ENVIRONMENTAL HERITAGE INCONSISTENCIES IN A MULTI-CULTURAL NEW WORLD

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by

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This paper seeks to explore the changing concepts of environmental heritage since the late 1960s. The global environmental concerns of the 1960s resulted in the World Heritage Convention, since that time the concept of heritage has undergone changes, shifting firstly from concerns predominantly associated with the natural environment to concerns about conservation of the urban fabric of cities to contemporary concepts of heritage as a commodity, namely "the heritage industry". The paper also investigates the problems associated with the notions of heritage in a part of the new world - Australia - which is manifest as an unresolved identification with place where the European notion of heritage as antiquity is translated in Australia as the ancient landscape and the aboriginal mythology. Such an attitude results in a devaluing (possibly even denial) of the heritage of the last two hundred years in a number of ways - the inevitable dissatisfaction with white Australia heritage when only European values of antiquity and excellence are used as measures of heritage worth; the denial of an aboriginal culture which is contemporary and has a recent history of two hundred years and finally the lack of recognition of a multicultural heritage, more particularly the heritage which has been generated over the last fifty years.

Background

This paper is based on the findings of a current research project whose original aims were to interpret the effectiveness of heritage studies and townscape and landscape guidelines in sustaining environmental heritage and environmental quality according to the Heritage Act (NSW) and the Environment, Planning and Assessment Act (NSW).

The research project was prompted by the author's concern about the bland universalism of technology and global economics and the resulting loss of local and regional distinctiveness and its associated meanings and values.

The ultimate aim of the research was to gain a regional overview of all the issues related to heritage and place in order to work towards an effective integration of place, culture and environmental management. Instead it became apparent that while there was an acknowledgement of the importance of environmental heritage even to the extent of including it in planning law, there was also clear evidence that the intrinsic value of place was being eroded throughout New South Wales. Apart from the obvious erosion due to development pressures, there was an undermining of environmental heritage caused by the appropriation of heritage by development interests.

The proliferation of state wide heritage icons which bear little relationship to particular places raises the questions of why such a superficial interpretation is so readily acceptable and whether the forces behind the acknowledgement of heritage are a genuine desire to understand and conserve places or whether the marketing of heritage as a tourist lure is the actual motivation.

To quote David Harvey in "The Condition of Post-Modernity" where he explores the socio-economic forces of the 1980s and their impact on time, place and cultural production.

The other side to the loss of temporality and the search for instantaneous impact is a parallel loss of depth. [Harvey,1989. p.58]

He cites Jameson as being

...particularly emphatic as to the 'depthlessness' of much contemporary cultural production, its fixation with appearances, surfaces and instant impacts that have no sustaining power over time. [Jameson, 1984 as cited in Harvey,1989. p.58.]

Through a study of State and Local Government perceptions of heritage, it has become increasingly evident that there is a depthlessness in the general perceptions of Australia's environmental heritage and this depthlessness has resulted in a fixation with appearances, surfaces and superficiality particularly in the process of commodification of heritage. This is not evident, however, in the perceptions of the natural environment as heritage, an issue which will be discussed later.

Leaving aside the paradoxical aspects of natural and cultural heritage and the possible exploitative use of heritage by tourism, the question still remains as to why there is such a ready acceptance of a superficial notion of cultural heritage. The answer could be interpreted as a lack of value for the inherent meanings associated with the Australian culture of the last two hundred years or the question could reveal the uncertain and uncomfortable paradoxes which exist for Australians in their culture since white settlement. The transporting of an exploitative new world ideology from an old world culture; the vastness of a land which is also unyielding in production resulting in the ethos of "the little Aussie battler"; the lack of an ideology associated with the settlement in contrast to the religious ideology associated with the settlement of North America; the collective guilt that contemporary white Australians feel about the dispossessed aborigines all act against a willingness to understand, let alone 'own' the cultural meanings associated with Australia as a place.

As well as considering these uncertain issues this paper seeks to address the complexity involved in identifying new world relationships with place within the particular context of the last decade where the condition of post modernity has resulted in universality intermingling with historicism to produce ephemeral and confusing images of place: a cultural production which further widens the schism between the actual environmental heritage of Australia and the pseudo-environmental heritage which is now so evident.

