Place + people = fabric: conserving and sustaining values in the 21st century

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Abstract
Heritage places are testament to humankind’s creative and unique responses to physical location, climate, social conditions and needs. Heritage places, their physical fabric and the people who created and conserve them are inextricably linked. Sustaining the multiple values inherent in built heritage places over the long-term relies not only on technical expertise but also on an understanding of the relationships between the intangible and tangible attributes and values and how to sustain them.

It appears government support for heritage conservation has decreased in the last decade or so; this has created challenges to conserving fabric. It is therefore timely to reassess how to sustain the necessary know-how to secure good conservation outcomes in the twenty-first century. What are the potential implications of the current framework for heritage conservation that exists in many parts of the world including Australia? What is the role of the private and non-government sectors in setting and maintaining standards for work? How do we ensure that we have well-trained and experienced practitioners that are able to sustain the traditional craft skills and supplies of materials needed to adequately care for our heritage? Are there useful models that can be adapted to the specific local circumstances and that may have relevance in Australia? What opportunities are there for the various sectors to work better together to secure improved outcomes for the conservation of the fabric of places and sustain the link between people, fabric and place that is often critical to significance? By provoking such questions this paper hopes to generate detailed discussion on these critical issues. Much of the opinion in this paper is drawn from the author’s experience working for and with government, non-profit and education sectors internationally.

Introduction
In late 2015, ISIS ideologues destroyed much of the ancient city of Palmyra in a carefully orchestrated publicity exercise, which along with numerous other destructive campaigns to heritage sites across Syria and Iraq provoked international outrage. The destruction of places of incalculable importance and beauty in times of conflict does much to focus attention on the importance of physical fabric. Earthquakes, floods, storms, fire and other natural disasters also have an irreversible impact on the fabric of our heritage places. The impact of climate change on cultural heritage is also of increasing concern. Each incident involving the destruction of irreplaceable and treasured heritage places is met with horror and grief. It is easy for heritage practitioners to feel powerless in the face of such events.

However, there are more pervasive everyday factors that put heritage at risk and demand attention that the heritage sector has the ability to prevent, as a scan of the World Monument’s
Fund Watch and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre’s List of World Heritage in Danger demonstrates. Development and lack of care and maintenance are key criteria for a place’s inclusion on such lists (World Monuments Fund 2017; UNESCO 2017). Two decades into the twenty-first century, we are at a critically important point in securing and sustaining the know-how to conserve the fabric of the built environment. Strategic effort by stakeholder groups involved in conservation is needed to prevent irreversible damage to heritage places.

 Appropriately, conservation practice has evolved and developed from an emphasis on conserving the physical fabric of monumental buildings and archaeological sites that dominated twentieth century practice. In Australia, some thirty years of *Burra Charter* methodology has resulted in greater recognition of the need to understand the multitude of values and tangible and intangible attributes that contribute to the significance of a place and how to make decisions that preserve these values. More attention is now also given to the importance of good management and the various other factors that affect the state of conservation of a place.

 The fabric of a place may play host to practices, traditions and spiritual values that contribute to its significance. Whilst the relationship between the tangible and intangible attributes of a place may have always been well-recognised, implementing conservation actions to sustain these relationships has become more difficult to achieve in the twenty-first century, resulting in a steady decline in the knowledge, skills and experience in the practical conserving of fabric.

 In the last few decades in many parts of the world, government support for heritage conservation has decreased, China being a notable exception. As pressure on the public purse intensifies, securing the intervention needed to conserve fabric has become increasingly challenging. The sell-off of the government estate and the inevitable loss of know-how, reduced technical training for professionals and craftspeople and shifting patterns of procurement are all contributing factors impacting on the quality of conservation work. This is eroding the significance of heritage places and severing the connections between place, fabric and people. The shifting of responsibility for heritage from the public to the private sector has been incremental, and unlikely to be reversed any time soon. Given this shift, how can we secure and sustain our cherished heritage places in the twenty-first century and beyond?

