THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE AND CONSERVATION POLICIES FOR THE AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Introduction

The Australian War Memorial is another one of those national institutions located in Canberra, or so it would seem. Most of us who have lived with it as a feature of the Canberra landscape and others who have visited Canberra from the 1930s onwards might take it for granted, or perhaps look at with familiar fondness. It has always seemed to be a part of the Canberra scene..... But it really is unique. What is it that makes it so unusual?

The conservation study has been coming to grips with its unusual nature for about six months now. We think we are beginning to unravel some of its secrets. There are a whole number of factors that make it special. Some of the most important are:

- the original concept underpinning its formation;
- the length of time taken for the place to reach some form of physical completion and the extent and nature of changes occurring over that time;
- the location of the place at the northern end of Burley Griffin's land axis;
- the design of the building and its style and;
- the nature and culture of the organisation.

These factors probably explain most of the conclusions which led to the completion of the statement of significance for the place. I will address each in turn and hopefully lead you to an understanding of why and how we reached our conclusions.

The conceptual factor

Australia was just thirteen years old when it went to war in one of the world's most horrific conflicts. Approximately 60,000 Australians died, mostly overseas in battlefields which would take two months or more to get to, given the transportation systems available at the time. The loss of life for a country of such small population was almost overwhelming.

Charles Bean, the Memorial's founder, conceived of the idea for a place which gave Australians the opportunity to mourn. He went further. He saw the need to bring something to Australia which allowed people to understand the nature of war, a gigantic mental step. He recognised the problems of distance and he thought of the idea of bringing relics of the war back to Australia, not so much for museum purposes as in the Imperial War Museum in London, but as relics of the sacrifice which could become part of a memorial.

This is the vision which makes the Memorial what it is. By the end of the war Bean had strengthened his idea for the link between the relics of the Australian experience of war, and the records, which provide the intellectual support for connecting the relics with Australian sacrifice. The physical relics and records had a 'sacred' quality and to convey this value to the public in Australia their authenticity and the story behind them had to be guaranteed. In 1917 he wrote down his thoughts about this quality the records needed to have:

Every country after this war will have its war museums and galleries, and its library of records rendered sacred by the millions of gallant, precious lives laid down in their making ... Australia may know this - that whatever is found amongst the Australian official photos is genuine, taken where and as its title indicates ... The first principle laid down for the Australian official photographers is that they are sacred records - standing for future generations to see for ever the plain simple truth.²

Bean wanted a building 'far grander and more sacred ... than the one raised for Napoleon ...'³. The development of his concept of the memorial encapsulating the three components of commemoration, records and relics seemed to run parallel with the form the building should take. Ken Inglis has illuminated the unusual nature of the problem.

England offered Australia no satisfactory model ... an unknown “British warrior” was buried at Westminster Abbey, the ancient church which had acquired over the centuries the character of a pantheon.... a “cenotaph” was unveiled in Whitehall.... Relics of their war were housed in an Imperial War Museum ...⁴

Australia could not use an ecclesiastical building because there was no state religion. Bean envisaged a purpose-built building which would both house 'sacred relics' of the war and be the chief memorial to the war dead at the same time. Both Bean and John Treloar, appointed Director of the Australian War Museum in 1920, the
predecessor of the Australian War Memorial, saw the memorial and museum functions as being inseparable, both philosophically and operationally. Treloar briefed the Prime Minister in the following terms:

Throughout, the memorial nature of the proposed museum has been emphasised and indeed the high quality of the collections secured is due largely to this... It is certain that the building which houses these collections will become the war memorial in Australia...

There are no other memorials known, either in Australia or anywhere else in the world, which aim to engender understanding and commemoration through the combination of the sanctity of the relics, the authority of the records and the aura of a commemorative area. The significance assessment concluded that the Australian War Memorial was the Australian War Memorial because it combines all three aspects into one.

