

# Developing the 1970s notion of 'significance' in the Burra Charter

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*(in)significance:*  
*a discussion about values and valuing in heritage*  
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## Developing 'significance'

'Basically it [the Burra Charter] was just teaching people they have to understand what they're dealing with before they deal with it. That's what it's all about.'

Clive Lucas, oral history interview with Bronwyn Hanna for the NLA, 2011

This talk discusses the historical development of the notion of 'significance' in 1970s Australian heritage practice based on research into the making of the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, including 23 oral history interviews with pioneering heritage practitioners in Australia and New Zealand. Most these 23 interviews are now available for listening on the National Library of Australia, amounting to about 60 hours of recording. Where appropriate permissions have been granted, they can be heard by following the links on the National Library of Australia website at:

[http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Search/Home?lookfor=bronwyn+hanna&type=all&limit\[\]=&submit=Find](http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Search/Home?lookfor=bronwyn+hanna&type=all&limit[]=&submit=Find)

## ICOMOS, the Venice Charter and the Burra Charter

The *Burra Charter* was first endorsed at a meeting of Australia ICOMOS members in 1979 in Burra, South Australia. It is an Australian adaptation of the *Venice Charter*, the brief statement of heritage principles adopted at the UNESCO-sponsored, international conference of heritage professionals in Venice in 1964. The same conference also resolved that a new organisation be founded to “to coordinate international effort for the preservation and the appreciation of the world heritage of historic monuments” to be called the International Council of Monuments and Sites - ICOMOS.

The *Venice Charter* remains the most influential set of heritage principles internationally, respected by heritage practitioners for its brief but profound guidelines for looking after monuments and sites. Its fundamental premise is that heritage conservation should maintain the physical fabric of a monument and respect its historical layers rather than creatively restore or imaginatively reconstruct it—to preserve monuments “no less as works of art than as historical evidence” (*Venice Charter*, 1964, Art.3).

In 1976 the Australian chapter of ICOMOS, known as Australia ICOMOS, was founded in Melbourne. Almost the first task that Australia ICOMOS set for itself was to re-write the *Venice Charter*.

## Differences between Venice and Burra charters

Whereas the *Venice Charter* talks about the “preservation and restoration” of “monuments”, the *Burra Charter* talks about the “conservation” of “places of cultural significance”. The change of emphasis in the *Burra Charter* was not just semantic. As Susie West explained in her history of heritage management:

- “[The *Burra Charter*] created an international impact on how heritage professionals make decisions about the meanings of heritage sites and places. It did so by renaming the heritage category 'sites and monuments' as 'places of cultural significance'. This switched the emphasis from 'stones and bones', material culture, towards the meanings of places, the significance that humans attribute to material culture.” (West, 2010, pp38-39)

Beyond the work of translation of the *Venice Charter*, the *Burra Charter* also offered new conceptual approaches for heritage practice. It insisted upon a logical approach to heritage conservation—that the assessment of significance of a place should be done before any management decisions are made or works undertaken. Another contribution was the clarity of its central message, that in conservation, you should do

- “as much as necessary, as little as possible” (*Burra Charter*, 1979-2013)

This “values-based conservation” approach was elaborated in the revised *Burra Charter* of 1999 which emphasised “significance” as community-based and contingent.

## 1974 Hope Inquiry into the National Estate

The immediate forebear of the Burra Charter was the 1974 Hope Inquiry into the National Estate, instigated by the Whitlam Government. There was a causal relationship in that the Hope Report recommended the founding of an Australian chapter of ICOMOS.

There were also important conceptual continuities. For example the “National Estate” is explained in the opening words of the Hope Report as “the things that you keep” (1974, p20). These words are deceptively simple, in fact they embed relationship, motivation and action. The report offered a sophisticated, even radical approach to heritage. It stated that the National Estate was “not merely objects for preservation”. Instead it emphasised “the human side” and the “relation between ‘items’ of the National Estate” and “the total environment”. (Hope Report, 1974, p26).

The Hope Report discussed proposed criteria for evaluating significance in terms very similar to that which would be used in the *Burra Charter*:

- [The National Estate is defined as being] “of such aesthetic, historical, scientific, social, cultural, ecological or other special value to the nation or any part of it, including a region or locality, that they should be conserved, managed and presented for the benefit of the community as a whole” (Hope Report, 1974, p334).

## The Burra Charter and significance

In 1979 the *Burra Charter* stated, “The aim of conservation is to retain the cultural significance of a place” and defined “cultural significance” as “aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value for past, present or future generations”. The 1999 revision added a fifth criterion “spiritual” —largely to address Aboriginal heritage concerns.

Miles Lewis, a professor of architecture in Melbourne and on the original committee which wrote the *Burra Charter*, explained that the four original criteria came from the *Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975* (Lewis, 2011):

- “We determined to adopt those categories of significance because the *Australian Heritage Commission Act* used them. There was no logic or reason why we should but we were being funded with the National Estate funding and it seemed sensible to have common terminology”.

The *Australian Heritage Commission Act* in turn had picked up the criteria from American preservation legislation and practice, not English law as might have been expected then. Sharon Sullivan, recently chair of the Australian Heritage Council, previously an innovative heritage bureaucrat and practitioner explained (Sullivan, 2013):

- “The *Burra Charter* thing about significance comes from the American model. You find it there embedded in American US Parks Service methodology . . . These are the reasons why something might be important, you know, aesthetic, historic, etc.”

## Burra Charter and significance

Many of the people interviewed gave examples of why it was crucial for significance to be understood before management decisions are undertaken. James Semple Kerr, facilitator of the 1979 *Burra Charter* committee, explained:

- “Ah yes, in the case of the Snowy Mountains authority . . . the National Trust [Historic] Buildings Committee wanted to classify a stone mountains hut that had been used for walkers and by rangers and people for nearly 100 years . . . And the [National Trust’s Nature] Conservation committee under Ivor Wyatt said. . . ‘no way’. He said no hut can be classified in a conservation area for natural significance. So this was a way where policy was driving the assessment of significance. And what should have happened, of course, which is what we originally tried to do, was to allow both the natural conservation area listing to stand and the [listing of the] hut to stand, and then to decide what should be done about it. But both should be recognised in the beginning. And so this process should be kept in a proper sequence.” (Kerr, 2011)

Liz Vines, the current chair of Australia ICOMOS, explained:

- “I think one of the reasons why I’ve kept working in Asia and a number of Australians consult there is that as a professional group we are respected because we can go to a site and apply a particular methodology. We’re not applying our opinions or our sense of what’s fashionable or should be done. We’re applying a rigorous process . . . I always say three-step process, of you first look at and understand the significance, you then develop the policies, and then you implement the policies.” (Vines, 2011)

# Acknowledgements and references

## Acknowledgements

Thank you especially to the oral history interviewees quoted here:

Clive Lucas

Miles Lewis

Sharon Sullivan

James Semple Kerr

Elizabeth Vines

## Some references

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