Outback and Beyond: the future of historic towns, industrial heritage and pastoralism

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Introduction

This issue of Historic Environment has been a long time in coming. It is based on papers presented at the Australia ICOMOS conference held in Broken Hill in April 2010, Outback and Beyond: the future of historic towns, industrial heritage and pastoralism. That conference was a resounding success with approximately 165 registrants and 53 papers presented on the conference’s three themes of Historic Towns, Industrial Heritage and Remote Pastoralism. At the time, the proposal that Broken Hill be included on the National Heritage list was a subject of considerable discussion and interest. Whilst it had been hoped that this listing would be completed by the time of the conference, this was not to be the case and did not occur until January 2015.

So the delay in producing this issue of Historic Environment was fortuitous and has enabled it to become a reflection on the listing process as well as an assembly of papers which provide a useful background to the nature of Broken Hill and the environment in which it is located. Broken Hill is not the oldest city in Australia, but it has been the first to be given National Heritage list status. Given its preeminent role in the economic fortunes of the country, this is probably appropriate.

The conference was opened with a keynote address by Sir Neil Cossons, entitled ‘Cultures, Communities and Conservation: a future for global heritage’ (Cossons 2010). Whilst it was decided not to publish his paper in full, we felt it important to refer to key parts of it that set the future of Broken Hill into an international context, and the quotations used in this introduction come from this address. In his address Cossons argued that:

Traditionally, we have valued the evidence of distinctiveness at local, or regional, or national level. Such sense of ownership as we may have for heritage is often manifested most strongly in communities and especially those undergoing the effects of externally imposed change.

But outsiders have of course played their part too. A typical trajectory for crystallizing the importance of an historic place or landscape was through discovery, usually by interlopers who arrived as explorers, then via archaeological investigation or aesthetic recognition, and on to international valuing and national designation.

Surely this is the recent story of Broken Hill and its pursuit of National Heritage listing?

Sir Neil went on to discuss the development of interest in industrial history and archaeology and its position in the gamut of heritage preservation across the world. He is, of course well versed in this movement as the instigator of the first International Congress on the Conservation of Industrial Monuments in 1973 and of course the first Director of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum:

It was not until the 1950s and the arrival of industrial archaeology that the first attempts were made to place the realities of the recent past in some sort of wider perspective, to
emphasise that the great age of industry itself had a distinguished heritage and to consider the intractabilities attaching to its conservation. We now need to move on again and recognize that the heritage of globalisation is something we must take seriously. And, when we contemplate this heritage we need to recognize the diverse nature of the material evidence. Urbanisation and pastoralism are just two of its prevailing consequences.

The steam railway in an even shorter time span created nations and the electric telegraph made their governance possible. Indeed it was the railway that brought into being many pastoral economies and enabled them to prosper while at the same time reinforcing the view of city dwellers of their inherent superiority and cultural sophistication. For them the rural world was a place to be enjoyed from the train window, a landscape occupied by other people, colourful peasants from a different world. So, rather than obsessing about polished steam locomotives let us recognize the enormous cultural significance of the railway which, perhaps beyond anything, defined the nineteenth century, and accord it a proper significance in our conservation strategies.

But what is the future for places like Broken Hill? Cossons uses the examples of Liverpool, UK and Gunkanjima in Japan, pointing out how in the last half of the twentieth century Liverpool’s population was halved from the 800 000 of 1930 and how it tops the deprivation list for UK cities. Of Gunkanjima, he suggests it is beyond all possibility of conservation and that:

Here a future as a ruin dedicated to unmanaged and continuous decay is both practical and I would argue the most satisfactory and ethically pure way forward. Intervention would destroy the majesty of disintegration. What Gunkanjima represents in high relief is the conservation dilemma facing much of the heritage of globalization, urban, rural and industrial.

