

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

Gillian Mitchell – Question and answer session

Fred Haynes: It's probably not a question as much as a statement. The island I work on...in our library I came across a conservation management plan. Oh, this was written, commissioned by the navy - this thing - terrific, great. But from my perspective, actually living amongst the old buildings and heritage buildings, the Defence maintenance people who organise any maintenance for anything pay absolutely no heed to that whatsoever. Joe Bloggs, the local contractor from down the road, comes and brings his bits from Bunnings hardware, screws them on, away he goes. There's absolutely no auditing of that process.

Gillian Mitchell: Yes.

Fred Haynes: So that's from the other end of what you're getting at I suppose. All those words are terrific but it's like a quality system – unless somebody actually follows that up it's bits of paper on a shelf.

Gillian Mitchell: Yeah for sure. And that's probably quite similar to my experience at Old Parliament House, that there is a lot of time and energy put into the communication. Once those ideas have been established - the communication and dissemination of information to everybody, whether they're staff or whether they're contractors coming in on site - does take quite a lot of time and energy. But I guess once you've got that agreed understanding and the agreed reasons for the significance, then you've actually got something to communicate. So it's a good starting point. But yeah, it's definitely a long road.

John Kemister: Mine's an allied question if you like. Gillian – you're out in private practice. A private collection – the owner has the ultimate decision as to what he wants to do with it. Have you had any interesting instances where you've had to sort of gently steer somebody away from a course of action to a more conservative course of action in private practice?

Gillian Mitchell: In the context of private collections...I haven't done a lot of work for private collectors. That work tends to be limited to much smaller objects – Mrs Blogg's ceramic that is broken. No, I can't really think of a good example of where that's been the case. As a general rule you can often sell, though, going with a more conservative approach because it's a lower cost, lower time-intensive outlay, and you can quite often get good results by saying “No look, you don't actually have to worry about all this really high cost, fancy technological stuff – we can just do this, this and this and that'll get us out of the woods”.

Alison Wain: That's something that Chris Knapp referred to yesterday actually, was the lower cost of conservation, in fact, than many more restoration based approaches.

Gillian Mitchell: Yes.

Alison Wain: You said that the clause on the removal of contents was perhaps not so relevant, but actually I think that's a really important one for large technologies. Because one thing I'm aware of is that we're often rather free with interchanging contents and spares from one LTO to the other, or considering parts of one LTO as spares for another, and we've referred to that in a number of papers today. And that's often necessary – it's the only way you can get parts that you need, to make an object complete for interpretation or structurally complete or operable or whatever. But particularly, also it can be where [there are] contents that you can easily take in and out – they're not part of the structure of the object, and we are I think perhaps a bit free with that and that's perhaps somewhere where the Charter would be really good.

Gillian Mitchell: That was actually what I meant – [sorry] if I said it upside down. I was saying that if you were looking from outside you might think that that clause was one of the least applicable if we're transferring it across, but indeed I absolutely agree with you it's one of the most essential, and it's perhaps one of the areas where we are too lax and there really are many instances where the contents and the context and the physical situation of the object perhaps should have much more attention than they do, being dragged out of context and plonked in a museum somewhere – absolutely. An example of that that I didn't actually get to was the Gallipoli boat that I talked about – the importance of contents. Part of the treatment was - the keel, under many layers of paint and dirt, was corroding quite badly and we had to do a corrosion control treatment in that spot, but that meant removing a whole lot of accretions that had been bound in by many many layers of paint. So we actually lined those with adhesive fabric lining and took all of that dirt out and kept it and put it in the Wear Memorial's collection in storage somewhere as historic dirt. But it actually contained all sorts of bits and pieces, including bullets, so there's a nice example of how something hidden adds a little bit more to the story.

Nikki King-Smith: Just a quick comment on the use of the Burra Charter – I've been thinking of using the Burra Charter for the outline for my project which is the submarine in the slipway, and that's predominantly because I don't actually have a curator or curatorial guidance on what I'm doing. So the Burra Charter gives me a really good way, and concise way, of thinking about the things that I'm not actually trained to think about. It's a good backup for a system that's a bit faulty.

Gillian Mitchell: Yeah – good stuff.

John Griswold: John Griswold, also a private conservator, from Los Angeles. I wanted to thank you for your talk and applaud you for the cross disciplinary imagination, applying this to the context of objects. And also to let you know that the Burra Charter is something that does resound around the world as something that we certainly discuss in the United States, where we have our own Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice from the AIC, but also work within the context of World Heritage – documents like this. And to me the significance of the Burra Charter, and the extreme value of it, is exactly what you just said – the focus on significance, And I think because our professional documents really grew out of the context of, quote, “high art” paintings and sculpture, where connoisseurship and curatorial expertise and input was just sort of endemic to that culture, there was either that sort of fundamental understanding of what the significance was or a qualified expert was there at your shoulder to tell you. But we were often the ones in the front lines coming up with the

primary evidence as we were entering into our treatments and we had a lot to do in participating in that dialogue. And I think it's a very valuable document in world dialogue right now, for our collective professions to really share that responsibility for recognising significance - and also multiple significances - and shining a real light on the fact that significance will change. And I guarantee you on just about any object over the next 500 years – which is not an unreasonable time span to be looking at things – different factors will affect the significance of the things that we do to enhance or amplify or highlight a particularly perceived significance. [So these] do need to be reversible, so again thank you for your talk, I found it really interesting.

Gillian Mitchell: No worries – thank you. If you haven't had the opportunity to read the Burra Charter, if you just get onto the internet and type in "The Burra Charter" you can get the full text and everything. It comes up immediately; it's very easy to find if you do want to chase it up.

Alison Wain: Just one more comment on that issue of change of significance – I was having a very interesting discussion with Nick Langford earlier today. We've got a Ford WOT truck which is acquired into our collection because it's relevant – trucks like that were used in World War Two. But it later had a history with Melbourne tramways, and in fact we were doing an initial induction and clean and Jamie found a tramways button, stuffed right down into layers of dirt that obviously hadn't been disturbed in decades. So that's just a really nice confirmation of that history, and we were discussing that - with the distributed national collection (the idea of a national collection, so you're not duplicating particular types of objects in too many different institutions) - Nick was saying that he wasn't aware of that type of truck in many other collections. So it may be that we actually have another responsibility besides our responsibility to our own collections framework. Do we have a responsibility to keep that other aspect of its history for the more distributed national collection? And who knows – in 100, 200 years time it might be that other aspect that might be seen as more significant, I don't know.

John Kemister: Just a follow on to the things you find in objects, could I urge everybody who is working with objects to be very very careful of the crud that you get out of the bottom of objects? There is a lot of history in those. It was just referred to there, the context if you like, what do we do with the bullets we found in the bottom of the Gallipoli boat? Do you leave them in there where they can disappear? The most important thing is to keep track of them, get them accessioned, get them as a subaccession to the object so that at least people know they're there and that they can be displayed. Things in the Lancaster – ammunition clips, propaganda leaflets, a whole heap of things which are part of the context of the object that should be either kept with it, or if impractical, recorded.