In 1978, heritage legislation was passed in New South Wales and a small professional staff was appointed to the Heritage and Conservation Branch of the Planning and Environment Commission (PEC). We were young, green (in the 1970s sense of the word) and keen as mustard to advocate heritage conservation after the ravages of insensitive urban redevelopment in Australian towns and cities in the 1970s. Some of us had been involved in Sydney's Green Ban movement, some were drawn from interstate — National Trust and university staff, some came directly from within the existing staff of the PEC.

Greg Young, Joan Domicelj, Chris Betteridge, Pam Barnett, Helen Temple and I were amongst those first appointees, and almost immediately we were drawn into the planning and organisation of the first conference of Australia ICOMOS. It was to be held at Beechworth, under the title 'Tide of Australian Settlement', with Dr Ernest Connolly, then the Associate Director of the US National Parks Service of the Department of the Interior as the keynote speaker. I had met Dr Connolly in Washington the previous year, when the PEC had sponsored my attendance at the Cornell University Summer School in Historic Preservation, and there were many late night waits for phone calls arranging his Australian visit – the convenience of faxes and emails were not available then.

The conference was a watershed. Seventy-six participants, drawn from major teaching institutions, the National Trust, newly appointed staff at the Australian Heritage Commission and state heritage offices (notably NSW and SA) attended: the learned, the learning and the hopeful. The value of ICOMOS as an open and democratic vehicle for bringing individuals interested in conservation together and developing professional standards on a nationwide basis was immediately evident. Already, a small ICOMOS working committee had been established to examine the Venice Charter, and to consider how its practical application in Australia might work.

At the Beechworth conference 16 papers were delivered with passion. Many basic philosophical questions about conservation practice were broached and from case studies and plenary sessions, five conference resolutions emerged. The resolutions were honed in lunchtime debates such as the role of Architects vs. Archaeologists in the conservation process, discussions about the outcomes of the Venice Charter working committee; as well as rambles around the town, its cemeteries and red wine enhanced discussions of the controversial works then underway at Port Arthur and Norfolk Island.

Conference Rapporteurs Professor David Saunders and PC James noted immediately the professional problems of language, definition and the need for clarity in communication about conservation processes:

Firstly...there is a very great reason to improve and emphasise the communication role of ICOMOS....

Secondly,...the clarification of the goals of restoration, is the vital matter and definitions are incidental to that....

Thirdly...support for a three stage process of working in relation to any restoration project....

We suggest in particular that an ICOMOS Committee is formed, whose numbers represent the leading professions that are concerned with this area, in order to examine the current usage of working terms, internationally and locally in order to recommend a practice for Australia, to be adopted by ICOMOS.

Before the Conference Resolutions were adopted a cautionary word or two was delivered by Dr Connolly in his closing remarks. He noted that the then current international review of the Venice Charter by ICOMOS Committees (meeting at Ditchley Park, UK) had concluded that there should be no challenge to the principles of the Venice Charter, but some substantial terminological and reordering issues might be put to the forthcoming Moscow General Assembly of ICOMOS for consideration. A 'wait and see' implication hung in the air as we departed Beechworth.

Dr Miles Lewis attended the Moscow GA as Australia's ICOMOS voting representative, and he reported that the recommendations of that Special Committee on the Revision of the Venice Charter (Ditchley Park) had been 'arbitrarily suppressed' by the newly re-elected President of ICOMOS, Raymond Lemaire. The fear of revision of the Venice Charter was already strongly held in Europe, and it continues today, 25 years later. Why? And what role has the Burra Charter come to play in this apprehension?

Miles' report from the Moscow General Assembly of ICOMOS was, as always, totally frank. He honed in on the evident problems of ICOMOS's Eurocentric vision, and recommended that it was essential that:

Australia ICOMOS should continue to make attempts to be involved in international committees and working groups on particular topics, but at the same time should accept the inevitable and try to organise its own groups based on Australia and the immediate region.

Australia ICOMOS accepted the general philosophy of the 1964 Venice Charter, but the Beechworth conference resolutions had added weight and force to the enthusiasm of the national working committee, and less than a year later in 1979, 13 years after the Venice Charter had been adopted, at its meeting in Burra, South Australia, Australia ICOMOS adopted its own national charter – the Australia ICOMOS charter for the conservation of places of cultural significance, to be well and truly known by its short title The Burra Charter.

There was no sense of either wanton criticism or antipodean distaste for the Venice Charter in the work, rather the simple need to respectfully translate the principles to a practical document that would be specifically applicable to Australian places and cultural conditions. The Burra Charter's basic guiding philosophy was the explicit identification and conservation of the values and significances of heritage places through rigorous analysis.
Two notable aspects of the Burra Charter, quite separate from its content have also had long term impacts for the way in which Australia ICOMOS has developed and operated. The first was a strong belief that regular review and revision of the Burra Charter would be essential. This philosophical approach flowed into the site records which the charter guided, such as Conservation Plans and Significance Assessments, most of which contain policies requiring review within a 5-year period. This ensures that new research and evidence can be regularly bought to bear on a place - its values and significances reassessed and reinterpreted, not frozen in aspic and myth.

