

Chapter 1

Introduction

In recent years, increasing focus has been placed upon the identification of heritage values that are enshrined in our built environment and in cultural landscapes. This is based on the notion that all buildings and spaces, whatever their age and however modest, make some form of contribution or have value to society.

This book is primarily concerned with how heritage is managed in order to protect and enhance it. Although it focuses on built heritage, we believe the principles and processes that we discuss are applicable to many aspects of cultural heritage. The book brings together our experience of research, consultancy and practice over a number of years, and integrates this with current thinking on approaches to the management of built heritage. It inevitably, and deliberately, does this within the context of a discussion of the benefits and the value of conserving heritage. In our view, this remains a much-needed publication. More than seven years after the first edition, surprisingly little has been written and published on the practical application of heritage values and its importance to the management of heritage assets. This is disconcerting, given that the need to assess significance and use it to manage change is being 'written in' to heritage policy in an increasing number of countries around the world.

This book is chiefly about the important role that effective management plays in protecting and enhancing the historic environment. It concerns itself with what has now become known in some quarters as 'values-based management', but which we have referred to generally as 'significance-based management'. Essentially the book is concerned with the need to identify and assess what is important about a heritage asset, and with devising management strategies, processes and actions that focus on the need to protect and enhance those values.

The collection of values associated with a heritage asset is generally referred to as its 'significance'. The idea of significance has been around for some time, but it was perhaps clearly articulated for the first time, and more importantly

Managing Built Heritage: The Role of Cultural Values and Significance, Second Edition.

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linked specifically to the management of a heritage asset by the original Burra Charter, dating from 1979 (Australia ICOMOS, 1979). The idea was developed in several later versions of the charter, with the latest (at the time of writing), being the 2013 edition (Australia ICOMOS, 2013). Building from that, modern conservation planning says that, by understanding the particular significance that a heritage asset holds for society, informed and better management decisions can be taken that will respect and potentially enhance that significance.

The basic premise behind this ‘significance-based management’ approach, then, is that in order to manage and protect a heritage asset, one has first of all to be able to identify and articulate why it is important and which of its different elements contribute to its importance – and how they do so. That is, we are concerned with determining why a heritage asset is valuable and what embodies and represents those values. This may seem like a simple and rather obvious concept – that you cannot protect something unless:

- You understand why it is important; and
- You know what it is about it that contributes to that importance.

Yet, until recent years, this was not an explicit approach. However, if we accept that as English Heritage (2008) observe: ‘Change in the historic environment is inevitable, whether caused by natural processes, through use, or by people responding to social, economic and technological advances’, then the key challenge in conservation is essentially about managing change to an asset while protecting, and hopefully enhancing, its significance. In order to meet this challenge, it is vitally important that heritage values are clearly identified and assessed.

If heritage values and their interrelationships can be identified and fully comprehended, this knowledge can then be used to assist in taking management decisions now and in the future that will strengthen and enhance the benefits that accrue to society from that asset. The sense is that there needs to be an understanding of the significance of an asset to be able to articulate and justify its designation, but it can also be, and in fact should be, both a focus and driver for managing the asset.

The concern addressed in this book is the need to develop an approach that guides management planning so as to optimise the benefits that can be gained from an asset without diminishing its value and potential for the future.

In this sense, the management process for a heritage asset is not dissimilar to approaches in other organisational arenas, which effectively ask a series of questions, such as:

- Where do we want to be?
- What have we got now?
- How do we get to where we want to be?
- How are we doing?

In recontextualising this, we can suggest that a coherent approach to the management of heritage assets, whether a single asset, a complex site, an area or indeed a town, will involve:

- Identification and measurement of heritage values;
- Identification of the attributes or elements of the asset that embody and represent those values – so that it is clear what needs to be protected and hopefully enhanced;
- Identification of any factors that may adversely affect heritage values now and in the (measurable) future. That is, in what way are the values vulnerable and what are the processes and situations that may lead to an erosion and loss of those values? Therefore what are the actions that need to be put in place in order to avoid or nullify those threats – or at least mitigate them?
- Identification of opportunities to protect and enhance significance, including by proactively seeking out opportunities for positive changes;
- Identification of ‘where are we now?’ in relation to matters such as the condition and use of the asset;
- The development of a management strategy and process that link the assessment of heritage values to the operational needs and activities of the asset and to the objectives of the organisation that owns or occupies it (and which integrates built cultural management planning into the general built asset planning on ‘mixed’ estates). Such a management approach must focus actions, processes and priorities on the protection of built cultural heritage values, i.e. be primarily concerned with the implementation of management practices that maximise protection and enhancement of heritage values;
- The development of evaluation and review processes that address issues of ‘how are we doing?’ while also considering the continuing validity of (heritage) objectives.

Note

This second edition of the book reflects new international guidance concerning heritage values and significance, as well as developments in national heritage policy in the UK since the first edition was published in 2008. The first edition put considerable focus on the preparation and use of conservation plans in the management of heritage assets. While much of that content has been retained and updated, in this new edition we have felt it appropriate to lay greater emphasis on the process of assessing significance (which, after all, lies at the heart of conservation plan preparation, too) and the use of assessments of significance as a ‘plug-in’ front end to a wider range of conservation management documents and tools.

Shortly after the completion of the text for this second edition, English Heritage, England’s national advisory body for heritage and conservation of the historic environment, was split in two. A new charitable body, retaining the name English Heritage, has taken on responsibility for running the nation’s National

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Heritage Collection of historic sites and monuments. The current organisation's wider duties and responsibilities as the UK Government's independent expert advisory service for England's historic environment has been handed over to a new body known as Historic England. This edition of the book retains the name English Heritage where this relates to the published work of the unified single organisation of that name.

References

- Australia ICOMOS (1979) *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance*. Burwood, VIC, Australia, Australia ICOMOS Inc.
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