

**Submission to the
Productivity Commission Heritage Inquiry
2005
by
Docomomo Australia**

Introduction:

Docomomo Australia is the Australian Working Party (Branch) of Docomomo (acronym for the International Working Party for the **D**ocumentation and **C**onservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the **M**odern **M**ovement) which was established in 1988 in the Netherlands with the purpose of raising awareness of, documenting and conserving buildings and sites of Modern Architecture.

Docomomo now comprises 45 national branches and has over 2,000 members world-wide. Biennial international conferences are held and a biannual journal is published from the headquarters of Docomomo (in Paris).

In accordance with the aims and objectives of its charter, Docomomo Australia wishes to submit the following points for consideration by the Productivity Commission:

1) Education:

Heritage was defined by Justice Hope as the “things we want to keep”. The things that people want to keep are those that are important to them and which give meaning to their lives within society. Things which are meaningful are those which they have been taught to appreciate and respect. They may be monuments of symbolic meaning (eg a cenotaph, war memorial or grave) or they may be the everyday surroundings which form the backdrop of their lives.

Such appreciation of objects and the understanding of their meaning and importance is learnt through education, acculturation and experience.

As recently as the 1950s Australian Georgian period architecture was not widely appreciated but since the 1950s it has become highly valued aesthetically and historically as Australians have come to accept the penal origins of non-indigenous Australia and because the dramatic loss of Georgian and Victorian architecture in the 1950s and 1960s gave birth to popular conservation movements.

We are at a stage where Georgian, Victorian, Federation and Art deco periods of architecture are well-appreciated and the general population values the retention of these styles of architecture. We are at the point where architects and an increasingly large minority of the general population appreciates the well-designed houses and buildings of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Changing public perceptions and taste mean that architecture of the mid-Twentieth Century is beginning to be valued and an important contribution to “telling the Australian story”.

Docomomo Australia believes that education regarding the built environment and architecture raises awareness and appreciation of well-designed buildings of our past and that it is an essential part of creating a society that is based on sustainability (keeping buildings from the past conserves the embodied energy in those buildings) and a society confident in its future because it appreciates its past.

Docomomo Australia therefore submits that governments at all levels should facilitate education on the built environment and its conservation by suitable school-based curricula, by post-school public awareness and education and by funding non-government organisations to undertake such work in the wider community. Such post-school work would include publications, TV programs, seminars, conferences, open days at buildings and sites, workshops, etc.

The methodology for the systematic identification and education program on heritage from the more recent past is well established internationally and in Australia. Identifying places from the more recent past does not mean conservationists want to keep everything and the more “recent” a place is the more it has to prove it is exceptional to warrant protection. Many 20th century places have already gained a place in the affection of Australians and as time passes more will be added.

2) **Research**

Following on from the points raised above concerning an ever-increasing awareness and appreciation of more recent periods of architecture there is a constant need to be researching and listing significant buildings and sites so that they are preserved for future generations.

Such research is thought to be a part of the planning process so that ordered land-use planning occurs. However, “heritage” is often considered to be an impediment to development rather than the stimulus for development which is rooted in the past but looking to the future. European countries such as France and Spain have strict controls over changing the historic parts of cities, towns, villages, buildings and landscapes and yet innovative, modern development is encouraged by this rich cultural milieu and rich public appreciation of art, architecture and history.

More thorough research and heritage surveys need to be conducted on a thematic and chronological basis rather than being left to the Local Government Authorities to conduct within the limited confines of their particular local government area.

Docomomo Australia submits that the Australian and state governments should adequately fund thematic and chronological surveys on a regular basis in order to ensure that important buildings and sites are protected and that such information can then be fed into the ongoing land-use planning process by state and local governments. Such surveys would not, of course, be limited chronologically and important and meaningful buildings and sites from the recent past would also be included in the survey work.

The purpose of such research and survey is to create a greater climate of certainty. Land-use planning in Australia does not adequately incorporate all the relevant factors (heritage, sustainability, landscape design, etc) and is usually arbitrary and ad hoc. The European systems assume that everything is of cultural value until proven otherwise whereas the Australian method appears to assume that nothing is culturally worthwhile until proven otherwise.

Docomomo Australia also submits that such research has to be readily available electronically so that comparative analysis is possible across the nation when assessing new buildings for inclusion as heritage items or when assessing threats to buildings and sites which are already listed. The current system of government departments and agencies commissioning heritage studies of their assets and then not releasing those studies publicly is a misuse of public funds and a waste of considerable professional input into those studies.

A more centralised, national system would improve access to such studies to facilitate comparative studies and analysis.

Docomomo Australia further submits that research into the technology of buildings should include the technology utilised in buildings of the recent past. Such research cannot be undertaken by the architectural and building industry as such research requires greater financial and technical resources than can be mustered by an industry dominated by very small, separate companies. Governments should adequately fund such research and ensure that the results of the research are widely disseminated. In the past, State government departments of public works used to conduct such work and disseminate the results to the industry. With the “privatisation” of those departments (or even with their “commercialisation”) such research, conducted with public funds, is now considered “commercial-in-confidence” and is not released to the wider community. The wider community thus suffers from the lack of dissemination of such technical research and knowledge.

3) Patrimony

Continental European countries have a more comprehensive model of National Patrimony than the Anglo-Saxon nations such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, etc. Governments of countries such as France and Spain see their built heritage as underpinning and differentiating their cultural heritage from that of other nations. Such heritage is considered an asset to be promoted in order to sustain their distinctive cultures

and one has only to experience the thousands of people flocking to heritage buildings on the national heritage open days to understand how important the built heritage is in providing a sense of local and national identity.

By contrast, the fragmented heritage system in Australia with its “exclusive” National Heritage List, the various State Heritage Registers and the items of local heritage significance in local planning instruments does not engender a sense of National Patrimony (ie something shared by us all as Australians).

The current system encourages disparate identification and management systems not centrally coordinated with central policies etc. Each section desperately trying to deliver what they can manage. The Australian Government now has its idea of the distinctively Australian but concentrates on a few special places rather than developing national, regional or local distinctiveness. A wider program could help deliver national identity but promote regional distinctiveness – what makes my place special is usually its heritage in the long run rather than a best pub or footy team. It is the local built and natural environment that attracts regional tourism and provides a sense of place.

Docomomo Australia therefore submits that the Australian Government should take the lead in engendering a sense of pride and ownership of our National Patrimony by adequately funding publications about our built and landscape heritage and adequately funding conservation works to our built and landscape heritage.

Instead of continuing to promulgate high level theory at a National level, after the strategic National and regional themes have been developed, funding should be provided to state and local governments and non-government organisations and individuals to deliver the policy and implementation frameworks and to fund projects and practical research and studies.

Scott Robertson
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27 July 2005