The Burra Charter of Australia ICOMOS in 1983

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In February 1979 Australia ICOMOS formed a committee to adapt the Venice Charter to Australian conditions. It included three architects, an archaeologist and a specialist in conservation method and was strengthened by the addition of a solicitor with experience in drafting legislation for conservation. The three architects had varied backgrounds, the first was primarily an academic and architectural historian, the second was in charge of the conservation of historically significant structures for a State public works department and the third was an architect turned academic.

In order to facilitate meetings of members from Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne and Adelaide, the committee was convened by a member who was at the same time a public servant with access to the necessary resources. To make funding possible all participants were members, or were made members, of the Australian Heritage Commission Technical Advisory Committee and the actual meetings were held under its patronage.

The principles of the Charter were drafted in two exhausting sessions of two days each and the draft was published and circulated to all members of ICOMOS for comment before the August meeting at Burra Burra the same year. The committee met beforehand to assess the comments, and to make recommendations for amendments to be set before the general meeting. At the general meeting all present had a chance to air their views in an unrestricted fashion and the session lasted till about 1 a.m. on the Sunday morning. A number of improving amendments were made, and the document was formally adopted by Australia ICOMOS for a trial period of a year.

Fifteen months later a similar process was followed and minor amendments which arose from the experience of members in implementing the document were incorporated. The Burra Charter, or as it is formally called, The Australia ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance, was then adopted. In organisational terms it was successful because momentum was never lost and all members of ICOMOS were aware of what was going on and could be involved. Had ICOMOS not had the help of the Australian Heritage Commission the momentum could not have been maintained and it would have been a more agonising and less certain project. The total budget was modest - as I recall it was in the vicinity of $1000.

Because the Charter was produced at a moment of considerable need it has had a surprising degree of acceptance by Australian and many State government departments. Apart from the Australian Heritage Commission, the first major breakthrough was in March 1980 when the Secretary of the then Department of Housing and Construction formally endorsed the Burra Charter for use in relation to the Kingston and Arthur's Vale project on Norfolk Island.

Following the completion of the Charter, ICOMOS has undertaken a second stage and is developing a series of documents which amplify aspects of the Burra Charter. These relate to controls on the degree of intervention which may be appropriate for a place, to planning conservation work and to urban conservation. These are likely to be completed in 1984.

This brief resume covers the evolution of the Australia ICOMOS conservation doctrine. Its philosophical and technical value will be judged by its users over the next few years, and at regular, but not frequent intervals it will be reviewed.

What were the ideas behind its drafting?

• Firstly, an acceptance of the general philosophy of the Venice Charter.
• Secondly, the need for a common conservation language throughout Australia.
• Thirdly, an emphasis on the need for a thorough understanding of the significance of a place before policy decisions can be made.
• Fourthly, an approach more flexible and practical than is suggested by the Venice Charter, and one which could cope with the realities of Australia's heritage, and in particular which would permit the stringency of conservation processes to be varied according to the nature of significance.
• Fifthly, that technical words or jargon be avoided and that where this was not possible, as in the types of conservation processes, definitions be inserted.
• Sixthly, that a neutral or multidisciplinary approach be adopted which would avoid defining the fields of architects, engineers, archaeologists, historians etc. and use instead terms like 'place' and 'work'.

This last point turned out to be a major factor in determining the format of the Charter document, that is, with the formal articles on the left and an informal explanation on the right. This arrangement enabled ICOMOS to include the wording desired by a much respected archaeologist who believed that the definition of place in Article 1.1 might not be generally understood to include archaeological sites. However this two-column layout, although introduced for reasons of political expediency, has proved to be a useful aid to readers and gives Australia ICOMOS an opportunity to add explanatory material as its need becomes known. Article 9 is an example.
Article 9 A building or work should remain in its historical location. The moving of all or part of a building or work is unacceptable unless this is the sole means of ensuring its survival.

