THE ASSESSMENT AND CONSERVATION OF RURAL AREAS OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

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BACKGROUND PERSPECTIVE

A couple of years ago, as a regionally-based State Government planner responding to an urban growth proposal in an interesting rural area, I found myself attempting to prepare a brief for a study of the area's significance. Calls to other agencies and areas around Australia resulted in repetitious replies of "If you hear of anything, please let me know!"

This stimulated a focus for my post-graduate studies leading me through the debates in the academic literature of the early 1970's: the "mathemagical" parametrics; the quest for objective visual assessment and so on. This activity seemed to suddenly dry up with a shrug of frustrated indecision about 1976. The practical work in the field presumably continued (particularly in Britain), but this too went unreported in the literature.

This year I was able to interview a cross-section of practitioners and academics in public agencies and voluntary bodies in Britain (and some other parts of Europe), gaining an overview of the extensive work proceeding in a limited theoretical context. The British have integrated the conservation of notable rural areas (and that is a large proportion of the nation) into their land-use planning and other programs, but do not seem to have yet been able to clearly articulate their theoretical basis.

Whilst the British are far in advance of Australia in this field, direct translation to Australia is not simple due to fundamental differences in the land and populations and some dangerously ambiguous terminology and conceptual differences.

The following paper is an attempt to order the jumble of thoughts which have evolved from the above experiences.

SIGNIFICANT RURAL AREAS: THE FORGOTTEN SECTOR?

The type of areas on which I have principally focussed my attention are tracts of inhabited rural land largely in freehold ownership. The extent of an area is usually delineated by visible physiographic or cultural patterns, generally being in the order of tens to hundreds of square kilometres in area, somewhere between "sites" and whole regions. They have been highly modified by human settlement (generally incidentally, rather than to some preconceived design) in a way which may be seen to complement or enhance the area's prior significance.

Such an area may exhibit a special character to the casual observer, or may have subtle qualities which are not instantly apparent. Superficially, landforms, vegetation or settlement patterns may give the area a distinctive character. This may be enhanced by clustered buildings, or remnants of early settlement. On closer familiarity, the observer may become aware of an interesting history, significant events or colourful personalities which add further depth to the area's interest. This may be supplemented by legends (aboriginal or post-aboriginal) and literary or artistic associations. All these components combine in varying degrees to contribute to the significance attributed by society. Furthermore the value placed upon it by society may be influenced by its accessibility to a substantial population, or by whether it is readily observable or appreciated, say from a main roadway or a good viewpoint.

The types of area visualised are comparable to those areas of Britain designated as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and to lowland portions of National Parks. In Australia, examples of this sort of area have simply been referred to as "nice country" and been informally recognised for decades through Beautiful Australia calendar tops and the like. Little academic interest or attention by planners has been directed to most of these areas, perhaps because they were not perceived to be threatened to the extent faced by pristine wilderness areas of elements of historic urban fabric.

The assessment, conservation planning and selective protection of both urbs and wilds has become highly refined and widely practised in Australia, yet proportionate attention does not seem to have been directed toward significant rural areas; those places falling between the two in both location and typology. The absence of a generally agreed and practised methodology may have inhibited them receiving due attention relative to their importance as perceived by society.

The terms "Places of Cultural Significance" as defined in the Burra Charter encompasses the relevance and importance to society of this type of area.

[Whilst my work has principally addressed this particular type of area, in seeking an appropriate methodological approach I have sought something applicable across a wider range of scales and types of potentially significance non-urban areas.]
"CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE"

The qualitative term Cultural Significance, as widely accepted in the field of built heritage, would seem an appropriate basis for a consistent methodological approach.

The cultural significance of an area appears to comprise two intertwined aspects: the physical elements or visible components of the place (the "fabric" in Burra terms), and the social perception of these. The fabric can encompass the topographical and climatic basis of the place, its plant cover, built elements, uses, patterns of man and nature, etc. and variations of these through cyclical and evolutionary changes.

The perceptions by a human culture (or cultures) of this fabric seems to involve two contributory inputs: intellectual knowledge (of, say, the invisible aspects of the area's history, or the rarity of an ecology or culture; and an emotional reaction to both physical and intellectual aspects. The combined effects of the physical place and human response to it determines its cultural significance.

The fabric of a given place may incorporate a diversity of contributory elements: say, scenic land forms, patterns of forests and clearings, historical relics and pockets of rich habitat. Modifications may comprise successive "layers" from various historical (and prehistoric) eras. Disaggregation of themes or eras may assist in clarifying understanding of the contributory components of a given place, but the present-day cultural significance is the nett overall effect of the place as a complex entity. This enables recognition of the widespread (but somewhat mystical) contention that the significance of the whole can exceed the sum of all contributory components, perhaps suggesting that society attributes value to inter-relationships and complexity.

Emotional reaction can incorporate a variety of aspects, including aesthetic response to visual characteristics, perception of an historic aura, or a sense of personal affinity with the place. Emotional response to a place can incorporate intellectual knowledge, relating to the comparative value of an element (e.g. endangered habitat), or awareness of events (real or legendary) associated with it.

