

## The Burra Charter at Work in Australia

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The Burra Charter was first adopted in Australia by Australia ICOMOS in the early 1980s at much the same time as the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards* were being prepared for use in the U.S. It is the official conservation code of practice adopted by Australia ICOMOS, but it has no legal status whatsoever. Nevertheless, it has had a remarkable effect on conservation practice throughout the country and has acquired a quasi-legal status due to its adoption by government and other agencies.

The genesis of the Burra Charter (so called because it was first officially adopted by ICOMOS in the South Australian town of Burra Burra) was the ICOMOS International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, more commonly known as the Venice Charter, which was prepared by European practitioners in 1964. ICOMOS Canada and ICOMOS New Zealand have since then adopted similar charters, namely the Appleton and Aotearoa charters.

The Venice Charter was drafted with the preservation of the great buildings of Europe in mind. This is also true of the Burra Charter which, based very closely on the Venice Charter, was intended to apply to significant structures in Australia. However, a rigid application of the Charter process to less important buildings, and the invariable and often unnecessary preparation of full Conservation Plans (see below) has now become the norm.

The Burra Charter was a product of its time and owed a great deal to the Venice Charter and the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards*. In Australia in the mid- to late-1970s a professional approach to the conservation of the historic cultural heritage was being adopted for the first time. Until then almost all "conservation"<sup>1</sup> in Australia was carried out through organisations such as the National Trust with some work being done by government public works departments. Such works were often carried out without any formal or professional consideration.

With the formation of the Australian Heritage Commission in 1974 and the beginning of a movement to introduce State laws to protect the cultural heritage, the need for a professional

body was realised. Shortly afterward, ICOMOS decided that its first major task after establishing the need for a professional approach to conservation was the preparation of the necessary standards. Thus was conceived the Burra Charter, although its birth was a couple of years and many meetings and discussions away.

The Charter itself is a simpler document than the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards*, but read in conjunction with the adopted guidelines to the Charter it is broadly similar. It defines the various terms including conservation, preservation, restoration, and adaptation. The Australian Charter defines "cultural significance" with reference to aesthetic, historic, or social value for past, present, and future generations. The Charter is divided into three parts: conservation principles, conservation processes, and conservation practice. However there is one big difference between the U.S. and the Australian documents. Whilst the U.S. document is prescriptive, the Charter sets out a process which is to be followed at the discretion of the practitioner. The Charter also adopts the policy of specifying who was responsible for the work that was undertaken and why that decision was taken.

Nevertheless, it provides a system resembling that of the U.S. and it suffers from some of what can be perceived as the same faults. Whereas they both provide that proper procedures should be followed, neither addresses the problem of aesthetic taste, which is always a problem in conservation matters. The Charter requires that new work be distinguished from old; a problem frequently played up by architects by using quite aesthetically unpleasant materials to establish the difference whereas a document or plaque could have done the job with far more pleasing results!

Since the adoption by ICOMOS of the Burra Charter, the attitude of conservation bodies, funding agencies, and professionals alike has changed dramatically. Many, if not all, funding agencies administering public funds for conservation work on the built environment require such work to be done in accordance with the Burra Charter. Many also require a Conservation Plan (see below) to be done before physical work can commence. These measures have had a remarkable effect on conservation practice in Australia, but not all of it is

good. Certainly standards have improved out of sight and now much more research is done before physical work is begun.

But there is a problem. There is still a great deal of scope, as there should be, for individual judgement; unfortunately, a proportion of practitioners choose the rigid application of the Charter in circumstances in which they should have exercised their own judgement as to the appropriate course to follow.

The conservation education system in Australia is still in its infancy, and issues such as the Burra Charter and their application often receive scant attention in relevant college or university level institutional courses. In addition, some people lack the confidence to make a decision regardless of the number of reports which are done. It is no good expecting the imposition of standards and the process of producing a conservation plan to aid an incompetent practitioner to become competent.

Similarly, through lack of judgement and/or lack of knowledge, attempts are often made to apply the Burra Charter indiscriminately to places of little or no cultural heritage significance.

Just what is a Conservation Plan? This document too has also acquired an almost mystical significance in Australia and is frequently prepared when a practitioner ought to know that all that is required is a half page of notes! The Conservation Plan grew out of the (U.S.) Historic Structures Reports format and when imported into Australia became inextricably linked to the Burra Charter process.

In theory, the Conservation Plan is an excellent concept, and fulfills the need specified in the Burra Charter to carry out full and adequate research prior to commencing any physical intervention in the fabric of the building. But there are often two problems—each of which requires an exercise of judgement by the practitioner. The first is that frequently the fabric will disclose, to the discerning and educated practitioner, far more than any research in archives or elsewhere. In many cases, the process has been hijacked by professional historians with the unfortunate result that very little attention is paid in the process to the needs of the client. Secondly, the Conservation Plan may not be able to be properly completed without some physical intervention.

