to our economic and social problems.”

Do either of his descriptions - the mature cultural diversity and the quick-fix response - apply to our approach to Cultural Heritage Conservation and to the role of government and the individual within it?

To date, ‘Cultural Heritage Conservation’ cannot honestly be said to have reflected cultural diversity and “the tolerance and maturity ... developed over the past two decades”. It has served, and been served by, the W.A.S.P.ish side of our culture (perhaps sometimes without the P for Protestant), barely touching upon other “fragrances of the earth” or sustaining legends. Amongst academics however, and somewhat less widely amongst professionals, this is now an active concern, frequently and quite passionately debated. The assessment of the social significance of places and of cultural landscapes indicates a broadening both in the range of participatory voices and in the subtlety of the field itself.

Similarly relevant to heritage conservation is Fred Love’s negative perception of Australia as a nation preoccupied with “quick-fix responses to our economic and social problems”.

The role of government in the field of heritage conservation has, with the advent of protective legislation, changed in tone. It has moved away from its early conceptual explorations and rescue operations, to the preparation and somewhat mechanical application of rules, guidelines and physical controls. This may reflect the scale of the task or is it perhaps, once again, our “quick-fix responses to ... economic and social problems”?

The balance of roles to be adopted in applying the new conservation tools - by which expert, which bureaucrat and which section of the community? - remains ill-defined, within processes which ignore the complexity of a dynamically changing environment and the interests of the people affected. Over-simplicity (the “quick fix”) is not acceptable in the age of the Chaos theory - nor are obscure procedures in a world of rapid, wide-spread and violent economic upheaval which people are struggling to understand.

The following glance at our national estate owes much to the series of expert workshops held for the Australian Heritage Commission, between February and September 1991, in the Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania, Victoria, Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia, Northern Territory, Western Australia and on the subject of the External Territories.

Through this and other work, I have been fortunate over the last few months to look with colleagues at the two extremes of perceptions of Australia’s cultural heritage:

- first, the unrecognised parts - the too subtle, the too close or the too painful for recognition through listing and conservation and,
- second, the rare or the awe-inspiring - those extraordinary places which provide physical evidence of stories of ‘outstanding universal value’. [of the World Heritage Convention 1972]

In the first group are human trails, telling stories of long and rewarding Aboriginal occupation, linking meeting sites with Macassans to the north, with Lutheran missionaries in the centre; of European explorers and their scatter of coastal shipwrecks, overland tracks, Antarctic huts and other remote settlements. There are the new settlers’ stark battles for survival, entrepreneurship and failure; adaptation to the rigours of climate, distance and economic depression. The Goyder line; the occupational sequence of sites and the struggle to connect through telegraph, railway and satellite systems. Ephemeral sites - the minor port’s wharf with shed, the remnant rural landscape, the windbreak or the transportable prefab. There are Graeme Davidson’s socially significant ‘buildings with clocks’, pubs and Masons’ halls; dairies and mills; parks and cinemas; and the new cultural styles brought here by refugees.
The second list is shorter but not because it is limited to the grand homesteads on the hill. It consists of exceptional places essential to the telling of an outstanding global or regional theme; breath-taking sites illustrating once again long distance ocean exploration; religious colonisation (in parallel with the Jesuit Missions of the Guarani or Goa...); the extraordinary convict transportation and settlement of Port Arthur, Norfolk Island; the gold rush from California, the cultural/technical transplantation and adaptive evolution from Northern to Southern hemispheres.

They may include the monumental - the myriad art galleries of Kakadu, Melbourne's Exhibition Building, the Sydney Harbour foreshore with Bridge and Opera House - but not necessarily so.

There are good prospects for the 1990's - but real hazards to be avoided.

The fears are of:
- unnecessary social polarisation
- narrowing of the conservation versus development debate
- inept trivialisation of history and cultural traditions
- loss of the philosophic and socio-economic value of conservation under a mass of restrictive controls and short-term economies.

The hopes however are greater, for:
- a growing public sophistication
- expansion of our sense of place to embrace many cultures
- coping with cultural conflicts imaginatively and generously
- improving the blend of community and expert voices
- caring for those aspects of places which extend understanding or inspire wonder, respect or curiosity
- integrating all those attributes into creative new development programmes.

In conclusion, "the 1990's will not be a decade of routin..."

References*
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Section Francaise de l'ICOMOS. Arts Contemporains et Edifices Anciens. Section Francaise de l'ICOMOS, Paris, 1981.

* For such a general paper it is hard to name principal sources - hence, for example the reference to the all-encompassing Gilbert & Inglis, Australians - A Historical Library of 1987. The recent and current work of many colleagues and friends in the areas of social significance and cultural landscapes in particular in Australia, although not listed here, is warmly acknowledged.