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Heritage Inquiry
Productivity Commission
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By email to: heritage@pc.gov.au

Dear Commissioners,

Submission to Enquiry into the Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places

The Collections Council of Australia Ltd is a national not-for-profit organisation supported by the federal, state and territory governments through the Cultural Ministers Council. Our charter is to advance the stability and sustainability of the collections sector (including the library, museum, archive and gallery domains) throughout Australia.

We note that the focus of your Enquiry is on places (landscapes, sites and the built environment) rather than on movable cultural heritage (objects and collections). In practice, however, it is often difficult to make a realistic separation between movable items and their heritage context as both are parts of a larger historical whole. Separation is also undesirable from a policy point of view, as heritage places that hold associated collections need an holistic policy and management framework to resolve and balance the needs of the place and the needs of the collections.

Our interest in making the following points to your Enquiry is to seek better heritage, cultural, educational and community outcomes (including economic outcomes for communities) from the existence, preservation and recognition of heritage places.

Why are collections important to heritage places?

Many collections of movable cultural heritage are associated with the history and significance of heritage places. The significance of a place is often strongly linked with (or determined by) the significance of its associated collections.

The heritage place provides a context for the better understanding of these collections. The collections can aid the understanding of many aspects of a heritage place, because they provide special or supplementary information about the place. Thus, collections are useful for owners, conservators and researchers who care for and investigate heritage places.

Collections carry strong interpretive potential. When the place is publicly accessible, collections are inspirational for visitors of diverse ages and backgrounds (including tourists).

We encourage the Enquiry to acknowledge that collections are relevant to the significance of heritage places.

What sorts of collections relate to heritage places?

Collections related to heritage places can be usefully divided into three categories:

1. Natural science specimens (movable and *in situ*), and things that were created with the expectation of:
2. being movable; or
3. being fitted immovably to a building or a site.

These will now be described under two headings, relating to whether the items are primarily movable or immovable.

Movable items

Collections of movable items associated with heritage places may typically include:

- Documents such as the maps, plans and records associated with the construction or modification of heritage buildings, and also the diaries, ledgers, account books and other records associated with the previous and/or continuing use of the heritage place.
- Photographs, film and works of art that record past appearances and uses of the heritage site and structures.
- Artefacts that are associated with the previous and/or continuing use of the heritage place, including furniture, soft furnishings, clothing and accessories, personal effects, domestic utensils, industrial equipment and machinery.
- Botanical, zoological and/or geological specimens that derive from the heritage site. These may testify to the culturally-imposed (often economic) significance of the place.
- Artefacts found through archaeological investigation of the site.

'Immovable' items

When the heritage of a place is recognised through official listing, the following elements are generally regarded as being part of the place:

- Building materials such as: timber; bricks; tiles; floor coverings; roofing materials; fasteners such as nails, bolts and screws; and surface treatments such as plaster, paint and wallpaper.
- Fittings found in built structures such as: door handles; switches and light fittings; fire grates, surrounds and mantles; taps and plumbing services; baths, basins and troughs; and 'built-in' furniture and equipment (including fixed machinery and industrial equipment).
- In some heritage places, the outdoor environment may include items such as garden plumbing systems, statues, fountains, art installations, fixed machinery and industrial equipment.
- Natural features of the place, such as the exposed indication of minerals that were mined at a site, or a significant tree associated with an historic event.

The heritage significance of a place may frequently depend heavily on the presence of these immovable elements. Interpretation both of the place, and of any movable items associated with the place, may be dependent of the preservation of finishes, fittings, installed items, as well as the natural features.

Although not normally 'movable', such materials, fittings and even natural features *can* be removed, and may then become movable heritage items, with consequent requirements for security, maintenance and interpretation. Typical reasons for removal of *in situ* elements are vandalism (including theft), natural disaster, and deterioration.

Of particular interest in this regard, therefore, are the collections of samples of building materials that are kept in order to preserve and document examples of original materials

that may have been replaced in part or in whole when a building has been conserved by repair, restoration or reconstruction.

We encourage the Enquiry to acknowledge the need for consistency of policy across jurisdictions to recognise the importance of:

- *the ‘contents’ of a heritage place, with respect to both the in situ elements and also the movable objects that are (or once were) in or at the place; and*
- *collections of documentation that assists in the understanding the development and use of a heritage place.*

Where are these collections located?

Collections related to heritage places may be physically co-located at the heritage place to which they refer or relate, where they may be presented *in situ*, to assist with the interpretation of the place, or in a purpose-built display venue (such as a visitor centre) at or near the site.

We encourage the Enquiry to acknowledge the important role played by the managers and owners of heritage places who also care for these associated collections.

Frequently, however, items associated with a heritage place may be held (singly or in large numbers) by other collecting organisations. These include libraries, archives, museums and galleries. In addition, many organisations and institutions hold collections even when this is not their primary role (e.g. government departments, universities, municipal authorities, schools, businesses and corporations).

We encourage the Enquiry to acknowledge the important role played by organisations that hold collections associated with heritage places, and whose resources support the work of those who preserve and present those places.

Resource and policy issues

The presence of collections in association with a heritage place carries a need for prioritising of resources, because the conservation and management needs of places and objects are often very distinct. In the following sections, we identify some areas of major concern.