The Research Project

The research project which has generated such questions sought to identify State and Local Government perceptions of environmental heritage and environmental quality as well as community perceptions of environmental heritage and environmental quality. To date the study has only concentrated on environmental heritage.

Perceptions of environmental heritage at the State and Local Government levels were considered through the current legislative framework and the processes associated with this framework which in New South Wales are both the Heritage Act and the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act (EP & A Act). One of the processes used in association with the Acts is the heritage study which integrates Local and State Government, being prepared by Local Government under the guidance of the State's Heritage Branch. Such studies establish the historical context of local places by developing thematic histories within which items of environmental heritage can be identified and assessed. The heritage studies in N.S.W. have been undertaken from 1980 to 1989. After 1989 there was a temporary halt while the State Heritage Inventory Programme was being prepared

During the decade the heritage study process has changed from the early diverse approaches to heritage assessment to the more recent studies which are thorough and well documented assessments of heritage. In the process of refinement the heritage study has become a method of identifying the State's environmental heritage and deriving a set of recommendations for the management of this heritage which can be implemented through the local government planning processes under the EP&A Act.

Many of the later studies had quite thoughtful discussions about the concept of environmental heritage and the recommendations which sought to conserve the environmental heritage seemed to be implementable and quite possibly effective in stemming the loss of environmental heritage. The active role that the Heritage Branch of the Department of Planning played in refining the heritage study process allows one to assume that the recent heritage studies reflect or are in accord with the perceptions of environmental heritage held by the State Government.

An analysis of the heritage studies, their thematic histories and their recommendations formed the basis of an extensive questionnaire which was sent to all local government planners in New South Wales. The questionnaire was divided into a number of sections two of which are particularly relevant to this paper; firstly the section which dealt with "understanding environmental heritage" where the questions sought to identify what local government planners perceived as environmental heritage and secondly the section which dealt with "the effectiveness of the heritage study process" which explored the management of environmental heritage.

Local Government planners perception of environmental heritage fell very heavily into the categories of "sites" "buildings" and "monuments" with very few planners appreciating the significance of thematic histories and their particular relevance to the understanding of heritage in the new world where concepts of heritage are revealed through the telling of the stories and often involve folklore and the commonplace in contrast to the European tradition of measuring heritage value by aesthetics and age. In the case of the heritage study recommendations, very few Local Governments had implemented the recommendations - at best the implementations had been partial.

The particular relevance of the heritage study analysis and the survey of Local Government areas in this paper is that it gave insights into perceptions of environmental heritage held at both State and Local Government level.

A further aspect of the legislative framework which reveals perceptions of environmental heritage is section 41 of the Heritage Act (NSW). This section enables Commissions of Inquiry to be set up should members of the community object to Permanent Conservation Orders being placed on items of environmental heritage. An analysis of the reports from the Commissions of Inquiry revealed some consistent community perceptions of environmental heritage through the nature of objections while the findings by the Commissioners also revealed broader community perceptions and values.

The Undermining of Environmental Heritage

The response of the Local Government planners plus the investigations into the Commissions of Inquiry and direct observations of the undermining of the meanings of place has led the author to question deeply the whole concept of environment heritage and its management during the 1980s.

It would appear that it has been a decade that has been greatly concerned with heritage for a number of diverse reasons and yet despite these concerns and

the legislative framework which has been in place and the rigour that has been developed by heritage professionals (possibly because of the rigour of heritage professionals) there has been a consistent loss of important elements of New South Wales heritage. The process of heritage evaluation has tended to result in only the rare or spectacular items of heritage being conserved and even then only one of a particular type. Meanwhile the general fabric of environmental heritage, the ordinary and familiar places, are being lost an an alarming rate.

As well there has been a loss of the inherent meaning of the heritage of our places by turning heritage into a commodity and marketing it for tourism. The commodification of heritage or "the heritage industry" has tended to theme Australia's cultural heritage into Victorian streetscapes, painted in heritage colours. This is characteristic of environmental heritage as interpreted by the Main Street Program where heritage is seen as a possible source of economic revitalization.

