

Bathurst Information and Neighbourhood Centre Inc (BINC) is a community based, non-government organisation (NGO). BINC auspices multiple different community services, some of which function to support the recruitment, management and involvement of volunteers in the Bathurst local community and across the Central West of New South Wales.

The Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places enquiry raises questions about the involvement of NGOs in historic heritage conservation. As a NGO we welcome the opportunity presented by the enquiry to express views regarding the involvement of our sector. The organisational experience gained by BINC in relation to heritage conservation has been incidental to the management of a now defunct volunteer project. Albeit incidental, the experience may be of interest.

Case-study of a volunteer project

Project Name

The Dead Trades School

Introduction

'Heritage trades' is used here to describe skilled manual trades outmoded by technological and economic change, eg. Brass Finishing, Chair Bodging. Technical training in heritage trades is not afforded by the current education system. It is possible that heritage trades skills henceforth will not be taught. Skills without common usage seem at risk of being lost with older trades-practitioners as they retire or die. The skill base is not being replaced. Heritage trade skills have applications to built heritage restoration; thus their shortage may impair the conservation of Australia's historic heritage places.

Project proposal

The potential loss of heritage trade skills was identified by members of the Bathurst community as a problem they wanted to address. The Dead Trades School was devised as a means to address the problem. BINC endorsed The Dead Trades School as a volunteer initiative. The initiative was supported (along with other pilot volunteer projects) by the NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home-Care under a funding scheme named Experienced Hands.

Experienced Hands projects aimed: to increase the availability of volunteer opportunities; to increase intergenerational contact; and to establish quality programs for older volunteers. In addition to these aims, The Dead Trades School aspired to: conserve heritage trade skills; and to apply manual skills to heritage restoration work.

The proposed premises for The Dead Trades School were Laycock's Engineers and Blacksmith Workshop (circa 1860), located at The Bathurst Goldfields. Plant and equipment on the premises are circa 1895 – 1904. The proposed premises required restorative work.

The Dead Trades School was intended to form a framework to support older people qualified in heritage trades to voluntarily teach the manual skills of their trade to younger people. Such skills were to be put into practice in work to restore the heritage premises.

Impediments to activity

As The Dead Trades School entered initial stages of implementation, impediments to its proposed activities were realised. The impediments (described below) may not be unique to The Dead Trades School; instead they possibly challenge the conservation activities of volunteer organisations in general.

a) Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) versus heritage values.

Just as paid workers must be provided with a safe working environment, so must volunteers. Due to the state of disrepair of the premises and the antiquated nature of plant and equipment therein, the working environment was deemed by the Volunteer Project Manager to be high risk. Potential conflicts between the heritage values of

Laycock's Engineers and Blacksmith Workshop and existing OHS requirements were identified. These conflicts could not be resolved within the confines of the project budget. The expertise required to develop an adequate risk management plan that accommodated the heritage values of the premises was an expense that could not be met. Without resources adequate to manage risk without compromising the heritage value of the site, the proposed premises could not be made safe for volunteer activities.

b) Insufficient available technical expertise and support

Volunteers have the right to receive sufficient training to do their job. Where a project requires skilful work from its volunteers, the project must either: recruit volunteers equipped with the necessary skills and experience; or else provide adequate training and supervision for volunteers.

A few older members of the Bathurst community, who were qualified in the practice of heritage trades, supported the development of The Dead Trades School proposal. They had a strong interest in seeing their special skills passed on to younger generations. The initiative was largely due to their willingness to be involved and to donate their expertise.

However, in the time that elapsed between when the project was proposed and when it was funded, those trade practitioners who put themselves forward as its key volunteers had been lost to illness, death and re-location. Together with these seminal volunteers went the technical skill base of the project and no replacements could be found. Because they are uncommon, qualified heritage trades practitioners are difficult to recruit.

There is no source of heritage trades training available in the Bathurst area - much less that suited to volunteerism. (It is the absence of training opportunities that inspired The Dead Trades School in the first place.) Had funds been available to purchase training, it would not have been possible anyway. Thus it was discovered that the community lacked the capacity to provide the training, skilled supervision and technical support required to support the conservation activities of volunteers.

With the loss of its trade practitioners, The Dead Trades School project was unable to conserve the cultural heritage represented by their trades. With inexperienced and unqualified volunteers, built heritage restoration work that required more significant skill could not be initiated.

Project outcome

With the impediments taken into account, The Dead Trades School was thought unlikely to succeed in its original mission. The project was then strategically modified to ensure delivery of Experienced Hands objectives:

- Laycock's Engineers and Blacksmith Workshop was abandoned, along with plans to restore built heritage.
- The project was renamed and volunteer activities were managed as a series of free demonstration and workshop events that adhered to an heritage trade and handicraft theme.

The Dead Trades School did not achieve its aims to conserve heritage trades and restore Laycock's Engineers and Blacksmith Workshop. These aims were beyond the given resources.

Discussion

Volunteer involvement can produce intangible benefits such as an enhanced sense of community and cultural identity. Volunteer work associated with built heritage can also produce tangible results that are easier for the community to appreciate. (For some volunteers, such results are particularly satisfying and satisfied volunteers are far easier to retain.)

It is important to realise that prospective volunteers with an interest in heritage are not necessarily equipped with a corresponding set of skills to donate pro bono. Projects that depend solely upon volunteer input in order to function are best avoided. Best practice volunteer management adds value to projects by extending the function of skilled professionals and trades people. It is feasible to expect volunteers under competent supervision to undertake semi-skilled tasks to progress conservation work more rapidly.

Heritage is a strong motivator and attracts significant numbers of volunteers. Volunteers have the potential to fulfil a significant role in the conservation of Australia's historic heritage places providing that they are involved in appropriate project-work. This volunteer potential could perhaps be better realised through the support of strong volunteer management and improved access to technical support and expertise.

Suggestions

It may be possible to augment existing resources for the benefit of Australia's Historic Heritage Places. For example, in the Bathurst local government area, it may be beneficial to:

- Expand the role of the local council Heritage Advisor to include community capacity building and public awareness-raising.
- Develop specialist volunteer training packages through partnerships between organisations such as BINC, Conservation Volunteers Australia, TAFE NSW and the NSW National Trust.
- Foster corporate volunteering through schemes such as 'adopt a building'.
- Devise avenues to extend Traditional Trades apprenticeships through on the job training with heritage trades practitioners.