

SUBMISSION TO PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION ON CULTURAL HERITAGE

Gordon Grimwade¹

The following submission relates to four specific areas of the terms of the enquiry.

1. The main pressures on the conservation of historic heritage places

New development and neglect are the key pressures on heritage places.

New developments and facility upgrades can impact adversely on heritage places. Heritage conservation is something of a dichotomy. There are some people who believe 'because it is old it should be kept'. This, of course, is unrealistic. There is no getting away from the fact that conservation costs money, and the funds have to be used selectively to maximise returns. But when the Government agencies responsible for heritage provide only token (or no) funding assistance then our collective heritage suffers.

There is an entrenched belief among many developers that old structures are redundant and should be replaced with modern designs. In some cases this is valid. Some former offices or factories present costly options if they are to be retained and have no real 'heritage value', except for the fact they may be locally important to a nostalgic few.

But, balance can be achieved. **The CSR Sugar Refinery, New Farm, Brisbane** was extensively modified to provide for quality flats. The former **St Mary's Convent, Cooktown** (now the James Cook Museum) was successfully converted to a popular museum documenting both local history and James Cook's exploration of Australia's east coast.

Other structures are left to deteriorate, often despite their highly significant nature. **The Annan River Bridge, Cooktown, Queensland** was built in the 1880s and remained in continual use until about 2001. It is an exceptionally rare example of a form of bridge construction as it uses screw piles, flat girders and a flat deck once equipped with collapsible side rails. The bridge was identified as a place of high significance but abandoned with no consideration for its long-term preservation. No efforts, despite recommendations to that effect, were made to interpret the structure. While recognizing that many bridges have been abandoned over the years, exceptional examples close to existing transport routes should be given closer attention to conservation and reuse. In **Winton, the former Corfield Fitzmaurice** retail store was purchased for development as a community facility. No funding has been available to make any significant use of the building beyond a small craft shop, installation of a dinosaur display and a modest beginning of displays reflecting on local history and rural retailing history.

Places of heritage value face ultimate destruction if there is insufficient creative energy and finance. I am not an advocate of preserving everything simply because it is old or has tenuous connections but I firmly believe that rare examples of historic structures should be given more sensitive attention. Regional areas have highly significant places, which, nearer major cities would have been the focus of attention many years earlier. 'Out of sight out of mind' seems to be an operational approach by default.

¹ Personal background

Gordon Grimwade is a north Queensland based heritage consultant with 18 years experience specialising in tropical area site management. Prior to that Gordon held senior field management positions in Aboriginal Affairs in a career spanning 24 years in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Queensland. He holds degrees in geography and anthropology and in material culture/ site management. Gordon is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and a member of the Australia ICOMOS Committee on Cultural Tourism. He has published widely on a wide range of heritage issues.

The rare **Hou Wang Miao**, a Chinese temple at Atherton, Queensland was left in a state of progressive deterioration for twenty years until the short-lived Queensland Heritage Trails Network funding was available. The National Trust of Queensland was able to complete only minor conservation of the temple in the first two decades of its ownership of this internationally significant structure, primarily because it was underfunded.

When funding was made available for the temple's conservation and interpretation it proved challenging to convince some steering committee members that certain actions taken were expensive, but essential, if quality conservation was to be completed. It was noticeable that appreciation of conservation practices in the early stages of the project was minimal.

There needs to be a concerted effort made to acquaint the public with what steps need to be taken to complete quality best practice conservation. Small steps were taken in this regard with the interpretation at **Hou Wang temple** and, more recently, **Wolston House, Brisbane**. In both cases part of the displays discuss the conservation and adaptive reuse arguments.

In exceptional cases the problem of 'loving it to death' is an issue for growing concern. Sites that are considered important at the local level are sometimes 'restored' with the best intentions in the world. But, the technical skills with which that conservation is undertaken are rarely consistent with 'best practice'. It is usually the efforts of good intentions and ignorance that are utilised. This is not necessarily the fault of the perpetrators. It is the fault of the heritage profession and the administrative watchdogs. There is too much attention given to heritage management by control rather than by education and understanding.

Heritage issues are intrinsic to all levels of society and the motivation for preserving elements of our past vary across the social spectrum. An Aboriginal massacre site is likely to evoke emotive responses from the Aboriginal community most involved and from supporters in the wider community. The local residents, whose forbears may have participated, or those who prefer to 'whitewash' our history would prefer to sweep such sites out of our collective memories. Good site management requires that sites of this nature receive a balanced interpretation free of emotive rhetoric from either side and are appropriately conserved in a similarly balanced manner.

