

# Application of the Burra Charter to large technology objects: a freelance conservator's experiences.

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**Abstract:** *In the heritage architecture field it is standard practice to apply the Burra Charter as a guiding document in planning all conservation work. In the absence of a similar document to guide the conservation of large technology items, this paper will show how the Burra Charter has been applied successfully to large technology. The benefits will be illustrated by drawing on examples of projects completed while in private practice. These examples will provide an insight into the various ways conservators can be involved in large technology projects, from limited consultancy to complete treatments.*

In 1964 an international charter for the preservation and restoration of historic monuments was drawn up at an international conference in Venice. This became the *Venice Charter*<sup>1</sup>. In 1977 after the formation of Australia ICOMOS (International Council of Monuments and Sites) conservation practitioners decided to review the *Venice Charter* in relation to conservation practice in Australia. The Australia ICOMOS *Charter for the conservation of places of cultural significance* was adopted in 1979 at a meeting at the historic mining town of Burra Burra in South Australia. Hence its short title, the *Burra Charter*<sup>2</sup>.

The Burra Charter reflects the concepts and philosophy of the Venice Charter but in a revised format more useful in Australia. The Burra Charter (henceforth referred to as the Charter) has been revised three times, in 1981, 1988 and 1999.

The Charter provides guidance for the conservation and management of places of cultural significance. It addresses conservation principles, processes and practices. The Charter is an industry standard document in the conservation and management of heritage sites, most often but not exclusively, built structures. In the absence of a similar document for movable heritage the Charter can be successfully applied to the conservation of large technology objects which have many similarities to sites in terms of size and complexity.

In Australia there is a *National Conservation and Preservation Policy for Movable Cultural Heritage*, which was developed by the Heritage Collections Committee of the Cultural Ministers Council in 1995<sup>3</sup>. While this provides strategic direction for government contributions to the preservation of moveable cultural heritage it does not outline in any practical detail appropriate conservation philosophy. The key concepts outlined in the Charter are already applied by many people working with large technology objects. Nevertheless I have found it is useful to review all treatments using the Charter framework. The Charter uses the term *place* to describe the site, area or building which is to be conserved. In this paper I have replaced the term *place* with *object* to emphasise and clarify the applicability of the Charter to large technology objects.

## Definitions

Initially the definition of terms in the Charter provides an insightful framework for understanding and managing conservation processes. The key terms from Article 1 of the Charter are:

*Conservation* means all the processes of looking after an object so as to retain its cultural significance.

*Maintenance* means the continuous protective care of the fabric and setting of an object, and is to be distinguished from repair. Repair involves restoration or reconstruction.

*Preservation* means maintaining the fabric of an object in its existing state and retarding deterioration.

*Restoration* means returning the existing fabric of an object to a known earlier state by removing accretions or by reassembling existing components without the introduction of new material.

*Reconstruction* means returning an object to a known earlier state and is distinguished from restoration by the introduction of new material into the fabric.

*Adaptation* means modifying an object to suit the existing use or a proposed use.

*Interpretation* means all the ways of presenting the cultural significance of an object.

## Significance

The most critical idea presented in the Charter is the notion of understanding significance and allowing the significance of an object to guide appropriate conservation. Significant values can be aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual for past, present or future generations.<sup>i</sup>

Conservation is based on a respect for the existing fabric, use, associations and meanings of an object.<sup>ii</sup> The Charter advocates a cautious approach to change – do as much as necessary to care for an object and make it useable, but otherwise change it as little as possible so that its cultural significance is retained. Similarly the Charter states conservation action should not impede the understanding of all of the layers of history in an object, as traces of additions and alterations may be an important part of

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<sup>i</sup> Article 1, Definitions, The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for places of cultural significance 1999.

<sup>ii</sup> Article 3 Cautious Approach, The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for places of cultural significance 1999.

the significance of an object. Additionally conservation should not place unwarranted emphasis on any one value at the expense of others.<sup>iii</sup>

In 1998 I was involved in conservation treatment of a landing vessel used at Gallipoli. This object had extensive post conflict alteration. The treatment had to both stabilise the boat, which was actively corroding along the keel, and emphasise the most significant period of the boat's history – its use in the Gallipoli landing. By assessing and understanding the significance of the object, it was deemed acceptable to repaint the interior of the vessel to imitate the original service colours. Detailed paint examinations were carried out to determine the most appropriate colour and the interior was then painted with a reversible technique. Similarly, many bullet holes which had been painted over after collection were carefully stripped of recent paint to emphasise the conflict involvement of the vessel. In this instance I worked as a contractor and completed all the required treatment works.

