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## THE BURRA CHARTER: Australia's Methodology for Conserving Cultural Heritage

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**The Rocks area, a nineteenth-century commercial district on the Sydney Harbour, is the type of place that is often overlooked by traditional preservation activity.**

**Photos courtesy Graham Brooks.**

Since 1966, practitioners in the conservation of cultural heritage throughout the world have used the Venice Charter as a guide for their work. The charter was developed by the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), an organization that brings together such professionals from around the world and continually seeks to raise the quality and standard of conservation practice.<sup>1</sup>

The charter drew heavily on the European background of many of its original authors and focused on the concept of the “monument,” a term that encompassed the great historic sites and buildings of antiquity.

In Australia we found that the concept of the “monument” was of little use; our island continent has been settled by Europeans only for some 200 years, yet aboriginal archaeological sites date back 40,000 years. None of Australia’s important historical sites could rate against a terminology that is more suited to the Parthenon or Chartres Cathedral.

By the mid 1970s, there was a real danger that the cultural heritage of European settlement in Australia would be despised, or at best ignored, before being swept away by the march of progress. European Australians tended to look back to their Old World roots for a sense of their cultural heritage and place in the world. Building conservation was practiced only by a few specialized architects and other professionals. And there was almost no legislative protection for the few buildings that the general public regarded as historic.

The Australian National Committee of ICOMOS recognized that new concepts of what should be regarded as valuable historic resources, and new techniques for conserving those resources, were needed to promote an

understanding of the cultural heritage unique to European settlement in Australia. The committee decided that a new charter, written for the Australian context, would be a statement of doctrine, an aid to communicate that doctrine and an educational tool for practitioners entering the field. As a written document it could become a point of reference and would help establish consistent methodologies for conservation practitioners.

It was important for the new charter to use the Venice Charter as a starting point, to accept its general philosophy but then go further. The Venice Charter had established the principles of research, understanding, sensitive intervention and protective care for monuments; the problem was that its language and terminology could be difficult to understand and apply in the new world.

In drafting the new charter, the committee found that it would have to expand upon the Venice Charter in several ways.

First, there was a need to establish common conservation language throughout Australia. For example, the term "restoration" had become widely used by non-specialists to encompass all aspects of saving and keeping old buildings. Such all-encompassing terms can mean different things to different people, often leading to confusion or the use of inappropriate conservation techniques.

Such a common language or approach can be adopted for an entire linguistic group or regional assembly of nations. Great care must be exercised, however, to avoid cultural imperialism by attempting to force one approach onto other societies or cul-

tural networks where subtle but important differences may require a change in approach. Second, there needed to be an emphasis on thoroughly understanding the significance of a place before policy decisions were made. Conservation processes should vary according to the nature of significance of the cultural resource.

Third, the charter should avoid technical jargon and include precise definitions included so the terminology could be understood easily.

## *The Charter of Venice*

*Excerpts from the statement of the II<sup>nd</sup> International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, Venice, May 1964.*

**Imbued with a message from the past, the historic monuments of generations of people remain to the present day as living witnesses of their age-old traditions. People are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage. The common responsibility to safeguard them for future generations is recognized.**

**Article 1 The concept of an historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or an historic event. This applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passage of time.**

**Article 3 The intention in conserving and restoring monuments is to safeguard them no less as works of art than as historical evidence.**

**Article 5 The conservation of monuments is always facilitated by making use of them for some social purpose. Such use is therefore desirable but it must not change the layout or decoration of the building.**

**Article 6 The conservation of a monument implies preserving a setting which is not out of scale. Wherever the traditional setting exists, it must be kept. No new construction, demolition, or modification which would alter the relations of mass and color must be allowed.**

**Article 9 The process of restoration ... must stop at the point where conjecture begins. ... Any extra work which is indispensable must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp. ...**

**Article 11 The valid contributions of all periods to the building of a monument must be respected, since unity of style is not the aim of a restoration. ...**

**Article 12 Replacements of missing parts must integrate harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.**

**The rich streetscape contrasts with the high-rise towers to the south.**

Fourth, it should emphasize a multi-disciplinary approach to conservation. The roles of particular practitioners such as archaeologists, architects, or historians should not be emphasized over the general concept of conservation work to a place.

In 1979 Australia ICOMOS developed *The Charter for the Conservation of the Places of Cultural Significance*, or the “Burra Charter,” after the old mining town in which the final draft was adopted. The Burra Charter underwent two revisions, the last in 1988, as experience from its use filtered back.

