The ugly historian
MILES LEWIS

In recent years all of us in the conservation field have been brought face to face with that formerly elusive poteroo, the Historian. This has come about through the development of the concept of cultural significance in the Burra Charter, the establishment of official bodies to determine the significance or importance of buildings and other places, the increasing demand for conservation analyses of these places, the increasing market for urban and area conservation studies, and the increasing desire for the various authorities to back up their decisions with citations or statements of significance. And it has not always been a happy encounter.

I have commented elsewhere on the idea of historical themes as the basis of conservation policy, and on the extraordinary collection of such themes that was seriously advanced by a historian commissioned for the purpose in Victoria. I have commented in the same place on conservation studies in which historians on the steering committees have failed to exert themselves to ensure even minimal historical standards. I turn now to the performance of historians in assessing individual places - and my comments do apply to all places in the Burra Charter sense, even though I will refer, for convenience and from preference, mainly to buildings.

I talk here about 'historians' in the restricted sense in which they do themselves, although in fact architectural historians are also historians just as much as their political, social, economic, technical and other historical colleagues. I do not consider that the mere lack of architectural skills gives any one of those sub-disciplines a special role in the conservation field which is denied to my own specialisation. The History Institute in Victoria exhibits this strange misapprehension. At its inception, that august body was most anxious to enrol architectural historians amongst its members, and to seek subsidies from teaching departments of architecture. But when it came to preparing its official comments on a relevant policy issue, the Victorian Conservation Plan, it forgot that those members existed. Clearly, they were not real historians.

The problem is not that historians (and I now mean, once more, the common or garden non-architectural type) are intrinsically bad, but rather that they are naive and behind the times. Historians in conservation are now at about the stage reached by architects in the 1950s and 1960s. The architectural mood at that time was one of confidence and of ambivalence - confidence because the modern movement was unassailable, because it in itself contained the criteria by which to assess works of the past, and because preservation was an issue in only a very few special cases which were not a challenge to the principal activities of the profession. Architects were ambivalent because it was not quite clear why they should feel any concern for the past at all. Historians are similarly arrogant about their standards, and they are ambivalent about whether the preservation of the physical evidence is of any real historical value.

In those architecturally halcyon decades there was virtually no need to justify judgements made about buildings. They were made on the basis of connoisseurship. There were no citations or statements of significance, but if one was asked to say anything more than 'A', 'B' or 'C', then a few words such as 'Georgian', 'charming', 'notable', 'nobly sited' and even 'historic' would suffice. Of these, 'Georgian' is the crucial one. Many of the architects making the assessments were, or had been, practising in a Georgian Revival mode. Others, who were modernists, shared their interest in simple, abstract and often symmetrical forms, light colours and careful proportions.

These were the hidden criteria for assessing old buildings, whether they were actually Georgian or not. The National Trust white paint syndrome, still not expunged from the psyches of some of the elders of conservation, was a symptom of this phase. Another is the persistent desire to reinterpret and improve upon the past, and to present it as it might have been in an ideal world.

Why should present-day historians be compared with the architectural connoisseurs of the last generation? Their attitude is essentially the same. They approach and organise the past by way of strong ideological structures of their own - well, of course we all do, but most of us try to limit our personal bias, and to make
explicit what we cannot eliminate. Not only have architectural historians almost entirely avoided putting on the latest post-modernist spectacles, they have (in Australia, if not elsewhere) entirely avoided putting on the site, as opposed to this last visit nor on any other occasion circumlocution, and when pressed to answer a direct answer to any question. More seriously than this, he refused to give more than an hour he conceded that neither sophisticated answer was required. After he launched here into a tide of length, and in a very rambling manner, about the depressions which followed them. Now, in fact most exemplified in the structures on the site, as opposed to the goods he produced, his political activities, writings, or other concerns. Nor was he bothered whether the buildings now on the site were in fact the same ones which had existed at the significant period.

More seriously than this, he refused to give a direct answer to any question. When had he been to the site? He finally admitted that it was last weekend, but whether on Saturday or Sunday he was unsure. Had he walked along Jones Street? He could never bring himself to give a straight answer to this. Had he actually been into the site? He launched here into a tide of circumlocution, and when pressed to answer yes or no, insisted that a 'more sophisticated' answer was required. After more than an hour he conceded that neither on this last visit nor on any other occasion had he actually entered the site. This historian was arguing for the importance of buildings which he had never seen, that he insisted that his judgement as a historian depended 99.9% upon the documents, not upon seeing the actual bricks and mortar. So the bricks and mortar do not convey much about history? No, not unless they are interpreted. Would the interpretation alone serve the purpose, without keeping the buildings? Dear me no. Why not why, if he himself didn't need to see the buildings to understand the site, should the public be made to see them? More circumlocution.

Historians really must accept a few basic principles. One is that the importance of people and their activities is not necessarily reflected significantly in physical remains. If we had the choice of losing Shakespeare's plays or Anne Hathaway's house, we would not hesitate to sacrifice the house. By contrast, generally speaking, architectural significance is reflected best in actual buildings. Therefore it is no good complaining all the time about the number of buildings preserved on architectural grounds. Nor is it any good to assert that the mere fact of somebody building, or living in, or working in a building makes it significant. We have to know that the building played a significant role - that it enabled or constrained the important activities of the occupant, or that it in some useful way illustrates or gives evidence about them.

