

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Concept of Managing through Significance

In recent years, increasing focus has been placed upon the identification of social and cultural values that are enshrined in our built environment and in cultural landscapes. This approach is based around 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 cultural heritage is managed in order to protect and enhance it. Although it focuses on built cultural heritage, we believe the principles and processes that we discuss are applicable to all aspects of cultural heritage.

This 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 cultural heritage. It inevitably, and purposely, does this within the context of a discussion of the benefits and the value of conserving (built) cultural heritage.

We believe that this is a timely publication because there is now a strong agreement on the importance of effective management strategies and processes for the protection and enhancement of the built cultural heritage. Until recently there had been a tendency to focus concern, on the one hand, upon technical issues related to the care and repair of the historic fabric, and on the other to the integration of conservation activity into general land use planning. Although both of these continue to be important perspectives, their particular emphases left a gap. This meant that conservation activity was not being considered as holistically as it needed to be because the crucial role of management strategies and tactics was not being adequately considered, either as an activity in its own right, or, indeed, importantly as part of an integrated approach to the protection and enhancement of the built cultural heritage. In many cases and situations, management, at both a strategic and a 'day-to-day' level, tended to be left to take care of itself – partly one suspects because the idea of 'managing' was anathema to many conservation professionals.

This book is essentially 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'

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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 place, and with devising management strategies, processes and actions which focus on the need to protect and enhance those values.

The collection of values associated with a place of cultural value is generally referred to as ‘cultural significance’. The idea of cultural significance has been around for some time, but it was perhaps clearly articulated for the first time, and more importantly linked specifically to the management of a place, by the Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS, 1999).

Every place around us has a unique identity that is made up of the complete range of such social and cultural values that represents and embodies and which give it significance to our society. Thus, for example, the Tower of London, the Eiffel Tower, a war memorial in any town centre, a modern library or hospital, a bus station or the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew all have particular value(s) to local communities and society at large. But the summations of that series of values, their cultural significance, are very different from each other. Modern conservation planning says that, by understanding the particular cultural significance of an asset, informed and better management decisions can be taken that will respect and potentially enhance that significance.

The basic premise behind this approach, then, is that in order to manage and protect a place of cultural heritage value you have to first of all be able to identify and articulate why a place is important and what the different elements of the place contribute to that importance – and how they do so. That is, we are concerned with determining why a place 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
- what it is about it that contributes to that importance;

but until recently this was not, at the least, an explicit approach.

However, if we accept, as most do, that as English Heritage (2007) 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 a place whilst protecting, and hopefully enhancing, its cultural significance. In order to meet this challenge it becomes vitally important that cultural values are clearly identified and assessed.

If cultural 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 cultural significance of a place to be able to articulate and justify designation, but it can also be, and in fact should be, both a focus and driver for managing the place.

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 a place without diminishing its value and potential for the future.

In this sense a management plan for the built cultural heritage is not dissimilar from approaches in other arenas which effectively ask a series of questions such as:

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

In recontextualising this we can suggest that a coherent approach to the management of built cultural heritage, whether it be a single object or building, a site, an area (or indeed a town), will involve:

- An identification and measurement of cultural values.
- An identification of the attributes or elements of the cultural 'item' that embody and represent those values – so that it is clear what needs to be protected and hopefully enhanced.
- An identification of any factors that may adversely affect cultural 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?
- An identification of opportunities to protect and enhance cultural significance – including by proactively seeking out opportunities for positive changes.
- An identification of 'where are we now' in relation to such matters as the condition and use of the place.
- The development of a management plan that links the assessment of cultural values to the operational needs and activities of the place and to the objectives of the organisation(s) that own and/or occupy it (and which integrates built cultural management planning into the general built asset planning on 'mixed' estates). Such a management plan must also 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' whilst also considering the continuing validity of (heritage) objectives.

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The Burra Charter.

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References

- Australia ICOMOS (1999) *The Burra Charter, The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance*. Australia ICOMOS Inc.
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