The Application of ICOMOS Guidelines to towns and other urban areas

MEREDITH WALKER

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to review the Australia ICOMOS Guidelines for Conservation Analyses and Plans which are now in operation on a trial basis, and specifically (quoting from the brochure) to comment on 'the investigative and evaluative processes which determine the cultural significance as a basis for conservation policy'.

The invitation to speak included the hope that each paper will be able to address such questions as:

- What are the special problems and particular techniques of analysing places in that category?

- Is there any difference in practice or in sophistication between the different states and territories of Australia?

- Have there been any recent analyses which have specifically attempted to follow the principles of the Burra Charter and the Guidelines?

- Do the Burra Charter and Guidelines apply well to the category?

The title of this paper 'Urban Conservation Areas' introduces the principal problem and misunderstandings concerning the analyses of cultural significance of towns and other urban areas, as well as measures to retain and recover that significance.

An 'urban conservation area' is a technique for conservation, a method of highlighting an urban area in which heritage or cultural significance is a major factor to be considered in its future. The general use of the term causes confusion: in New South Wales the National Trust now uses the term
'urban conservation area' as a general designation for classified urban areas, many of which would be more accurately described as villages, towns, main street, suburbs or portions of these.

The analyses of these places, and the preparation of management plans is thus integrated and even confused with the more general concerns of 'character', 'amenity' and civic improvement. Their cultural significance is primarily perceived as 'aesthetic'.

The reasons why this is so are easily described and understood: for example, the influence of European ideas and practice; the strong involvement of architects (keen on the aesthetic); the concern with groups of buildings; and the difficulties of obtaining more substantial data to allow other issues to be properly perceived.

The use of the term 'urban conservation area' for listing in fact foreshadows the possible technique or method of conservation. It is useful in that it promotes discussion about the difference between 'preservation' and 'conservation' which is a normal concern of residents. The drawing of boundaries around conservation areas has also been a useful promotional gimmick. But, it has its disadvantages, one of which is that its use in New South Wales implies that the decision to conserve has been made formally, whereas the National Trust listing in New South Wales only means that the place has been investigated to the point where its heritage (cultural significance) is recognised as a major issue in its future; but not of course, the only issue. In some places it might not be practicable for the area to be conserved due to other community needs.

The National Trust in New South Wales defines an Urban Conservation area as 'an area of importance within whose boundaries controls are necessary to retain and enhance its character'.

A useful definition for the early 1970s; but out of date in the current standards of perception and heritage controls.

Joan Domicelj, in summarising a National Trust seminar in Victoria entitled 'Urban Conservation at a Local Level' said:
This seminar has helped to point out the confusion that exists when we use the term 'urban conservation'. Urban conservation in its broad sense should not properly be considered as an activity: it is not a forceful thing, but rather like a request to stop beating your wife ... What I wish to say is that urban conservation in the roundest sense is proper planning. It is the responsibility of local councils, and is simply the council's obligation, and the populations obligation, to care for what it has; to care for the building stock; to make sure that new development is an enhancing process rather than a destructive one. ... it does not even in theory, require very heavy legislation to make it possible.

She continued to point out another type of 'urban conservation'; that concerned with heritage, and which required clearer definition to formulate and administer controls.

The analysis of cultural significance of urban areas has been largely associated and confused with the broader considerations of urban character (or townscape) and with urban amenity. This has led to confusion, misunderstanding in the policy and management of areas, and, regrettably, to an over concern with enhancement which frequently destroys and falsifies evidence.

BRIEF EXPLANATION OF THE BURRA CHARTER AND THE GUIDELINES FOR CONSERVATION ANALYSES AND PLANS

Both these documents, the 'Burra Charter' and the 'Guidelines' promote a methodical approach to conservation of places of cultural significance.

The Burra Charter is frequently misunderstood in New South Wales and Queensland, with more than a hint of vengeance and sometimes an attitude that borders on stupidity. Very briefly, the essence of the Burra Charter is:

that the cultural significance of a place is embodied in its fabric, its contents, its setting, its ethos, and the associated documents;

that the cultural significance of a place is best retained and recovered by methodical procedures of research, examination, and decision making, and by the recording of these;
that the keeping of records will facilitate interpretation and knowledge of that place and other places.