Hence, in line with the policy of regular review, in 1981 and 1988 Australia ICOMOS made revisions to the Burra Charter. Between times, various guidelines were added and the very influential Illustrated Burra Charter was published in 1992. In 1994 a thorough-going revision was initiated and the current version of the Burra Charter was approved by members in 1999. By 2000 the Burra Charter had been translated into many languages, a Burra Charter video had been completed and a revised edition of the illustrated Burra Charter was underway. Wild talk of the Burra Charter apron and tea towel ensemble regrettably proved to be without foundation.

The second influential aspect was the decision by Australia ICOMOS to ask its members to agree to 'practice within' the Burra Charter. This reflected a desire to raise understanding within the emerging heritage profession and to acknowledge that the Charter's approach to conservation/restoration was seen as a critical professional standard.

Professor Saunders had noted in introducing the 1979 Burra Charter to members that:

Australia ICOMOS continues to respect and observe the Venice Charter as a document of international agreement and sees these guidelines as following it closely in most respects; this Australian document however is now the working document for use in Australia, binding to ICOMOS membership and recommended to all Australian authorities and organisations concerned with the conservation of the built environment and all places with cultural significance. It is also intended to draw the attention of the parent body, ICOMOS, to this document, and to foreshadow that after suitable experience has tasted it (and very likely than modified it) Australia ICOMOS will press it forward as a model for the revision of the Venice Charter. (my emphasis)

In Europe however, these distant words sank without much response, and the co-ordinated web of ICOMOS-related documents continued to grow up around the revered tree of the Venice Charter - some simply declarations from conferences (Budapest Resolutions, 1972; the Declaration of Amsterdam, 1975; the Montreal Declaration 1993); others the products of intensive committee development and membership circulation (Underwater Heritage Charter 1996; Cultural Tourism Charter 1999); some from ICOMOS sources (the Washington Charter 1987, Guidelines on Education and Training 1993) or collaborations (Florence Charter 1982, the Nara Document 1994). Discussion of revising the Venice Charter was rare and its acceptance as an 'historic document' of its time was complete.

Back in the early 1980s practitioners were still teasing out the principles of the Charter in everyday practice - Miles Lewis and Jim Kerr were very vocally engaged. National ICOMOS conferences pursued controversial themes such as urban consolidation, redundancy, assessing social values.

In 1982 the first edition of Jim Kerr's The Conservation Plan founded on the Burra Charter approach was published, following a series of seminars in 1981. It is now in its sixth imprint, its influence internationally recognised, its evolving process demonstrated in thousands of Conservation Plans, culminating, perhaps in Jim's most recent publication, the Sydney Opera House Conservation Plan, utilising also the Principles prepared by Joern Utzon.

In the early Eighties, various UK Architecture firms and university faculties had heard of the Burra Charter, and when I attended the York Summer School in 1984 (one of a constant stream of Australians enrolling to hear Professor Derek Linstrum), I was taken aback to be chided by one eminent lecturer about Australia's need to create a simpler version of the Venice Charter ... it seemed that 'in Britain, we know what to do without being told'. A decade later it was satisfying to see the impact of Australian ICOMOS colleagues at work in UK architectural practices and in English Heritage, successfully promoting the practice and process of Conservation Plans, and the application of the Burra Charter principles.

At least two other national ICOMOS Committees have developed national conservation Charters. In 1992 New Zealand ICOMOS produced the Aoteora Charter, which follows the spirit of the Venice Charter and the process of the Burra Charter, presenting a statement of professional practice for its own members, affirming the protocols of the Treaty of Waitangi.

In 1997, the Chinese government (through SACH, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage) with the Getty Conservation Institute and the Australian Heritage Commission entered a tripartite agreement to develop a charter for the conservation of cultural heritage sites in China, which would draw upon the Burra Charter. The project was organised in close collaboration with Australia ICOMOS and in 2002 The Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China was finalised.

Other nations have simply adopted the Burra Charter without adaptation. I was surprised to learn earlier this year whilst on a UNESCO Mission in South Africa, that there, Conservation Plans simply adopt the Burra Charter process and philosophy, often including the Australian document directly as an appendix (a joint Australia ICOMOS/South Africa ICOMOS charter project is currently being developed).

