The Burra Charter and Archaeological Practice

1 Purpose

This Practice Note illustrates the application of the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, 2013 (hereafter Burra Charter) to archaeological practice, and addresses a perception within some parts of the heritage profession that the Burra Charter is mainly for places that contain built form.

This Practice Note provides guidance to archaeologists and practitioners who work with places that are significant, in whole or in part, for their archaeological values. It elaborates the principles contained in the Burra Charter but it is not a substitute for it. Another valuable source that includes examples related to the assessment and management of places with archaeological significance or archaeological sites is the Illustrated Burra Charter (2004). The Resources list in section 4 of this Practice Note includes other key guiding documents that may be relevant to archaeological practice in different parts of Australia.

This Practice Note complements the other Practice Notes to the Burra Charter, especially Understanding and assessing cultural significance, Developing policy, and The Burra Charter and Indigenous cultural heritage management.

Scope

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2 Definitions, concepts and principles

Archaeologists have a strong background in the identification and analysis of material culture. Therefore, they often bring a fabric-based approach to archaeological sites. This Practice Note recognises that places with archaeological significance (especially, but not limited to, places associated with Indigenous cultures) can also embody social and spiritual values. For additional guidance in relation to Indigenous places see the Australia ICOMOS Practice Note on The Burra Charter and Indigenous Cultural Heritage Management.

This Practice Note acknowledges that there is a large body of archaeological literature (both academic and non-academic) concerning what constitutes an ‘archaeological site’ (e.g. a single artefact, a collection of artefacts and features with a stratigraphic or chronological relationship, or an ‘archaeological landscape’). Consistent with the terminology used by the Burra Charter, this Practice Note sometimes uses the word ‘place’ to capture all those locations that archaeologists might think of as a ‘site’, while bringing the flexibility of the Burra Charter’s definition of ‘place’ to the archaeological context.

This Practice Note was prepared by archaeologists. It recognises that the word ‘archaeology’ can refer to the study of material culture in many forms. The word ‘archaeology’ is used in this Practice
Note in its more traditional sense to describe material culture (and related geomorphological features) that are located underground, although including surface material (such as artefact scatters) that reflect and/or derive from the subsurface material culture.

The term ‘archaeological significance’ is used in this Practice Note to characterise places that are of cultural significance, in whole or in part, for the archaeological values that they embody. This is a phrase that is familiar to archaeologists and useful in describing the cultural significance of archaeological sites. However, ‘archaeological significance’ is not a phrase used by the Burra Charter and practitioners are advised to recall that ‘archaeological significance’ might be more appropriately regarded as a sub-set of ‘scientific significance’, or of the other kinds of cultural significance defined by the Burra Charter.

3 Common issues that arise in the assessment and management of places of archaeological significance

Issue: The Burra Charter is not applied to an archaeological ‘site’ because it is incorrectly assumed that the Burra Charter definition of ‘place’ does not apply

The Burra Charter defines ‘place’ broadly. It includes ‘archaeological sites’ (Article 1.1).

Guidance: Archaeologists usually call places containing archaeological evidence ‘sites’. An ‘archaeological site’ constitutes a place as defined by the Burra Charter.

In assessing the geographical extent of a place, and its cultural significance, it is necessary to consider all aspects of the place including both the known and potential archaeological evidence.

‘Archaeological sites’ of all sizes and levels of complexity can constitute a place. In some cases the find-spot of a single artefact may be a place. Equally, a suite of related archaeological ‘sites’ may together comprise a single place, sometimes called an archaeological or cultural landscape, and require a holistic approach to its assessment, conservation and management. Many ‘places’ could be considered archaeological sites, including mining sites, shipwrecks and formerly terrestrial sites that have been submerged by water.

Some Australian legislation defines the term ‘Aboriginal place’ to have a particular meaning. The Burra Charter definition of ‘place’ should not be confused with these legislative uses of the word ‘place’.

Issue: An overly narrow view of the Burra Charter’s definition of cultural significance is adopted

The Burra Charter defines cultural significance broadly. It includes archaeological significance (Article 1.2).