All the articles in the Venice Charter and the Burra Charter follow from these three basic principles, for example, any work to a place should be such that:

- intervention in the fabric is minimised and the removal of culturally significant fabric and contents is minimised; and the evidence provided by the fabric is not distorted;
- all aspects of cultural significance, and all periods of a place are respected without unwarranted emphasis on any one at the expense of others (in accordance with their significance), and that,
- the place, its fabric, together with documentary evidence and samples should together provide a clear and accurate record of decisions and works and policy.

These beliefs, and the statements that flow from them can readily be applied to all kinds of places of cultural significance.

Any apparent differences, between (say) the considerations involved in the analysis and conservation of a building, and the consideration involved in the analyses and conservation of a town, are a matter of degree rather than any essential difference. For example, buildings are adapted to accommodate services to achieve an acceptable standard of amenity, and so are towns; however, the impact on the town - both visually and in terms of cultural significance - might be greater. I am sure you can all think of other analogies.

The application of the Burra Charter to towns and urban areas requires no intellectual gymnastics; only a clear understanding of the meaning of the Charter and its definitions. As I and others have said before, the most important aspect of the Burra Charter is the adoption of a methodical approach based on an understanding of the place. The steps involved can be readily explained in a diagram.

To a large extent the Guidelines for Conservation Analyses and Plans cover these matters, but again, I believe that a simplified version to convey the essence of the method is necessary.
I don't think that anyone would question the desirability of a methodical approach to Conservation Analysis or Conservation Plans. Some method is necessary for all investigations. The essence of the Guidelines is that:

- decisions and action about any matter concerning a place of cultural significance should be preceded by an analysis, or at least a statement of cultural significance.

- that a policy, based on the analysis and an understanding of the circumstances should be formulated and adopted; and form the basis for decision and action.

- that the procedures be undertaken in a professional way, such as timing, costs, opportunities for comment etc.

The logic of this abstract is obvious. The first part of the Guidelines, dealing with conservation analyses, is relatively straightforward, and well able to be used for the analyses of the Cultural Significance of towns. The second point is not so amenable and there would be more straightforward ways of describing the preparation of conservation policies and management plans for towns and urban areas. But from experience the guidelines for plans are not ideal for buildings either. And this was foreshadowed at last February's ICOMOS meeting when they were adopted. The principal problem is that the guidelines for plans mention matters more usually concerned with building specifications and plans and also suggests much more detail than is usually considered in one single task or contract. This conference will assist this process. Attached to this paper is a list of matters essential to a management plan for towns and other urban areas. It's a beginning that took about ten minutes, but it has similarities with the contents of a conservation plan as suggested by Elizabeth Vines in a talk at the Seminar 'Urban Conservation at a Local Level' from which I quoted Joan Domicelj earlier.

I believe that the Burra Charter is applicable to all types of places of cultural significance, including towns and other urban areas, and so also are the Guidelines for Conservation Analyses although diagrams would help.
THE USE OF THE BURRA CHARTER AND THE GUIDELINES IN RESPECT OF TOWNS AND OTHER URBAN AREAS

I am sure that the great majority of people who have undertaken heritage studies of towns and urban areas in the last few years would agree with the notions expressed in the Burra Charter, but that it would be difficult to perceive this from reading the contents page of a report. Until very recently very few studies attempted a concise description of cultural significance. Many more described the character of the place which included 'historic buildings' as one, if not the, major component. There has been very little comparison with other similar areas, as is required by the Guidelines for Analysis.

There have been a large number of studies of towns and areas in Australia, particularly in the 1970s largely fostered by the Federal government's National Estate Programme. The influence of this programme has been enormous; and in addition to a large number of studies of individual places, there have also been statewide surveys funded in the period 1978-1980, which assist with comparative analysis.

Again, the authors of these studies, many of which were funded by the National Trusts, would have followed some of the notions of Charter, especially as adherence to the Charter was one of the requirements of the National Estate Grants.

For a variety of reasons there now appears to be a lull in towns and urban area studies: because many have been studied or possibly due to problems in funding. There have been very few studies since the trial adoption of the Guidelines last February, and little time for the Guidelines to have been incorporated in briefs. Anyone who conscientiously followed the Guidelines would only have done so for their own interest. I have in a Study of Morpeth, but not at the request of the client. Indeed, the New South Wales Department of Environment and Planning, whose Heritage and Conservation Branch administer many studies does not appear to be aware of the contents of the Guidelines and has certainly not adopted the Burra Charter, preferring to take a 'it's better than nothing approach'. Because they have nothing in the form of published guidelines or philosophy, the Burra Charter has proved useful.
Many of the essential components of the guidelines have been used, particularly for industrial and building sites.