Like the Venice Charter, the Burra Charter has taken on a life of its own, beyond the clutches of ICOMOS family from which it grew. Australia ICOMOS has recently become aware that a professional group in India is closely examining the Burra Charter as it develops a Conservation Charter for the sub-continent. The draft Hoi An Protocols developed by the Asian Academy in Bangkok in 2003 incorporates sections of the Burra Charter verbatim, a more worrying trend in the absence of context.

The Burra Charter has been published in many languages with encouragement by Australia ICOMOS. Try a quick web search on the words 'Burra Charter' and 4400+ mentions appear, many from teaching institutions as diverse as the Universities of Pennsylvania and Mumbai. Its influence is more far-reaching than its enthusiastic drafters could possibly have imagined.

Accompanying the globalisation of the Burra Charter's influence, has been the active engagement of Australian practitioners in overseas heritage agencies and organisations, especially at international ICOMOS levels. Australia did take heed of Miles Lewis' 1984 recommendations to get involved on the international scene, and local members have been
appointed to most ICOMOS International Scientific Committees over the years. Several ISCs have been based in Australia at various times.

Max Bourke was the first Australian elected to the International Executive Committee of ICOMOS, and although another Australian representative was disappointingly unsuccessful at the Washington elections in 1987, Joan Domicelj was elected in 1991, serving two terms; followed by myself in 1996, currently completing my third triennium next year. Throughout my period on the International Executive Committee, the tension between the Burra Charter and the Venice Charter, through international terminology and practice has always been intense, with a rather Old World/New World flavour.

Between 1999 and 2002 I was convener of a small working group established by the ICOMOS Executive Committee that worked extensively on the document which became the Ethical Commitment Statement for ICOMOS Members. With many, many drafts and circulations, it became a touchstone for re-examining some of the difficult issues – terminology for starters – should we use ‘preservation’ or ‘conservation’ (we opted for both, in the final document); ‘place’ or ‘monument and site?’; how should the various ICOMOS Charters be mentioned? Should we note only the Venice Charter, or acknowledge the whole garden of ICOMOS-related guidelines, charters and principles? What should the scope of the members’ commitment to ICOMOS be? Were they to be asked to ‘practice within’ the Venice Charter, for example?

The Statement was adopted by ICOMOS at the Madrid General Assembly in 2002. It includes a regular review clause, and can indeed be modified by the ICOMOS Executive Committee at any time. It represents the first attempt to nominate a philosophical relationship between practice and ethical principles for ICOMOS members. Its first criticism has been that it may inadvertently appear to close the doors of ICOMOS by requiring commitment to conservation principles. It seems that some ICOMOS members do not wish to be affected by standard conservation principles, even the Venice Charter, especially cities or corporations which feel the need for flexibility.

The arguments for regular review of doctrine and terminology are far from over. In May 2004, an ICOMOS Hungary meeting celebrated 40 years of the Venice Charter, paying tribute with respect and gratitude to those who conceived and drafted the Venice Charter. Amongst the resolutions prepared for consideration by the participants was the following rather sweeping statement: ‘Recurrent initiatives both within and outside ICOMOS to amend or substitute the [Venice] Charter were based upon an incomplete understanding or a misinterpretation of it.’ Whilst going on to recognise the ethical ‘right and duty of each and every new generation…to examine and interpret the guidelines of the Venice Charter over and over again’, the resolution notes that ‘exclusive attention should be paid to the contents and above all the spirit of the Charter’.

At the ICOMOS Advisory Committee meeting in Bergen, Norway in September 2004, several international speakers reflected upon the Burra Charter’s influence and clarity, citing examples of its application in diverse cultural settings and various site types. At the end of a rather long day, an eminent ICOMOS personage was overheard to sigh ‘Will we never hear an end of this Burra Charter?’

The ambivalence of wanting to keep faith with the Venice Charter, but not be bound by it, seems rather contrary. The simple commitment to ethical practice standards and the Burra Charter which is now implied by Australia ICOMOS membership seems to me to be a preferable and flexible approach.

My experience in working overseas with the Burra Charter is that it is both a blessing and a continual challenge. Worthwhile, but requiring a sturdy constitution, diplomatic immunity, a good sense of humour and perspective and perhaps the hide of a rhino.

Endnotes
1 Including Dr Colin Pearson’s ‘Priority issues: research the definition of conservation terms’; Jane Lerman’s “Problems of preservation in the face of the loss of physical evidence” and Peter Forrest’s ‘Policies for remote settlements’.
2 Miles Lewis, Australia ICOMOS Newsletter Spring 1979.
3 Cultural significance, 1984; Conservation Policy, 1985; Ethics of co-existence in conserving significant places 1998; Procedures for undertaking studies and reports 1988.
4 Meredith Walker and Peter Marquis Kyle.
5 David Saunders, Australia ICOMOS Newsletter Spring 1979.
6 Susan Macdonald, Jacqueline Goddard, Kate Clarke etc.