 The current framework for heritage management established in many parts of the world recognises that good conservation outcomes are dependent on a number of areas of government intervention including funding, legislation, policy and access to guidance and training. Does this framework still deliver acceptable outcomes given the reduction in government intervention, or does the framework need to be rethought? What role can the private and non-government sectors play in setting and maintaining standards for work, ensuring there are well trained and experienced practitioners that are able to sustain the traditional craft skills and supplies of materials needed to adequately care for our heritage? What opportunities are there for the sectors to work better together to secure improved outcomes for conservation that sustain the link between people, fabric and place that is often critical to significance? Are there useful models from other places that may have relevance in Australia? Drawing from the author’s experience internationally working with governments in a number of countries, non-governmental (NGOs) and intergovernmental organisations, this paper raises these interrelated issues, to provoke more detailed discussion on the critical issues. It concludes with some suggestions on potential approaches and explains some of the projects that the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) is undertaking as examples of a third-sector organisation’s attempts to intervene.

**Place and locality**

The physical location of a heritage place, the people who created it and the resulting physical fabric are inextricably linked, an obvious condition with conservation implications that are not always well-understood. The current positioning of heritage conservation as a force for managing change, has helped our industry to be seen as positive and active as opposed to resistive to change. However, too much has been given away, as a walk around many conservation areas demonstrates. Small subtle, incremental changes over time, each one seemingly insignificant results in cumulative impacts that can transform a place. The fabric of a place matters. Gradual
change erodes the link between fabric and its specific location or context, which can be difficult to reverse. For example, over a few years, the tin and tile roofs of Yangon have given over to bright blue metal roof decking. A seemingly small change with a significant impact, and not hard to address through policy or an appeal to industry for at least a more appropriate coloured roofing material.

The underlying geology of a region shapes the natural and the built environment. The geology and climate creates the specific and unique ecology of a region resulting in the specific building materials that have over time been appropriated by people to meet their needs. The incredible variety of built forms across the world, within a country or a region are a testament to humankind’s creativity and ingenuity in responding to particular societal needs, climatic conditions and the creative use of available local materials.

Over thousands of years, humankind has developed ways to work with local materials. Until the modern era, local materials were typically used to construct buildings, towns and cities. Transport limitations meant that stone usually came from local quarries, earth from surrounding fields, bricks were made close to site, and timber harvested nearby. The use of local materials results in a harmony between the landscape and the built environment that contributes to the special character and quality of many heritage places.

The United Kingdom, for example, boasts a large variety of distinct local building traditions within close proximity of each other due to the complex underlying geology. Each geological layer generates unique architectural responses and building traditions: the grey slate structures of the Lake District, fissile sandstone walling of the Yorkshire dales, the oolitic limestone of the Cotswold’s; then in areas without good building stone such as Essex or Hertfordshire, timber walling and earthen plaster work. Sustaining these unique and cherished cultural landscapes relies on the recognition and valuing of the relationship between place and fabric and requires holistic and strategic approaches to conserve cultural significance (Macdonald et al. 2003).

Australia developed its own vernacular building traditions. During the early years of colonisation in Australia, building materials were usually locally obtained or made, with some exceptions. Wattle and daub, lime burnt from oyster shells, and soft bricks made with local clay were common materials. With increased mobility, architectural styles developed in one place and were exported great distances and adapted to local materials and climates thus generating new building types, forms and construction techniques. The evolution of the Australian cottage is a prime example. In most parts of Australia, the relationship between fabric and location is still discernable. Sydney’s underlying sandstone geology is reflected in its grand streetscapes and many of its public buildings. Adelaide is a bluestone town, the north coast of New South Wales up through Queensland boasted plentiful sources of good timber giving rise to Queensland’s timber vernacular. In many parts of the country earth was used, clay sources provided opportunities for brickmaking and so on.
From the early nineteenth century, industrialisation provided new opportunities for producing building materials. The development of the canal system in Britain made Welsh slate available across the country and vast quantities were exported to countries, including Australia, supplanting local materials and beginning the erosion of local vernacular building materials, construction techniques and styles. In Australia, the importation of building materials began on a large scale in the Victorian era with Welsh slate, Marseilles tiles, cast iron, and many other products. Subsequently, some of these materials became associated with emergent local architectural styles such as the Federation-suburb of Haberfield, characterised by its decorative slate and tile roofs.