The key difference between the Burra Charter and the Venice Charter is that the Australian document is applied to all places of cultural significance, not just the monuments covered by the older document. In fact, the concept of cultural significance is the key to the whole conservation process: The Burra Charter urges and provides guidelines for plans that identify the cultural significance of heritage sites and suggest conservation policies that protect that cultural identity.

“Cultural significance” is defined as “aesthetic, historic, scientific, or social value for past, present, or future generations.” These terms are not mutually exclusive and can embrace many other values. Places likely to be of significance are those that improve our understanding of the past or enrich the present, and which will be of value to future generations. The assessment of cultural significance is not seen as a one-time exercise: Just as society’s views towards historic buildings change over time, so the assessment process should reflect changing attitudes that can arise from new and more widely available information.



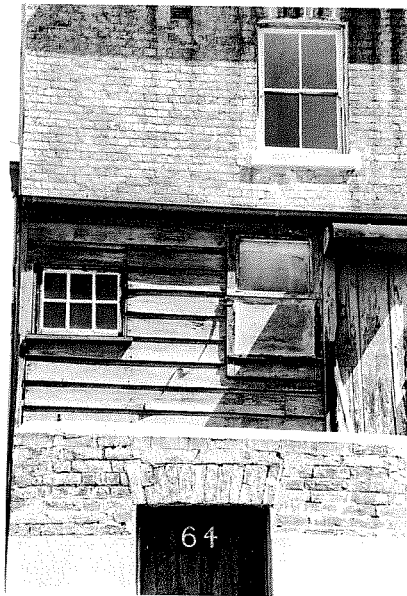
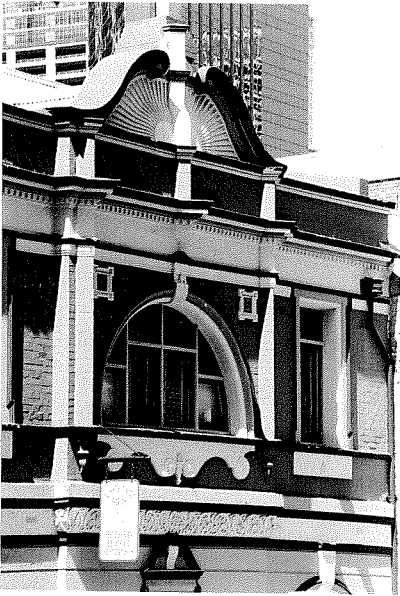
Conservation practitioners in Australia use “cultural heritage” to describe all aspects of historical development that differ from the natural environment. It includes buildings, sites, structures, ruins, archaeology, industrial archaeology, movable objects and even shipwrecks (known as “underwater cultural heritage”). The term has recently been extended to embrace the concept of “cultural landscape,” which means any landscape in which the occupants have transformed the original landscape to suit their needs. Farms, gardens, plowed fields, stone walls, dividing paddocks, traditional road networks, tree-lined canals and even battlefields are included in the concept.

The strength of the Burra Charter is its universal approach and clear methodology, which enables practitioners to examine cultural sites and to plan for their conservation using a consistent technique. The methodology is not a set of rehabilitation or restoration standards applied irrespective of the nature of the historic structure; each place is recognized for its own qualities and identity.<sup>2</sup> Nor does

the methodology give preference to cultural sites of a particular type or scale, or from a particular period or geographic location. It has been applied with equal vigor to the remains of an explorer’s hut erected in Antarctica in 1905 and to major office buildings from the 1960s.

Over the past decade, the Burra Charter has had a remarkable influence and effect on conservation practice. Many government conservation bodies tie conservation funding to the application of its methodologies. Most state and local governments now require consideration of potential impacts on a place’s cultural significance before development can proceed.

The Burra Charter is most successful when it is used to prepare a conservation plan at the outset of a project. This planning document has a number of goals: to understand a place’s history, physical fabric and cultural significance; to examine issues surrounding its future use; to propose conservation policies that will conserve the place’s cultural significance, whatever the



The Burra Charter encourages practices that retain and respect the texture of age and wear (top) and traditional paint schemes that enliven the rich, decorative facades.

## The Burra Charter

*The following is excerpted from the charter adopted by Australia ICOMOS in 1979 at Burra Burra. Revisions were adopted in 1981 and 1988.*

### Article 1 Definitions

1.1 Place means site, area, building or other work, group of buildings or other works, together with associated contents and surroundings.

