Understanding and assessing cultural significance

1 Purpose

This Practice Note provides guidance on cultural significance and its assessment, and elaborates the principles contained in the *Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, 2013* (hereafter *Burra Charter*). It is not a substitute for the *Burra Charter*. Another valuable source that includes examples related to the assessment of cultural significance is the *Illustrated Burra Charter* (2004). The Resources list at Section 5 of this Practice Note includes other key guiding documents that may be relevant to assessing cultural significance in different parts of Australia.

This Practice Note replaces *Guidelines to the Burra Charter: Cultural Significance* (1988).

The Practice Note is for all practitioners, with a particular relevance for those new to applying the Burra Charter.

Scope

This Practice Note covers:

1  Purpose
2  The concept of cultural significance
3  Assessing cultural significance
4  Common issues in assessing cultural significance
5  Resources

2 The concept of cultural significance

The concept of cultural significance is used in Australian heritage practice and legislation to encompass all of the cultural values and meanings that might be recognised in a place. Cultural significance is the sum of the qualities or values that a place has, including the five values—aesthetic, historic, scientific, social and spiritual—that are listed in Article 1.2 of the *Burra Charter*.

Through the processes of investigating the place and assessing each of these values, we can clearly describe why a place is important. This is the first step towards ensuring that our decisions and actions do not diminish its significance.

The *Burra Charter Process*

Understanding a place and assessing its cultural significance are the first two steps in the *Burra Charter Process*. Establishing cultural significance is an essential step in developing the best policy for that place.

Steps 1 and 2 in the *Burra Charter Process* (below) are relevant to this Practice Note.
Terminology

The terms cultural significance, cultural heritage value and heritage significance are often used interchangeably. The *Burra Charter* uses *cultural significance* as the term that brings together all the *cultural values* of a place. Similarly the *Australian Natural Heritage Charter* (AHC & AIUCN: 2002) uses and defines the term *natural significance*. Many places will have both natural and cultural values. For Indigenous peoples for example, natural and cultural values may be indivisible.

What are aesthetic, historic, scientific, social and spiritual values?

These five terms, which are listed alphabetically in the *Burra Charter*, are often included in Australian heritage legislation, though some jurisdictions include extra terms such as ‘architectural’ or ‘archaeological’ value. Criteria are also used to help define cultural and natural significance, and there is now a nationally agreed set of heritage assessment criteria.

Each of these criteria may have tangible and intangible aspects and it is essential that both are acknowledged.
It is important to recognise and acknowledge that these values are frequently interdependent. In some cases they may be in conflict.

The five values are briefly defined below, drawing on the definitions used in the *Illustrated Burra Charter*.

**Aesthetic value** refers to the sensory and perceptual experience of a place—that is, how we respond to visual and non-visual aspects such as sounds, smells and other factors having a strong impact on human thoughts, feelings and attitudes. Aesthetic qualities may include the concept of beauty and formal aesthetic ideals. Expressions of aesthetics are culturally influenced.

In considering aesthetic value, ask:

- Does the place have special compositional or uncommonly attractive qualities involving combinations of colour, textures, spaces, massing, detail, movement, unity, sounds, scents?
- Is the place distinctive within the setting or a prominent visual landmark?
- Does the place have qualities which are inspirational or which evoke strong feelings or special meanings?
- Is the place symbolic for its aesthetic qualities: for example, does it inspire artistic or cultural response, is it represented in art, photography, literature, folk art, folk lore, mythology or other imagery or cultural arts?
- Does the place display particular aesthetic characteristics of an identified style or fashion?
- Does the place show a high degree of creative or technical achievement?

**Historic value** is intended to encompass all aspects of history—for example, the history of aesthetics, art and architecture, science, spirituality and society. It therefore often underlies other values. A place may have historic value because it has influenced, or has been influenced by, an historic event, phase, movement or activity, person or group of people. It may be the site of an important event. For any place the significance will be greater where the evidence of the association or event survives at the place, or where the setting is substantially intact, than where it has been changed or evidence does not survive. However, some events or associations may be so important that the place retains significance regardless of such change or absence of evidence.

To help understand the historic value of a place, ask:

- Is the place associated with an important event or theme in history?
- Is the place important in showing patterns in the development of history locally, in a region, or on a state-wide, or national or global basis?
- Does the place show a high degree of creative or technical achievement for a particular period?
- Is the place associated with a particular person or cultural group important in the history of the local area, state, nationally or globally?

**Scientific value** refers to the information content of a place and its ability to reveal more about an aspect of the past through examination or investigation of the place, including the use of archaeological techniques. 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 its potential to contribute further important information about the place itself or a type or class of place or to address important research questions. To establish potential, it may be necessary to carry out
some form of testing or sampling. For example in the case of an archaeological site, this could be established by a test excavation.