The availability of cheaper materials throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has had a significant impact on the fabric of the built environment—severing the physical relationships between a place’s physical context and its fabric and marking the beginning of a trend that has gained pace ever since. By the 1890s, English artisan, William Morris (1890) was lamenting the impact of industrialisation on the historic landscape, ‘If any regard is to be had to the general beauty of the landscape, the natural material of the special countryside should be used instead of imported material.’ Many local building traditions have been lost completely, some only survive in museum contexts, and others are threatened. Sadly, the loss of building traditions may be inevitable. Yet in some cases traditional materials continue to provide viable, sustainable and high-quality options for conservation and new buildings.

People

If buildings, created landscapes, archaeological sites and historic urban landscapes are testament to human ingenuity and creativity in responding to location, then sustaining the connection between the physical object and the activities associated with their care and the people who sustain these activities is critical. The fabric of Australia’s towns and cities reveal a history of immigration. From the Cornish miners of Cadia and Burra, to the German settlers of South Australia whose artistry, carpentry skills and exploitation of local materials created distinct buildings. Fabric demonstrates the connection between people and the place created and sustaining this connection preserves the authenticity of such places, as recognised in the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994). Not to pay attention to conserving the fabric severs...
the connection between place and the people who transformed the landscape in response to their environment. The erosion of these connections between place, its location and fabric has been occurring at an alarming rate particularly since the post-war era.

**Fabric**

If we are unable or uninterested in preserving the knowledge, skills and practices that contributed to the making of places (for example carpentry or masonry skills), then we cannot successfully conserve the physical fabric. For example, activities and traditions associated with the maintenance of buildings are often crucial to their survival. The annual whitewashing was part of the housekeeping of buildings in many places and just one of many examples of how looking after the place is woven into the fabric of daily life. However, such traditions and practices are difficult to sustain in the twenty-first century due to changes in religious practices, demographics, economics and shifting patterns of habitation community and societal structure.

Retaining these critical connections or intangible attributes between place and fabric is challenging. How do we engage people today in the activities needed both to conserve the fabric and retain those intangible values and or attributes that connect place and fabric? How do we sustain supplies of traditional materials, nurture new generations of craftspeople who can work these materials and how do we preserve other practices and traditions that were an essential part of maintaining traditional buildings and landscapes in the modern world?

**Challenges to conserving physical fabric**

**Declining government support**

Many parts of the world have experienced a decline in government support for heritage conservation over the last few decades. In the push to ‘cut red tape’, legislation has been amended and heritage agencies have been losing their authority to affect outcomes. England’s reduction of funding to English Heritage, now Historic England over the last decade is one example, the NSW Government’s subsuming of the NSW Heritage Office as a separate agency into the NSW Department of Planning in 2005 another. The disposal of government properties

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**Figure 3:** In Lampa, Peru, a holiday festival celebrates the reapplication of the red lime wash that is applied annually and which is an important means of maintaining these earth buildings (photo by Claudia Cancino)
and loss of experienced staff in government with the skills to manage and conserve historic buildings provides fewer opportunities for government to lead by example. Reduced policy work, reduced technical advisory services and declining grants funding are all observable trends in government heritage services in a number of countries, including Australia.

The current system of heritage management in Australia and many other countries is based on balancing ‘the carrots’ and ‘the sticks’—the premise being that legislation on its own is not as effective as when there are some mechanisms in place to encourage and support owners of heritage places to invest in the care of heritage places. This was the premise behind submissions to the Productivity Commission Inquiry Conservation of Australia’s Historic Heritage Places by the Chairs of the Heritage Councils of Australia and New Zealand in 2005. The components of government heritage systems commonly used in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, United States and Canada usually include a combination of the following:

- Legislation to protect heritage places and identify the role of government in its administration, policy and guidance that serves to set standards for conservation and sets appropriate levels of impact and change;
- Information and support to owners of heritage places including programs such as heritage advisory services, professional advice from skilled staff, technical information and support;
- Research to strategically address knowledge gaps; and
- Incentives to help fill what is sometimes called the heritage deficit—acknowledging that heritage is a public good and helping owners share the financial responsibility for its care.

