

# The Analysis of Cultural Significance ICOMOS National Conference 1983

## Opening Address

MAX BOURKE

1983 marks the 50th anniversary of the original drafting of the Athens Charter.

At the fourth Assembly of the International Congress on Modern Architecture, Edouard Jeanneret, also known as Le Corbusier, proposed the principles of A Town Planning Charter. Many would regard Le Corbusier's work as leading to a lot of the problems we now face in cities but at the time the great man argued the need to take account of the existing environment in any development work.

The Athens Charter was a precursor of the 1964 Venice Charter of the International Council on Monuments and Sites. Fifteen years later the Australian professionals working on conservation decided through Australia ICOMOS that it was necessary to set standards and principles for professional practice in this country and the Burra Charter was developed as an interpretation of the Venice Charter. Subsequently it was felt that there was a need to elaborate on the issues of conservation analysis and conservation plans. Accordingly guidelines were developed by Australia ICOMOS following from the Burra Charter. It is the purpose of this conference to review these guidelines.

At the outset it is necessary to make a strong plea, and the plea is for 'reasonableness'. It is a plea not to see this conference as a chopping block for the etymology of certain words. In the interpretation of any set of guidelines individuals and circumstances will always demand a certain flexibility regarding any code of conduct. Let us try and live with the ideology of that greatest of restoration objects, Humpty Dumpty. 'When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone 'it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less'.

It is important to remind professional conservators of a sentence in the preamble to the draft guidelines which reads: 'Although [the guidelines] may appear complicated and elaborate in relation to similar projects, it will be found that a common sense interpretation will produce an effective approach even at this scale'.

There may be some who doubt the validity or use of any charters or guidelines for conservation practice and accordingly they will be totally uninterested in these proceedings but of those professionals involved in conservation work the majority would seem to accept a need to develop a set of conservation principles. The Chairman of Australia ICOMOS, Dr Lewis last year made an eloquent plea for these principles in a radio broadcast, called 'The New Conservation' later reprinted in the ICOMOS newsletter.

Essentially the point of developing guidelines is based on a belief that without them we would not have a professional and intellectual approach to our various tasks which would in any way satisfactorily stand the test of time. A philosopher may argue that this statement is merely an article of faith rather than a logical position, but I think not. I too would like to use an analogy similar to, but perhaps less fun than Dr Lewis' relating to mini skirts and the paintings in the National Gallery.

If I had to choose one painting that I love above all others it is a work of Jan van Eyck, called today 'The Madonna of Canon van der Paele'. A stunning, moving icon of the early fifteenth century. For the last thirty years conservators have studied it, re-conserved it (for the umpteenth time) and historians have written about it. X-radiography, fluorescent radiography, UV radiography, paint analysis and many other tests have shown clearly and precisely which part of the painting was by van Eyck and which part by conservators. We know all about this work. Just before Christmas this year, in an area of this painting (and it is only about thirty per cent of the work) which is 'known' to have been by the master, a friend who is an art historian discovered quite a serious blunder, totally unlike any of the known style of van Eyck. There is, in my view, every likelihood that none of the surface of this painting at all is by Jan van Eyck and that all of it is the work of conservators.

Similar problems exist in the conservation of historic building fabrics and it is for this reason we must have a code of practice which guides us in our technical approach to our task and leaves us with a logically sound set of principles. One hopes that it will also leave posterity with objects which can be understood.

Put simply by Luce Hinch, Secretary of ICOMOS Norway a few years ago: 'Indeed the most noteworthy action [of ICOMOS] is to raise the consciousness among scientists and conservators in charge of the cultural heritage of what we have to hand down to future generations'.

The establishment of the Burra Charter for Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance was a step forward and has led to further initiatives. One of these was the production of draft Guidelines for Conservation Analysis and Plans, issued in early 1982. The need for such guidelines arose particularly out of the following articles in the Burra Charter:

Article 6. The conservation policy appropriate to a place must first be determined by an understanding of its cultural significance and its physical condition.

Article 23. Work on a place must be preceded by professionally prepared studies of the physical, documentary and other evidence, and the existing fabric recorded before any disturbance of the place.