Perceptions can be more dynamic than the fabric of a place. By publicising (or discovering) that a particular place was scene of a given event, or is in some way rare or unique, perceptions of its significance may change dramatically without any alteration to its physical state. On a longer time scale, popularity or appreciation of a particular type of appearance can be subject to fashion, such as the picturesque landscape movement in the eighteenth century.

Probably the most relevant "emotional" response to a place is the sense of importance evoked, whether due to its rarity, beauty, historical contribution or other characteristic or blend. This, in essence, is cultural significance.

It is appropriate to address whose perceptions are relevant. The cultural significance of a place does not necessarily reflect a consensus of mass sentiment. A specialist or interest segments of society may place intense value on a place or elements of it, which may be accepted by a generally indifferent population, particularly if some rarity or special value can be rationally established. The "culture" to which significance is attributed extends beyond the present population to future generations, and includes members who may never experience the place directly, but may simply be reassured to know it is there.

Perhaps cultural significance is best exhibited through the "intuitive" pride or concern about a place exhibited by a community, a sector of the population or the "national sentiment". This raises the proposition that an area may be of "latent significance" and may not be given recognition until interpretation of it, or perception of a threat, triggers recognition.

Ultimately, the extent of cultural significance is demonstrated by the extent to which a society's socio-political processes are prepared to change behaviour or devote resources and power to ensure its conservation (i.e. the extent to which enough people can get excited about it). This is not necessarily a democratic process involving the whole society, but has elements of both "mass" sentiment and reflection of the influence of specialised or sectional interests.

SCIENTIFIC VALUE AS PART OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

An unresolved issue in the Australian context appears to be the places of scientific significance (particularly in relation to ecological or biological matters) relative to cultural significance. The Burra Charter clearly incorporates scientific value within the umbrella term, however in practice a gulf exists between perceptions of "natural" (i.e. biological/ecological) and "cultural" significance.

Perhaps, in Australia at least, there has been a tendency for all non-urban areas to be crudely judged on a scale from least modified ("good") to most modified ("bad"). Whilst ecological integrity may have declined, other attributes to society may have been introduced. United Nations World Heritage sites are separately listed, with recent proposals to merge them understood to have been abandoned due to practical difficulties.

British and European perceptions have been more pragmatic in the face of wholesale human modification. For example, the Lake District is a highly modified environment from the forests which preceded clearing and grazing in medieval times, yet it is considered the pin-
nacle of natural beauty. Some English wildflower meadows require mowing and grazing to maintain their ecological equilibrium. (It is noteworthy that the term "natural" is commonly applied to most non-urban elements in British common language and legislation.)

Clearly, scientific study and understanding of aspects of a place forms part of the intellectual knowledge which affects society's response to an environment. Perhaps the most relevant cultural aspects of scientific significance are parameters such as rarity, diversity, and ecological integrity: those aspects of a natural systems which influence society as an observer/consumer. This is a step aside from an idealised "pure" nature-for nature-alone perspective.

TOWARD AN APPROPRIATE METHODOLOGY

To assist rational planning and prioritisation, there needs to be a structured approach to the understanding and comprehensive analysis of places perceived to require some form of intervention. Logically, this would involve a systematic attempt to understand the factors which contribute to the significance (and latent significance) of an area.

A great deal of effort and refinement has already gone into establishing a rational and responsible process for assessment and intervention in places of cultural significance. The process evolved form the work of Kerr and others has been adopted as the supportive guidelines to the Burra Charter. These outline:

(i) the establishment of the cultural significance of a place, then
(ii) the development of policies for the conservation of the significant aspects of the place.

Figure 1 is a diagrammatic representation of this two step process, integrating the components of Cultural Significance as proposed earlier, and some methodological proposals which will be canvassed at the conclusion of the paper. The study process is then placed within its socio-political context.

The appropriate means to understand significance is by ANALYSIS; to seek out the essence of the place's significance through examining and comparing its components and composition, and the cultural responses to them. In recognition of the popular maxim that "the whole exceeds the sum of the parts" (i.e. that the presence of inter-relationships adds a premium to significance), the analysis should attempt to summarise the significance of the place as a single multi-faceted entity. This does not preclude the use of a process of disaggregation in understanding the anatomy of the place, or highlighting of contributory aspects of the place's significance.

The alternative assessment approach of EVALUATION suggests a performance measurement against some predetermined or subconscious criteria, and is considered inappropriate as a means of understanding the substance and significance of a place. The most appropriate criteria would seem to be comparisons with the fabric and social perceptions of other places (i.e. comparative analysis).

For example; the human perception of scale may contribute to the significance of a place. An evaluative process tends to predetermine consideration of such a parameter, then attempt to quantify its presence. Two different places may be influenced by this parameter: one evoking a cosy sense of intimacy, whilst the second is valued for its awesome vastness. It is difficult to see how the evaluative approach could encompass the positive contributory significance made by apparently disparate "quantities" of this parameter to the two places. A description and analysis approach seeking to understand the component contributions to a place's significance would seem better able to cope with such a circumstance.