Unfortunately, governments across Australia have gradually whittled away at three of the complimentary components of the system, reducing the government role largely to ‘the sticks’—the regulatory process. Grant funding has been sustained in some states and at the federal level and is important, but can never cover all the demands. Inevitably the shortcomings results in pressure to reduce the level of legislation to ‘ease the burden’ on owners and the erosion of the level of care for the conservation of heritage places.

In the United States, the National Park Service (NPS), a leader in conservation for many years, had its funding and role severely curtailed over the last fifteen years. Historic England’s recent significant downsizing and restructure is already starting to impact many of the strategic research, policy and educational areas of work. Local governments struggle to fulfil their obligations with the funding provided. Intergovernmental organisations like the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and ICCROM are struggling as their remits continue to expand while resources decline.

Government agencies in Australia are also under pressure and most have reduced staff numbers. Few practical guidance documents are currently being produced and advisory services have been reduced. Local heritage advisory services in some states are threatened and grant funding has short-sightedly been reduced. State funded support to local government through the heritage advisory services is a tiny investment that makes a huge difference, leveraged significantly by the dedication of the advisors.

The decline in government ownership of a significant stock of heritage buildings has had repercussions for the fabric of some very special places. The body of knowledge and experience that builds up over the years by asset managers has had real benefits in conservation terms, particularly when government has been purposefully leading by example. Places like the Rocks and Miller’s Point in Sydney have retained their significance due to a well-defined governance structure, authority to implement their legislative responsibilities and through setting standards and securing the right skills for conservation projects. Up until the present NSW government plans to sell-off 50 house and terraces, the largely single-use and single-ownership circumstances of Miller’s Point had supported the conservation of this precinct. It will be almost impossible to achieve the same level of oversight once these places are individually owned.
and managed. It will be interesting to track how the inevitable process of change in Miller’s Point that will come from private sector expectations will be managed and if the significance of one of Australia’s most important historic urban landscapes will survive. Good baseline documentation and regular evaluation over the short, medium and long-term will be important to assess the impact of change.

**Loss of traditional materials and construction methods**

The impacts of the two world wars radically transformed the building industry and accelerated the pace of change in the built environment like never before. The introduction of prefabricated, mass manufactured, and therefore cheaper materials, along with the deskilling of the building industry and reduced transport costs reduced the demand for traditional materials, which raised their cost comparative to modern materials. When fewer contractors and architects know how to use and specify traditional materials, two things happen: firstly, traditional materials are specified less often, further reducing the market and opening the way for cheaper substitute materials; and secondly, they are more frequently used incorrectly, creating a perception that traditional materials are problematic.

Frequently price is a determining factor in selecting materials. Shorter cycles of building ownership usually results in cheaper, short-term repairs rather than investment in high-quality materials and long-lasting repairs. A Welsh-slate roof for example lasts over 100 years, a concrete or cheap substitute material perhaps thirty. High-quality materials, skilled contractors and craftspeople offer long-lasting repairs, in some instances at an initially higher cost. Without some form of financial assistance it can be difficult to convince owners to invest in the long-term care of a building. Government policy requiring the use of authentic materials and grant funding to help subsidise repairs are important mechanisms for securing long-term quality and appropriate conservation outcomes.

Some traditional materials are simply no longer available. There are now limited supplies of old-growth timbers available for repairs. Quarries eventually run out of stone and recent environmental legislation has made new quarrying ventures difficult. Innovative government approaches are sometimes needed to help balance heritage conservation needs with environmental concerns. Health and safety legislation can restrict the use of some traditional building materials and certain conservation materials. The traditional roofing material of lead, for example, is now rarely used in parts of the United States due to regulatory restrictions and stone consolidants are banned for health and safety reasons in some countries. The heritage sector needs a seat at the table when environmental legislation is being developed as there are often solutions to balancing environmental and heritage conservation needs.

A visionary project undertaken by English Heritage in the 1990s aimed to revitalise the stone-slate roofing industry in order to sustain the important local material of many distinct types and which is used in areas such as the Cotswolds, Derbyshire, and Yorkshire (Macdonald et al. 2003).

