PROLOGUE

'WHOSE CULTURAL VALUES?'

"It was good to have some preconceptions about indigenous cultures in the South Pacific challenged" - Lester Borley, Scotland.

The conference ‘Whose Cultural Values?’ presented in this issue of Australia’s Historic Environment was the culmination of an intense week of professional events, at which Australia ICOMOS explored with international, regional and national colleagues some of the extraordinary human stories underlying the cultural environment of this region. The following papers reflect that emphasis.

At its 1990 General Assembly in Lausanne, ICOMOS determined to change direction by holding at least some of its executive meetings in areas outside Europe. Australia ICOMOS strongly supported the wish to share ICOMOS activities across the world’s regions and to further the breadth and depth of cultural exchange. It was therefore pleased to welcome the Bureau, the Executive and the Advisory Committees to their first meetings in the Southern hemisphere - in Sydney, November 1992.

Community groups, professional bodies and government cooperated both in assembling a week-long series of cultural events for ICOMOS members and friends and in encouraging delegates from the Asia-Pacific region to join some forty international Committee members in these activities.

The new International Scientific Committee on Underwater Cultural Heritage was launched at the Australian National Maritime Museum. Archaeologists discussed the management of the controversial first Government House site, differently valued as symbol of Aboriginal oppression or as symbol of British enterprise. The twentieth year of the World Heritage Convention was celebrated, first with debates emphasising indigenous values at a regionally focused workshop and then with the cutting of a magnificent regional cake by Gough Whitlam and Mechtild Rossler of UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre.

For the final weekend conference on the topic of ‘Whose Cultural Values?’, a 1930s cargo wharf on the edge of Sydney Harbour was converted in a couple of days into an ample, if temporary, hall with banners, exhibitions, bookstall, milling area and sundecks. Close to three hundred delegates were issued with passports by local Pyrmont citizens and were ferried for lunch to the threatened Woolloomooloo Finger Wharf - variously perceived as a ‘cathedral of commerce’, soldiers’ launch to the first World War, immigrant landing place or ‘eyesore’.

For Australia ICOMOS, the conference topic was the logical successor of earlier passionate discussions in Fremantle over conflicting Aboriginal spiritual values and NON-Aboriginal values (at the Goonininup/Swan Brewery site). In facing some of the “invisible cities” and the differing values confronting conservation, November’s international conference was designed to challenge and stimulate - through its fresh yet enduring subject, its setting and the range and quality of its speakers.

Post-conference enthusiasm was infectious, with a flood of letters from home and abroad proclaiming broadened perceptions. We thank the organiser, the NSW Historic Houses Trust, and above all the speakers for this.

We regret the absence from this publication of presentations by Herb Stovel (Secretary General of ICOMOS, who joined President Roland Silva in discussing the conservation of global and regional heritage) and by Jonathon Mane-Wheoki, Maori academic, and Paul Twpin, Aboriginal representative from the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, both of whose stimulating presentations were given at extremely short notice.

This then is the context of the international conference on ‘Whose Cultural Values?’. We hope that you will enjoy the papers and that they may give you pause for reflection.

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