There is also some debate as to whether the views of an area from selected points (chosen or random) can be taken as representative of the whole area. (This implies a heavy orientation to visual quality assessment, which is but one component of social perception of a place's significance.) Essentially, the views of an area, particularly from readily accessible points (such as a line of "view points" forming a road through the place) are strong determinants of initial (superficial?) perceptions of the place. The attribute of sectors of the place not frequently seen by most people still form part of it, but their nett cultural significance may be diminished as a consequence. Clearly, an aerial assessment of the whole fabric of the place and recognition of present (and latent) visual perception both require acknowledgement in an assessment process.

The assessment process should attempt to involve all interested parties, engendering a sense of common ownership or involvement in the evaluative process and its consequent management implications. Without this, resistance and lack of goodwill could become a major obstacle to implementation of the conservation plan.

DESIGNATION: ITS ROLE

The effort directed toward significant rural areas in Australia to date has principally been designation of places by voluntary and government agencies. This is generally in the form of Classification by state National Trusts, of listing on the Register of the National Estate, respectively. Such designations perform the role of giving recognition to the value of a place, publicising this value (i.e. interpretation) and encouraging its conservation. Presently, in very few circumstances does designation have any legislative effect, but it does alert planning authorities to the perception of the place's significance.
by the designating agency.

The limited basis for influencing the future conservation of designated areas severely restricts the impact such listings can have. In some circumstances there is a real risk that designation in isolation may create or accelerate threats to the conservation of the place, particularly where the local community or landowners perceive an attempt to diminish their control over the place.

Ideally, designation should be incorporated within the two stage process outlined earlier. Outside this, it may be utilised by agencies as a strong statement to assist the groundswell for a full study process. However designation should not become a substitute for a comprehensive approach incorporating conservation strategies, in conformity with established principles. Voluntary agencies in particular have important roles in the socio-political context surrounding the study process, initially in focussing attention on priority areas, then subsequently in seeking effective implementation of the resulting conservation actions and in monitoring its on-going appropriateness.

CONCLUSION

It seems apparent that a rational methodological approach to the assessment and preparation of conservation policies for significant rural areas is urgently needed to ensure early attention to these places. Such a process needs to gain broad acceptance with practitioners and the wider community. It appears appropriate to follow the established and refined approach now widely taken for buildings and sites of cultural significance, given that the differences are generally of composition and scale, rather than issue.

The established processes (culminating in the Burra Charter) have evolved with their attention focussed at a different emphasis and scale, so will need modification and refinement in detail (but not principle) to be readily usable in addressing rural tracts. A "model checklist" may assist in achieving a consistent, structured approach whilst retaining flexibility between the circumstances of different studies. Appendix I is an initial (and somewhat crude) attempt to draft such a guideline document.

It is proposed that a guideline document such as this could, with refinement and revision (particularly through the experience of practical application), be a rational and methodical framework for addressing the conservation of rural areas of cultural significance. Perhaps through the guiding structures of such a document, the practising of rural conservation work will generate a methodological tradition and pattern of precedents to fill the present void.

REFERENCES:


3. Concise Oxford Dictionary: analyse: "ascertain constituents of; find or show essence or structure of;...

4. Concise Oxford Dictionary: evaluate: "ascertain amount of; find numerical expression for;...

In addition to the references generally quoted in papers on this topic (for example, the paper by Sandy Blair and Marilyn Truscott presented to the 67th meeting of the Australian Heritage Commission and reproduced as Background Note No. 34 circulated by the Commission), the thinking in this paper has been influenced by interviews conducted during 1988 with a cross-section of practitioners at all tiers of rural conservation in Britain, and various British publications, particularly those of the Countryside Commission. A paper summarising rural conservation processes and agencies in Britain is proposed.
PRECEDING SOCIO-POLITICAL PROCESS

INITIAL RECOGNITION AND SELECTION
OF SITE FOR ATTENTION

Either 'bottom up'
(intuitive recognition or local/specialist pressure)
or 'top down'
(comprehensive surveys of region/state)

PART A: Establishment of CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE
("What's special about the Place?")

Principal Elements of the Place (Aspects/Eras, etc.)

- PHYSICAL FABRIC
  ('Site Analysis')

- INTELLECTUAL KNOWLEDGE
  Research Data; Social History, etc.
  Comparisons

- EMOTIONAL ASPECTS
  Responses to Place
  Affinity with Place

varying contribution of elements

- distilled to

CONCISE STATEMENT OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE
(including reference to principal contributory aspects)

PART B: Development of CONSERVATION POLICY
("How to conserve what's special")

Attributes Requiring Conservation
(restatement of cultural significance)

Assessment of Existing or Potential Risks,
Threats, Conflicts to significant aspects of place.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS/STRATEGIES
to conserve contributory elements

Grouped by themes as appropriate

(Prepared in Draft Form)

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Consultant's conclusions following feedback

PUBLIC / CLIENT RESPONSE PHASE

SUBSEQUENT SOCIO-POLITICAL PROCESS

IMPLEMENTATION

Adoption by relevant bodies (including client group)
Allocation of resources; integration of policies
Monitoring and adjustment to changing demands of Place
Review process after significant shift in - significance of place
- techniques / principles of conservation