The states with which I am most familiar in terms of towns and area studies are Queensland and New South Wales, and to a lesser extent, Victoria, largely from information recently sent to me. My information about other states, other than familiarity with National Estate studies, is sketchy.

Queensland

The only study of an urban area in Queensland in the last two years has been a typological study of houses in Warwick which followed the method implied by the Burra Charter. So also did the only study of St Helena Island, a comparably complicated area.

Many of the National Estate studies followed the Charter, although little consideration was given, to say, 'storage and reinstatment of culturally significant fabric' (Article 23). The most recent studies all included statements of cultural significance (National Estate significance) but, naturally these followed the 'prompts' for significance provided in the nomination form for the Register of the National Estate, namely association with a significant person, event, or cultural phase, etc. rather consideration under the adjectives in the Burra Charter definition: 'Cultural significance means aesthetic, historic, social and scientific, value for past, present and future generations'. I think that statements of significance following the 'National Estate' format are more emotionally powerful, but that the Guidelines method is more likely to be accurate. My statement of significance about Morpeth turned out better than expected.

The major purpose of these Queensland studies was to heighten awareness and therefore, only a couple of studies considered the 'conservation plan' aspects in any detail. Such an approach would have been politically 'heavy-handed'.
New South Wales

There have been many studies of townscapes and character, many with good descriptions of town character, but very few with clear analyses of cultural significance.

The methodology adopted and still in use by the Urban Conservation Committee of the National Trust in New South Wales (of which I was a foundation member) is based on character analysis. (See its recent publication 'Urban Conservation Areas - definition, delineation and purpose'.)

The Heritage and Conservation Branch of the New South Wales Department of Environment and Planning has developed a standard brief for heritage studies of towns or local government authority areas and many of these studies are under way. The brief encompasses many of the same notions as the Guidelines, namely an equal balance between analysis and conservation action, a thematic analysis of history prior to the identification of evidence of the past and hence heritage items (the equivalent term for 'places of cultural significance' under the New South Wales Heritage Act). A clear statement of significance is not required, and the brief would benefit from such an inclusion.

Victoria

In Victoria a somewhat similar brief has developed, fostered as in New South Wales, around the contribution of the state government to studies undertaken by local government authorities. It divides studies into two parts, analyses and planning but is not I think as clear as the New South Wales brief which itself would be improved by editing (as its author agrees!).

In general, both in the briefs and the studies of towns, 'conservation areas' in all states suffer from the same problems, namely the confusion between analysis and techniques. Thus, people are asked to identify areas of significance with a view to special controls being imposed when other techniques, such as a typological technique, could be applied. It would
be beneficial to discuss this aspect further, but it may be a useful exercise to prepare a standard brief and see how it fits the Guidelines.

There are significant differences between the States in respect of techniques; but before discussing these I should mention some of the problems of analysing urban areas.

PROBLEMS

The problems of analysing urban areas are generally the same as those for other types of places:

- lack of reliable and basic data about the place, e.g. statistics, maps showing components likely to be significant, such as buildings;

- information about comparable places and urban development generally;

- establishing a common understanding with the client (councils and community).

All studies are limited by resources - time, money, expertise and information. There are always special circumstances such as political matters which suggest an emphasis for the study. It is difficult to convince the client of the usefulness of the Burra Charter (although in some cases one suspects an unwillingness to understand) and this problem is best described as a lack of perception (of the scope of cultural significance). Theoretically, this does not affect analysis, but it certainly affects conservation policy and action.

The principal problem for analyses and plans is the inter-relationship of the work with other objectives. Thus, heritage conservation, has long been closely allied and confused with urban amenity. Studies are also associated with tourism, museums, and planning schemes and promotion and whilst there is some use in these associations, many of the subject studies lack a clear statement of significance, and hence conservation policy, i.e. they absorb money that might be spent on clarifying the cultural significance so that a sound policy can be developed.

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The wish to publish popular documents often appears to preclude a clear analysis. But, the community awareness of the components of heritage areas is increasing quickly.

There are many problems associated with preparing and implementing conservation policy and plan, which there is no time to discuss, for example, gentrification, - the concern about social effects of conservation which are nowadays considered in relation to other town planning controls such as redevelopment.