1.2 Cultural significance means aesthetic, historic, scientific, or social value for past, present, or future generations.

1.4 Conservation means all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance. It includes maintenance and may, according to circumstance, include preservation, restoration, reconstruction and adaptation and will be commonly a combination of more than one of these.

1.5 Maintenance means the continuous protective care of the fabric, contents and setting of a place, and is to be distinguished from repair. Repair involves restoration or reconstruction and it should be treated accordingly.

1.6 Preservation means maintaining the fabric of a place in its existing state and retarding deterioration.

1.7 Restoration means returning the EXISTING fabric of a place to a known earlier state by removing accretions or by reassembling existing components without the introduction of new material.

1.8 Reconstruction means returning a place as nearly as possible to a known earlier state and is distinguished by the introduction of materials (new or old) into the fabric. ...

1.9 Adaptation means modifying a place to suit proposed compatible uses.

1.10 Compatible use means a use which involves no change to the culturally significant fabric, changes which are substantially reversible, or changes which require a minimal impact.

Article 2 The aim of conservation is to retain the cultural significance of a place and must include provision for its security, its maintenance and its future.

Article 3 Conservation is based on a respect for the existing fabric and should involve the least possible physical intervention. ...

Article 8 Conservation requires the maintenance of an appropriate visual setting; e.g., form, scale, color, texture and materials. No new construction, demolition, or modification which would adversely affect the setting should be allowed. ... (New conservation work, including infill and additions, may be acceptable, provided it does not reduce or obscure the cultural significance of the place ... )<sup>1</sup>

Article 14 Restoration ... is based on respect for all the physical, documentary and other evidence and stops at the point where conjecture begins.

Article 16 The contributions of all periods to the place must be respected. If a place includes the fabric of different periods, revealing the fabric of one period at the expense of another can only be justified when what is removed is of slight cultural significance and the fabric which is to be revealed is of much greater cultural significance.

Article 19 Reconstruction is limited to the reproduction of fabric ... it should be identifiable on close inspection as being new work.

Article 21 Adaptation must be limited to that which is essential to a use for the place [that has been] determined in accordance [with a conservation policy].

Article 25 A written statement of conservation policy must be professionally prepared setting out the cultural significance and proposed conservation procedure together with justification and supporting evidence, including photographs, drawings and all appropriate samples.

### Note

1. Comment in parenthesis is from the explanatory notes to Article 8.

future use; and to outline strategies and procedures for the implementation of those policies.

An example of the changes brought about by the rigorous application of the methodology outlined in the Burra Charter to a large urban historic precinct can be seen in The Rocks area of Sydney. Located on the edge of Sydney Harbour, close to the Opera House and the central city, the area contains a large collection of nineteenth-century buildings.

During most of this century the area was neglected and very run down. By the late 1960s it was scheduled for total redevelopment as an expansion of the main central business district. A series of often violent protests by residents and building workers led to a gradual change by the city. The redevelopment plan was dropped, but for many years quite large infill projects were permitted.

In recent years, however, The Rocks has enjoyed another change of direction, with a strenuous effort to apply more rigorous conservation principles as a means of revitalizing the area. Original building fabric is now protected and is kept, where possible. The emphasis is on repair rather than reconstruction. New uses are limited to those that are compatible with the existing buildings. External colors, reconstructed verandahs and shop awnings, signs, street lighting and street furniture are now based on earlier forms and details, which are documented in early photographs. The Rocks is now a popular destination for both local residents and tourists. The rich texture of the urban fabric is appreciated by visitors as a genuine historic place.

There remains a number of key challenges to the future of conservation in Australia and the application of the Burra Charter. We must:

- remain responsive to developing social attitudes towards history and historic places,
- gain further acceptance from the property industry that heritage conservation is a valid component of growth and development
- continue building links to other conservation groups, notably those concerned about the natural environment,
- encourage the tourism industry in Australia to recognize the potential of cultural heritage sites to balance the nation's wilderness attractions, and
- continue emphasizing that the conservation planning process should commence at the very beginning of the development process.

### Notes

1. In Australia the term "conservation" has the same meaning as the term "preservation" does in the U.S.

2. The tendency to apply general rules and traditional but inappropriate approaches is avoided. There was a tradition in Australia in the 1960s for all historic houses to be painted white. Now there will be research of the early color schemes.