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HISTORIC BUILDINGS AND THE HERITAGE PARK

A paper to the Australian Heritage Parks
Association 6th Biennial Conference
Echuca, 12 September 1986

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The preservation of historic buildings is an age old practice.

In 458 AD, Emperor Majorian enacted legislation which required a permit for demolition of buildings in Rome. Penalties ranged from fines to severed hands. In 1560 Queen Elizabeth I issued a decree 'agaynst breakyng or defacing of monuments' and later in relatively recent times in 1751, the English 'Society of Antiquaries' received its Charter for the preservation of historic monuments.

Modern historic preservation legislation was largely shaped with the less than 400 word decree of the Grand Duke Ludwig of Hesse in 1818, and in England some sixty years later, in 1877, the Craftsman/Socialist William Morris founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (S.P.A.B.). His action in forming this still extant society was in response to the so-called restoration architects led by Gilbert Scott who in the name of sanctified restoration attempted to reinstate mediaeval monuments. Morris regarded their actions as having done more for their destruction than all of the foregoing centuries of revolution, violence and contempt.

There is a powerful lesson to be learnt from these late nineteenth century practitioners. The great wave of restoration conservation and preservation fervour which has swept Australia in the last 20 years can also be seen in the same light, for much of Australia's architectural heritage has been irreversibly violated or mutated in the name of the heritage.

Many of these projects were undertaken without any understanding of the nature of the cultural significance of the structure, and a complete disregard for established principles of conservation.

It has until recently been a time of great pragmatism and passion in the preservation of the heritage. It is now a time to develop a philosophy to conservation and a policy for each building of heritage significance.

In much the same way, heritage parks have developed in Australia without any established philosophy, growing in an ad hoc manner, integrating salvaged structures amidst replicas to create an enormous historical pastiche.

Unlike Colonial Williamsburg, the real and the replicated buildings are easy to detect in heritage parks in Australia.

The practice of relocating buildings in heritage parks must be treated with some apprehension for I believe that generally, historic buildings should remain in their original settings.

The National Trust of Australia, founded in Victoria in 1956 now has some 3,000 odd buildings either classified or recorded as being of heritage significance in this State.

The government's statutory preservation arm, the Historic Buildings Council, established in 1974 with an embryonic register of some 350 buildings, now has over 640 buildings listed and subject to preservation controls.

As a consequence of sponsoring Conservation Studies in the metropolis, select inner suburban municipalities and a sprinkling of country shires and regions, the Historic Buildings Council now has some 2,000 buildings nominated for inclusion on the Historic Buildings Register.

Whilst this number no doubt has caused concern in some quarters, the number is miniscule and pales to insignificance when compared with the 80,000 listed historic buildings in Great Britain.

The range of buildings types listed on the Victorian Register is however, diverse and full of variety. Most building types are currently represented, but many historic buildings and places throughout Australia remain as yet to be identified. The work of identification has only just begun.

The pressure to re-develop (read as rupture) the Australian metropolis has produced many stresses on preservation organisations and developers alike. In the case of many central city buildings in Melbourne, historic integrity and authenticity of the fabric has been unceremoniously sacrificed and compromised to such an extent that now facade preservation alone is seen in some quarters as palliative enough to the conservationists.

The sham of such a preservation/development policy is obvious and several recent examples, including Melville House in Collins Street, the Wool Stores in Geelong and the Pram Factory in Carlton illustrate this disturbing trend.

In the process of examining buildings for the Historic Buildings Register, the Historic Buildings Council is required to conduct public hearings, and in the case of many a sensitively sited historic building in the city, it has been suggested by learned and expensive counsel to the owners that the subject building should be removed to a museum site.

Magnanimously, the owners often agree to donate the fabric to any heritage park foolish enough to consider the offer.

The lesson learnt in relocating the facade of the former Bank of New South Wales (1856) at the University of Melbourne makes a mockery of these propositions. In one celebrated case, the Rialto development in Collins Street, even the Chairman of the Planning Appeals Board was moved to comment that the historic fabric would be better set in an outer suburban park rather than preserved in situ.

However impossible it may be to relocate solid slabs of the heritage on distant sites, there is however a case for the relocation of less substantial historic buildings and structures in heritage parks or on alternative sites.

The practice of relocating historic buildings and other relics in heritage parks is well established in Victoria and there are notable examples including the two storey iron house 'Loren' at Moe (Old Gipps town).

The guiding doctrine for the preservation of historic buildings and places in Australia is contained in Australia ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance, otherwise known as the Burra Charter.

Article 9 reads:

A building or work should remain in its historical location. The moving of all or part of a building or work is unacceptable unless this is the sole means of ensuring its survival.

In explanatory notes to Article 9 of the Charter the following interpretation is explained.

Some structures were designed to be readily removable or already have a history of previous moves, e.g. pre-fabricated dwellings and poppet heads. Provided such a structure does not have a strong association with its present site, its removal may be considered. If any structure is moved, it should be moved to an appropriate setting and given an appropriate use. Such action should not be to the detriment of any place of cultural significance.

The Charter should be compulsory reading for all those well meaning conservationists who might see relocation of historic fabric as a viable alternative to destruction.

Heritage Parks of various themes throughout Australia have to varying degrees of success integrated historic buildings into the theme or layout of the park, but more often than not, without appreciation of the original setting or the heritage context.

At its worst, relocation of historic buildings can be seen to relieve the once significant fabric of much of its contextual meaning, and the building survives merely as a relic of another age.