Article 9 Some structures were de-signed to be readily removable or already have a history of previous moves, e.g. prefabricated dwellings and poppet-heads. Provided such a structure does not have a strong association with its present site its removal may be considered.

If any structure is moved it should be moved to an appropriate setting and given an appropriate use. Such action should not be to the detriment of any such place of cultural significance.

The formal articles of the Charter are divided into four sections:

Definitions, 1.1 to 1.10;
Conservation Principles, 2 to 10;
Conservation Processes, 11 to 22; and
Conservation Practice, 23 to 29.

Definitions of all words in bold are given in Article 1. They are essential to an understanding of the Charter and have been carefully chosen to give the document an internal consistency, to approximate to educated usage and to make the explanation of the Charter as simple as possible. Because the value of the definitions depends on a precise use of the English language it may be that the Charter cannot be effectively translated into a language with different origins. It would be better to appropriate such concepts in the Charter as are found to be useful and to write a new document entirely.

Let us look now at the various conservation processes defined in the Burra Charter. They are all embraced by the word conservation.

1.4 Conservation means all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance. It includes maintenance and may according to circumstance include preservation, restoration, reconstruction and adaption and will be commonly a combination of more than one of these.

1.6 Preservation means maintaining the fabric of a place in its existing state and retarding deterioration.

1.7 Restoration means returning the existing fabric of a place to a known earlier state by removing accretions or by reassembling existing components without the introduction of new material.

1.8 Reconstruction means returning a place as nearly as possible to a known earlier state and is distinguished by the introduction of materials (new or old) into the fabric.

1.9 Adaptation means modifying a place to suit proposed compatible uses.

1.10 Compatible use means a use which involves no change to the culturally significant fabric, changes which are substantially reversible, or changes which require a minimal impact.

It is important to emphasise that these processes are normally carried out in combination, and not singly. However in order to explain them further I propose to illustrate each approach as set out in Articles 11 to 22 by brief examples.

Preservation

Article 11 Preservation is appropriate where the existing state of the fabric itself constitutes evidence of specific cultural significance, or where insufficient evidence is available to allow other conservation processes to be carried out.

The 1840 Guard House on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour is an example. Until an analysis of the evidence has led to an understanding of the significance of the features and marks on walls and floors the only conservation policy appropriate to the place is preservation. Article 12 notes that preservation is limited to the protection, maintenance and, where threatened, the stabilisation of the fabric, but without distorting its significance.

Following a proper analysis of the documentary and physical evidence we may well decide that the existing fabric, with its embrasures, musket-racking clasps, ordnance storage systems and the like, is the best example of its time in the country and warrants a continued policy of preservation.

Restoration

Article 15 Restoration is limited to the reassembling of displaced components or removal of accretions in accordance with Article 16.

As an example of the former, the wings of the Guard House have been used as a source of stone for modern work elsewhere on the Island, and some of the removed stone is still stacked against a wall. Providing it can be reassembled without conjecture its replacement in its original position would be a legitimate act of restoration. However as Article 13 says:

Article 13 Restoration is appropriate only if there is sufficient evidence of an earlier state of the fabric and only if returning the fabric to that state recovers the cultural significance of the place.

The other aspect of restoration mentioned in Article 15 involves the removal of accretions (later additions). The removal of a temporary lean-to structure built on the north side of the Guard House in the 1940s would be an example. So too would be the removal of modern acrylic paints from the wall of the cell in Bathurst Gaol to reveal the 1880s brown and 1900s green paint scheme.

Article 16 then goes on to give a rough rule of thumb guidance on when it is acceptable to remove accretions.

Article 16 The contributions of all periods of the place must be respected. If a place includes the fabric of different periods, revealing the fabric of one period at the expense of another can only be justified when what is removed is of slight cultural significance and the fabric which is to be revealed is of much greater cultural significance.