What makes the place unique and special is this tripartite connection. However, it is not so much the physical connection. It is the conceptual link. The Memorial has always had more relics in its collection than it could possibly show. Before the completion of the building, many items in the collection, which were considered surplus to needs, were made available for other levels of government to use in local memorials. There are any number of war memorials of World War I guns, set on plinths in towns around Australia, which came from the national collection. Similarly, there are many works of war art originally hung in the galleries which move in and out of display. The statement of significance of the place stands on the assessment that there is a generic connection between the place and the collection and the records. Hence the statement identifies the collection and its parts, not only significant in themselves, but also significant as integral to the place. On the other hand conservation policies accept that display needs will mean that items move into and out of the building.

The statement of significance therefore emphasises the conceptual link rather than the physical location. The conservation policies take up this theme and focus on the need to interpret the place in a way which recognises this connection but also accommodates change, particularly in the galleries. The significance is the concept, not so much the fabric. However, there is always an exception to the rule. This exception concerns the status of particular dioramas. Many dioramas have been moved and some have been destroyed. The Romani diorama and the Transport series are dioramas which have remained in the same position since 1941. The assessment found this to be significant and the conservation policies recommend that the Sinai Palestine gallery generally remain in its present form. The fact that much of the finishing fabric in the Sinai Palestine gallery, such as the rubber tiled floor and the ceilings, remains as it was in the 1940s supports this conclusion. It is the fabric in this instance which is significant. On the other hand, World War II dioramas are not as well constructed or as artistically important. Therefore, they do not achieve a level of significance, as do the World War I dioramas. The conservation policy recommends they be given status as interpretative devices but need not necessarily be retained in their present location.

The long haul

Bean and Treloar had great difficulty in convincing a relatively new nation to commit itself to the concept of an Australian War Memorial.

In 1911 the Commonwealth created the Australian Capital Territory from land transferred from New South Wales. In 1912 Walter Burley Griffin won a competition for the design of Australia’s capital city located on the Limestone Plains.

In 1916 Australia followed Canada and won control of its own war records from the British War Office and in 1917 the Australian War Records Office was set up under Treloar. This was the trigger which allowed Bean to contemplate the future war memorial. At about the same time the Government committed itself to the creation of an Australian War Museum. This commitment waxed and waned as financial pressures bugged the Commonwealth. Bean, during the next few years consolidated his vision for the memorial, linking relics and a permanent memorial to the fallen. In 1919 the Government created the Australian War Museum Committee with Henry Gullett as Director and in 1921 adopted Griffin’s plan for Canberra. This resulted in the creation of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee and finally the Government asked this body to find a suitable site for the Australian War Memorial.

We must remember that during this period, Canberra did not exist in physical terms. Yet Bean never wavered in his view that the memorial should be located in one of the most important sites in the new capital. It was not until 1923 that the Commonwealth cabinet resolved to proceed with the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, selected its present site, and agreed to hold a competition for its design.

The competition was advertised in August 1925 to close in April 1926. There were 53 conditions, the most onerous, given the spatial requirements, being a cost limit of £250,000. The form of the building echoed Bean’s earlier concepts: it was to be a monumental building incorporating a Hall of Memory large enough to have the names of the war dead inscribed on its walls, together with courts and galleries to house the war relics and records, among other accommodation. In 1925 the Australian War Memorial was formalised in legislation and the exhibition of the
collection moved from Melbourne to Sydney for seven years.

There was no clear winner of the competition because the conditions could not be satisfied. As a compromise two architects were asked to develop a collaborative scheme amongst much controversy.

In late 1927, Sodersteen and Crust submitted their design. Griffin gave evidence to the Public Works Committee hearing and supported the scale and location of the Memorial but said he would have designed it differently. Although the site was inaugurated in the same year and site works commenced soon after, the depression intervened and in 1929 the building of the Memorial was put on hold. It was not recommenced until 1934, the collection having been moved to Canberra in the meantime. From 1935 onwards the building was progressively occupied and work on the dioramas proceeded. The completion of the building was approved by Cabinet in 1935 but about this time Sodersteen began to submit proposals for changing the design, particularly the dome of the Hall of Memory. In 1938 he withdrew from further involvement, but saw some success when the dome height was raised, roof cladding changed from terra cotta to copper and entrance pylons accepted.