TECHNIQUES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE STATES

There are various techniques associated with the analyses of urban areas, but no special techniques related to the Burra Charter or Guidelines. In general, techniques of analysis develop to suit the information available, the resources (time and money), the methods of control - town planning and heritage legislation. The techniques are also influenced by fashion; by notions of what the public like and understand, and by the abilities of the study team.

For example, I am not good at sketching and I also think that sketches are a subterfuge in many studies, so I do not use them; the argument suits me.

In 1980 Miles Lewis commented on the differences between townscape studies in New South Wales and Victoria. Much of what he said still applies. Dr Lewis explained that the townscape tradition developed in England promoted by Gordon Cullen, Thomas Sharp and other in 1950s and 1960s '... was more concerned with ideas of enhancement than of restoration, of good design rather than authenticity, and especially with an overall philosophy of the picturesque'. He pointed out that 'this approach depends heavily upon taste and fashion and is much open to challenge as are fashions in the design of individual buildings'.

In Victoria, townscape studies have been more closely associated with conservation and indeed preservation issues than with more general ideas of civic improvement. Studies in Victoria have a more solid basis of...
research than those in any other state; no doubt due in large part Dr Lewis and others at Melbourne University, such as George Tibbits, who directed the 1976 Beechworth Study.

In comparison, the New South Wales studies are somewhat lightweight, as are those in Queensland, and reflect the nature of the states and the amount of funds, rather than the abilities of the people involved.

Although the Victorian studies involve much detailed research, it is clear that the perception of cultural significance is similar to that held in New South Wales and that the 'townscape' influence lingers, that to be significant, urban areas must be good-looking and have lots of old buildings, preferably in clearly definable precincts. The nomenclature is almost entirely visual and the techniques of research and preservation visual also.

Good looks and views, picturesque landscape, setting and groups of buildings with 'interesting architectural detail'. If these were the only valid criteria for significance, then many of the towns in Queensland, which have considerable evidence of the past and are very authentic, would never be recognised for their heritage significance.

In general, towns and urban areas have been preserved as groups of buildings in a pleasant (photogenic) setting rather than as entities containing several (characteristic) components, road layout, physical setting (landscape), and characteristic building uses and types - main street, hotel, banks, railway station, school, post office, and houses.

The historic and social values of towns have been overlooked also. Naturally enough, studies concentrate on the components to which controls can be applied (buildings) and other components - for which no conservation action may be perceived or necessary - are neglected, or referred to only in general terms: the road forming the boundary of the original grants, which in turn influenced the form development and orientation of the town. Mount Morgan is an example. Roads which were once railways and associated with mining, for example, Charters Towers and Newcastle, is another. There is rarely any discussion of the merits aesthetic or practical of town layout. The layout of Melbourne had been so good and also works well in Rockhampton.
The principal techniques of analysis have been:

- a visual (townscape) analysis, identifying areas of identity,

- a survey of buildings of significance to which controls should apply and sometimes in categories (n.b. the Victorian studies have very detailed information about individual buildings),

- a map showing components of character including landmarks.

These techniques are illustrated by maps, sketches, photos and are used to develop recommendations about urban conservation areas, buildings to be controlled, civic improvements (some of which probably destroy significant fabric, and distort the evidence) and interpretation and education.

Techniques for management involve controls already in use for development such as setbacks, height, building envelope, plot ratios, materials, land use. The additional controls relate to specific heritage items and to demolition. Guideline brochures for alterations and for infill development are common. Unfortunately there is a tendency for infill buildings to actively compete for attention, rather than be unobtrusive. Some authorities even actively encourage reconstruction for which there is no evidence. There may be places where this does not distort the evidence and the fabric, but our outstanding urban areas are worthy of better care.

In each state there have been studies that initiated new techniques of analysis, some of which deserve special mention:

Maldon
The study of Maldon (1977) pioneered the technique of the complete photographic record, regardless of the quality of the item, which has been used in other studies in Victoria, but only occasionally elsewhere. The benefits of it are enormous.

Yackandandah
This study, undertaken in 1975, included a building typology using computer analysis.
Beechworth
The 1976 study, led by George Tibbits, included full elevational drawings of major streets, both present and reconstructions of earlier periods indicating town evolution. Street elevations are popular in Victoria.

Ballarat
The studies of Ballarat involved very detailed assessment of buildings. The studies show what can be done for a substantial sum by people who are prepared to make a small income.

Many other notable studies have been produced in Victoria, particularly those examining inner suburbs of Melbourne.

