The road from Burra: thoughts on using the Charter in the future

Caitlin Allen

Those of us who don't know professional life without the Burra Charter owe its creators a vote of thanks. We have inherited a solid and simple framework for understanding and managing cultural heritage places in Australia. It is clear that it has had a profound effect both here and overseas. It has provided a common 'heritage' language, helped us find a consistent means of assessing, weighing and comparing the ways we value heritage places and has provided a common anchor for making decisions about how to care for these places. It has legitimised the heritage profession, become the basis for most of our legislative and management systems at all levels of government across the country and has helped put Australia on the international heritage map. Used wisely it is an important tool and frame of reference for heritage practitioners, policy makers, legislators, developers, interest groups and local communities wishing to identify and protect places of heritage significance.

There can however be some traps for the unwary in the way the Charter is applied to heritage practice and the particular way it focuses practice certain ways. It seems appropriate, as we celebrate the Charter's 25th anniversary, to examine some of the potential problems with the application of the Charter and to reflect on broader issues of increasing importance in cultural heritage management in Australia. In particular, the need to better articulate heritage values and principles within broader social, economic and environmental frameworks. This paper aims to bring together and highlight the emerging recognition of these issues as a basis for looking to the future of heritage practice in Australia.

Professionalisation of heritage practice

One of the key benefits of the Burra Charter process has been the professionalisation of heritage practice itself, through consistency in cultural values assessment and standardising management practices (Lennon 2000). This air of legitimacy has greatly assisted in gaining the current levels of support for cultural heritage conservation in Australia. This professionalisation has also had its down side.

We have in many respects isolated non-professionals, particularly local communities from having a legitimate and respected role in heritage conservation. Community efforts are often viewed with suspicion by heritage professionals despite the fact that it is often these efforts that have saved many heritage places in practice and have led to their conservation and continued use long before heritage management became a profession. Indeed there is often conflict (or at least difference) between the professionally held values of a place and those highlighted by the community. Most communities would probably do quite well without the Burra Charter to help them decide why a place is valuable. But it can be useful to those communities to help them speak the 'correct' language when attempting to advocate for heritage with heritage professionals or consent authorities and to understand appropriate management responses for significant places. This is not to suggest that there isn't an important role for heritage professionals who can often appreciate the broader context in which heritage places might be valued or can bring technical conservation expertise not present in the community. Many local heritage advisors reflect the ways in which a collaborative approach between professional and community can be productive and mutually respectful.

Consciously or unconsciously excluding communities from an active role in heritage management has long been recognised as a serious problem in regard to Aboriginal places. Far clearer guidelines for partnerships between professionals and communities exist for such places, even to the extent of completely handing management over to Aboriginal communities. While issues relating to self-determination are often different with non-Aboriginal communities and their heritage assets, some aspects of community involvement models can be helpful. Some successful models for historic heritage already exist. Community heritage studies (which actually ask the community what they value) and community/professional partnership arrangements place the power of decision-making, at least about what is important, equally in the hands of local communities and professionals (see for some examples the extensive bodies of work in this area done by Meredith Walker and Chris Johnston). In general however, we seem to have the balance slightly wrong in favour of professional heritage practice, which tends to involve other parties only on its terms.

Exclusion of communities can have a more serious effect on the way we determine (and hence manage) heritage significance. Seriously measuring and accounting for community expectations can be difficult and time consuming. The Burra Charter recognises the need to consider social significance as a specific value criterion but this is rarely possible within the budget or the time allowed for most heritage projects.

As a value system with associated means of deciding what actions are right and wrong in conservation terms, in reality all the significance criteria in the Burra Charter are based on social values at particular points in time. More often than not, this value isn't even measured on a community basis. What heritage value assessment really is in most cases, is the value of a place to the heritage practitioner or practitioners who are charged with making the decision, as much as they try to take other views and factors into account. Even if it is couched in terms such as "historic" or "aesthetic" value the decision is still a subjective one and made by an individual or small group who have an inherent bias of one form or another. As environmental historian and commentator George Seddon noted:

Part of the difficulty with such studies is that it is not always clear what should count as evidence. The only perceptions we know directly are our own. We guess at the perceptions of others from what they say they have perceived, what they record, what they omit, how they behave (Seddon 1997: 65).
Of course trying to ask people directly what they think is problematic for both project budgets and timeframes. It will probably be impossible to ever really know what Australians as a whole see and what has shaped these attitudes (Seddon 1997: 64). So we are left with the heritage practitioners’ guess about what is important to the community, tinged with their own personal beliefs on the matter. Perhaps with more serious attempts made to assess social value heritage outcomes will change and possibly for the better in some cases. It will be important, but potentially nerve-wracking and challenging, for historic heritage managers to let go some of their control over the decision making process and more seriously measure and account for community expectations and values in a realistic way.