To appreciate scientific value, ask:

- Would further investigation of the place have the potential to reveal substantial new information and new understandings about people, places, processes or practices which are not available from other sources?

**Social value** refers to the associations that a place has for a particular community or cultural group and the social or cultural meanings that it holds for them.

To understand social value, ask:

- Is the place important as a local marker or symbol?
- Is the place important as part of community identity or the identity of a particular cultural group?
- Is the place important to a community or cultural group because of associations and meanings developed from long use and association?

**Spiritual value** refers to the intangible values and meanings embodied in or evoked by a place which give it importance in the spiritual identity, or the traditional knowledge, art and practices of a cultural group. Spiritual value may also be reflected in the intensity of aesthetic and emotional responses or community associations, and be expressed through cultural practices and related places.

The qualities of the place may inspire a strong and/or spontaneous emotional or metaphysical response in people, expanding their understanding of their place, purpose and obligations in the world, particularly in relation to the spiritual realm.

The term *spiritual value* was recognised as a separate value in the *Burra Charter*, 1999. It is still included in the definition of *social value* in the Commonwealth and most state jurisdictions. Spiritual values may be interdependent on the social values and physical properties of a place.

To appreciate spiritual value, ask:

- Does the place contribute to the spiritual identity or belief system of a cultural group?
- Is the place a repository of knowledge, traditional art or lore related to spiritual practice of a cultural group?
- Is the place important in maintaining the spiritual health and wellbeing of a culture or group?
- Do the physical attributes of the place play a role in recalling or awakening an understanding of an individual or a group’s relationship with the spiritual realm?
- Do the spiritual values of the place find expression in cultural practices or human-made structures, or inspire creative works?

### 3 Assessing cultural significance

#### Locating cultural significance

The *Burra Charter* says that cultural significance is embodied in the place—in its fabric, setting, use, associations and meanings. It may exist in: objects at the place or associated with it; in other places that have some relationship to the place; and in the activities and traditional and customary practices that may occur at the place or that are dependent on the place.
A place may have multiple aspects of significance and these may or may not be interdependent. The process of assessing cultural significance should include defining the tangible and intangible attributes that embody each aspect of cultural significance.

For example, a bora ring or a temple is the tangible expression of the spiritual values of certain cultural groups while the ceremonies and rituals that are held at each place are the intangible expressions. For some cultural groups the meanings and associations of a place may transcend all the *Burra Charter* criteria. For example, the meaning of a place or country to an associated Indigenous group may be the source of and underpin fundamental aspects of their identity, purpose, meaning, cultural obligations or practices. Such meanings may not be able to be defined or described adequately in Western cultural terms.

It is also desirable to determine how important each of these attributes or expressions is in supporting the significance of the place.

**How is cultural significance assessed?**

The cultural significance of a place is assessed by analysing evidence gathered through the physical investigation of the place, research and consultation.

The next step is to evaluate its qualities against a set of criteria that are established for this purpose. The criteria used may be as simple as the five values identified in the *Burra Charter*, or they may be more complex. Australian heritage agencies generally use eight criteria. A place may be of cultural significance if it satisfies one or more of these criteria. Satisfying more criteria does not mean a place is necessarily more significant.

To help achieve consistency, some heritage agencies use a set of significance indicators to assist in applying each criterion. A good example is the Queensland Heritage Council’s *Using the Criteria: a methodology* (Queensland Heritage Council: 2006). In addition, threshold indicators may be used to determine the relative significance of a place. Often these rely on comparison of a place with other similar examples within a defined area—across a State for example, a locality or nationally. Threshold indicators are most commonly used to determine if a place can be included on a particular heritage list or register.

A place that is not listed on a statutory or non-statutory heritage list may still be a place of cultural significance, and a significance assessment process may be warranted.

Some elements of a place may be more important than others. The contribution of each element needs to be recognised. It is often useful to identify those elements that are not significant or detract from significance. This will assist in policy formulation.

**What is a statement of significance?**

A statement of significance provides a concise and distilled summary of the cultural significance of the place. It is common practice for the statement of significance to follow an analysis of each aspect of significance against each value or criterion. The statement of significance summarises each aspect, highlighting the aspects of significance that are most important. The statement of significance underpins decisions about statutory protection and conservation actions and is therefore of critical importance. It should be supported by sound evidence and be able to withstand scrutiny.
In some jurisdictions there is a standard format that needs to be followed. Where there is no statement of significance for a place, use the prompts and questions under each value in Section 2 of this Practice Note to gain a preliminary understanding of significance.

4 Common issues in assessing cultural significance

This section provides guidance about a range of issues that may arise when assessing cultural significance.

Issue: The underlying research is not adequate

Some assessments of cultural significance are based on inadequate research, meaning that the assessments made cannot be relied upon.