Guidance: The Burra Charter defines ‘cultural significance’ to include ‘scientific … value for past, present or future generations’. Scientific value refers to the information content of a place and its ability to reveal more about an aspect of the past through investigation or research. The relative scientific value of a place is likely to depend on the importance of the information or data involved, on its rarity, quality or representativeness, and the potential to contribute further important information about the place itself or a type or class of place.
Places with archaeological significance may embody a range of values. Usually they are significant for their potential to yield data that are of value for understanding the past (‘scientific significance’). However, a place with archaeological significance may also embody aesthetic, historic, social, and/or spiritual values. The archaeological evidence at the place may yield information that is useful for understanding these other values too.

Places containing archaeological evidence may be significant for their social and spiritual values. This is often the case with places of archaeological significance associated with Indigenous cultures, and is sometimes the case with non-Indigenous archaeological sites too. Archaeologists should consider the range of values in making assessments of significance and in devising conservation responses.

An archaeological site need not be ‘old’ to be of historic or scientific significance. Places containing archaeological evidence of quite recent date can be of cultural significance. The analysis of such places may require a range of methodologies including the gathering of oral history or other historical information.

The scientific significance of an archaeological site may depend (among other things) on whether or not other sources (e.g. written or photographic documents), and other places, can yield additional or comparative data.

**Issue: It is incorrectly assumed that the Burra Charter definition of ‘fabric’ does not capture archaeological features or deposits**

*The Burra Charter defines fabric broadly. It includes archaeological features and deposits (Article 1.3).*

**Guidance:** The Burra Charter defines fabric to mean ‘all the physical material of the place’. This includes archaeological features and deposits.

Often, conservation actions at a place will need to respond to, and make allowance for, the in situ retention of archaeological fabric at that place.

**Issue: It is incorrectly assumed that the Burra Charter’s definition of ‘conservation’ does not capture archaeological investigation or management**

*Conservation encompasses the act of archaeological investigation (Articles 1.4, 2 and 28).*

**Guidance:** The Burra Charter defines conservation to mean ‘all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance’. Archaeological investigation is commonly an appropriate conservation response, particularly where the place will undergo significant change, or the archaeological evidence may be damaged or destroyed by ground disturbance activities (such as grading or basement excavation) or natural processes (such as erosion or subsidence), and especially where the place’s cultural significance is largely embodied in the data that the place may yield.
Issue: An archaeological site is damaged or disturbed in the act of archaeological investigation without considering the alternative management responses or possible competing values

Archaeologists should observe the maxim: change as much as necessary but as little as possible (Articles 3 and 28).

Guidance: Although archaeological practice has the positive outcome of generating data, it is inevitably destructive of the fabric of the site. Archaeological data are commonly obtained at the expense of some of the physical material that is excavated away. Therefore, options for the in situ retention of archaeological evidence need to be thought through early in the planning process by an appropriately qualified archaeologist, not as a last resort. In fact, the in situ retention of archaeological evidence, without physically intrusive archaeological investigation, is often the most appropriate conservation measure (see issue below).

Where an archaeological site embodies social or spiritual values in addition to scientific value (as is the case with many places associated with Indigenous cultures) it may be desirable to leave the place undisturbed by archaeological excavation. Archaeologists should not assume that the scientific value that excavation may contribute to is necessarily more important than the social or spiritual values.

No elements, features or objects of a place of archaeological significance, either located above or below ground, should be disturbed, damaged or destroyed without appropriate prior consideration, planning and documentation. Physical disturbance, damage and destruction should be minimised.

Issue: Parts of a place with archaeological significance, or the place in its entirety, are removed to another location without consideration of alternative courses of action

The in situ retention of archaeological features is often the most desirable conservation outcome.

Guidance: Article 9 of the Burra Charter states that ‘the physical location of a place is part of its cultural significance’.

Archaeologists should always consider the in situ retention of archaeological features. In many cases this is not possible. When that is the case, the archaeological site should be comprehensively documented before its disturbance, including the details of its location and relationships (Article 27).

In some cases, the removal and reconstruction of archaeological features at another place (for example, a museum) may be appropriate, especially where the original location is under threat of destruction.

Issue: Archaeological investigation or management is undertaken by a person without appropriate skills, experience or qualifications

Archaeology is a skill requiring a combination of academic study and practical experience. Only qualified people should carry out archaeological investigation.

Guidance: The Burra Charter (Article 4) requires that conservation be carried out by people with appropriate knowledge, skills and techniques. People who do not have training in archaeological theory and practice should not assess or make management decisions in relation to archaeological sites.