**Fabric versus intangible values**

There is still debate about whether the Burra Charter can and should be continually changed to try and cover every issue relating to heritage conservation or if we should aim for a set of charters or guidelines that complement each other. But the current impact of using one largely focused around conserving heritage fabric and place is fairly obvious. It is particularly important here to recognise the role the Charter has played in underpinning our current heritage legislation around the country. While many legislative systems do not currently embrace the full range of values and conservation options discussed by the Charter they all share a focus on the importance of heritage fabric and place. This is particularly the case for those that manage historic as opposed to Aboriginal cultural heritage. The result has been a lack of protection or even value for intangible heritage values in public service delivery of heritage management outcomes and in the work of many heritage practitioners who work within these systems. This is particularly the case for cultural traditions and practices that exist in their own right, but can also be the case for values that attach to a particular place.

The Burra Charter does discuss conservation of intangible values. Consistent with the Charter’s focus on fabric and place however, value is based only around cultural traditions and practices that attach themselves to place or fabric. In practice these values can be vulnerable if their conservation conflicts with conservation of the fabric of the place itself, which seems to implicitly have a higher status unless, and sometimes in spite of, the relationship between the two being clearly articulated. This can be particularly evident in the application of state government consent processes for listed heritage items. Take for example an historic wooden bridge, which is attributed a high level of heritage significance and statutorily listed on the basis of its rarity and technical excellence. The original design and maintenance intention was for the bridge to be cyclically dismantled and rebuilt as components failed. Under current legislative protection, which places prime importance on existing heritage fabric such action would be akin to heritage vandalism. In this case while we may protect historic fabric and previous evidence of repair and modification, it is at the cost of the knowledge and practical skills about how to repair and maintain it. The bridge will eventually begin to fail, pass out of use, lose maintenance funding and fall down. In the end we lose both the bridge and the skills to build or maintain another one.

We are also choosing to halt the continuance of the working life of the bridge in the name of heritage conservation without recognising that in the future, physical evidence of the conservation process will itself become a layer of cultural use. Why that layer of cultural use should be given primacy over another (the continuance of use and maintenance according to the original specifications) is often not clearly articulated, where it clearly needs to be. It is important for heritage practitioners to be aware that conservation practice itself is just another layer of cultural activity on a site, not a means of freezing past layers in time that is somehow exempt from being a cultural construct in itself. If this site was an Aboriginal fish trap instead, the need for the community to maintain cultural practices by using and hence continually changing the historic form (but not the function) of the fish trap would probably be respected and permitted. This activity is not seen to impinge on the cultural values of the place but rather to maintain them. There are of course other factors at play in the decision apart from cultural practice versus fabric. In the case of the bridge, it would be important to decide what we are aiming to conserve and tip the scales accordingly. There is no doubt that in some cases, the direct experience provided by the fabric would outweigh the desire to maintain form, function and cultural practice and of course they are not always mutually exclusive. Examples of inappropriately citing continuation of use as a reason to destroy heritage fabric also abound and no doubt leads to nervousness that in turn can lead to consideration of historic fabric as untouchable. What is missing is an adequate application of decision-making mechanisms that allows for cultural activity and fabric to receive balanced consideration where appropriate.

The Burra Charter’s focus on fabric and place and hence underplaying of more intangible aspects of heritage was one of the factors that led to its revision in 1999. This was largely prompted by requests to make the Charter more applicable to the values and management options for Aboriginal places. While this has gone some way to addressing the value and management of intangible values attached to place the revisions don’t address intangible values that exist in their own right. Anita Smith pointed this out in a paper given to a forum at Adelaide University in 2002 (Smith 2002). It highlights an increasing focus of interest in intangible values over the last ten years and in particular since UNESCO’s adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, in 2003 (Kuruk 2004). Deciding how best to approach more formal recognition of these principles in an Australian context will be one of the key challenges Australia ICOMOS will face in the next few years.