Redefining Environmental Heritage.

Perhaps it is time to redefine environmental heritage. The German School of Hermeneutics in exploring the nature of understanding and the meaning and significance of things saw hermeneutics as a function of history and the arts and an essential part of what we mean by culture. Wilhelm Dilthey, one of the philosophers from this school, felt that there might be a right or a wrong interpretation of culture or a real or unreal interpretation of culture however science had not shed light on the matter and that the real world was best interpreted as a text of underlying patterns and relationships [Dilthey as cited in Aldridge, 1989.p.84].

This is in strong contrast to the way environmental heritage is interpreted in New South Wales where there is a tendency for lists, registers, inventories and criteria for the assessment of heritage significance which are rigorous and strongly influenced by exclusionary guidelines, that is, what can not be included.

One could also argue that environmental heritage is essentially a construct a set of values which is derived from particular socio - political and economic conditions and which involve cultural choices at any particular time. Hewison, a heritage theorist, states

in practice, the definition of heritage is the product of conflicting interests in our culture, and its real meaning is the job of the cultural critics to decipher. [Hewison, 1989 p.17].

Both approaches indicate that perceptions of heritage are subject to constant change and yet one cannot ignore the notion that heritage is something that is perpetual - something fixed - which survives changes in socio-political perceptions. Heritage is supposed to be our connection with our past - the way we can continue to know ourselves and it is also what we pass on to the future. There is clearly a desire for heritage to be a constant.

How then does one deal with the fact that what we perceive as our past is constantly changing. This change in perception can be seen even during the last two decades where the early 1970s were dominated by a socio-economic and political perspective derived from the concerns of the environment movement and the impact of modernism on the urban fabric of cities. Such concern led to the idealistic aims of the World Heritage Convention and to Australia's National Estate. By the early 1980s however, heritage had been appropriated as icons for the messages associated with post-modernism and by the mid to late 1980's was fully exploited as part of the spectacle and hyper - reality developed for the

economics of tourism.

In the 1990s there is a need to redefine heritage as part of the total environmental debate, leading to a new aesthetic - the aesthetic of understanding social meanings in our cultural environment. This needs to be an aesthetic of integration rather than the fragmentation and ephemerality which have been characteristic of the philosophy of post-modernism. It is possible that such an integrative aesthetic - the total environment (nature, culture, economics and the social agenda) - could facilitate a sustainable future.

'Heritage' according to the World Heritage Convention.

To support such an approach, the concepts of environmental heritage as seen by the World Heritage Convention (WHC) in the early 1970's need to be considered.

The World Heritage Convention was adopted by UNESCO in 1972. One year before the oil crisis which is considered by some economists to have precipitated the condition of post modernity [Harvey, 1989]. The Convention defined environmental heritage as both cultural and natural heritage which exhibits "outstanding universal value".

Cultural heritage was considered to be monuments, groups of buildings or sites which had outstanding universal value in terms of history, art, science, aesthetics and anthropology. Whereas natural heritage was considered to be natural features and sites and habitats of threatened species which had outstanding universal value in terms of science, conservation, and natural beauty [World Heritage Convention, 1972].

In Australia, the World Heritage Sites have been put forward as natural heritage and are perceived as natural heritage even though they are strongly imbued with cultural heritage for the aboriginal Australians.

If there is any degree of consensus about what the Australian community values as environmental heritage it would appear to be the natural environment and more recently, the aboriginal mythology of place.

But despite this apparent agreement, environmental heritage confusions certainly appear when one examines the community values which emerge in disputes arising from the designation of places as environmental heritage, whether at the local, state or national level. The disputes at the WHC level relate to the fact that Australia has a wide range of natural environments which are of significant heritage value, but are also highly prospective for minerals, timber production and the latest environmental impact - tourism. The issues of the right to exploit are a very strong aspect of the Australian cultural heritage.

There is, however, another interesting aspect to these disputes and that is the issue of multi national controls and federal vs state rights in terms of who has the power to control development and exploitation. Such concerns over who has the right to exploit also is evident in State vs Local Government rights.

The disputes at the WHC level however have highlighted the question of what is environmental heritage and have prompted further legislation at the federal, state & local level [Boer.1990].

