THE LAKE INNES HOUSE PROJECT:
WORKING WITH A CONSERVATION ARCHITECT

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INTRODUCTION

In May 1987 the National Parks and Wildlife Service of NSW commissioned Clive Lucas & Partners (now Clive Lucas, Stapleton & Partners) to write a conservation plan for the Lake Innes House site near Port Macquarie, NSW. As part of the conservation plan an interpretation policy and plan was required, which Campbell Conservation was sub-contracted to undertake.

It gave me my first chance to work professionally with a conservation architect and compare their working methods with those of a material conservator. The purpose of this paper therefore is not to examine the Lake Innes House project in detail and certainly not to comment on the architectural approach to the conservation plan, but rather to look at the way the project was approached from my viewpoint.

SITE HISTORY

But first a brief description of the house and site. In 1830 Major Archibald Clunies Innes returned to Port Macquarie where he had been Commandant in 1826. He took up land at Lake Burrawan, and renamed the Lake, Lake Innes. The construction of the house probably started shortly after, and continued on and off for at least eighteen years. The main house complex comprised four buildings: the house itself, a stables/office block, a kitchen, and a detached bachelor’s hall. By 1843 the house had 22 rooms in an “L” shaped arrangement running off a long passage. The stables/office block was even bigger than the House, being designed on an open square pattern with a Central Stable yard.

The grand style exhibited in the house design was reflected in the gardens. Visitors commented on the “luxuriant and tasteful garden, profuse in fruits and flowers”. The road leading from the house to Port Macquarie was lined with lantana hedges (possible the first introduced to Australia).

More detail than might be expected is known about the house through the journal of one Annabella Boswell, a niece of Major Innes, who lived at the house for periods in the 1840’s. Her detailed observations of the grand lifestyle of the Innes family, including a visit by Governor Fitzroy, provide an enormous amount of information about the house, valuable as it now bears the unusual Australian cartographic term of “ruins”.

For Major Innes’ prosperity waned after transportation of convicts to New South Wales ceased in 1840. He moved to Newcastle, and Lake Innes House was occupied by a succession of people; it then gradually decayed until it was destroyed by a bushfire in the 1890’s. From then on the surrounding bush quickly resumed the site. One import of Major Innes, Mysore thorn, played a major part in providing a virtually impenetrable wall of undergrowth through which only a scrap of wall and an odd chimney could be seen.

Various attempts have been made to re-open the site in the last twenty years. In 1957 enthusiasts from the Hastings Historical Society cleared the remains of undergrowth, principally lantana, and made measured drawings. However, all this really achieved was to open the site to enthusiastic home renovators, who removed the stone verandah flagging, the stone sills and the rubbed bricks form the window arches. Subsequently the ruins became overgrown again, this time by Mysore thorn.

Finally in 1987 the National Parks and Wildlife Service undertook, as a Bicentennial Project, the opening-up of the site for public access, despite the fact that although they intended to acquire the site they did not at the time own it. My first visit to the site was in May 1978, by which time a team of Mysore thorn cutters had been at work for six weeks clearing along the wall lines and around the main features. Since my knowledge of ruins to that date had been limited to picturesque ecclesiastical buildings sacked during The Reformation and surrounded by manicured lawns, it was refreshing to come upon a site so totally consumed by its environment. Apart from the odd wall being visible, evocative remnants of the great garden remained, such as the giant bamboo plants creaking in the wind and the odd rose flowering. The view to Lake Innes is now obscured by large trees, and the lake itself is edged by a 20-metre strip of dead gums, brought about by a misguided attempt to drain the fresh water lake in the 1920’s, which only resulted in sea water entering and killing-off the trees.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Enough of the romance of the place, which is certainly strong, and to the conservation plan. The closest comparison to this document in the material conservator’s experience is a condition report. The fundamental difference between a conservator’s condition report and an architect’s conservation plan is the inclusion in the latter of a statement of cultural significance. This in turn leads to constraints in the treatment of the site arising out of its cultural significance. The rest of the report dealing with documentary evidence, physical evidence, the conservation policy and guidelines for future intervention have parallels within the conservator’s condition report sec-
tions on condition, analytical examination and proposed treatments.

The cultural significance of the Lake Innes House site was analysed in various sub-sections, including its archaeological significance, its significance as ruins, and its historical, architectural, technological and social significance. Thus, for instance, its archaeological significance was seen to lie in its resource of architecture, garden history, farming and domestic arrangements made, all the more valuable by the subsequent inactivity on the site.

Its significance as ruins included the fact that it is virtually the only known large house ruin in Australia, and also the aesthetic judgement that its romantically-overgrown nature and evocative character has significance (not so romantic when you encounter Mysore thorn close-up, I assure you!). Its technological significance included the sophisticated boiler room and plumbing systems.

INTERPRETATION

The interpretation plan I suggested came out of the statement of cultural significance. A list was made of all the issues raised by the statements and points were identified on the site where these issues could be interpreted. A conceptual route for visitors to follow through the site was then worked out. This took into account all the points to be interpreted and considered the best way to approach the house. Finally a detailed physical route was developed from the conceptual route taking into account the clearing of the site which would be required.

With the route established through the house, the specific points of interpretation were then considered. The statement of significance identifies important features in a range of areas. An important criteria for the interpretation was that the visitor should not be overloaded with large amounts of information on different aspects of the site. It was therefore proposed to take one specific aspect of the house and interpret it in that light.

The dominant feature of Lake Innes House is that its life in its prime was in a sole period, namely the 1840’s. The history before and after this time period, although significant, is of less importance. The interpretation then was based on the visitor asking "What time is this place?" - with the question being answered by a variety of techniques, so that they could imagine the house in its heyday.

One particular area of potential also came out of the interpretation plan and that was the great archaeological value of the site. It rendered itself ideally to archaeological investigation in a way very rarely available in Australia, namely by allowing for public access to the site while it was being excavated.

CONCLUSION

I hope this gives you a brief summary of the project from my point of view. But what have I learnt about conservation architects? Leaving aside the fact that I thoroughly enjoyed working with the principal on this project, Ian Stapleton, and his assistant Hector Abraham, the key issue to me was that I discovered conservation architects take their approach to their buildings a whole stage further than material conservators do with their objects. That is, they make decisions on a building's cultural significance and decide a course of action accordingly.

My training as a conservator has always been that we treat all objects equally and in isolation. If significance is to be interpreted then it is definitely up to the relevant curator to undertake that interpretation and dictate any decisions as a result of that interpretation to the conservator.

A conservation architect's training is such that it combines the training of conservator and curator, and therefore allows them to make decisions. But the fact remains that conservators are also often very knowledgeable about objects in their area of specialisation. Should we then, fellow material conservators, be taking a more active, some might say more responsible, role in including aspects of cultural significance in our decisions as to how to treat objects? I beg the question without answering it.

I just conclude by saying how interesting it would be to have the evocative character of, say, a piece of furniture as a criterion in how it was to be treated.