### **Skills and materials choice**

The Charter states that interdisciplinary input is required in the care of objects. In my experience a synergistic relationship between skilled tradespeople and conservation professionals is necessary for good treatment outcomes, particularly when restoration and reconstruction treatments are proposed. The Charter also states that traditional materials and techniques are preferred for the conservation of significant fabric. In many contexts this has the advantage of maintaining traditional skills as well as preserving objects. For example, in 2002 I was contracted to underpin and stabilise a laundry chimney for a regional museum. Traditional lime mortar mixes were used for all masonry repairs. These materials are of appropriate strength and chemically compatible with older building materials.

The Charter also states that the use of modern materials is acceptable where they offer substantial conservation benefit and where the materials and techniques are supported by firm scientific evidence or a body of experience.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Use**

The Charter specifies that where the use of an object is significant it should be retained. Similarly, objects should have a compatible use. New uses of an object should involve minimal change to significant fabric and should respect meanings and associations and, where appropriate, provide for continuation of practices which contribute to the cultural significance of an object.<sup>v</sup> I have been involved in a treatment to an Avro Anson cockpit in which original dials that had low levels of radioactivity were replaced with replica dials to facilitate the safe use of the cockpit by visitors. While significant fabric was removed, it was carefully identified, stored

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<sup>iii</sup> Article 5, Values, The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for places of cultural significance 1999.

<sup>iv</sup> Article 4, Knowledge, Skills and Techniques, The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for places of cultural significance 1999.

<sup>v</sup> Article 7, Use and Article 23, Conserving Use, The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for places of cultural significance 1999.

and catalogued to facilitate replacement in the future. The benefit of this treatment was the continuation of use of the cockpit in its tradition as a training aircraft.

### **Setting, Location and Contents**

It could be argued that Articles 8-10 in the Charter, which address setting, location and contents of places, have limited application to moveable cultural heritage. However many large technology objects have site specific histories that contribute to the significance of the objects. I was involved in a conservation study and treatment design for a large working plant room in an historic building. Individually many of the items of plant equipment had limited significance, however as a whole collection that illustrated technological and social change over a period of seventy years they were worthy of preservation. In this case, modern equipment was fitted in around redundant services that were retained in situ. Reversible concrete floors were cast over the historic floors to make the area meet modern OH&S standards for safety while preserving the original floors and markings below.

Similarly contents and fixtures within objects can also contribute to their significance and should be retained. The Charter states that removal of contents, relocation or significant changes of setting are not acceptable unless it is the sole means of ensuring the objects' preservation. In the treatment of the landing vessel mentioned earlier it was necessary to remove large accumulations of soil from against the keel in order to stabilise corrosion. Recognising the potential significance of this material, adhesive lined fabric was used to support the removed dirt and inclusions (including bullets). This material was carefully labelled and accessioned into the museum collection.

### **Participation**

The importance of providing for the participation of people for whom the object has special associations or meanings is also outlined in the Charter. It states that opportunities for commemoration and celebration should be investigated and implemented.<sup>vi</sup> As a consultant designing a treatment I was involved in the control of dry rot in a Waka (Maori war canoe). The canoe was to be paddled regularly for celebrations. This requirement for use had an impact on materials selected for consolidating the weakened timber.

### **Change**

The issue of change to objects is also outlined. Here many of the tenets of museum conservation practice are reflected. The Charter recognises that change may be necessary to retain cultural significance, but that it is undesirable where it reduces cultural significance. Any change which reduces cultural significance should be reversible. Removed significant fabric should be reinstated where circumstances permit. Existing fabric, use, associations and meanings should be adequately recorded before any changes are made to an object. Additionally, any significant

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<sup>vi</sup> Article 12, Participation and Article 24, Retaining Associations and Meanings, The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for places of cultural significance 1999.

fabric which has been removed from an object, including contents and fixtures, should be catalogued and protected in accordance with its significance.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Preservation, Restoration and Reconstruction**

Treatments that involve preservation (i.e. the protection of an object without obscuring the evidence of construction or use) should always be applied when the fabric is so significant that it should not be altered, or in cases where there is insufficient evidence to allow other conservation process to be carried out.<sup>viii</sup> I have been involved in making treatment recommendations for a number of items in regional collections, including train carriages, saw mill equipment and coastal defence weaponry. In a number of instances there has been insufficient evidence of the significance of the objects to formulate complex treatments. Instead, low cost preventive solutions have been the key to ensuring ongoing protection while further research can be done.