While on the issue of historic heritage and the pressures faced it is noteworthy that Australia's tendency to categorise its heritage as 'historic' and 'indigenous' is divisive. Australia's heritage dates back over 40,000 years (depending on what school of thought you subscribe to). It should be recognised by all Australians, irrespective of whether they are descended from Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, European or Asian stock, that Australian history is a continuum of which we should *all* be justifiably proud.

2. The economic, social and environmental benefits and costs of the conservation of historic heritage places in Australia

Economic benefits and costs are poorly articulated in the extant literature. There are unsubstantiated, but possibly quite valid, claims that heritage has significant economic benefits to the adjacent community. In the case of remote and rural places this is probably quite valid, but it is yet to be proven.

Research is needed to establish factual support for this premise. It is frequently stated that heritage projects must result in the place being sustainable on completion. Few sites can achieve that. Heritage places are inherently costly to maintain at a level considered acceptable within the heritage profession. To conserve a significant place requires initial, and often substantial funding. To maintain that place needs continuing commitment from the nation/ state or locally. Entry fees, souvenir sales etc can go a long way towards achieving sustainability. Rarely is the management able to 'balance' costs of maintaining the site, on-going conservation and providing for realistic upgrades of interpretive elements (some would argue that this should be done every 3 to 5 years. In practical terms it is realistic to ensure changes occur within 7 to 10 years. Displays age as do the people who visit them!

Cultural heritage places are intrinsic to our national sense of identity. They provide a nation's link with the past and present. They can engender community pride or community concern and a sense of justice. These

may seem nebulous and high ideals and certainly challenge the whole concept of economic sustainability. But, these are the fundamental building blocks of a national culture. On that basis we should consider some form of social sustainability and discount economics accordingly. Western societies build themselves on this very linkage with the past. Australia should be no exception, but its record is patchy in this regard.

The Commonwealth provides negligible consistent funding to sustain cultural heritage places. All states except Queensland provide 'heritage grants' to assist with conservation and interpretation. Queensland provides absolutely nothing apart from lip service to the concept of support for heritage places. When historically significant sites are disturbed or even destroyed there seems to be no consistent approach to learn what we can *before* destruction.

In **Brisbane when a Queens Street** city block was being cleared for the owners to construct a new office block an archaeological investigation was required by the Queensland Government. At that stage the Queensland *Cultural Records Act* was still operating and provided the legal basis to have that work done.

Company executives saw the project as an undesirable expense. They failed to recognise the public interest in the project and the potential loss of historical and archaeological data that might otherwise have eventuated. Office workers in the surrounding buildings would regularly drop in to the site to see what was happening. Some offices actually nominated an employee whose task it was to get a daily update on the dig.

As Project Director I suggested the owners, a particularly large commercial semi-government business, could gain favourable publicity by demonstrating their commitment to recording heritage values. This was not acted upon, except when the media actually appeared on site to follow up a news tip. In that case a fairly defensive media statement was issued.

I suggested providing a small display indicating what was being investigated – the site of the convict era lumberyard. No approval was forthcoming and team members developed, in their own time, a couple of panels outlining site history and providing a daily bulletin board. This was not just to inform a handful of people. It was frequently the case that our lunch breaks in particular were taken up in talking to the public. It was nothing to have 40 or 50 visitors between about midday and 2pm.

This corporate lack of interest in cultural heritage is not confined to a single company nor, I suspect, to Queensland. But it is not a situation reflected by the public. There is widespread interest in well-presented heritage places.

At **Green Hill Fort, Thursday Island; Hou Wang Temple, Atherton Chinatown; Croydon Chinatown (Gulf Country, Queensland)** and recently at **Cooktown** we were often asked to provide impromptu tours and talks. The public was fascinated to see an archaeological site being revealed and genuinely keen to learn more.

During the early 1990s we developed a series of **interpretive signs** outlining aspects of the **Cooktown's** history. Tourists comment extremely favourably about the interest these signs raise. Working in the same town at present on the archaeological oversight of the town's new sewerage scheme one is frequently quizzed by locals, by tourists and workers on what is being found and its significance. The construction team has a legal obligation to report any finds – from Chinese wells to bottle dumps, stone pitched culverts and house foundations. They do this willingly and, for the most part, with enthusiasm.

