Planning for the future of the historic town of Cossack through community engagement

Nerida Moredoundt

Abstract
Cossack was established in 1863 as the first port in the north-west of Australia. Highly susceptible to cyclone activity it was eventually abandoned, but is now widely recognised for its cultural heritage values as a multi-cultural settlement in a remote and harsh environment, for its archaeological significance and for its notable group of historic buildings.

In 2005, the State Government and the Shire of Roebourne commissioned Palassis Architects to lead a team of consultants to investigate a range of issues affecting the future of Cossack.

Palassis Architects worked closely with Helen Grzyb & Associates, to develop a consultation process that would ensure that the views of the local and wider community were taken into account during the development of the Draft Master Plan. Innovative ways of engaging the indigenous community, land owners, and people with a particular interest in the future of Cossack were developed. The consultation process allowed the project team to build on their technical knowledge and expertise to identify the distinct values of the historic port town and to plan for its future in a balanced way, considering the need to preserve the past within a context of a sustainable future.

Planning for coastal land is about balancing... often competing needs and desires in a way that takes into account the values of the coast. These values include its scenic, aesthetic and ecological qualities, its recreational opportunities, and its social, indigenous, cultural and economic importance. (Western Australian Planning Commission, State Coastal Planning Policy, 2003)

The historic town of Cossack
Cossack is located on the Pilbara Coast of Western Australia, over fifteen hundred kilometres north of Perth and over a hundred kilometres from the regional centre of Karratha. Established in 1863 at the mouth of the Harding River, Cossack was the first port in the north-west of Australia.

The landform of the Pilbara Coast is characterized by a low flat plain broken by rocky hills and ranges. The vegetation is mainly grass, spinifex and low shrub, with trees confined to the ephemeral watercourses. Views across this landscape are expansive and within this landscape, Cossack with its landbacked wharf and stone buildings, is dramatically revealed behind a substantial rocky outcrop on the flats of Butcher Inlet.

Initially called ‘Tien Tsin’ after the ship that carried the area’s first British settler, Walter Padbury, it was renamed in 1871 when Governor Weld visited the region and named the town in honour of the ship he was travelling on. The Cossack port serviced the pastoral, mining and pearling industries of the Pilbara region and was a multi-cultural town with a community of European, Asian and Aboriginal people.

After the early colonists found pearl shell in the region, Cossack became one of the largest pearling centres in the world. By the 1870s, more than eighty pearling boats were operating out of the port. The townsite was officially declared in 1872 and by 1887 a horse drawn tramway connected Cossack with the nearby township of Roebourne. Substantial public buildings designed by the prominent Western Australian architect, George Temple Poole were constructed in the 1890s and today form the core of the historic town.

Following the discovery of gold in 1877, Cossack was an important staging post for prospectors setting off for the Pilbara goldfields. In the 1880s and 1890s, Cossack was a boomtown and home to people from many nations. The main township extended along the bank of Butcher’s Inlet from the cemetery to the base of Nanny Goat Hill. All the early buildings were constructed of timber with iron roofs. The first government buildings were also of iron and timber, but were replaced by solid stone buildings built to withstand cyclones.

The population was subject to fluctuations and during the lay-season for the pearling industry it would swell to over 1 000 people who used the town as a base. Official population figures show a peak of about 400 in 1894; by 1901 this figure had dropped to 164 permanent residents.

While the growth of Cossack was spread over 40 years, its decline was much more rapid. By the turn of the century, the pearling fleet had shifted its headquarters to Broome and impetus from the goldfields waned with the discovery of gold in other regions. The harbour, which had never been suitable for large vessels and whose tidal movements caused considerable delays in docking and turnaround, began to silt up and Port Hedland and then Point Samson were the preferred ports of call.

By 1910, Cossack had relinquished its position as the premier port of the north. Attempts were subsequently made to revive...
the town through the introduction of new industries. In 1913 a leprosarium was established on the peninsular opposite the town and a turtle soup factory was established in the Bond Store in the 1920s. However, by the early 1950s, the town was completely abandoned.

Interest in the town re-emerged in the 1970s when the Cossack Project Committee (later the Cossack Restoration and Development Association) was formed with the aim of developing Cossack into a major tourist attraction. The State Government formed the Cossack Task Force in 1986 with the objective of redeveloping the town and conserving the existing buildings. Today, the buildings and structures that remain extant include:

- Landbacked Wharf (1884-1898)
- Galbraith’s Store (1888)
- Police Quarters, Lockup and Service buildings (1890)
- Cossack Post and Telegraph Office (1894)
- Old Cossack Courthouse (1895)
- Customs House and Bond Store (1895)
- North West Mercantile Store (1895)
- Cossack School (1896)
- Cossack Cemetery – Japanese and European sections

The restored buildings house the Bhujee-Nhoor-Pu Indigenous Art studio and gallery, a Museum and the Cossack Backpackers. They are also the location of numerous community events, including the annual Cossack Art Award.

Planning for a sustainable future for Cossack

Cossack was classified by the National Trust of Australia (WA) in 1977 and entered in the Heritage Council of Western Australia’s Register of Heritage Places in 1992. It is recognised for its cultural heritage values as a frontier settlement in a remote and harsh environment, for its archaeological significance and for its notable group of historic buildings.