Reconstruction

Ross and Oatlands were two of a small group of unusual post offices built in Tasmania in the nineteenth century. Oatlands facade was similar except that it was decorated with strange Mannerist motifs. In order to celebrate the coronation of Elizabeth the Second the Department of Posts and Telegraphs demolished the old facade and replaced it with something more in keeping with progressive ideas. It was an approach that did not fit well into a predominantly nineteenth-century stone streetscape. As the original facade does not now exist it
cannot be restored, but as Article 17 and 18 make clear would be an acceptable option to reconstruct.

Article 17 Reconstruction is appropriate where a place is incomplete through damage or alteration and where it is necessary for its survival, or where it recovers the cultural significance of the place as a whole.

Article 18 Reconstruction is limited to the completion of a depleted entity and should not constitute the majority of the fabric of a place.

It should be noted that most restoration involves an element of reconstruction because it usually involves the introduction of some new materials. Even the reassembly of displaced elements (anastylosis) normally requires new elements.

Adaptation

The majority of conservation work in Australia involves a substantial amount of adaptation.

Article 20 Adaptation is acceptable where the conservation of the place cannot otherwise be achieved, and where the adaptation does not substantially detract from its cultural significance.

Juniper Hall at Paddington is an example. It is a grand mansion built by an emancipated convict about 1825. Parts are of such significance that adaptation is unacceptable. On the other hand some later accretions are of such modest significance that this adaptation to a less compatible use would not substantially detract from the significance of the place, though they would help make the whole complex viable. Such adaptations may under some circumstances involve the opening of doors, installation of modern conveniences and other similar work, provided:

Article 21 Adaptation must be limited to that which is essential to a use for the place determined in accordance with Articles 6 and 7.

Article 22 Fabric of cultural significance unavoidable removed in the process of adaptation must be kept safely to enable its future reinstatement.

New construction

In addition to these processes new construction, including infill and additions, may be carried out as a part of, or in conjunction with, conservation work, provided it does not reduce or obscure the significance of the place and it is in keeping with Article 8.

Maintenance

Of course the single most important process is that of maintenance. It means the continuous protective care of the fabric, contents and setting of a place, and is to be distinguished from repair. Repair involves restoration or reconstruction, and is treated accordingly under those headings.

Conservation principles

Articles 2 to 10 are a set of general principles bearing on all the processes already discussed. They are in general simple to understand, uncontentious, and reflect the Venice Charter. Stress is laid on a proper understanding of why a place is significant, as it is right through the document. Articles 6 and 7 emphasise the decision-making sequence, that is, understanding significance, deciding policy and determining use. The exception is Article 10; it is included to deal with the very real problem of the removal of significant artefacts and equipment from sites where they are important elements.

Article 10 The removal of contents which form part of the cultural significance of the place is unacceptable unless it is the sole means of ensuring their security and preservation. Such contents must be returned should circumstances make this practicable.

As a general principle Australia ICOMOS believes that the long-term future of such contents should be in association with the place rather than in a museum or private collection.

Conservation practice

The last sections containing Articles 23 to 29 cover the recommended practices in conservation work.

Articles 23 and 25 deal with the preparatory work necessary before work commences. Article 24 sets the degree to which intervention in fabric is acceptable.

Article 26 requires those responsible for policy decisions to be identified.

Article 27 covers supervision of work.

Article 28 ensures the safety of records.

Article 29 requires the cataloguing and protection of fabric and artefacts removed from a site.

Article 26 is the only one which may require comment. It seeks to increase the sense of responsibility and accountability in anyone making decisions which will affect cultural property of significance.

Endnotes

1 Ed note: The authors were Judy Birmingham, Peter Bridges, Peter James, Jim Kerr, Miles Lewis and David Saunders; 506 paper by Max Bourke above.

2 [Footnote 350] It should be emphasised that the Burra Charter has been written as a set of principles to help in the decision-making processes. It is not suited to statutory enforcement. It is also necessary an imperfect document which Australia ICOMOS proposes to refine progressively and any constructive suggestions which conference members may wish to make over the next eighteen months will be most welcome.