All these cases indicate the community interest that is not equally matched by Government or industry. In the words of one senior Minister in the Queensland government to me recently the problem was identified simply that heritage was not a politically sensitive issue'. Put simply it is not a 'vote catcher'.

3. The current relative roles and contributions to the conservation of historic heritage places of the Commonwealth and the State and

Territory governments, heritage owners (private, corporate and government), community groups and any other relevant stakeholders

My comments in regard to governments are focused entirely on the Commonwealth and the State of Queensland and ownership of places within that state. In brief, I consider the contribution by the Commonwealth and the State of Queensland as little better than abysmal responses to what is perceived an issue of low political sensitivity.

Attention has shifted, at the federal level, in recent years from practical conservation to issues of a 'warm and fuzzy feeling'. It has moved from actually conserving our physical heritage to documenting the oral history associated with our heritage. While I have no problems with the latter being identified and actioned I do have a problem when it is at the expense of physical conservation.

The cynic in me considers that this shift of focus was in subconscious recognition that there was a lot of money going on management plans which were never implemented, in part because funds were being spent on management plans and not on conservation works. For a brief period conservation plans were required before conservation funds could be made available. Ironically, it was then quite difficult to access funds for conservation plans and so many sites were overlooked which should have had conservation works completed.

What is needed is a heritage support grant process that provides staged funds:

1. Conservation plans and
2. Conservation works.

There is absolutely no point in doing a conservation plan (the cost of which can run between \$12000 and \$25000) if subsequent funding is unavailable. It's all very well saying 'we have a Conservation Plan' if there is no way of implementing it. A grant scheme that provides for funding of conservation plans (broadly, within the range I have noted above) and then a second stage of implementation funding would be far more productive. Alternatively, do we need to re-jig the form of Conservation Plans and make them achievable with less effort and expense?

Grant schemes, like the recent, and belatedly approved, 'Australian Stories' should be seen as something quite apart. Those projects add value to our perceptions of ourselves as a nation, but they do little to preserve our *physical* cultural icons.

In the case of Queensland it is extremely disturbing to note that it is apparently the only State or Territory that has no heritage grants system in place. While the days of the midnight bulldozing of heritage icons like the **Bellview Hotel in Brisbane** are now, hopefully, over there is absolutely no constructive effort made to conserve places within Queensland which are considered to be of heritage value. True, there is a *Heritage Act*, but that only protects *listed* places. Even that 'protection' is superficial and relates only to wielding a very floppy 'big stick'.

The heritage legislation we have in place does nothing to provide community incentive for conservation works. It does nothing to educate the public in conservation and heritage. It does nothing to protect the myriad of important heritage places that for one reason or another have never made it to the heritage registers. (We seem to delight in developing registers as a simple, administrative solution to assuaging the fears of the public that 'we are losing our heritage' by developing a plethora of registers that require numerous public servants to administer, for what?).

There is no way that heritage place conservation can succeed if the only stimulus is the avoidance of prosecution. The community at large has a proven interest in heritage in its continuing, if subconscious, search for a sense of identity and belonging.

That has to be weighed against the desire of developers to cash in on prime sites. Incentives should be available to encourage thoughtful conservation of places. A former **Chinese site in Cairns** has been nominated for heritage listing. The owner has appealed the listing. The building is on a prime development

site. A legal battle is almost inevitable. It should be possible for sensitive development to be undertaken without having to resort to litigation.

A former **Timber Mill in North Queensland** has been identified as an important heritage place that reflects many of the attributes of the formerly important timber industry. That industry went into rapid decline when the Wet Tropic rainforests were listed as World Heritage in 1988. The mill site has been abandoned for about ten years. The buildings are unsafe and the chimneystack is at risk of collapse. Conservation is beyond the reasonable capacity of the owner but the State does nothing to support him. The Local Authority has expressed concern about the unsafe nature of the industrial buildings on the site.

The owner has sought to have the property removed from the Queensland Heritage Register because it was economically impossible to effect meaningful repairs and still retain heritage values. After a wait of some six months the owner is no nearer obtaining a decision. This type of procrastination would not stand up in the Commercial world but it is affecting the owner's future plans and is certainly doing nothing to engender any sense of support for heritage conservation in general.

