

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION: CONSERVATION OF HISTORIC HERITAGE PLACES

Submission to the public inquiry on behalf of Artlab Australia

Background – what we are and what we do

Established 20 years ago, Artlab Australia is a conservation centre based in Adelaide, with a worldwide reputation for professional excellence.

We are a business enterprise operating as part of Arts SA, within the South Australian Government's Department of Premier and Cabinet.

Our prime purpose is to care for and help make accessible to the public, South Australia's cultural collections. These include the History Trust, the State Library and the Art Gallery of South Australia, the South Australian Museum and Carrick Hill.

We also provide conservation services for the broader care of the public heritage including private collections.

In addition to the care of museum, gallery and other movable collections which do not form the central part of the scope of this inquiry, a significant part of our work involves the conservation and preservation of sculpture, monuments and fixtures within heritage buildings and other historical sites.

Artlab provides expertise and offers services for the conservation and restoration of murals and decorative paintwork, historic interiors, mosaic and terrazzo floors, stained glass windows, carved timberwork, carpets and curtains, furniture and other fittings such as lights, balustrades and decorative railings.

Artlab is also involved in the broader management of heritage buildings and sites. We have been commissioned to deliver strategic plans for sustainable tourism, counter-disaster training and planning and cultural impact assessments within Australia and overseas.

The conservation of the intangible heritage also impinges upon our practical work.

Artlab employs around 25 staff, which makes it the biggest conservation facility in the country, and carries out projects throughout Australia and overseas.

Our involvement in this inquiry

We are eager to make this submission and to take part in the inquiry because the subject, the conservation of historic heritage places, is central to our role and purpose.

Our aims in doing so are specifically to:

- Inform the Commissioners of the nature and scope of Artlab Australia
- To contribute to the understanding of heritage conservation issues in Australia, through examples of our work over the last twenty years
- Describe Artlab as a funding model
- Emphasise the need for specialist knowledge, skills and expertise
- Make comment on the issues included in the terms of reference from our perspective and position within the industry

Examples of Artlab projects relevant to this inquiry:

We have provided a background Powerpoint presentation of images to give a visual description of the scope of work Artlab has carried out, largely in situ, in historic heritage sites.

The work includes treatments of statues and monuments, historic interiors and exteriors, mural paintings, textiles, vessels and vehicles, and was undertaken in Adelaide, Sydney, Melbourne, Western Australia and Taiwan.

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Artlab's Funding Model

Artlab Australia specialises in the scientific conservation and restoration of movable and immovable cultural heritage material. This material resides in both private and public collections.

Operating as a business enterprise within the administrative ambit of Arts SA, Artlab provides a broad range of conservation services to a wide variety of clients. Artlab's principal clients are the State's public collections, but other clients include major collecting institutions, businesses, private collectors, families and individuals within South Australia, interstate and increasingly overseas.

Artlab's funding model is unique within the Australian heritage industry. Approximately 67% of funding is received from the South Australian government and is provided on a fee-for-services basis to provide conservation services for the State's collecting institutions and public advisory services to South Australians. The remaining funding is earned through commercial contracts with the private sector, other government departments and organisations.

Artlab's commercial model has led to a highly responsive and value-for-money service that is amongst the most efficient in the country.

The key to Artlab's success was the initial investment made by the South Australian government in a facility capable of offering a commercial service and the policy initiative to implement a commercial service. Artlab fully complies with the Competitive Neutrality Principles and therefore genuinely illustrates the value of government investment in the heritage industry.

The Commission is encouraged to view Artlab as a successful model of government commercial activity in helping build and sustain a small industry.

Addressing the specific issues within the Scope of the Inquiry:

- 1.1 Like many other contributors to the inquiry, we see the main pressures as being pecuniary, and the lack of sufficient funding is the most common restriction to good practise. The inability of owners, whether private individuals or institutional to fund projects has affected Artlab's operations in several ways: delays, postponement or cancellation of projects can cause operational inefficiencies, whilst pursuing a cheaper alternative treatment has been, on occasion, detrimental to an object.
- 1.2 A further major pressure we see, however, and a threat to the proper management and conservation of the heritage is the lack of suitable skills and expertise within the conservation profession.

Together with other Australian organizations Artlab has experienced periodic difficulties over the years in the recruitment of skilled and experience staff in several areas of conservation.

The training model for conservators has changed in the past three years with the demise of the University of Canberra's undergraduate degree program. Only two courses remain and these are both Masters degree programs that have less emphasis on hand skills. With the approaching retirement of Australia's first generation of conservators it will be increasingly difficult to find people with the requisite hand skills and practical expertise to undertake high level conservation work.

Artlab has also had difficulties contracting out work for skilled stone masons, wheelwrights and carriage makers and gilders. These skills are in low demand in a city as small as Adelaide and they are in danger of disappearing. Here too the skills shortage will become more severe in the near future.

The Commission should realize that critical skills shortage are occurring within the heritage industry and this situation is likely to become worse over the next decade. We see a clear need for further tertiary training courses and apprenticeships in appropriate areas.

2.1 As conservators of works of art and historic artifacts we take as axiomatic the view that the preservation of our cultural heritage is an overall positive benefit, and we readily agree with such visions as that of the National Trust of South Australia:
“That the lives of present and future South Australian will be enriched by the conservation of our natural and cultural heritage”.

2.2 Additionally, in our experience as practitioners working in the public realm, we would also make the point that the processes of conserving cultural objects and places holds a natural fascination for most people.