To return to the idealistic period of the early 1970's it is interesting to see how quickly Australia responded to the growing concerns about the loss of environmental heritage. Australia was one of the first countries to ratify the World Heritage Convention in 1974, but in terms of its own heritage, the term "National Estate" had been adopted as an objective of the Australian Government policy by

Prime Minister Whitlam as early as 1972 and soon after a Committee to Enquire into our National Estate was established.

The National Estate was defined as

those places being components of the natural environment of Australia and the cultural environment of Australia that have aesthetic historic, scientific or social significance or other special value for future generations as well as for the present community [Aust.Heritage Commission. 1981.].

In 1974 the Committee presented their report noting that there was a great deal of concern about the National Estate because so much which was of national value in the human and natural spheres was under strong threats from damaging human action and that much had already been lost.

The report highlighted the importance of the Trade Union movement and the 'green bans' which included protecting working class housing of the inner city.

Despite the acknowledgement of vernacular housing as heritage, there was a pervasive emphasis on the unique qualities of the Australian natural environment and its fragility and this notion of the unique, the rare, the spectacular has dominated concepts of environmental heritage up to today, meanwhile the inherent fabric of the cultural environment, the cultural heritage of the 'vernacular' has, in general, not been valued if it is more recent than the Victorian era.

Equally interesting were the pervasive garden city notions. The report expressed concern that "urban growth was cutting people off from their natural biological background" and that the inner city older areas should be conserved even though they were "not special" but they were "old and familiar"; however more importantly by keeping these areas, the increasing population density was kept down and the cities could be kept "open" [Parliamentary Paper no.195.1974]

Such statements show that nexus between the garden city and environmental concerns was still strong. The report went on to say

Indeed, from the force of feeling apparent in submissions to the committee and expressed by many witnesses, it seems likely that it will not be long before the fulfilment of the prediction that the issues which will make or break governments in the seventies will be those of conservation, pollution and environment [Parliamentary Paper no.195. 1974].

In fact, the prediction was a decade out - by 1975 the Government was brought down by economic forces - the cost of idealism whether social, cultural or environmental was considered too high by the community. Ironically, a decade later the Labour Government came in on a green vote; but it was a duplicitious platform because the actual agenda of the 1980s was economic rationalism and environmental heritage became appropriated as an economic resource - both natural and cultural and in this climate, particularly in the cities the right to exploit property to its maximum economic potential resulted in the lifting of many permanent conservation orders and ultimately in the State Government itself seeking to exploit the real estate potential of its items of cultural heritage.

To return to another interesting aspect of the 1974 report on the National Estate where the National Estate was defined as having aesthetic, historic, scientific or social significance - i.e., of value for the social culture of the

community of Australia. The report pointed out that the conservation of Australia's environmental heritage was weakened by the cultural cringe. The report stated

As one of the countries most recently settled by Europeans we have long suffered from a 'cultural cringe' in which even the Australian landscape was thought to be somehow inferior to European landscapes. The growing interest in Australian native gardens is a significant mark of Australians new appreciation of what is unique in our environment [Parliamentary Paper no.195.1974].

By the 1990s such a statement seems naive and yet the cultural cringe is still evident in attitudes to conservation of suburban vernacular place.

At this point it is probably interesting to contrast old world understandings of heritage with new world concepts and to consider how important the issue of social significance is in new world concept of environmental heritage.

The old world is richly imbued with nostalgia. The landscape, towns, villages and cities speak to you from ancient times and this conversation has been continuous right up to the present [Clifford.1985]. There is a strong sense of antiquity and cultural continuity which is not only evident in the qualities of the landscape and the buildings but is also incorporated into the mythology - the heritage artifacts of the old world are rich with meanings that are collectively understood.

In the new world and in Australia in particular there is a definite sense of cultural discontinuity - the sense of antiquity is evoked by the ancient landscape and the aboriginal mythology, whereas the recent heritage over the last 200 years lies in the stories as much as the artefacts, and interestingly when studying the different thematic histories developed for the Heritage Studies in the research project referred to earlier - there were two consistent themes, one was the theme of change and the other was the theme of the right to exploit.

