

Understanding The Burra Charter

A simple guide to the principles of
heritage conservation in Australia

© Walker, M. *Understanding the Burra Charter*,
Australia ICOMOS, 1996

What is The Burra Charter?

- Many places are important to us because they tell us about who we are and the past that has formed our community and our environment. Almost everyone would agree that some places should be kept as a part of our common heritage.
- How can we ensure that a heritage place is cared for properly? How can it be handed on to future generations in a way that retains the values which make it important to us?
- ***The Burra Charter* defines the basic principles and procedures to be followed in the conservation of heritage places.** These principles and procedures can be applied to a monument, a courthouse, a garden, a shell midden, a rock art site, a cottage, a road, a mining or archaeological site, a whole district or a region.

The creation of The Burra Charter

- At an international conference of people involved in conservation in Venice in 1966, a charter was drawn up dealing with the preservation and restoration of historic monuments. In 1977 the newly formed **Australia ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites)** decided to review the **Venice Charter** in relation to Australian practice.
- In 1979, the ***Australia ICOMOS charter for the conservation of places of cultural significance*** was adopted at a meeting at the historic mining town of Burra Burra in South Australia. It was given the short title of ***The Burra Charter***.

The creation of The Burra Charter

- ***The Burra Charter*** accepted the philosophy and concepts of the ***Venice Charter***, but wrote them in a form which would be practical and useful in Australia. ***The Burra Charter*** is the result of the collective wisdom and experience of people working in the conservation of heritage places in Australia and overseas.
- ***Conservation*** means all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its meaning to people. It includes provision for the security of the place, its maintenance and its future, and is based on respect for the existing material (fabric) of the place and for its meaning to communities.

The creation of The Burra Charter

- ***Cultural significance*** is the term used to encompass all the meanings (values) that a place may have to people, beyond its utilitarian value. **Commonly it refers to aesthetic, historical, scientific or social value for past or present generations, and for its likely value to future generations.**
- Since its publication in 1979 ***The Burra Charter*** has been twice reviewed to ensure that it is up to date with conservation practice. A third review is underway.
- ***Guidelines to The Burra Charter*** have been prepared to explain the major tasks involved in the conservation of individual places.

Who uses the Charter?

Although ***The Burra Charter*** was first written to guide practitioners such as archaeologists, architects', engineers and historians, it is also a useful document for others. Anyone involved in the care of important places will make better, more informed decisions if they understand ***The Burra Charter***.

People who use it include:

- property owners and managers;
- professionals involved with the care of heritage places;
- administrators assessing applications for heritage approvals and grants. eg. in local government;
- many other people concerned about caring for our cultural heritage.

Recognition of *The Burra Charter*

- ***The Burra Charter*** has been adopted as the standard for best practice in the conservation of heritage places in Australia. Government grants for heritage places give preference to work that follows an accepted conservation philosophy such as that of ***The Burra Charter***.
- State heritage organisations and local government authorities have incorporated the principles and logic of *The Burra Charter* into guidelines and other conservation planning documents.
- ***The Burra Charter*** has been used by conservation professionals in Latin America North America, Europe and Asia and has been used as a model for conservation guidelines in Canada and New Zealand. In Australia the Charter has informed practice in the care of moveable heritage and the natural environment.

The Burra Charter principles

These are the principles inherent in the ***Charter***:

- There are places worth keeping because they enrich our lives — by helping us understand the past; by contributing to the richness of the present environment; and because we expect them to be of value to future generations.
- The cultural significance of a place is embodied in its physical material (fabric), its setting and its contents; in its use; in the associated documents; and in its meaning to people through their use and associations with the place.

The Burra Charter principles

- The cultural significance of a place, and other issues affecting its future, are best understood by a methodical process of collecting and analysing information before making decisions.
- Keeping accurate records about decisions and changes to the place helps in its care, management and interpretation.

The aims of *The Burra Charter* are to ensure that people involved in the conservation of heritage places:

- Understand the place and its cultural significance, including its meaning to people, before making decisions about its future;
- Involve the communities associated with the place;
- Care for the culturally significant fabric and other significant attributes, taking account of all aspects of significance;
- Care for the place's setting;
- Provide an appropriate use;

The aims of *The Burra Charter* are to ensure that people involved in the conservation of heritage places:

- Provide security for the place;
- Use available expertise;
- Make records of the place and changes to it, and the reasons for decisions and actions; and
- Interpret and present the place in a manner appropriate for its significance.

Use of the charter at heritage places

The Burra Charter advocates a cautionary approach to changing a place, doing as much work as is necessary to repair and secure and to make it function, but as little as possible – so the history of the place can continue to be recognised in its physical material (fabric). Use, management and change at a place are guided by a *conservation policy* prepared following the assessment of significance and the investigation of the issues affecting the future of the place.

Use of the charter at heritage places

The ***Charter*** does not prescribe the techniques to be used or the manner in which an individual place should be cared for. The decisions and works must be appropriate to the place and circumstances, but the investigations should always involve a number of essential steps.

The Burra Charter Process

Steps in planning for and managing a place of cultural significance

UNDERSTAND SIGNIFICANCE

1

UNDERSTAND THE PLACE

Define the place and its extent

Investigate the place: its history, use, associations, fabric

Articles 5–7, 12, 26

2

ASSESS CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Assess all values using relevant criteria

Develop a statement of significance

Article 26

The Burra Charter Process

Steps in planning for and managing a place of cultural significance

DEVELOP POLICY

3

IDENTIFY ALL FACTORS AND ISSUES

Identify obligations arising from significance
Identify future needs, resources, opportunities
and constraints, and condition

Articles 6, 12

4

DEVELOP POLICY

Articles 6–13, 26

5

PREPARE A MANAGEMENT PLAN

Define priorities, resources, responsibilities
and timing

Develop implementation actions

Articles 14–28

The Burra Charter Process

Steps in planning for and managing a place of cultural significance

MANAGE IN
ACCORDANCE
WITH POLICY

6

IMPLEMENT THE MANAGEMENT PLAN

Articles 26–34

7

**MONITOR THE RESULTS
& REVIEW THE PLAN**

Article 26