



historycouncilnsw

History Council of NSW submission
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The History Council is the peak body representing history in New South Wales. History is broadly practised in the community in a diversity of forms by many different groups and individuals. It is a vital part of community life.

The identification and conservation of historic heritage places is one way in which our history can be interpreted and presented to the community.

Historic heritage places worthy of conservation are generally identified through heritage studies and the compilation of heritage lists. A numerical breakdown of historic heritage places on official lists is provided in Table 1 of the Productivity Commission Issues Paper. The impression of the History Council of NSW is that these lists of historic heritage places are not representative of the diversity and complexity of our society's history. This may be partially due to the architectural bias of many assessments of heritage significance, and the focus of lists on tangible heritage, but also perhaps due to the limited involvement of professional and community historians in the heritage assessment process.

Architectural / aesthetic significance still dominate the process of conserving historic heritage places in NSW. The value of history in the identification and assessment of historic heritage places is often brushed over, despite there being a specific criterion for history in the State Heritage Inventory and the State Heritage Register. (See Heritage Office publication on Assessing Heritage Significance: <http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/docs/assessingheritage.pdf>)

The historic significance criterion are often interpreted to mean the architectural history of buildings or sites, for example, when the land was subdivided, when the building was built, and who the architect was. It is contended that histories for heritage assessments should be much broader and also include a contextual, social history of the building or place. For example, the history should focus on the people who used and/or worked in the building or on the site, or on how the building is/was utilised by the community.

In many instances, the significance of an item or place is not due to its physical or tangible qualities. An example is the Day of Mourning site on Castlereagh Street in Sydney, which has been listed on the State Heritage Register because it was the site of the Day of Mourning in 1938, not because of its physical attributes. Recently both ICOMOS & UNESCO have focussed upon intangible heritage. Although intangible heritage is outside the scope of this current inquiry, such concepts of heritage are more aligned with social rituals rather than built heritage, and therefore may prove more productive in identifying historic significance. Certainly this is a starting point for a

Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places

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different perspective on heritage significance, and for identifying why particular places or items are valued in and by the community. See

http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=2225&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

Places, Protests and Memorabilia: the Labour Heritage Register of NSW compiled by Terry Irving and Lucy Taksa (UNSW Studies in Australian Industrial Relations no.43, 2002 published by Industrial Relations Research Centre, UNSW) engages with this issue of historic and intangible heritage, by identifying places of significance to workers and places that have been part of shaping the labour movement. In this register the primary significance is not architectural. The register illustrates 'the labour movement's founding role in our society's history and the lives of ordinary working people'. (Irving and Taksa, 2002). Not only are the more obvious factories or meeting places included, but also cooperatives, pubs, cemeteries and market places.

One of the reasons for the lack of input from an historical perspective in heritage assessments is the fact that many heritage assessments are completed by professionals other than historians, such as architects, planners and historical archaeologists.

The History Council has received feedback from its members, including the Professional Historians Association (PHA), about the role of historians in the preparation of heritage assessments. Many historians are employed in the heritage field, either in Government agencies or as consultants in private practice.

Historians employed in the heritage field are involved in the conservation of historic heritage items and places. To this end, historians work on a range of heritage assessments, including Statements of Heritage Impact and Conservation Management Plans. For these types of heritage reports, historians tend to research and write contextual histories for the items or sites, which tend to go at the front of the report. In private practice in particular, consultant historians rarely go on site visits, which means that they do not gain an understanding of the physical context of the site. As well, historians rarely provide advice on the assessment of heritage significance of the particular item or place under investigation; nor do they get the opportunity to comment on the relationship of the history they have written on the overall assessment of the item or places heritage significance.

The History Council contends that the involvement of professional historians in the process of assessing the significance of historic heritage places -- in private practice and within government -- is essential at all stages to provide the necessary historical context for an informed and balanced heritage assessment that addresses all aspects of our society's history.

Furthermore, the History Council advocates the appointment of historians to government boards, authorities, departments and enquiries involved in heritage assessment and conservation.

In conclusion, the History Council believes that more emphasis upon historic significance should be given in the assessment, conservation and interpretation of historic heritage places.