

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

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Developing 'significance'

Basically it [the Burra Charter] was just teaching people they have to think about their own role in 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:

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

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)

Differences between Venice and Burra charters

Whereas the Venice Charter talks about the 'material culture' and 'works of art' of a civilisation, the Burra Charter talks about the 'cultural significance' of a place. 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

- "The Burra Charter (Burra Charter, 1979-2013)

This 'cultural significance' approach was elaborated in the revised

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 *'things that you care about'* (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 display'*. Instead it emphasised *'the special values of the objects and the total experience'* (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] *'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 'the historical, scientific or social value for past, present or future generations'. The 1999 revision added a fifth criterion 'to address Aboriginal heritage concerns'.

Miles Lewis, a professor of architecture in Melbourne and on the original committee which wrote the [Burra Charter](#), explained

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