***In situ* collections**

Some of Australia’s most significant heritage places are identified as such because they have intact *in situ* collections. In most instances, the presence of a significant intact *in situ* collection means that the place needs to be managed as a museum, rather than adapted for another more commercial use – for example, the presence of original engines and engineering equipment at the Spotswood Sewage Pumping Station encouraged Museum Victoria to establish its Scienceworks museum at the site. Some places, such as Brennan and Geraghty’s Store in Maryborough in Queensland, or Miss Traill’s House in Bathurst NSW, would not be on a State or National heritage list if it were not for the fact they have such significant and relatively intact *in situ* collections. These places need special programs of assistance to help them holistically to manage, conserve and interpret the significant stories that arise from both the place and the collections.

Keeping the collections *in situ* is an important policy objective but this requires careful planning and programs of support to balance the conservation needs of the heritage building with the conservation needs of the collections.

Communities managing heritage places with *in situ* collections face many constraints in the way they can use and manage the property to generate revenue. Such places are often quite fragile and the collections need particular supervision and care, which may limit visitor numbers, increase operational costs and create more demands on volunteers.

Heritage places with significant intact *in situ* collections may not be in towns or communities with high volumes of visitors to sustain its operation as a museum or heritage destination. Well-targeted policies and funding programs are required, and these need to recognise the high degree of significance of such places, and the added costs and limitations they face in generating revenue and surviving in a competitive environment for visitors.

We encourage the Enquiry to give special consideration to ways of ensuring that we can keep such special and vulnerable places for the next generation.

Privately-owned collections

Some of Australia's most significant heritage collections are held *in situ* by private owners of historic houses. This is particularly the case for families that have lived in the one property for generations, where the accumulated collections of furniture, personal items, paintings, libraries and archives are of particular significance because they survive in a well-documented context. Families with heritage places with relatively intact *in situ* collections need special assistance to keep them in the place where they have most significance, and to document the collections, improve the environment and storage conditions, and in some cases conserve significant items that need expert attention. Without special programs of assistance to document and manage the collections *in situ*, Australia will continue to lose important parts of its heritage and national memory through attrition, dispersal and sale at auction. The alternative, of removal of parts or all of family collections to a museum, is usually a poor outcome that diminishes the significance of both the place and the collection.

Australia needs well-tailored programs and tax incentives to support families that are maintaining significant heritage buildings with intact *in situ* collections. Unless such collections are better documented we often cannot make an accurate judgement about the significance of the place as a whole. These historic places with their archives and heritage collections often have tremendous research significance for their region and the nation, deepening our understanding of key themes in the development and evolution of regions, industries and the economy.

We encourage the Enquiry to acknowledge the need for improved whole-of-government policies to assist private owners of heritage places in retaining and researching their associated collections.

The use of heritage buildings as collection repositories

Many small, volunteer-run archives and museum collections are housed in heritage buildings. The collections give these buildings a community life, which generates cultural, tourism and economic benefits for society. But the custodians face many difficulties in funding the conservation and maintenance of these buildings, and the security and conservation of the collections. Work on heritage buildings is expensive and time consuming. It requires careful planning and special skills. Heritage buildings can add to the costs and difficulties of managing a collection; collections can be more vulnerable to theft in heritage buildings and they often provide less than ideal environments for the conservation of collections. Programs of assistance often do not recognise the interdependent nature of managing a collection in a heritage building.

It should be noted that many of these heritage buildings that now hold community archives or museum collections were formerly government properties such as jails, courthouses and railway stations, where responsibility for conservation and maintenance has been passed to local government, or to community organisations such as historical societies. In many cases, governments have transferred their responsibility for these buildings onto the shoulders of small organisations that are ill-equipped and under-funded to conserve them. Communities are giving these buildings a public life, because the buildings hold important collections, and are often the key tourism attraction in the

town. The buildings, however, are desperately in need of heritage conservation. In addition, the facilities for visitors and volunteers in heritage buildings are often well below accepted standards, and this can diminish the viability of the collection and the heritage building as tourism destinations.

As Australia had widespread networks of jails, courthouses and railway stations, the current arrangement of targeting funding on the basis of listing on state or national heritage registers means that places that are merely 'representative' are often given lower levels of recognition and funding, even though the heritage building is an important part of the community. In our view, heritage funding programs should recognise that those heritage places that are open to the public as an archive, museum or interpretive centre, should be eligible for special assistance to improve the conservation, environmental conditions, and interpretation of the building, the (often related) collections, and the wider interpretation of the town or region.

We encourage the Enquiry to acknowledge the need for improved programs of assistance to groups that manage heritage places as repositories for publicly-accessible collections.

Vulnerable collections

Many highly significant heritage places have movable items and relics that are extremely vulnerable to theft. These places include sites of rural industries such as milling and mining, where the high degree of heritage significance of the place is due to the scale and survival of movable items and archaeological relics. These places are at risk of damage to, or theft of, the heritage items. Sometimes this destructive activity is opportunistic, attributable to fossickers and casual visitors, while in other cases there appears to have been considerable planning to remove large-scale items of machinery for sale overseas. Lack of appropriate security for these sites is diminishing many nationally significant parts of Australia's heritage. It is also depriving communities of potential economic benefits in the future, as these are places that might otherwise be an important tourism attraction if they were conserved and secured for the next generation.

We encourage the Enquiry to acknowledge the need for programs of assistance in improving security provisions at heritage places.

Directors and staff of the Collections Council of Australia would be pleased to discuss with the Commissioners ways of improving the policy and funding arrangements for heritage places that hold significant collections, and for heritage collections that survive in heritage places.

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Birtley
CEO