At **Georgetown, Gulf Country, Queensland** the 'Ant bed house' is in a precarious state of disrepair. It is recognised as a highly significant structure but it is beyond the capacity of the Local Authority to do anything about it. They, in fact, sought deregistration of the listing, which was refused by the Queensland Heritage Council. The basis for their refusal is perfectly legitimate: it is a rare structure and it has association with the first surveyor in the area. But, questions remain:

1. Who is going to pay for conservation plans and conservation?
2. Who is liable in the event of a structural collapse?
3. Why is it that a place that could attract visitors is ignored when we have clear evidence that the travelling public has a demonstrated interest in Australian culture and heritage?

Without some form of incentives the preservation of our tangible heritage will be lost. Loss of tangible heritage:

1. Reduces the potential to develop a meaningful tourism industry, which must compete with places in Europe, the Americas and Asia.
2. Reduces the visual amenity and the attraction of places with a high number of significant cultural heritage structures and smaller artefacts. This is particularly evident in capital cities, provincial towns and even smaller regional centres where the setting and ambience continues to be lost in the basic neglect of conservation and presentation and the drive for development.
3. Reduces our opportunity to view the physical attributes of Australian society as it has emerged from its pre-colonial and colonial past.

Australians are continually seeking to establish a distinctive Australian culture. Those efforts extend from showcasing art, the environment and trying to devise a distinctly Australian cuisine. What has been missed are genuine efforts to preserve a diversity of our heritage icons from Hyde Park Barracks to modest Native Police compounds, from the Sydney Harbour Bridge to the Annan River bridge, from the Sydney Opera House to a sandstone hall in outback South Australia. Instead, we have developed a series of heritage registers and then failed to adequately maintain many of those and any others through lack of funds. Those funds are, being spent on paying salaries and expenses to preserve data contained in umpteen heritage registers (which is frequently incomplete and sometimes inaccurate anyway).

We now have three Commonwealth Registers, individual State Registers, National Trust registers and then actively encourage local authorities to maintain registers for their individual council jurisdictions (Places of Local significance). It would be more practical to have a single centralised register that allows for places to be entered and the level of significance identified: international/ world; National; State or Regional/ local.

4. The positive and/or negative impacts of regulatory, taxation and institutional arrangements on the conservation of historic heritage places, and other impediments and incentives that affect outcomes

As indicated above any positive encouragement to heritage place owners to preserve places is virtually non-existent. The taxation incentives etc are too esoteric to be of much value.

Unfortunately, positively educating the public is apparently considered less important in bureaucracies that are more concerned with maintaining registers and in compliance monitoring.

Ownership of a heritage place is widely considered to be onerous. This is totally contrary to what should be intended. Owners with a passion for heritage conservation exist, but in a minority. For developers it seems the easiest way is to pressure government for changes to heritage legislation rather than to seek innovative approaches to incorporate heritage elements within a new development.

Few developers are willing to modify their plans if an Aboriginal midden or an historic building is found in the middle of a proposed golf course or a block of units. Some will agree to incorporate heritage elements within their developments, but from my experience there are rarely any checks undertaken to ensure they have met their promises (compliance monitoring is sometimes almost conveniently spasmodic).

Interestingly enough, a lot of developers will actually opt for the expensive option of opposing any heritage requirements. Instead they will expend their energies on litigation. A study of comparative costs between compliance and opposition would have interesting results, I suspect.

The provision of Heritage Awards which, in Queensland are an initiative of the National Trust, generally encourage a diverse field of nominations. A National Award system, similar perhaps to those applied in the Tourism industry – regional, State and National awards – would be invaluable and give credibility to the whole process.

Heritage grants of meaningful amounts, rate rebates, tax exemptions, free technical advice would all have a positive impact. In the present environment owning a heritage place is an imposition, maintaining a heritage place is costly while adapting and redeveloping a heritage place is challenging.

Heritage cannot be adequately protected by mere legislation. The more diverse the legislation that is in place, the more opportunities exist to challenge it, the more chance there is of confusion and the higher the cost of administration. Incentives and education would have more positive outcomes, and are probably comparable with administering the negative approach in the current compliance regimes.

It should be possible to develop a more balanced approach between heritage management and development demands. We are always going to have development, but we are not always going to have our tangible heritage around us if we continue current philosophies. Developing that right balance needs input from all sides and a carefully implemented set of workable guidelines (not theoretical pipe-dreaming) which meet those, currently, often diametrically opposed views.

Gordon Grimwade

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