The theme of change is the boom and bust phenomenon. This has inevitably undermined cultural continuity in the form of buildings, places and local environments. The theme of change, however, has also produced a kind of strength - a resourcefulness - a willingness to consider new ideas. Whereas the other theme - the right to exploit - is a very interesting problem in terms of environmental heritage. The NSW Corps set this pattern at the time of first settlement and it has been maintained ever since. It is particularly evident in the way the cultural heritage is considered in the Commissions of Inquiry under the NSW Heritage Act. As stated such Inquiries are set up if people object to the conservation of their property. Under S.41 of the Heritage Act the grounds for objections can be -

that the place is not an item of environmental heritage.

even if it is, it does not need a permanent conservation order.

• that a permanent conservation order will prevent an economic return from the property.

that conservation will result in undue financial hardship to the owner.

[paraphrased from Heritage Act (NSW) 1977]

The emphasis on economic viability is clear. The individual's rights to the maximum financial return on private property are obviously highly valued and tend to be seen as more important than the collective rights of a community to sustain element of their culture.

Interestingly this is most strongly evident when the conservation value is related to social significance, the heritage significance which is associated with the telling of the story - the thematic history or what could be described as the 'intangible heritage'.

Two cases which bear this out are Miles Franklin's house and May Gibbs' house. Both are houses in which Australian writers have lived and worked and were houses subject to a permanent conservation order. [Reports from the Commissions of Inquiry, S.41,H.A.]

In the case of Miles Franklin's house, a relatively humble house in Rockdale, the owner ran a boarding house for old men and was alarmed that any form of permanent conservation would reduce the property value should she wish to sell it at some date in the future. The Commission of Inquiry upheld her appeal even though the financial impact was quite tenuous showing that the concerns for individual rights were more important than the collective value to the community of a house in which relatively important Australian books and plays were written.

In the case of 'Nutcote', May Gibb's house, situated on the foreshore in Neutral Bay in a garden which contains the trees which inspired her characters which are now marketted as Australian icons along with the Opera House and Ayres Rock - the value of a foreshore property for development was seen as much more important than maintaining the house and its garden for the common culture.

These cases and other cases and their findings in the Commissions of Inquiry reveal both consistences and inconsistencies. The consistent response by the objectors was that if a **place** is seen as environmental heritage then the Government should buy it. Conservation was not considered to be the responsibility of the individual and yet the objectors were frequently the church, local government and developers who had bought properties knowing that they had permanent conservation orders on them and were therefore able to buy them cheaply.

As Denis Jeans states in the preamble to the Historical Guidelines for the State Heritage Inventory Program

New South Wales, colonised by Britain and subjected to many other influences in a world-wide framework has shared a common experience. The Australian environment has been modified eroded and in some cases destroyed by the production of commodities for Britain, U.S.A.. and Japan. Sydney is at the centre of an historical network of settlement and transport which first discovered the country's resources and then organised capital inflow to exploit them [Jeans.1990.p xxx.111].

Jeans points out that the regions of the state of New South Wales are derived from resource differentiation in the process of exploitation and distribution; for example the fodder of the semi-arid plains were eaten up and transported as profits to British capital. Any study of heritage must recognise this capitalist process as the engine of regional development in New South Wales. Relicts of that process are the heritage places of the 21st century [Jeans, 1990].

While one can agree with some aspects of what Jeans says, the issues are not as simple as an ethic of total exploitation. This paper contends that the right to exploit is tempered by the value placed on the natural environment.

The value given to the natural environment is revealed to some extent by the

findings of the Commission of Inquiry about the conservation of Agnes Banks - an anomalous coastal vegetation formation at the foot of the Blue Mountains adjoining the Nepean River. This area of bushland sits on top of 21 million dollars worth of sand and gravel extraction and yet it was given permanent conservation despite the very strong protests by the sand and gravel extraction companies who had provisional rights for extraction.

[Report of Commission of Inquiry on Agnes Banks]
One has to ask why an area of bushland was valued when the social

significance in terms of people and events was not?