Article 24. Study of a place by any disturbance of the fabric or by archaeological excavation should be undertaken where necessary to provide data essential for decisions on the conservation of the place ...

Article 25. A written statement of conservation policy must be professionally prepared setting out the cultural significance, physical condition and proposed conservation process together with justification and supporting evidence, including photographs, drawings and appropriate samples.

The draft guidelines for conservation analyses and plans were, like the Burra Charter, the product of much discussion and argument of an ICOMOS sub-committee, masterminded by Drs Miles Lewis and Jim Kerr. Much of the credit, in fact, for these developments of conservation and principles and policy must go to Dr Kerr, who has made an enormous contribution to ICOMOS and who has recently published a booklet on 'The Conservation Plan: a guide to the preparation of conservation plans for places of European cultural significance' (published by the National Trust of New South Wales in 1982).

The aim of this conference is specifically to review the ICOMOS guidelines for conservation analyses and plans and more generally to discuss the analysis of cultural significance. One problem has always been to make the Burra Charter and conservation plan guidelines applicable to all places of cultural significance, not just to European buildings. This has been attempted, but in this conference we will hear how successful or otherwise it has been when applied to non-European places such as Aboriginal sites. Even within the European cultural heritage, there are severe problems in developing general guidelines for conservation of such differing subjects as individual houses, entire urban areas, mining relics and historic sites.

For this reason the Burra Charter states only general conservation principles but is being augmented by further guidelines for specific needs or types of place. In addition to the guidelines for conservation analyses and plans under present consideration, ICOMOS is also in the process of producing a draft charter for conservation of urban areas and guidelines explaining article 24 of the Burra Charter with particular relevance to archaeology. The latter has irreverently been called the 'Wombat Charter', but in fact it is not only concerned with archaeological practice but any physical intervention in a place of cultural significance by architects or others.

I am strongly of the opinion that the same basic principles apply to all places of cultural significance, be they individual buildings, industrial sites, urban conservation areas or aboriginal sites. Since each of these types of place will be dealt with in detail by an authority in the succeeding papers, I will now turn to the second half of my paper, in

which I have been asked to provide an overview of the extent to which conservation analyses are now being undertaken, or are required to be undertaken, by the Australian Heritage Commission and other official bodies.

Traditionally, architects and other cultural environment specialists such as archaeologists, planners and engineers have been engaged by a building owner to undertake reports for particular purposes. These purposes have included surveys of the structural condition of a building for its repair, of its original design (for restoration) and of its cultural significance, for possible inclusion in a list aimed at its protection. Rarely have such reports been as broadly based as the conservation management plans now being produced all over Australia.

The Commonwealth Government had made a start in the right direction in 1963 by forming an inter-departmental committee to assess which Commonwealth-owned buildings were worthy of preservation and to list them. The committee was then to consider the use of those buildings, their adaptability without detriment to the original design and to recommend policies of preservation, having regard to costs and change of use. However the committee had few resources and relied on officers who attempted surveys in their spare time. Very little was achieved in this way. At the same time reports were prepared on the obviously important historic buildings when they were likely to be affected by demands for additional accommodation. The object of these reports on the historical and architectural significance of the buildings was to enable officials to decide if the buildings were worthy of preservation, and if so, what should be done in order to preserve their original character and environment.

The passing of the Australian Heritage Commission Act in 1975 was an important step for conservation at Commonwealth level. Section 30 of the Act requires Commonwealth agencies to inform the Commission of proposals which would affect 'to a significant extent' places on the Register of the National Estate so that the Commission could provide constructive comments on the proposals.

The realisation of the need to prepare conservation management plans for buildings and precincts on the Register evolved when the Commission's

Assistant Director, Dr Kerr was faced with the task of providing comments on proposals when insufficient research into the significance of a place was available. He began in 1978 to press for conservation plans of Commonwealth properties.

The Department of Transport and Construction (DTC) and earlier forms of that department has been responsible for the bulk of conservation plans. Most have been of post offices. The consultants' fees for these must be funded by Australia Post which is finding the plans expensive but most useful. Other departments have plans prepared by DTC or its consultants. The DTC manual states that conservation management plans should be prepared but only if substantial work is required on a building of historic significance or it is surplus to the requirements of the client department. There are probably about six plans being prepared in each State by DTC at present.