Archaeological investigation commonly requires multiple specialist skills that will not always be found in one person. Archaeologists should have an understanding of their own skills and experience, and
make use of the skills and experience of others as appropriate. For example, a specialist in the field of Indigenous archaeology may not have the skills appropriate to the investigation of a historical archaeological site (and vice versa).

**Issue: People that should participate in the conservation of a place with archaeological significance are excluded from the process**

*Often, it will be necessary to involve non-archaeologists in the conservation and management of a place that contains archaeology.*

**Guidance:** Articles 12 and 26.3 of the *Burra Charter* encourages the participation of a range of people in the conservation of heritage places. This reflects the fact that any one place may embody a range of values for different people.

The management of archaeological sites (like all places of cultural significance) requires the ‘participation of people for whom the place has significant associations and meanings, or who have social, spiritual or other cultural responsibilities for the place’. Management decisions about places with archaeological significance will commonly require such participation. This is sometimes the case with places associated with Indigenous cultures.

Sometimes it will be appropriate and desirable to encourage the participation of non-specialists in archaeological investigation. This sometimes takes the form of ‘public archaeology’, for example, as part of interpretation.

**Issue: The scientific value of an archaeological site is inappropriately privileged over the other values embodied in the place**

*Practitioners should be responsive to the different kinds of heritage that a single site may embody. Sometimes, this will require that the scientific significance of an archaeological site should be balanced against other kinds of significance recognised by non-archaeologists.*

**Guidance:** The *Burra Charter* recognises that there will sometimes be different or competing values embodied by the same place (Article 5 and Article 13). Where archaeologists and Indigenous peoples differ on the appropriate management of a place with archaeological significance Article 13 provides that ‘co-existence of cultural values should always be recognised, respected and encouraged. This is especially important in cases where they conflict’. This will require consultation and negotiation between the parties, and a thorough assessment of all cultural values (see ‘Practice Note: Understanding and assessing cultural significance’).

When assessing the cultural significance of a place that includes Indigenous archaeology, the views of the Indigenous people that speak for the place should be sought. This is commonly called ‘consultation’. Consultation is best regarded as a knowledge-sharing process. For further guidance see ‘Practice Note – The *Burra Charter* and Indigenous Cultural Heritage Management’ and the guideline documents for consultation in section 4 below.

**Issue: An archaeological site is damaged or disturbed without appropriate levels of prior documentation and subsequent publication**

*Archaeological investigations at a place, and conservation actions, should be undertaken only after adequate information has been obtained and based on thorough research.*
Guidance: The Burra Charter Process involves assessment of cultural significance through ‘a sequence of collecting and analysing information before making decisions’ (Article 6). This demands appropriate record-keeping (Article 32). The data yielded by archaeological investigation should be gathered through the application of the highest standards of archaeological practice, using demonstrated and accepted archaeological methodologies. This will always include the preparation of a research design prior to commencing excavation (Article 28).

The data yielded, and the archaeological and other methodologies employed to investigate the place, should be made accessible to the wider professional community and the public through publication, especially where the cultural significance of the place derives in whole or part from its scientific value. The publication of the data should be within a reasonable time of completion of the project. Publication may be by a range of means.

However, archaeologists should always recall that some Indigenous peoples may prefer that certain aspects of a place’s archaeological significance or physical attributes remain confidential. The publication of ‘scientific’ information should be responsive to the cultural sensitivities of Indigenous peoples.

Issue: The archaeological evidence at a place is assessed and managed without reference to the wider physical context

The surrounding environment of a place with archaeological significance (including inter-relationships between the place being assessed and other archaeological sites) needs to be considered when assessing cultural significance. Similarly, archaeological sites may require an appropriate setting (including visual setting) for their conservation and management.

Guidance: Article 8 of the Burra Charter states that ‘conservation requires the retention of an appropriate setting. This includes retention of the visual and sensory setting, as well as retention of spiritual and other cultural relationships that contribute to the cultural significance of the place’.

In the case of archaeological sites, an appropriate setting might include the physical and/or visual relationships between archaeological features and extant buildings or natural features and landscapes (including cultural plantings). Relationships between a series of archaeological sites that together comprise a larger cultural landscape might also need to be retained. Sometimes, an appropriate setting will require that the place with archaeological significance remains located within a peaceful or tranquil environment, or within a particular natural environment.

Issue: ‘Artefacts’ from an archaeological site are removed, divorcing them from their place of origin and from important associations and meanings

The connections between a place with archaeological significance and its ‘fabric’ (including objects) and ‘related objects’ should be maintained, either physically or through other means.