At its best, the relocation of an obsolete, redundant or otherwise unwanted historic building in a heritage park with an appropriate setting can enhance our understanding of the nature of the heritage as well as guaranteeing the continued preservation of the fabric. Appropriate interpretation of the evidence can further enhance any inspection of the fabric and establish the historic relic in an educative context.

To date, Heritage Parks in Victoria have largely avoided taking custody of registered or classified historic buildings, preferring instead to concentrate on the more non-descript vernacular.

In any case, only a small number of building types should be considered as suitable for relocation. More about these types later.

The conservation practice discipline has in recent years rapidly developed as a specialised aspect of architectural practice. Modern conservation practice relies upon a diverse range of expertise for the various processes associated with an often complex conservation program.

The conservation processes have been formalised in documents prepared by Australia ICOMOS in recent times and guidelines are now available to assist in the preparation of a conservation analysis of an historic building, and to formulate a conservation

policy and management plan for the structure. As a precursor to any major works proposed for a registered historic building, the Historic Buildings Council now requires an analysis of the fabric to be undertaken and a conservation policy established.

Government departments are now in the habit of commissioning studies on major public buildings and the National Trust is well advanced in a program to have analyses performed for a number of historic buildings in their custody prior to undertaking any restoration works.

A typical conservation analysis program now involves a number of stages and contributions from expert disciplines including an architectural historian, social or urban historian, archaeologist, conservation architect, restoration engineer, building materials technologists, interior decoration specialists, paint analysts and landscape and gardening authorities.

As the need to improve the presentation and interpretation of historic buildings in heritage parks inevitably increases, it will become mandatory on park management to undertake the same laborious investigations in accordance with the Australia ICOMOS guidelines. Whilst I appreciate that heritage parks have in many cases already undertaken such work, the practice is not yet widespread or universally accepted.

There is a place for real historic buildings in the Australian Heritage Park, however there is a much more urgent need for a museum devoted exclusively to portable buildings.

Take the situation at Geelong as an example. When Professor Gilbert Herbert, author of the definitive history of portable and prefabricated buildings Pioneers of Prefabrication: The British Contribution in the Nineteenth Century, (1976) visited Australia in 1980, I had the pleasure of showing him more extant iron and timber portable/prefabricated houses in one day in the Geelong region, than he had personally inspected in total prior to that date.

Geelong has a unique legacy of iron and timber buildings of the immediate gold rush era, many of which have only just survived the ravages of time and their natural enemies, rust and dry rot respectively. Iron houses such as that to be found at Mount Duneed, Brown Brothers' two storey iron store in Mercer Street, Geelong and the timber cottage at 22 Coronation Street, Geelong West are all historic relics with little future.

They are however rare documents of another era and of prime archaeological interest.

A case can be made for the preservation of this disparate collection to form part of a portable houses museum, for they will not long survive the hostile Geelong environment.

In such an establishment the long homeless, but important National Trust collection of cast iron could be displayed. An important consideration would be to ensure that all the rescued structures were set well apart in a sheltered landscape, restored and capable of individual interpretations. The Weald and Downland Open Air Museum near Chichester in England is a model of its type, being a museum of regional vernacular buildings all individually located in a grassy rural environment.

A brave, but nevertheless misguided attempt to establish a timber buildings museum has already occurred at Deakin University, but the salvaged structures of varying historical significance have unfortunately been located cheek to jowl on a prominent hill at Waurin Ponds. The value of this establishment is questionable. The project is no doubt hampered by a lack of funds and available volunteer expertise. However the precedent set should not be followed as the Social History House Museum is lacking in contextual associations and the Burra Charter Article 9 is compromised.

Placing of historic buildings in a museum context must however be seen as a last resort, and all alternatives to placing the fabric in a museum environment should first be exhausted.

An interesting alternative future was recently organised for an exceedingly rare timber house of Asian origin in Collingwood.

This four room prefabricated cottage, the 'Singapore House' was built with structural components clearly marked in a variety of Chinese characters, which translate as common words such as moon, sun, pearl. These characters were matched during construction.

The building was erected in Collingwood in the mid 1850s and sold for removal in 1898 to make way for the extensions to the Collingwood railway line. It was purchased and shifted to Mentone prior to 1900 and integrated into a modernised format.

The building, although reputedly of prefabricated origin had not been documented and when demolition was proposed a frantic evaluation of the fabric was undertaken by both the Historic Buildings Council and the National Trust. The Historic Buildings Council declined to register the relic, primarily on the grounds of lack of integrity.

During demolition however, the structure was exposed and the Chinese characters were revealed.

Attempts to save the structure ensued and the Historical Buildings Council, in an about-face issued an Interim Preservation Order to protect the part demolished structure.

An approach to the Trustees of Sovereign Hill at Ballarat to take the building into their custody was declined, on the correct grounds that the particular building could not be incorporated into the park as research had shown that it or a similar building was not located on the Ballarat gold fields.

A saviour, in the form of an enthusiastic Collingwood resident with a vacant allotment in Sackville Street, offered to take the structure and after a great deal of local government procrastination, a permit was issued to allow the Singapore House to return to Collingwood.

The alternative future will find the house once again serving in its traditional role as a residence, in my view, a more satisfactory role than in a museum. There is, however, a place for real historic buildings in heritage parks. The mechanism for selecting them, relocating, presenting and interpreting them must of course be improved.