Sometimes the conservation analysis is completed but not the management plan stage. This at least allows decisions on the future of the building to be made with the benefit of adequate research into its history, condition, and cultural significance.

In the past, criticism has been made of plans for their preoccupation with history, failure to state concisely the building's significance and for the restrictive nature of conservation management policy. Suggestions for future uses compatible with the retention of cultural significance are much more helpful to a client than statements of constraints imposed by the need to conserve the building. The advantage of using experienced consultants is that feasible and compatible uses can be suggested.

Although a consultant should maintain an independent stance, liaison with the client has sometimes been neglected. The result has been to upset the client by the presentation of a management plan without the courtesy of inviting his participation.

The Australian Heritage Commission recommends that preparation of conservation management plans for all places of national estate significance. The need to retain the qualities which warranted the inclusion of a place on the Register is, in most cases, not a factor which

inhibits development but one which helps determine the character of any future development.

Full conservation plans have been completed for major Commonwealth-owned buildings and precincts. The Department of Defence has commissioned such plans of its establishments before major changes are planned. A number of customs houses and other Commonwealth property being disposed of, particularly in Victoria under charges of annuity, have required conservation plans or similar reports. Buildings of some significance on sites being redeveloped by the Commonwealth have in some cases been analysed and recorded before their demolition.

The Commonwealth's National Estate Grants Program has funded the preparation of studies of urban areas, buildings, industrial sites and Aboriginal sites which have been, in effect, conservation analyses and sometimes management plans. The program assists conservation of non-Commonwealth property although Commonwealth property is often included in an urban conservation area. Privately leased Commonwealth property such as that in the Australian Capital Territory are granted funds for studies under the scheme.

In New South Wales the Heritage Council has for the last four years insisted on the preparation of plans of management of places, particularly State government properties, for which there are problems of future use or present condition. Conservation management plans for privately-owned places have also been co-ordinated by an experienced consultant who arranges for other specialist sub-consultants.

In some cases the consultant prepares the conservation analysis only and the Heritage Council completes the policy and management segments of the plan.

In Victoria the Historic Buildings Council has had ten conservation plans completed but finds them too expensive to be prepared for all buildings for which applications are received for inclusion on the Victorian Register of Historic Buildings. The Council is pooling its resources with the National Trust programme of plans funded by National Estate Grants. The Government Buildings Advisory Council in Victoria has made some movement in the direction of conservation plans for State-owned historic buildings.

In South Australia a few plans have been completed for the State Heritage Unit for buildings when there are problems concerning their future use. Other plans are proceeding notably under a \$25,000 National Estate Grant for plans of National Trust properties. Applicants for grants are now generally required to prepare conservation plans rather than undertake unjustified repair work.

In the Australian Capital Territory the Heritage Committee is convinced of the value of conservation plans and is pushing for them to be undertaken. The Committee will not approve grants under either National Estate or Australian Capital Territory Heritage Grants schemes for a building unless a conservation plan is prepared.

Some have already been completed for the Department of the Capital Territory (DCT) and other Departments but only for buildings on the Register. It is not yet DCT policy to have conservation plans prepared but the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) is close to having such a policy. One plan has been completed for the NCDC and others have been commenced.

Perhaps the most notable result of the introduction of the conservation plan guidelines, and more generally, the ICOMOS Burra Charter, is that commissioning authorities, heritage bodies, consultants and the public generally, now have common ground for the determining, commissioning and understanding of conservation proposals and works. This common ground has already led to more sympathetic, considered and well understood programmes for conservation projects, with the end result being a maximised use of the limited resources available.

Thus, much work has been done or is under way. There have been dire predictions that all these charters and guidelines would lead to so much red tape that no practical conservation would get done. This is always a danger, but if the guidelines are used with common sense, they should act as an aid to systematic and comprehensive analysis of cultural significance and conservation of our heritage.

I would like to thank my colleagues Dr Josephine Flood and Mr Ken Charlton for the substantial contribution they made to the writing of this paper.