The original town cadastral map was prepared in the 1860s and was imposed upon the landscape without consideration for the landscape and the environmental qualities of the area. The town lots extend into the tidal flats and over steep rocky terrain and although there are some private landowners in Cossack, it remains largely unallocated crown land. The remaining historic buildings are leased to the Shire of Roebourne by the State government.

The area of coastline in which Cossack is situated is highly susceptible to cyclone activity. Between 1872 and 1898 five recorded cyclonic events impacted on Cossack and nearby Jarman Island, destroying the pearling fleet and town buildings and causing devastating loss of lives. The risk of storm surge associated with cyclone activity continues to impact on the town with two recent cyclones resulting in waves crashing over Jarman Island and the Cossack townsite. This risk impacts substantially on the future of Cossack.

At present Cossack requires an annual injection of local and State Government funding to maintain the historic buildings and provide access to the site. Recent government funding commitments have been made to bring water, power and telecommunications into the centre of the historic town, however without an endorsed master plan, its future is uncertain. In 2005, in recognition of this uncertainty, the state government, through the Department of Housing and Works and the Heritage Council of WA, together with the Shire of Roebourne, commissioned Palassio Architects to prepare the Cossack Draft Master Plan.

Palassio Architects, an architectural practice specialising in heritage and conservation, with particular expertise in master planning for complex heritage sites in accordance with the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter principles, co-ordinated a project team of local and national experts with a wide range of relevant skills. The project team, led by architects Kevin Palassio and Nerida Moredoundt, investigated land use along with archaeological, environmental, town planning, tourism, heritage, and technical and economic feasibility considerations. The provision of essential services and the storm surge implications for the future of the site were also considered. This investigation has culminated in a draft master plan, the aim of which was to identify a sustainable future for the town.
Com m unity Consultation Fram ew ork

Palassin Architects worked closely with Helen Grzyb & Associates, a ‘boutique’ consultancy which provides policy, facilitation and community consultation/communication services to projects that have a significant community focus. The consultation process was developed within the policy framework of the Western Australian government (Citizen and Civics Unit (2004), as well as the OECD framework for citizen engagement (OECD, 2001) and was designed to ensure that the views of the local and wider community were taken into account in the planning decisions for this historic port town. Innovative ways of engaging the indigenous community, land owners, and people with a particular interest in the future of Cossack were developed for this project.

The project team members were able to effectively engage with the community through a series of community meetings and facilitated focus groups that were held in the Pilbara region and in Perth. The consultation team, which was based in Karratha and Perth, planned a two stage process. The first stage was to facilitate citizens informing the draft master plan development and was designed to capture local and specialised knowledge of interest groups in relation to the project. The second stage was to receive feedback from interested people about the conceptual planning for Cossack.

The stakeholder list was developed over the course of the project and included local individuals and organisations at Cossack and surrounding areas, local, state and federal government bodies, as well as interested professionals and government officers based in Perth. Cossack landowners were also included in the stakeholder list, and while these names were fluid due to changes in land ownership, efforts were made to ensure that ongoing contact with stakeholders reflected these changes. People working and living at Cossack were included in the list.

Informal community meetings were arranged at both Roebourne and Cossack to provide opportunities for local indigenous community members to contribute their views. It was at these meetings that the project team were first made aware that the concept of Cossack as a ‘ghost town’ as promulgated in the tourist literature was not the view of the local community who continued to regard Cossack as a place for employment and recreation.

Complementing these occasions, structured focus groups were held in Karratha and in Perth, in both day and evening, so that a wide range of people could contribute their views. A workshop was also held in the Bond Store in Cossack, which provided an opportunity to discuss the future of Cossack with a wide range of interested people. Group discussions focused on archaeology, history, tourism, the local community, employment and training, land use and the environment.

The project team developed a series of overlays, which graphically represented the opportunities and constraints that were identified for the future of Cossack. The Department of Land Information provided a high resolution aerial photograph, which was so detailed that the footprints of the early buildings could be clearly identified. At the start of the project the aerial photograph was produced as a large poster to assist in open discussions about the place. As the project progressed, the project team used graphic software to overlay the areas of archaeological and historic significance, tourism and land use opportunities and the key environmental considerations. This graphic presentation enabled communication of the key issues that were raised by the community and assisted in a shared understanding of the technical issues that informed the conceptual planning.

Supporting the consultation process, communication was also available via local and state government websites. Letters were written to interested stakeholders, there were press releases, and displays in local libraries and shopping centres in the Pilbara, as well as at the Heritage Council library in Perth. In addition, the Juluwaru Aboriginal Corporation’s media unit (and trainees) compiled a visual record of the meetings at Roebourne and Cossack.

Feedback from event participants was positive as they reported that they found the team interested in listening to their views (as compared to a process of telling people what was going to happen). The consultation was also seen as
particularly valid in that it showed respect for individual views and established a process that promoted thoughtful reflections for Cossack’s future at an early stage in the planning process. Importantly, the consultation process established a significant ‘community of interest’ for the Cossack site.

**Conclusion**

Through the opportunity to safely and freely express their views in a well-designed and carefully implemented consultation process, the participants found that the divergent ‘all or nothing’ approach that often characterises public debate, was transformed into meaningful contributions to the planning for Cossack. The consultation process allowed the project team to build on their technical knowledge and expertise to identify the unique values of the historic town of Cossack and to plan for its future in a balanced way, considering the need to preserve the past within a context of a sustainable future.

**Bibliography**

Western Australian Planning Commission 2003, *State Coastal Planning Policy*.