Supplies of stone slates had dwindled due to government policies that had restricted the opening of new quarries despite their very small scale, cheap substitute materials were flooding the market, and skilled contractors hard to find. This was degrading the character and significance of many towns and villages with stone slate roofing traditions across the UK.

Tackling the problem of the loss of traditional materials and construction methods required recognising the relationships between the economic, social cultural and environmental issues affecting the conservation of the historic fabric and a taking multi-pronged approach to solving them. Solutions included working with the stone industry and environmental legislators to gain acceptance for the opening of small-scale quarries to sustain supplies of local roofing materials. English Heritage and local authorities developed policies that demanded the use of the appropriate local stone when replacing or repairing roofs to support the market for local materials. Technical guidance was developed for architects on the appropriate selection and specification of work. The few remaining stone slate roofers helped deliver short training courses in local trades and crafts at education centres. Training for both specifiers and roofers helped
prevent costly failures that might undermine the material. English Heritage also provided a small amount of grant monies for stone slate roofing projects. The project exemplifies how through multi-stakeholder cooperation it is possible to tackle complex problems across different sectors.

The Getty Conservation Institute’s (GCI) earthen architecture initiative provides another example of an attempt to sustain the use of traditional architectural practices and building materials. Its seismic retrofit project, based in Peru, tackles one of the factors inhibiting the use and conservation of historic earthen sites in South America.

Earth is one of the world’s earliest living building traditions. Many parts of the world with earthen heritage are located in seismic zones and like other masonry buildings, earthen structures are susceptible to earthquakes. Currently the building codes in many countries prevent the use of earth as a new or repair material. Whilst there are some solutions for improving the seismic resistance of earthen buildings, these are not always well-suited to the local context where access to heavy machinery and sophisticated equipment, expensive materials and the engineering expertise required to design the interventions is impossible. Modern methods are invasive and can destroy significant fabric. This is particularly problematic for buildings with important wall paintings and other decorative features.

The GCI project involves scientific research to understand the behaviour of typical earthen historic buildings when subjected to seismic activity. Historic research is informing how traditional earthquake resistant methods might be adapted. Retrofitting techniques are being developed, tested and trialled to demonstrate to the engineering community and authorities the efficacy of the methods. Building the capacity of the various stakeholders to ensure these approaches and methods can be embedded into practice is also important. Gaining support for the alternative conservation approaches by the authorities and ensuring these are included in the relevant building codes is critical.

The GCI project also helps secure and sustain local knowledge in the production and use of traditional material. As with all GCI projects, the earthen seismic retrofit project is being undertaken in partnership with universities, government heritage and other regulatory agencies, local partners and building owners. In this project, research will build policy and ensure current legislation supports rather than thwarts conservation. The outcomes are relevant for other parts of the world with similar problems.

Declining knowledge and skills

The lack of education about traditional materials and construction in undergraduate architecture and engineering courses has been a problem since the 1960s. Without additional training, the professionals responsible for diagnosing problems and specifying work lack knowledge about traditional buildings and materials (National Heritage Training Group 2005). Postgraduate education and short training courses have thus been essential to conservation education for many years. The expanded content of conservation courses over the last twenty years, to include many other worthwhile units, has reduced the technical content and compromised practical conservation components within many postgraduate conservation courses. The result is there are not enough architects and engineers who understand traditional buildings, how to diagnose problems, how to specify good conservation work or how to work with craftspeople. Most archaeologists have little idea how to conserve the places or objects they are excavating and there are few opportunities for them to acquire this knowledge as part of their university education. There is only one dedicated course for architects and engineers covering structural repair for historic structures available internationally, despite this being an area of identified need. Access to dedicated practical conservation is patchy in many parts of the world, particularly in Australia.

Short training courses have long provided a solution. There are good courses across many technical areas offered in a number of places but their future is precarious and their delivery ad hoc. Occasional courses on topics such as lime mortars, tuck pointing and cleaning have been run in Australia by organisations such as the National Trust, usually catalysed by passionate
individuals when they are able to mobilise support. These short courses are a good option for busy professionals. However as a reliable source of training, critical subjects need to be delivered on a regular basis so people can build up a body of technical knowledge over time.