At Artlab, we hold regular “Clinic Days” when members of the public bring along their own possessions for comment, advice or treatment, and conduct tours of the studios and laboratories. These are well attended and favorably received, with a great deal of positive feedback. Increasing the accessibility of our activities to the public is a priority in our strategic planning.

Conservation studios in other parts of the world are proving equally popular and attractive to visitors: the Conservation Centre in Liverpool UK, received 82,000 visitors in 2003 – 2004 and was itself the “European Museum of the Year” in 1998, the year after it opened to the public.

The heritage industry should take advantage of the popularity of conservation amongst the public, and the interest it provokes to raise awareness of its importance and enjoyment of the benefits.

2.3 At Artlab we recognise the international importance and potential of a vigorous conservation profession and we are seeking to expand our expertise and our markets.

A strong domestic heritage industry will be a strategic diplomatic asset for Australia as well as a potentially important export service. Cultural heritage conservation has been demonstrated on many occasions to be a valuable diplomatic tool. The very processes of conservation inherently convey a deep respect for the cultural heritage being conserved. Australian organisations have used cultural heritage conservation to build close and long lasting relationships in the South Asian region.

Most recently a team of Australian heritage experts under the auspices of AusHeritage Ltd, Australia’s export network for cultural heritage services, prepared a strategic plan for ASEAN’s Committee on Culture and Information that was endorsed by all ten countries.

DFAT and local Embassies and High Commissions have recognized the diplomatic potential of heritage conservation and have sponsored many projects in the South East Asian region.

Demand for heritage conservation in Asia is growing at an increasing rate and there is very little local supply capacity. There is considerable potential for the export of Australian heritage services and products in the Asian region over the next several decades. Artlab has been active in Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and recently Taiwan. But for the Australian industry to remain competitive over this timeframe it must continuously innovate. This must include broadening the approach to heritage conservation to embrace more fully the cultural context of living heritage including intangible cultural heritage.

In evaluating the heritage industry in Australia the Commission should consider the international strategic value of the industry.

3. We have no comments to make on these points.

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5. We recognise the significance of technological advances in the conservation profession and the importance of keeping abreast of developments. The development of laser technology in

the cleaning of works of art, monuments and buildings, and its application in non-contact replication of artefacts is a good example of both the enormous benefits new technologies can bring to the field and of the need to develop new expertise and knowledge.

Artlab is currently in partnership with the Australian War Memorial, the Australian National University and the Art Gallery of New South Wales to undertake research in this field. By doing so we hope on the one hand to advance our technical professional capabilities to the benefit of the heritage sector and on the other to maintain our position as leaders in the commercial field of building and monument conservation.

As well as the opportunities presented by new technology, we are faced by major challenges in dealing with the conservation of new materials and construction techniques.

It is hoped the Commission recognise the importance of appropriate funding and support for well-focused technical research

6.1 In examining future policy directions we see great benefit in the two specific areas of cultural impact assessments and disaster preparedness planning.

The World Bank is in the process of adopting a policy on the safeguarding of cultural property for all Bank financed projects. The intent of this policy is to ensure that cultural property is not adversely affected by the projects.

The expected method for operation of the policy will be the undertaking of cultural impact assessments. A cultural impact assessment will assess the impact of the project on all aspects of culture of those people affected. Akin to, and likely forming part of, the Environmental Impact Assessment, the CIA will be a formal process of analysis by an expert group. The underlying purpose of these assessments can be viewed as analysing the future economic loss of an adverse impact to the culture of today. Critically, a CIA will look not just at built and natural heritage but also as moveable and intangible heritage.

Such a process exists in parts in Australia. The affects of projects on indigenous cultural property is routinely carried out. The affect on broader cultural property is rarely carried out as a formal process and never is there an assessment of intangible heritage.

The Commission should examine the process of cultural impact assessments with a view to evaluating their usefulness in the Australian context.

6.2 This past year in South Australia has seen fire severely damage an important regional National Trust museum in Millicent and threaten several more on the Eyre peninsular.

This has brought into stark focus the need for better disaster preparedness planning for heritage places. Heritage places and objects are by their very nature, irreplaceable. Often too they require a different type of response by the emergency services if they are to be saved. And post-disaster loss mitigation and recovery also require a trained response.

Without compromising the priority of human life over objects, both emergency services and heritage asset custodians would benefit from basic heritage disaster management training. Emergency services would better appreciate the constraints of the disaster they are responding to and be informed enough to choose less damaging intervention if possible. Custodians and managers would have the knowledge and skills to responds decisively in the critical post disaster period.

The Commission should understand that disaster preparedness planning and training is an important component of risk management for the heritage industry.

Further comment

The Inquiry specifically precludes the conservation of collections and the movable heritage, but we would make the point that in some circumstance this is a difficult distinction to make. Sometimes the dividing line is an arbitrary one, and at others our actions change the nature – “movable” or otherwise – of an artefact.

An example illustrated above would be the Tiffany windows, unarguably a fixture in an historic building, removed for both security and economic reasons to the Art Gallery of South Australia where they would now be considered part of the movable heritage.

A more controversial case in the 1990’s was the purchase of the historic property, Purrambeete in Victoria and the subsequent removal for profit of original paintings.

We would argue that the conservation of collections and historic heritage places are closely, sometimes inextricably, linked.

We look forward to discussing these points further at the Public Inquiry on Wednesday 3 August.

- Andrew Durham ▪ Director
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- Joanna Barr ▪ Conservation Project Manager