The real danger with both the indiscriminate application of the Burra Charter and the preparation of Conservation Plans is that the cost of the Plan may exceed the funds available for conservation and require the application of inappropriate conservation principles so strict that the structure is no longer capable of reasonable economic use, not to mention the fact that the owner may not be

able to afford the work. In many cases, the balance between conservation and practical reality is lost in an adherence to process rather than the seeking of a sensible outcome.

On balance, in Australia, the benefits of the application of the Charter in the past have far outweighed the detrimental effects that may have followed its application. But today, with the professionalism of conservation well established and the vital need to look at a broader spectrum of places requiring conservation to maintain the character of our towns and villages becoming, in the author's opinion, the predominant conservation need, the application of the Charter needs to be re-examined.

All those procedures in Australia, as in Europe, were introduced to ensure that important buildings were not vandalised in the name of conservation by unknowing or uncaring practitioners. They were intended to raise standards by installing a process and ensuring the proper conservation of elements of the cultural heritage of which they form a part.

Instead, they are often applied by narrow-minded zealots who use the Charter in a way which prohibits work which may well have saved a building for future generations. Not every building has fabric of such importance that it must not be altered or changed. A few have. Many have not.

Despite its shortcomings, however, the improvement in professionalism and process since the adoption of the Charter is extraordinary. Since the adoption of the Burra Charter by Australia ICOMOS, the sister body in New Zealand has adopted the very similar Aotearoa Charter. This is a relatively brief, clear, and user-friendly document, being, of course, more recent than its U.S. and Australian equivalents. It, too, defines terms including conservation, preservation, restoration, adaptation, and cultural heritage value. It comprises a preamble, and sections dealing with general principles and conservation processes. It makes specific reference to indigenous cultural heritage, recognising the fluid nature of indigenous conservation precepts and the role of guardians in the conservation of indigenous heritage.

Internationally, we are slowly realising that our (Western) philosophies are not always the correct ones. In many countries not of Anglo-Saxon background, the focus on fabric-based conservation takes second place to less tangible values. In Australia, we may spend a fortune filling an old beam with epoxy to ensure that the original fabric appears to remain. In other cultures, the beam would be removed and replaced by a new one of similar material and appearance. Many ancient temples in Asia retain little or no actual fabric which is more than a couple of centuries old. Our

(Anglo-Saxon) pre-occupation with the physical fabric rather than the spiritual or conceptual idea of the place puts undue emphasis on the retention of fabric long past its useful life and in some cases preventing a new and financially-viable life for the building.

For this reason, the appropriateness of the application of the Burra Charter policy to places of cultural significance to Aboriginal people is very limited. While there are places of importance to both Aboriginal and European people, the European reverence for the fabric of a place rather than its spiritual aspect creates a dilemma.

A recent example is the Kimberley repainting case in Western Australia where traditional Aboriginal people "restored" an important work of rock art by using modern materials, namely plastic paint, rather than the traditional clay and mud. It was a practical solution to the people charged with the care of the site. But the non-traditional (and definitely non-Burra Charter) process of "restoration" caused great offense to the European conservationists and the rights and wrongs of this case are still being hotly disputed by experts. To try and impose these precepts on Aboriginal peoples in relation to places of significance only to them, or to try and impose restrictions designed for bricks and mortar to the growing and ever-changing natural environment can do nothing but debase the reputation of the current document.

One of the real issues facing Australia ICOMOS today is the acceptance of the limitations of the role of the Charter; that is to say, an acknowledgement that it should apply only to places of sufficient importance to warrant the expenditure necessary for a full Conservation Plan. In many cases, the major issue is the question of working out the scale and form of the Conservation Plan necessary for the type of place.

Unfortunately, the Charter and the Plan have become inseparable in many people's minds. This issue has to be confronted in today's changing economic and social times. Similarly, the move to try

and extend the Burra Charter concept to Aboriginal and natural places is fraught with danger and disaster. The Venice Charter and ICOMOS itself are Euro-centric concepts based upon the European perception of buildings and their importance.

The beneficial effects of the Burra Charter in ensuring a much higher and professional standard of conservation work is undeniable. The fact that it is not government edict but the advice of an independent expert body has been a strong point in favour of its general acceptance. But no number of standards of whatever sort will aid the practitioner who has not the knowledge or courage to make a common-sense decision. In many cases, the requirements of the Conservation Plan and the Burra Charter are very clear and precise. In very many of those cases, an attempt at inflexible application will result in outright rejection by the owner, followed perhaps by demolition of the property.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In Australia the term "conservation" is used as the all-embracing term for the various processes, rather than "preservation" as in the USA.

<sup>2</sup> Whilst the factual information contained in this Article gives an accurate picture of the Burra Charter it must be noted that the opinions are those of the author (who incidentally was one of the original authors of the Charter and who has worked in the field of historic conservation for over 25 years) and do not necessarily represent those of all other members of ICOMOS in Australia.

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