Education and training is a core GCI activity. Between 2009-2015, the GCI partnered with ICCROM to rebuild the International Stone Course, a three-month intensive technical training course for 20 mid-career professionals that aimed to secure knowledge on how to deal with one of the world’s most important building materials. The course took the participants (architects, conservators, engineers, archaeologists, scientists and geologists) through the various stages of the conservation process from values assessment, investigation and analytical approaches, documentation and recording, repair techniques and processes. The International Stone Course concluded with a two-week on-site practical experience exposing the participants to international best practice.

The lack of training for craftspeople who undertake conservation work is now a well-documented problem (National Heritage Training Group 2005; Construction and Property Services Industry Trades Council 2012). The work undertaken here in Australia over the last several years to understand the scope of the problem and identify potential actions is admirable and it is important that the recommendations are implemented (Construction and Property Services Industry Trades Council 2012).

The small size of the conservation market makes it vulnerable to declining demands for skills. A lack of interest by the next generation in pursuing craft-based trades and changes in the apprenticeship system, which facilitated the handing down of craft skills over many years, means we have moved beyond trying to sustain specialist skills. Unfortunately, intervention was needed some time ago and some skills have already been lost. There is however, a small niche market that continues to demand skilled craftspeople and we need to find ways to continue to train and retain these people. Re-establishing skill is difficult and requires concerted integrated effort by government and support from the heritage sector. This is urgent, challenging and essential.

The NSW Public Works stonework program is an example of a well-targeted government intervention that demonstrated long-term and significant impact. There are a large number of important and well-conserved buildings resulting from this program. Importantly, their work has catalysed similar projects in Sydney, helped set standards and sustained craft skills. Sadly, governments see less need to invest directly in heritage conservation and they rarely display a long-term vision for the built environment in the way they once did.

It is undisputed that the private sector has highly skilled contracting firms. However, contractors can rarely invest in the strategic research, technical guidance and training that is often needed to support the private and public sectors. Both a robust and skilled private sector and proactive intervention from government is required. Intervention is needed to set and maintain standards of work and to tackle the more challenging problems such as where legislation impacts upon the supply of materials, quality control and maintaining a critical mass of skilled craftspeople.

Recent trends in procurement and how work is managed on construction sites has further challenged the ability to maintain high standards of conservation work. Contractors are often selected according to price rather than value for money, which includes quality. There are superb craftspeople about, experienced, skilful and dedicated to their trade. Such craftspeople know what it takes to do the job, and are often undercut in the competitive tender process. Those less familiar with what is involved in a project inevitably under-price it. Unqualified, untrained people with no experience with traditional materials or construction may be cheaper but it will be difficult to get an appropriate outcome.

A recent and unfortunate trend where the contractor engages an architect after the diagnosis, project development or tendering stages has made it more difficult to secure a high quality conservation outcome (essentially the design-build contract approach). By the time the contract is signed there is little opportunity to influence the work and ensure the contractor selected is appropriately experienced and skilled for the job. Diagnosing and investigating building...
problems, developing specifications and drawings is not a luxury, rather a necessity. Owners however, seem reluctant to pay for such services and the conservation community has not done enough to demand that these processes are retained. These recent procurement trends are eroding the quality of conservation work and should be discouraged.

In summary, the contributing factors to sustaining skills, materials and ultimately the quality of the historic environment are interrelated and demand a holistic approach. Australia’s small conservation market and tax base make this additionally challenging. Australia does not have access to funding from sources such as the Heritage Lottery Fund in the United Kingdom, or the philanthropic tradition in the United States, or strong government support as in countries like France, or Germany. Australia does however boast a robust heritage sector that is good at finding ways to improve things in difficult circumstances. These challenges need to be approached strategically. The challenge is how to achieve this when government intervention is heavily weighted towards regulation and when government resources and leadership has been depleted. The first step is to reaffirm why the conservation of fabric is important and recognise what is needed to achieve it.

**Suggestions for improving the status quo**

There are a number of steps that can be taken within the current framework for heritage management in Australia to improve the current situation. There are also useful models from other countries that could be applied.