The building was opened in 1941, but this was not the end of the saga. In 1947 extensions to deal with World War II were authorised. Work on the Hall of Memory continued until its opening in 1959. The Roll of Honour for both wars was completed in 1967. The extensions foreshadowed in 1947 were begun in 1968 and completed in 1971. More alterations occurred in 1983 and 1984 including new stairs, the theatre and book shop. The new Administrative building opened in 1987 and 1993 saw the interment of the unknown soldier.

The building is still too small and the NCPA has proposed more changes, with new buildings planned for the site.

The purpose of this potted history is to indicate two of the characteristics of the place. It is one of continuing change and more will occur. The other is the length of time between conception of the Memorial and its current stage of completion. Taken together, they contribute to the background for the development of some of the conservation policies.

The issues they raise for the statement of significance is the impact on the fabric. For example, what fabric is important? The courtyard and pool of reflection have gone through major changes. Crust’s original design shows what appears to be beds of annuals and pencil pines. This was never implemented. Garden boxes have been installed, a fountain built and removed and, more recently, an eternal flame set in the pool. The story of continual change is similar for the Cloisters and the Roll of Honour.

The statement of significance identifies the commemorative places as being significant but not all the fabric. For example, the fabric of the Roll of Honour itself is not significant, it is the use of the space and the concept of a roll which is significant: it is the form, not the fabric. Similarly there is not sufficient evidence to yet identify the sculpture or the tomb of the unknown soldier in the Hall of Memory as significant, but significance does attach to the mosaic interior, the stained glass windows, and particularly to the use of the place.

The site

I alluded to the selection of the site for the Australian War Memorial above. The design of Canberra with its land and water axes provide the Australian War Memorial with a special character. The location of the building approximately two miles away from the other anchor on the land axis, Parliament House, gives it another unique role - at least in Australian terms. There are of course other memorials and shrines in other cities. The ANZAC memorials in Sydney and Brisbane are monumental in style, but they have a more urban setting. Indeed the Sydney memorial has lost some of its presence because of the impact of commercial office buildings built on its southern axis. It once stood in silhouette against the skyline when viewed from Macquarie Street. Banal building facades now frustrate and confuse this vista. The Melbourne Shrine is another monumental edifice on an axis down Swanston Street. Banal building facades now frustrate and confuse this vista. The Melbourne Shrine is another monumental edifice on an axis down Swanston Street, but the view is hard to access and difficult to read, perhaps because of the commercial nature of Swanston Street.

The Australian War Memorial is located in a specially planned site. At least Griffin thought it was OK.

The significance assessment identifies these factors and the important axial role of the Australian War Memorial in the Canberra plan. The statement of significance says the building is an important landmark. The role of the Memorial as a national icon is reinforced by its central location in the nation’s capital. The conservation policies promote the recognition and retention of the axial design scheme, the siting at the end of the land axis as the northern anchor, views to and from the Memorial and Parliament House: they also propose that attempts be made to improve links between the place and Anzac Parade.

Architecture

All current significance citations (Register of the National Estate, National Trust of Australia (ACT) and the Royal Australian Institute of Architects) refer to the place as an example of Art Deco architecture. However this was questioned during the consultation process. Apperley et al describe a number of styles for the inter-War years, and particularly nominate Stripped Classical as one commonly found in Canberra. Buildings in
Canberra they give this classification to include the Robert Garran Offices, (Patents Office) Barton, and Provisional Parliament House. They identify other Sodersteen buildings such as City Mutual Building and Birtley Towers in Sydney as being inter-War Art Deco. Charlton et al. identify Manuka Pool and Canberra School of Art (Canberra High School) as being Art Deco. They nominate the School of Anatomy as Stripped Classical with Art Deco decorative elements and Robert Garran Offices as Art Deco with Stripped Classical influences.