The Charter clarifies that treatments that involve restoration, reconstruction and adaptation should reveal significant aspects of the object. Restoration is only appropriate if there is sufficient evidence of an earlier state of the fabric. Reconstruction and new work should be identifiable on close inspection or through additional interpretation.<sup>ix</sup> For example, during the treatment of a First World War Howitzer I applied many reconstructive treatments. This was acceptable as the significance of the object was purely as an example of type and it had no specific service history. For the purposes of interpretation it was necessary to present the object as close as possible to its service appearance. However all changes made were reversible and based on physical or documentary evidence.

### **Conservation Practice**

The final section in the Charter outlines key considerations in conservation practice. It highlights the necessity for treatment works to be preceded by studies which help to identify the significance of the object. Analysis of physical, documentary, oral and other evidence should always be part of conservation. When completing contracted conservation work I have found that it is often beneficial to have a staged work program that is flexible enough to deal with unexpected findings. The Charter recommends that statements of significance for each item should be prepared, justified and accompanied by supporting evidence.<sup>x</sup> While this is common practice in the built heritage field, it is also increasingly common in museum environments with moveable collections. While in my experience I have never been presented with a written statement of significance for a moveable item, much of the same information is collected in an informal situation through discussion with curatorial staff. The

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<sup>vii</sup> Article 15, Change, Article 27, Managing change and Article 33, Removed Fabric, The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for places of cultural significance 1999.

<sup>viii</sup> Article 17, Preservation, The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for places of cultural significance 1999.

<sup>ix</sup> Articles 19, Restoration, 20, Reconstruction, 21, Adaptation and 22, New Work, The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for places of cultural significance 1999.

<sup>x</sup> Article 26, Applying the Burra Charter, The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for places of cultural significance 1999.

discipline of producing a written statement of significance can nevertheless be beneficial as it ensures all parties involved in work on an object have the necessary background information to inform treatment decisions.

The Charter recommends the records associated with the conservation of an object should be placed in a permanent archive and be made publicly available where possible. Similarly the records about the history of an object should be protected.<sup>x1</sup>

The Charter concludes with a comment on resources, stating that adequate resources should be provided for conservation. It also notes that the best conservation often involves the least work and can be inexpensive.<sup>xii</sup> This paradox is nicely illustrated by some sawmill equipment for which I designed a treatment program. The components were extensively corroded and had suffered significant paint loss. As the evidence and justification for repainting the objects was not available, my recommendations included siting the equipment undercover and raised up off the ground. This inexpensive option preserved all the layers of history embedded in the object and provided the time for the owners to research the significance of the collection before deciding on any more invasive treatments. Similarly, involvement of conservation professionals is not always as expensive as one might expect. I complete work that ranges from quick onsite consultations to full hands-on treatments. In many cases I have been involved in designing treatments for objects that will then be carried out by others with limited skills, in one instance using people on a work-for-the-dole project.

## Conclusions

The Burra Charter provides a user friendly guide to appropriate conservation treatments. It is applicable to both heritage sites and large technology objects without any compromise. It is also a useful tool for communicating conservation philosophy in those instances where treatments or limited treatments need to be justified.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> ICOMOS. *The Venice Charter, International Charter for the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites*, (1964), ICOMOS.

<sup>2</sup> Australia ICOMOS. *The Burra Charter: the Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of cultural significance* (1999), Australia ICOMOS Melbourne.

<sup>3</sup> Heritage Collections Committee of the Cultural Ministers Council. *National Conservation and Preservation Policy for Movable Cultural Heritage* (1995), Heritage Collections Committee of the Cultural Ministers Council.

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<sup>x1</sup> Article 32, Records, The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for places of cultural significance 1999.

<sup>xii</sup> Article 34, Resources, The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for places of cultural significance 1999