Without adequate means to preserve the skills, practices and events themselves, we are only left with the option of interpreting them from records, the empty shells of places, or other remnant evidence of past activity. Sometime this is unavoidable. But while an archaeological site, an interpretative display or a museum may be interesting, no doubt most people would prefer to directly experience the real thing. It is unfortunate that with the rise of the heritage interpretation profession, the option of interpretation is increasingly seen as more attractive in terms of cost and effort than conserving the use or practice (or even the place) itself. Too often interpretation is used (largely by people outside the interpretation profession) as an antidote for bad planning or as a legitimate excuse for the destruction of a heritage place. Why bother maintaining the practice when we can interpret it later. Of course considered use of interpretative devices and skills can no doubt enhance understanding and lead to protection and appreciation, but we need to be careful to use interpretation wisely as a tool not a replacement. An example of a program that is aiming to maintain use (hence the site interprets itself) is the National...
Trust’s program to keep historic cinemas working as cinemas. This reinvigoration program has been largely successful in maintaining not only the buildings themselves, but the use. The experience of the place can be had directly and not through the lens of a professional interpreter.

We are already well advanced in the recognition that intangible cultural values are key elements of significance in understanding and managing Aboriginal places. This has been incorporated comparatively successfully into legislation and management frameworks around the country. Aboriginal communities themselves are also highly skilled at continuance of cultural traditions and practices. We are not so fortunate in historic heritage management and could learn much from the ways Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal heritage managers approach these issues. Take for example a recent case in regional NSW where a woodchopping festival held in the same community for many years was threatened with closure, largely due to insurance and funding difficulties. Setting aside for a moment, the ethos of woodchopping in our more environmentally aware society, it was clear that this yearly festival, while important to the local community in its own right, was also one of the few remaining forums for celebrating and continuing a cultural practice and set of techniques that has been an important element of rural life in Australia since European settlement. The local community (and national woodchopping community) were struggling to find a means of protecting this event and this cultural practice within the NSW Heritage System. The only available option was to list the site of the event, which in no way guaranteed the continuation of the event itself. The community is currently attempting to have woodchopping recognised as a national heritage sport at the federal level, hence potentially attracting funding to allow these skills to be passed to successive generations. This example highlights a significant gap in our heritage management system. As previously highlighted, much thought has already occurred in relation to affording intangible Aboriginal cultural values. More work needs to be done in seeing how these existing systems can be adapted or built on to protect intangible non-Aboriginal cultural values. Perhaps a program where indigenous people teach historic heritage managers ways of protecting and continuing knowledge and more importantly practice of traditional skills and customs would be one way to address this problem.

**Focus on process**

As a process for valuing and conserving heritage, the Charter has undoubtedly improved heritage conservation standards and outcomes in many ways. The number of countries seeking to model their own heritage processes on ours, is testament to its effectiveness and simplicity. In practice in Australia however, while the basic process is good, management systems based on the principles of the Charter can become too process-oriented. It is unfortunately common for conservation actions to be insisted upon simply because the processes to implement them exist, regardless of whether they are suitable for the site in question. This could happen for example if we assume archaeological sites should always be recorded because (in certain jurisdictions) the legislative provisions to require it exist, although it is clearly not the intention of the legislation to give intrinsic value to everything below the ground over a certain age. Being too cautious or inflexible can sometimes be just as problematic as not applying heritage management principles at all. Similarly asset managers can fall prey to a system where formalised heritage requirements are used as the basis of a tick box system, being satisfied that the process has been followed without assessing the quality of the end result. Regulatory authorities can also fall into this trap under resource and workload pressures.

Unfortunately in many of these circumstances, articles of the Charter are often quoted as if their mere existence justified the validity of any action that seems to match their intention. Not only is it dangerous to isolate articles rather than applying the philosophy as a whole, inappropriate conservation actions are sometimes agreed upon because they fit the prescribed process. Legislative provisions based on the intention of the Charter can also be misused in this way to achieve a process rather than a value derived outcome. If the broader principles and philosophy of the Charter were applied in a considered manner in these cases it is more likely that a satisfactory and case appropriate outcome would be reached. It is particularly important to ensure that newer practitioners who are starting their careers with the Burra Charter and associated systems already in place are educated in the meanings and values that lie behind the system. It is natural when you are less experienced to fall back on uncritical application of process (although practitioners of longer standing are not immune to this). A greater degree of caution and awareness on the part of heritage practitioners and statutory authorities and better on the job specialist training opportunities for new starters would go a long way to avoiding process driven outcomes.

**Broader social, economic and environmental frameworks**

Much effort has been expended over the last 25 years to establish heritage conservation practice in Australia and to set up the necessary heritage specific legislative frameworks and policies to achieve its aims. The Burra Charter has been an important foundation for this process. Over this time, there has also been an effort to use other non-heritage specific mechanisms, particularly urban planning policy, to further heritage conservation outcomes in a more integrated way. What is still missing is the presence of heritage outcomes within other less obvious but probably more important aspects of public policy. Without this change in focus, support for cultural heritage in all its varied forms will never be seen as ‘core business’ for public policy development. Of particular importance are the inclusion of heritage values and the achievement of heritage conservation outcomes through economic theory and policy and the recognition of the importance of heritage places and traditions in sustaining social health and identity of communities. In some larger organisations the idea of ‘triple bottom line’ reporting on social, environmental and economic descriptors is already including heritage within broader environmental values. The analysis is often meaningless however as the frameworks themselves are often not set up the right way to incorporate heritage issues.