Guidance: Article 10 of the Burra Charter recommends that ‘contents, fixtures and objects’ from a place should stay at that place when they contribute to its cultural significance. ‘Objects’ includes archaeological artefacts. However, the Burra Charter acknowledges that the in situ retention of objects will sometimes not be possible. Article 10 provides scenarios in which it would be appropriate to remove such things to another place (e.g. where their removal is the sole means of ensuring their security, for health and safety reasons, or to protect the place).
The association between an archaeological site and the artefacts recovered from that place should be appropriately recorded through best practice archaeological methodologies.

The *Burra Charter* is consistent with the fundamental archaeological principle that an artefact divorced from its context is of lesser scientific value. Article 33 recommends the retention of significant fabric at the place.

Artefacts removed from their find spot commonly experience accelerated deterioration in their changed circumstances. Steps should be taken in advance to ensure that they will be appropriately conserved.

**Issue: It is incorrectly assumed that the responsibilities of archaeologists are limited to archaeological excavation and publication**

The conservation requirements of an archaeological site extend beyond excavation and documentation. They may include additional protective measures and require detailed planning.

**Guidance:** The *Burra Charter* provides guidance with respect to maintenance, preservation, restoration, reconstruction and adaptation at places of cultural significance (Articles 1.5-1.9 and 16-21).

The conservation requirements of a place with archaeological significance may include protective measures such as fencing, erosion and subsidence control, security measures, and back-filling. Archaeologists should always plan for the future of the place and any materials recovered after the physical investigation is complete. This will include planning for adequate resources for conservation (Article 34).

Preservation, restoration and reconstruction are commonly effective conservation measures for archaeological sites. These measures can assist in conveying the cultural significance of the place to the public through interpretation. This may also result in ‘adaptation’ of the place (Article 21) and ‘new work’ (see ‘Practice Note: *Burra Charter* Article 22—New work’).

**Issue: ‘Potential’ and ‘significance’ are confused when the cultural significance of an archaeological site is assessed**

A place may have high potential to contain archaeological evidence, but that evidence may be of low cultural significance. A distinction should be drawn between the two concepts when assessing archaeological significance.

**Guidance:** Establishing the archaeological potential at a place is only the first step in the process of assessing cultural significance. A place may contain archaeological features and deposits from a range of periods, illustrating a range of activities, and exhibiting a range of levels of disturbance. These different kinds of archaeological evidence may be of different levels of cultural significance, and reflect different values, and this should be reflected in the practitioner’s assessment.

The general principles guiding the assessment of places of cultural significance should guide the archaeologist (see ‘Practice Note: Understanding and assessing cultural significance’). This often requires specialist knowledge on the part of the practitioner.

Where different levels of scientific significance are identified at an archaeological site, this may have an impact on the development of appropriate conservation responses.
**Issue: Inadequate measures are taken to ensure the appropriate management of the archaeology at a place**

Archaeological sites require management planning just like all types of heritage places.

**Guidance:** It is often desirable to prepare an Archaeological Management Plan (AMP) to ensure that the significance of the archaeological site is appropriately identified, assessed and managed. This will be the case where the archaeological evidence at the place is being retained in situ, and therefore demands carefully planned management responses. An AMP will also be desirable where the place is particularly complex, composed of many different parts, or vulnerable to a range of known or anticipated threats.

An AMP is a form of Conservation Management Plan (CMP) or Heritage Management Plan (HMP) tailored specifically for places with archaeological significance. Sometimes an AMP will be a component part of a CMP or HMP that relates to a place that includes archaeological evidence as well as significant buildings or natural features. Similar principles apply to the preparation of AMPs and CMPs/HMPs (see ‘Practice Note: Developing policy’ and Step 5 on the flowchart illustrating the Burra Charter Process below).

An AMP should be prepared by an archaeologist.

**4 Resources**

The following National, State and Territory guidelines are useful resources for the conservation of places containing archaeological information. Most of these documents are available online. Note that this is not a comprehensive list but provides direction to helpful advice. Further, this list seeks to include guidelines and other documents prepared by agencies that manage archaeological sites rather than academic literature on archaeological method and theory.

**Primary Resources**


**New South Wales**


Queensland


South Australia


Tasmania


Victoria


**Western Australia**


**Other useful information:**