Only within the last few days have I heard a historian argue that an enormous industrial complex should be preserved on the grounds that the workers there were amongst the first to vote Labor: but there was nothing on the site which reflected this historical consideration in any tangible way whatsoever. Not long since, Chris McConville was arguing that the land boom of the 1880s and the expansion of the 1920s were no more historically important than the depressions which followed them. Now, in itself, this is fine, but he was arguing in the context of conservation - implicitly claiming that as much should be preserved of the depressions as the booms, which is utter nonsense. Poverty, more or less by definition, generates less in the way of physical remains than affluence. The twenty years of silences may be very important in a musical work, but there is little point in choosing this section alone to perform as an encore. As it happens the Victorian National Trust has recently discovered that its own property 'Medlow', in Camberwell, is in fact a relic of the 1890s depression, a land boom subdivision which was aborted, and the Trust is grappling manfully with this novel type of significance. But it is being researched by an architectural historian, because the
historian who first investigated it missed the point entirely.

Another principle is that the building must be the same one which existed when the significance was generated. There is nothing wrong with those historical bodies which resort to throwing together the few cliches which might constitute the historian's name is included, so should be the builder's. Now this is absolute nonsense. In sophisticated buildings, where tenders are called, the identity of the builder makes no significant difference to the finished product. There are exceptions, such as when his negligence causes a historic collapse, as was the case with the British Tobacco Building in Melbourne, but fortunately these are rare. By way of a test, ask your favourite historian to examine half a dozen structures by a given builder and then to use his knowledge to identify some more. But don't hold your breath.

A fourth principle is that significance is effable. If it can't be expressed in words, and in good clear English at that, it doesn't exist. No historian, any more than any architect, is entitled to ask his audience to place their faith in his connoisseurship, take him on trust, or will through his 'more sophisticated' answers.

In fact the acid test comes when you sit your expert down to write a citation for a place or building. The old-style architectural connoisseur, after exhausting the few cliches which I have previously mentioned, resorts to throwing together a few facts:

A two-storey Georgian brick house with a Corinthian portico, sited on the top of a hill, and intact but for the addition of a carport.

The new generation of architect-or, more correctly, architectural historian-says

One of the first colonial revival houses in Victoria, designed by H D Annear and betraying in its joinery, ventilators and other details his interest in such other stylistic sources as the Chinese and the Beaux Arts. The carport was one of the first by Annear, and indeed one of the first examples in Australia of this novel element.

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Your historian, more than likely, will develop the primitive architect's citation by the addition of even more facts, such as:

A two-storey Georgian house built by the local contractors Grobert and Leibert for Frederick Jones, prominent milk bar owner and councillor of the Shire of Upotipotipo from 1927 to 1933. It has a Corinthian portico, &c., &c.

What should the historian have said? Well the odds are that he should have said nothing, for only a small proportion of significant buildings are historically significant. But it may be that there is something to be said about how this house represented the vanguard of change in an area which was formerly industrial, or the breaching of post-war building restrictions, or the subject of an epoch-making lawsuit, or the focus of an important strike, or that it became the setting for Patrick White's first novel. But in many of these cases the builder's name, or the owner's, may remain as sublimely irrelevant as the brand of the oven or the colour of the curtains.

It was during an interval in a hearing before the Victorian Historic Buildings Council that a historian who was an ex-member of the Council itself, but now, like me, engaged in the current case, remarked that he supposed we could look forward to a slide show from me. The remark may have been either an ingenious or a flippant one, but I sensed in it undertones which are familiar to me. Historians (unless I am becoming paranoid) tend to think that the use of illustrations in analysing buildings is some sort of cheap trick of dubious academic validity, and they don't seem to recognise the specialised knowledge and skill required to do such a thing properly. They seem to think that there ought to be some respectable way of dealing with buildings that could ignore all visual aspects, if not all physical manifestations of any sort. They would of course be horrified if I were to suggest, by way of a parallel, that they should conduct their own discussions without any references to dates.

In Victoria the Historic Buildings Council has on occasion issued guidelines as to what might constitute the architectural and/or...
historic importance' specified in its own Act. They have not been terribly helpful in relation to architecture - for example a building might be important because it was typical, or because it was exceptional, which covers pretty well everything. They were still less explicit about historical importance, but recently the Council has published a booklet by its own chairman, Graeme Davison, Professor of History at Monash University, entitled What Makes a Building Historic?

Professor Davison has made some very useful points. One is that historians have not been able 'so far' to produce the sort of taxonomic framework used, or implied, by architectural historians when they rank and compare buildings in terms of style, technology and so on. Another is that there are ambiguities in the very idea of 'historic importance'. And there is much more here by way of cogent and sensible explanation of what might constitute historic significance. So it is clear that Davison is not one of the ugly historians, but we search almost in vain for such clarity and reason among his colleagues.

REFERENCES

5. I have discussed citations and statements of significance at greater length in my 'The Analysis of Buildings' Historic Environment, III, 1 (1983), especially pp.52-5.