Guidance: Practitioners should be rigorous in their assessment of cultural significance. The cultural significance of a place may not be immediately evident. Adequate research and appropriate consultation are essential, and need to be completed before an assessment of cultural significance can be made or an existing assessment reviewed.

Assessments of cultural significance should be robust in the face of public scrutiny. They should be comprehensible not just to heritage practitioners, but also to owners and others who may have an interest in the place but have no experience in heritage conservation and in how cultural significance is assessed. The process used and the conclusions derived should be clearly stated and well documented.

Assessments of cultural significance often require a comparison with other places of a similar type, values, history or associations. Care is needed in selecting the comparable places.

Issue: The assessment of cultural significance is now inadequate or requires review

Our appreciation of the cultural significance of a place may change as a result of new research, changing values or the continuing history of a place.

Guidance: Assessments of cultural significance should be reviewed regularly, especially when there is new or better information about the place and its context, or a change in cultural, physical or environmental circumstances.

Issue: Incomplete assessments

All aspects of significance should be assessed for each place. Time, budget, skills, and other resource constraints may narrow the assessment. This is likely to result in an inadequate assessment of cultural significance.

Guidance: Assessments of cultural significance are specific to a place, and all aspects of significance should always be assessed. It is not appropriate to limit an assessment by excluding any aspect. To do so risks diminishing the significance of the place as policy decisions will be made with an incomplete understanding of significance.

Where one or more values or criteria have not been able to be assessed, this should be clearly stated. Where there is an indication that a place may be significant in relation to a particular value, and yet this has not been assessed, its potential significance should be clearly noted and further assessment recommended.
It is important that sources of information be reliable. Primary sources should be consulted wherever possible in preference to secondary sources. An error or misunderstanding by an earlier researcher may have a serious impact on the understanding of the place.

Where heritage practitioners are asked to provide an assessment of many places—for example in a municipal-wide heritage study—a lack of time and budget may limit the level of assessment that can be provided. Any such limitations should be clearly stated for the benefit of future users of the study.

**Issue: Avoiding preconceptions**

*Assessing cultural significance requires a careful process of analysis. It is not sufficient to make judgements based on rules of thumb or conventional wisdom.*

**Guidance:** A place can be culturally significant regardless of its age, notions of conventional beauty, or the presence or absence of built form, or the number of people for whom it is significant. A place does not have to be ‘old’ to be historically or socially significant, nor conventionally beautiful to be aesthetically significant. Places with no visible physical evidence can still be highly significant.

In assessing cultural significance, it is essential to be open to knowledge and values expressed from different perspectives and cultural contexts. Be prepared to conduct deeper research beyond ‘the mainstream’ (see also the next issue).

**Issue: Engaging with diverse forms of knowledge and cultural perspectives**

*Assessing cultural significance requires the assessor to be responsive to different sources of knowledge and different ways of perceiving the value of the place.*

**Guidance:** In assessing cultural significance, all forms of knowledge should be considered and no one form should be privileged over others. For example, for some places much of the knowledge may not be written down, and consultation with those who hold that knowledge will be essential. Practitioners should think broadly about the likely sources of knowledge about a place and how best to access them.

In some circumstances, protocols may be needed to protect culturally sensitive knowledge and information, and cultural sensitivities may limit the amount of information that may be revealed.

Different cultures may value a place in different ways, and this should be reflected in the assessment of cultural significance. The *Code on the ethics of co-existence in conserving significant places* (Australia ICOMOS: 1998) provides guidance on how to recognise and respect the rights of different cultural groups.

**Issue: The condition of a place**

*The physical condition of a place does not generally influence its significance, but will often be a factor in determining policy for the place.*

**Guidance:** A place may be in ruinous condition, yet still be significant if its values can be clearly understood. In this case the condition does not influence significance, but will have a bearing on the development of policy for the place.

Where a place is intact and in remarkably good condition, then it may be significant for its rarity. Here the condition affects its rarity, which in turn may make it significant; but there is not a direct link between condition and significance.
Issue: The assessment lacks logic, is poorly argued or is too subjective

*Assessing cultural significance requires a careful and rigorous approach that is designed to clearly articulate each and every reason why the place is important.*

**Guidance:** Assessments of cultural significance are an expression of expert opinion. As such, they are based on the experience the assessor brings to the task. Such assessments should present a well-argued case, clearly based on and well referenced to the evidence. The arguments underpinning the assessment should be internally consistent and lead to a logical and defensible conclusion. Where different strands of data have been given different weight by the assessor, this should be indicated in the assessment.

Peer review may be of value, especially for complex assessments.

Issue: Place is too narrowly defined

‘Place’ in the Burra Charter has a broad meaning, and includes its elements, objects, spaces and views. Place may have tangible and intangible aspects.