**Governance and advice**

It is important to maintain the current level of legislation for heritage conservation—it will increasingly be under threat as other government services are withdrawn and communities rally against being left solely with regulation (the sticks). Legislation alone is not enough.

Retaining or re-establishing professional positions for knowledgeable and experienced practitioners, well versed in conservation at all three levels of government is important. When no one understands the problem it is hard to fix. Government decision-making heritage bodies are getting less expert. Knowledgeable people are needed on decision-making bodies—people who can read plans, architects that understand what a good heritage project looks like, who advocate and can help establish and sustain appropriate standards of work. The heritage sector needs to demand governments meet their mandate for protecting the nation’s heritage and require that appropriately qualified professionals be given roles of responsibility.

Policies are a powerful way to set standards for work, to mandate the use of appropriate materials and they provide transparency in the system for owners. Policies help sustain the market for traditional materials and heritage trades skills. If government does not have the capacity to provide suitable policies then NGOs, professional bodies, universities and the rest of the sector needs to step in and work to get agreement on appropriate standards of work and establish quality assurance systems outside the regulatory system. Government buy-in and commitment to such policies will be important in this scenario.

If government will no longer provide the support, advice and guidance that is needed to help owners know how to appropriately care for their heritage, then there is potential for other players to fill this void. There are also opportunities for the various government heritage agencies to work more effectively as a group to slowly and steadily develop what is needed. The few surviving pockets of expertise in government, hidden away for example in the National Park Service and various government asset management departments, are often developing policies and standards within their own specific areas of interest and have great skills and knowledge that could be more widely applied. Having each state or different agencies within states, working on similar things is a waste of scarce resources. Bringing NGO organisations and professional bodies in to assist can also leverage the limited existing resources—something that has worked well in many instances already in Australia. This takes vision and coordination but would be a way of setting standards across the country and securing buy-in across the government and non-government sectors.
Government working with professional bodies such as the Institute of Architects, Engineers and Archaeological professional groups helps to build expertise within these constituencies. The policy guidance documents on infill development and adaptive reuse prepared by the former NSW Heritage Office and the NSW Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects is a good example (2005; 2008). The process of jointly developing the guidance helped to secure a more supportive working relationship between these bodies, based on their mutual interest in improving the quality of the built environment.

Retaining local heritage advisory services, and the advisory committees of heritage agencies, costs little and has huge benefits. The sector needs to lobby hard to retain these services. Grass roots heritage efforts are vital, fostering connections between local communities and their heritage.

Education and training

Education and training for heritage conservation is a large subject beyond the scope of this paper, however a few priority points follow. It is important to query whether what is being delivered in terms of undergraduate, postgraduate and short training courses is sufficient to meet the needs of the field. There are a few universities in Australia delivering graduate programs. Which are delivering good practical technical training to the level of detail needed? Is there potential for one of these providers to become a centre of excellence for practical building conservation? Regrettably there is conservation expertise within Australia that is not being utilised to deliver practical building conservation training.

Establishing or maintaining the short training workshops across core technical subjects on a regular basis is important. Are any of the relevant universities able to take this on, or could these universities, together with suitable NGOs, collaborate to deliver what is needed on a regular basis and support those dedicated professionals delivering this training?

Addressing the decline in trades training is also a significant topic that needs strategic effort to address. Unless there is cross-sector effort to tackle this problem, skills will continue to decline and eventually many traditional construction techniques and supplies of materials will be lost, eroding local distinctiveness and the significance of our cultural heritage.

Action is needed to prevent the erosion of standards of conservation and the necessary ingredients to sustain the connections between people, fabric and place that are fundamental to the significance of Australia’s built heritage. Is there sufficient awareness and interest in the topic to address these challenges? Clearly it is difficult with no government leadership, therefore it is up to the NGO and private sectors to work together to tackle these issues.

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Endnotes

1 For the full project description and information see Seismic retrofitting project, 2017 www.getty.edu/conservation/. There are a large number of reports available that reference this work, the author is the project director.

2 Three Australians attended the course over this period, selected on the basis that they had the potential to influence practice in Australia.