In New South Wales notable studies include: Carcoar (a well presented analysis with policy and management), National Trust's Urban Conservation Manual and more recently the Mosman Village video show, North Sydney Study (1982), the Morpeth Study (1982) and others in preparation.

The highly visual and subjective technique used in New South Wales, particularly by the National Trust, smacks of Big Brother. It also allows little factual comparison between places and denies historic significance. Although easily understood by the surveyor my experience suggests that it adds little to the townspeople's understanding of conservation. If a person has little knowledge of the aesthetic involved he or she is not likely to appreciate the town more because of the Trust's assessment. In contrast, the facts as collected in the elevations of Beechworth had a considerable positive impact and so also do Guidelines Brochures.

Factual and pictorial information about the town and comparison with other towns is much more convincing than visual analysis.

In Tasmania, the comparative study of towns undertaken by Ken Latona highlighted the themes of towns both historically and visually and presented much useful information in a no-nonsense fashion.

In Queensland, the comparative study of towns looked at the themes of town settlement and development siting, town form and layout, typical uses and buildings (and their significance), evidence of the past and housing
styles. Forms representative of the history of towns in Queensland, and as authentic as possible were identified and towns of visual appeal (most of which were also significant for other reasons) were also included. A chart of doubtful technical usefulness, but interesting for comparisons, was prepared.

The Queensland study identified several towns where people are not living and whose significance is largely either historical and as examples of mining towns.

Somewhat similar techniques were applied in a study of towns in the Hunter Region (1981-82). However, the concentration of visual qualities is strong; where there is no significant group of buildings there is no significance.

Wingen, a small railway settlement north of Scone is a government town with allotments 2 chains wide (which was common in small, somewhat remote towns). Wingen never grew large enough to have its population recorded in the census and historic photos show a smatter of buildings much as today. The construction of these buildings is a derivation of vertical slab, with an exposed frame. It occurs in northern New South Wales and is nowadays more commonly seen in outlying towns or villages rather than towns with a population of say 3,000 or more. I suspect that Wingen is authentic: certainly there is little recent development, and its character (whilst not picturesque) is typically Australian.

I believe we are reaching a new plane in appreciation of heritage significance of towns and other urban areas; one in which:

- the use of conservation analyses will promote clearer understanding of cultural significance, including matters other than aesthetics

- there will be more concern with evidence of the past than just a concentration of aesthetics

- there will be greater comparison with other, similar areas

- studies will be integrated with planning scheme investigations and at least partly funded by the local Council
- techniques will be more factual
- recommendations and action will include guidelines
- there will be greater appreciation of industrial artifacts and land uses; many of such uses being considered visually disruptive
- extreme care will be exercised with public works and town improvements.

To assist with analysis and with our overall appreciation of towns it is desirable to add to our knowledge with studies of building types, construction details, town services, and fashions in landscape and tree planting.

In summary, whilst the Burra Charter and the Analyses section of the Guidelines are able to be used for towns and areas, there has been little attempt to do so, and most studies are bound up with the analysis of townscape rather than significant evidence or fabric, and somewhat limited by the use of conservation areas as the principal technique.

My view is not commonly held, partly at least due to the format of both documents. Mr. S.D. Martin, Administrator of the National Trust in Victoria, in a letter to me states that:

it would appear that whilst The Burra Charter has been implemented in the case of Historic Structures Reports for individual buildings, the document as such is not well suited to urban conservation studies. Subsequently, in March 1982, ICOMOS proposed a draft 'Charter for the Conservation of Urban Areas'.

Another of the major criticisms of the Charter and possibly the Guidelines is its applicability to small tasks far from the ideal, where, for example, urgency, or lack of funds makes a full study impracticable. Certainly, comprehensive analyses of places of cultural significance should be encouraged and ICOMOS has promoted these. However, it is possible to apply both documents to these matters, indeed the Guidelines specifically mention this, and I shall propose some examples.
I believe the proposed Urban Areas charter should be abandoned. The Burra Charter through its definitions was intended to apply to all places of significance. Unfortunately, the conclusion of definitions, which are usually associated with building works tends to confuse the uninitiated reader. With this document Australia ICOMOS has made a contribution to world practice in conservation. Let us make it work and not burden the public with more Charters. Similarly, let us make the Guidelines work, especially the Policy and Plan section. I have found them very useful in the last year for studies of a town (Morpeth), a suburb (Hunters Hill), a large mining site (Stanford Main No. 2) and also for writing up a comparative study of Post Offices and in a single house.

I recommend them to you.