There is increasing recognition by environmentalists and policy makers that environmental degradation needs to be factored into economic modelling if we are to have any chance of successfully managing some of the serious environmental threats that modern society has created. Similarly, although for different reasons, there has been increasing recognition that in a market driven society, cultural heritage conservationists must begin to seek ways in which to modify economic models not only to reflect the
economic and social impacts of heritage degradation but also to incorporate mechanisms to assist heritage conservation. In particular, we need to better understand the potential effects of an economic model that internalizes the depreciation of cultural environmental capital and what the impacts of accounting for that depreciation may have on overall economic health (Thampapillai 2002). Key to this aim is the collection of data on real world economic benefits of heritage conservation, studies on which have already been completed overseas (Allison et al. 2000) and are currently underway in Australia under the guidance of the National Heritage Chairs and Officials and individual state agencies. Economists have also turned their minds to data collection methodologies, ways of measuring economic values for heritage places and mechanisms for applying modified economic models based on natural heritage values to cultural heritage (See Abelson 2000, Lockwood and Spenneman 2000, Thrasyby 2000 for examples). Of course talking in economic terms doesn’t sit well with many heritage advocates and it presents the risk the heritage places will be under threat wherever a better economic argument could be made. But this threat will exist regardless of whether heritage professionals enter the debate or not and we will be better armed if we do. Continuing work in this area is vital to the long-term success of heritage conservation, especially for heritage places or practices that are not currently seen to be economically viable within current economic models. Now that we have the methodologies in place to understand heritage places in a more consistent and measurable way it is imperative to continue examining non-heritage specific mechanisms for heritage conservation.

As a precursor to the success of these initiatives, it is important for us to re-examine the ways we articulate the value of heritage conservation (in non-economic terms) and how we go about convincing others of this value. We may be adept at talking about heritage value in terms of aesthetics or historic importance. The criteria may be easily applied in a range of situations and help lend a greater level of certainty to decision making about management of heritage places. In the end however, it is a tool for expressing and achieving deeper needs about our relationship to the world around us and defining our place in it. We are particularly unskilled at articulating these deeper needs which are perhaps the greatest key to success in achieving broader community support for heritage conservation. Apart from the occasional glib motherhood statement in public service policy that ‘heritage improves our quality of life’ and a vague sense that quite a lot of people enjoy it, we are lacking serious, recent, philosophical consideration of the attitudes that underlie the need for heritage conservation practice to exist at all, particularly in the Australian context (Thompson 2000 is an exception). This kind of deeper articulation is also noticeably absent from much public policy-making, where it is particularly needed. A recent example is the NSW Heritage Office’s draft discussion paper on sustainability and heritage (NSW Heritage Office 2004), which suffers from the absence of a clearly articulated statement as to why other public policy-makers should care about the historic environment in the first place. If we are to convince others outside the confines of the heritage profession of the value of heritage conservation in order to advance the success of heritage conservation initiatives, clarity in and supportive detail for this kind of basic values statement would seem to be an important foundation.

While many heritage practitioners are pushing for further development of technical skills, revision of guidelines and further focus on ‘the profession’, if we are unwary and fall into the trap of being too precious and inflexible, excluding non-professional methods and viewpoints, we seriously run the risk of being seen as a hindrance or an irrelevancy. In addition to being aware of these issues within our profession, it is also important to continue looking outwards. Continually improving our means of articulating the deeper values motivating heritage practice, our understanding of factors which impact on heritage conservation and developing new ways of realistically integrating heritage conservation into broader environmental, social and economic agendas are all important focuses for the next 25 years of the activities of Australia ICOMOS.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to various colleagues and friends for many enjoyable discussions over a number of years that have helped shape my thoughts on current heritage practice. Of particular relevance to this paper are: Vince Scarcella, David McBeath, Claire Everett, Peter Romne, Tracy Ireland, Anita Smith, Duncan Marshall, Liz Vines, Sharon Sullivan, Kristal Buckley, Alan Croker, Dodo Thampapillai, Ken Cussen and David Foster. Many of you may not remember the conversation that led to your name being in this list, but thanks for the real (and imagined) examples, shared experiences, and comments of frustration and enthusiasm.

References