And for Liverpool:

Liverpool offers metaphors for the issues we need to be addressing in gatherings such as this. The narrow economic arguments—tourism and cultural renaissance, adaptive re-use and expanded retail opportunities—are challenged by the sheer scale of Liverpool’s dilemma. But they are equally tough for small rural communities in decline, for mining settlements where the lode is now barren, for places where the trains no longer run, all victims of economic circumstances external to their own immediate day-to-day lives. The heritage of these relict landscapes is frequently rich but the economic capacity to secure their futures often fragile. These are places marooned in time. Perhaps we should leave them there. In decay theirs is a quality of innocent authenticity unspoilt by tourism, unsanitised by conservators, untainted by voyeurism.

This probably is not the message the community of Broken Hill wished to hear. They are looking for his alternative view, which ‘might question what other options are on offer and stress that the benefits of regeneration through conservation will attract inward investment and help both expand and diversify the city’s still frail economy’.

Sir Neil concluded his address with the following:

We need, too, an acceptance that not everywhere can enjoy renaissance in the conventional sense of the term, that—like the deserted villages of medieval England, dramatic in their melancholy loneliness—some of these places are going to die. Let us re-ignite our respect for the ruin, for the spirit of Piranesi and the cult of decay. In doing so we may find a new romanticism, a new authenticity and a practical format for securing a future for landscape.

For Broken Hill the future is probably a mixture of regeneration and renaissance and decay. The problem for the community and the local managers is to ensure that the right mix is achieved.

These themes are taken up by Chris Landorf, in Broken Hill: A comparable case study of sustainable Heritage management, where she reviews the challenges facing the conservation of industrial heritage sites and proposes a model of sustainable heritage management that she sees as relevant to such industrial sites. Chris Johnston, in Seeing through others’ eyes, understanding the aesthetics and meanings of place takes up the challenge of identifying the
community’s attachment to the place and how this must feed into any formal acknowledgement of heritage significance. In doing so she picks up on Sir Neil’s suggestion that the sense of ownership and identity is often provoked by externally imposed change.

David Jones’ paper, Creating the Regeneration Reserve Heritage Landscape of Broken Hill: Evolution and Significance, then exposes us to this less than obvious element of heritage significance, an element that makes the city as liveable and perhaps reinforces the community’s strong attachment and understanding of the identity of the place.

Samantha and Martin Westbrooke’s paper, Balancing Heritage and environmental conservation and Sandy Blair’s and Diana James’ Indigenous heritage at Australia’s northern and western pastoral frontier—recognising and managing the contemporary social values of remote stations and stock routes, point to the contradictions that arise when pursuing the conservation of a different sort of industrial heritage—in this case the heritage of pastoral enterprise in remote parts of the country.

Miles Oglethorpe’s Losing our Mines: Scotland’s Coal-Mining Legacy is a sobering exposure of the fate of Scottish coal mining and its legacy. From these papers there are valuable lessons for the future conservation and management of Broken Hill and its extensive industrial relics.

Finally we have included a paper by Kirsty Altenburg, Grahame Crocket and Michael Pearson: Broken Hill, the National Heritage List, and the Management of Heritage Values. Here, we gain an understanding of the bureaucratic processes involved in gaining a National Heritage listing and most importantly are confronted with the difficulties associated with managing change through the different value perspectives of different jurisdictions and agencies. This is a clear case of Sir Neil’s outsiders playing their part in the conservation effort, hopefully, for the better and in acknowledgement of the local attachment to identity.

To that end we are left with Elizabeth Vine’s (Broken Hill Heritage Advisor and President of Australia ICOMOS) comment about the listing:

Entry of the City of Broken Hill on the National Heritage List was announced at a public ceremony in Argent Street on January 15, 2015, the first city in Australia to receive this accolade. It is still early days, but this recognition of the extraordinary heritage values of this city has given the community new confidence. Careful management of its built and natural assets, and of the rich cultural legacy is now the key to its future. More Australians will be keen to explore and experience the city of the ‘accessible outback’ - and locals now can proudly showcase a city built on extraordinary mining wealth which will continue well into the future (Vines pers. comm., 15 January 2016).

Bibliography