Stapleton and Stapleton refer to the Australian War Memorial as an early example of Australian Art Deco drawing on Goodhue’s Nebraska Capitol. Certainly the mosaic in the Hall of Memory is Art Deco in style, but it was completed so long after the building, it may be an anachronism. What about the Memorial?

There are some clues. One of the characteristics of Stripped Classical is that it can be seen exactly as that. A building facade stripped of its classical details but with the form still intact; examples of this are buildings having a classical columnar portico entrance.

The Australian War Memorial does not exhibit any such character. The entrance is flanked by pylons, harking to the Egyptian influence of Art Deco, as does the battered plinth. The corners of the building are rounded and there is an organic feeling about its massing, enhanced by its lack of fenestration. The windows are small and punctuate the wall where they do occur, because Sodersteen designed the building with a massive system of natural skylights which are now covered up. Although there is limited Art Deco decoration, it does exist in carved stone air vents. The telling Art Deco signature is the interpenetrating cubes at the base of the Hall of Memory dome.

The assessment of significance reviews the evidence and concludes in favour of Art Deco, probably much to the relief of the custodians of the existing citations. The statement of significance describes the place as an outstanding example of Art Deco architecture, which contains within it significant examples of applied art in the same style.

The conservation policies encourage consideration of the restoration of a part of the skylight system for interpretation purposes.

**Organisation culture**

The nature and culture of the organisation of the Australian War Memorial was another factor which influenced the development of the statement of significance and the conservation policies. Part of the process involved wide consultation, both within and outside the organisation. This brought us into contact with the range of interests of those having a stake in the Memorial.

Firstly, there are the different professional streams within the place. There are historians, curators, conservationists, educationalists, archivists and librarians, apart from different managerial streams. There are strong lobby groups, like the RSL, outside of the organisation which have interest in the activities of the Memorial. Others are interested in the outcome of the conservation plan, such as the NCPA, the AHC and the National Trust of Australia. There is the Commonwealth Government with its funding concerns creating an atmosphere of uncertainty about the future management of the place and there is the present public service turmoil. All this made the policy formulation exercise a complicated one.

The consultation process became as much a process whereby each area of interest expressed their views in the context of their concerns about more general issues. For example, the problems of accommodation became a theme about which many interest groups expressed concern. Uncertainty about what the Commonwealth is going to do about funding in general and charging admission in particular were other issues. Management limitations on the resources available to get things done, like protecting the collection, acquiring items to fill gaps, developing programs to cater for the needs of the changing nature of the visitors, attending to their physical needs and the educational and marketing opportunities going begging, all surfaced. Getting down to the matter of what it was about the place that made it important from a heritage point of view took time to crystallise.

The principal factor settling these matters was the *Australian War Memorial Act*. The Memorial has its own legislation which establishes it and identifies its role. This makes the place special. That it is important enough for the function to require the status of an Act of Parliament reflects on the value the community has attributed to the place. An Act of Parliament is probably the highest form of policy statement a democratic society can make about something.

The statement of significance and the conservation policies took their lead from that position. The statement of significance points out the importance of the use of the place as Australia’s national shrine to those who lost their lives through Australia’s formal involvement in war. The conservation policies encourage continued use of the place in accordance with the aims of the legislation, and particularly the purpose of understanding the sacredness of the place, through the principal activities the building houses. It is the combination of the commemorative role, as expressed in the Hall of Memory. Cloisters and Courtyard, the sanctity and authenticity of the collection and the guarantee which the records provide to the collection, which makes the Australian War Memorial the unique place it is.
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Endnotes

1 M McKernan, *Here is Their Spirit: A History of the Australian War Memorial 1917-1990*, University of Queensland Press in Association with the Australian War Memorial, St Lucia, 1991, p x.

2 Commonwealth Gazette. 15/1/1918 (written by Bean 29/7/1917).

3 M McKernan, *op cit.*, p. 58.


5 Treloar to AWM Committee, 9/1/22, AWM 38, 3DRL 6673 Item 663.