It could be said that this is part of our cultural cringe and that at the community level there is a reticence about nostalgia - particularly if it is associated with what is seen as ordinary and everyday. The familiar environment is not equated with a connectedness to the land or to place as is evident in Britain or Europe; despite the fact that there is increasing cultural bereavement over the loss of the familiar and everyday places.

Instead at the community level one finds Progress Associations and one of the strongest movements at the local level is the Tidy Towns Movement - which is part of the Keep Australia Beautiful movement. Clearly the sense of identification with place is strongly associated with a resource to be used rather than a nostalgic revocation of an earlier time.

Multiculturalism

Into this confusion of values and the exploitative hidden agenda, is introduced another issue. The phenomenon of multiculturalism and the recently transposed cultures have a strong sense of their own cultural identities, in contrast to the Anglo-Australians.

The Anglo Australian may have an intangible heritage - but the multicultural groups have 'moveable heritages'. Greek settlers create Greek communities which are full of artifacts of 'place'. Similarly the Italians, the Chinese and the Vietnamese have re-created their cultures. They, in their short period here, have more quickly "owned" this place than Anglo Australians have in 200 years.

Interestingly the multiculturals also have a boom mentality so evident in the Anglo-Australians and when they have made enough money, they move onto other areas, leaving behind remnants of their culture; where upon a new ethnic group moves in and again they bring their "moveable heritage". So we see a repeat of the theme of change, this time with the multicultural communities. In such a dynamic situation it is somewhat alarming to realize that little is known about how different ethnic groups feel about their heritage within Australia. Multiculturalism has greatly enriched the culture of Australia and it is important to include in any understanding of the environmental heritage of Australia the heritage created by the different multicultural groups since their arrival in Australia.

In the recent survey of Local Government and the management of environmental heritage, the planners consistently said that the groups in the community which were least likely to become involved in community conservation were the ethnic groups. This may be true of new arrivals who have other priorities but what about the different multicultural groups who have been here for ten, twenty or thirty years and those who were born here?

It is clear that there is strong community cohesiveness within the different multicultural groups and that any understanding of social significance and cultural heritage must incorporate the multicultural groups' perceptions of their Australian heritage.

heritage must incorporate the multicultural groups' perceptions of their Australian heritage.

Summary

The concept of environmental heritage with particular reference to social and cultural significance at both the local and state government level is not accepted comfortably. Nor is it understood at the community level.

If it were possible to overcome the apparent reticence to deal with social values, in other words to look at the Australian "way of being" - the Aboriginal, the Anglo Australian and the Multicultural Australian - then such an enquiry would give environmental heritage a new dimension.

It could be part of an aesthetic which considers heritage as part of the total environmental debate where a sustainable environment for Australia could include the management of the collective cultural heritage of all Australians as a continuous phenomenon.

The ideas of heritage and sustainability are so closely linked that one could consider calling the whole of Australia a "National Park" and then define sustainability within the resources. Many of these resources lie within the Australian character - the characteristic of resourcefulness.

Until now that resourcefulness has been modernist in vision. But there is a need to develop a resourcefulness which relates to a different vision - the medieval vision of husbandry of resources. There is however, also a need to maintain a sense of caution when urging the spirit of nationalism through an idealisation of the land.

One needs to be mindful of the parallels with Germany in the inter-war years where

Revolutionary modernism of the Nazi sort simultaneously emphasised the power of myth (of blood and soil, of race and fatherland, of destiny and place) while mobilizing all the accoutrements of social progress towards a project of sublime national achievement [Heidegger as cited in Harvey. 1989.p209].

to quote Heidegger

all this implies that this nation as a historical nation must move itself and thereby the history of the West beyond the centre of their future 'happening' and into the primordial realm of the powers of being [Heidegger as citied in Harvey.1989. p209].

By such means he hoped the German people might "grow in its unity as a work people, finding again its simple worth and genuine power and procuring its greatness as a work state". To the man who would realize this dream, Adolph Hitler, he gave a three fold "seig-hiel!" [Harvey.1989]

There is certainly a profound need to us to question and establish an Australian environmental heritage in the context of the total environmental debate but this should be in context of caution about the development of a nationalistic fervour which has been aroused by blood and soil.

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