**Guidance:** A place should be considered in its wider physical, social or spiritual context. It should not be assessed in isolation.

A group of individual places with shared histories, common social associations, or complementary aesthetic characteristics may form a larger ‘place’ or a serial place.

Care is needed in defining the extent of the place and the tangible and intangible elements of the place. Its setting may include views to and from the place, its cultural context and relationships, and links between this place and other places: refer to Articles 1.12 and 8 in the *Burra Charter*.

Issue: Importance of involving those with associations and knowledge

Places may have important associations with communities, cultural groups and individuals, and these associations should be considered in assessing significance.

**Guidance:** Assessment of cultural significance should involve all those for whom the place may have significant associations and meanings, including those who hold cultural knowledge about and responsibilities for a place.

In some traditional cultures and in other groups, relevant knowledge may reside in only a limited number of people. They should be identified and consulted. In particular, engagement with relevant knowledge-holders will be essential where cultural significance assessments concern social and spiritual values.

Review of preliminary conclusions by those with significant associations or cultural connections will help ensure that their values have been understood and clearly articulated.

Issue: Social value is not well assessed

*Social value refers to the significant associations that may develop between a contemporary community or cultural group and a place over time.*

**Guidance:** Social value is the value to the **present** community, and is not the same as social history. Historical research into past connections and users of a place can provide a useful foundation for understanding social value.
A variety of social research methods can be used to help assess social value. Generally these include direct engagement with the communities or cultural groups that have known associations with the place using established research techniques such as interviews, group discussions and surveys.

In preparing to assess social value, it may be helpful to define specific indicators of significance. Several State government heritage agencies (Queensland, Victoria and NSW) and the Australian government have developed useful guidance documents for their own jurisdictions, and there is considerable alignment between them in the area of social value assessment.

**Issue: The assessor lacks all the skills needed**

*Recognise that a range of skills will be needed to assess the cultural significance of each place.*

**Guidance:** Cultural significance assessment usually requires a range of skills and experience, and it is unlikely that one person will be able to cover all aspects, particularly for complex places. Assessors should be honest about the limits of their own skills and experience. Often a team of appropriately skilled specialists is needed.

Typically an assessment of cultural significance will involve historical research, physical examination of the place, engagement with people with associations to and knowledge about the place. Each of these tasks may need a range of specialist skills or knowledge, as will the task of synthesising the information collected.

**Issue: Recognising intangible heritage**

*Intangible heritage means the non-material aspects of culture that are valued. Expressions of intangible heritage include traditions, practices, performance, use, knowledge and language. Place and objects are tangible expressions.*

**Guidance:** A place may be the locus for the expression of aspects of intangible heritage that are important to a community or cultural group. Assessing the cultural significance of the place involves understanding its intangible heritage, and this means consulting with those for whom it has this value. The intangible heritage may be dependent upon the existence and form of the place.

**Issue: Natural values are ignored**

*Both cultural and natural values should be assessed for any place likely to have both sets of values.*

**Guidance:** The Australian Natural Heritage Charter defines natural significance as ‘the importance of ecosystems, biodiversity and geodiversity for their existence value or for present or future generations, in terms of their scientific, social, aesthetic and life-support value’ (Article 1.3). Where appropriate these values should be assessed.

The cultural significance of a place may in whole or part derive from the natural environment of the place, including its natural heritage values. For many traditional cultures there is no conceptual division between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, and the social significance and spiritual significance of a place for Indigenous people may, for example, be wholly or partly dependent on the natural environment of the place.
Issue: The statement of significance fails to answer ‘why’ a place is significant

The purpose of a statement of significance is to clearly express why a place is of cultural significance.

Guidance: The assessment process should produce a clear and definitive statement of significance. A statement of significance expresses why a place is significant. The statement of significance should never just restate the history or description of the place.

Statements of significance are analytical in nature. They should relate directly to the specific assessment criteria used, succinctly and clearly indicating how those criteria have, or have not, been satisfied.

Issue: Scientific value is misunderstood

The scientific value of a place refers to its potential to yield information about the past through investigation.

Guidance: In the Burra Charter, scientific value does not refer to any historical or contemporary association with science. Scientific value is often called ‘research value’ or ‘evidentiary value’ so as to avoid this confusion. Refer back to the definition of scientific value in Section 2 under What are aesthetic, historic, scientific, social and spiritual values?

5 Resources

Primary Resources


Assessing social significance


Indigenous heritage


Other key guidelines

Commonwealth


New South Wales


Northern Territory

There are no specific guidelines on assessing cultural significance available from the Northern Territory government heritage website at present. For updates check: [www.dlp.nt.gov.au/heritage](http://www.dlp.nt.gov.au/heritage)

Queensland


South Australia


Tasmania


Victoria


Western Australia