

Sustaining an indiscrete cultural landscape: A case study of the South Brisbane peninsula

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The aim of this paper is to expand heritage conservation philosophy and practice, particularly as applied to inner urban areas experiencing rapid change. It is hoped that the paper will contribute towards the development of a cultural landscape orientation in planning, and thereby towards 'sustainable conservation.' The paper focuses on the Australian urban conservation context, using the established conservation practice guides as its starting point. These guides, *The Burra Charter* (Marquis-Kyle and Walker, 1992) and *The Conservation Plan* (Kerr, 2002) provide rigorous and useful definitions of 'cultural significance' and 'conservation'. It is argued that further development of cultural landscape theory and practice will assist the achievement of more effective urban conservation.

Heritage conservation practice in Australia has, to date, concentrated on the identification and conservation of discrete elements of the humanised environment: heritage 'places', 'items', sites, buildings, and Conservation Areas. These discrete items and places can usually be defined with considerable precision, both spatially and in terms of their heritage values. The cultural significance of many of our everyday cultural landscapes, however, remains much less easily defined. This paper pursues these issues by examining the South Brisbane peninsula, one of Queensland's oldest and densest inner urban areas. This area of physical, socioeconomic and cultural diversity demonstrates Brisbane's history of development from colonial outpost to postmodern capital city. The concept of cultural landscape enables us to balance the traditional focus on discrete heritage elements with a broader concern with the diversity and dynamism of the wider urban environment. The management of such indiscrete cultural landscapes raises challenges for contemporary urban conservation planning, beyond the limitations of established, discrete, heritage conservation systems.

The development of theory and practice in cultural landscape offers potential for a broader understanding of heritage and its relationship to contemporary urban life. Cultural landscapes cannot be managed by the discrete mechanisms of heritage conservation legislation alone. Cultural landscapes are diverse, contested and continuously being made and remade as circumstances and values change. Every land management decision is a cultural landscape making decision, and so cultural landscape planning requires engagement in the full range of 'everyday' urban management legislation and practice.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to supplement – rather than supplant – established heritage conservation planning practice and philosophy, particularly as applied to inner urban areas experiencing rapid change. It is hoped that the paper will contribute towards the development of a cultural landscape orientation in planning, and thereby towards what Delafons (1997) refers to as “sustainable conservation.”

Heritage conservation practice in Australia has, to date, concentrated on the identification and conservation of discrete elements of the humanised environment: heritage ‘places’, ‘items’, sites, buildings, and Conservation Areas. These discrete items and places can usually be defined with considerable precision, both spatially and in terms of their heritage values. The cultural significance of many of our everyday cultural landscapes, however, remains much less easily defined. This paper defines ‘cultural landscape’, and pursues these issues by examining the South Brisbane peninsula, one of Queensland’s oldest and densest inner urban areas.

Cultural landscapes: embracing change

The concept of cultural landscape used in this paper has been established earlier by O’Hare (1997):

The cultural landscape is the constantly evolving, humanised, landscape. It consists of a dialectic between the natural physical setting, the human modifications to that setting, and the meanings of the resultant landscape to insiders and outsiders. Continuous interaction takes place between these three elements over time. The concept of cultural landscape therefore embodies a dynamic understanding of history, in which past, present and future are seamlessly connected.

Cultural landscapes are defined in terms broader and less tangible than physical boundaries and artefacts; they also encompass “the feelings of the community towards its environment [and] the social networks developed by the community” (Pearson and Sullivan, 1995, p.32). Cultural landscapes are produced by constant interaction between physical and narrative landscape patterns. In other words, the story of a particular place is as important as its physical characteristics. Armstrong (2001, p.8) notes the importance of “stories, myths and beliefs” in the making and understanding of any cultural landscape.

Cultural landscapes are not static, isolated relics from the past. Cultural landscapes are never ‘complete’ and unchanging: the process of landscape making continues with the everyday priorities and decisions of those who own, use, legislate and value the evolving urban heritage. Discussion of heritage ‘integrity’ and ‘vulnerability’ is problematic, because cultural landscapes are dynamic – ie subject to constant change according to cultural forces including political and economic imperatives and changing value systems. The theoretical implication of this is that cultural landscapes are *inherently* vulnerable to change. The practical implication is, therefore, that planning is a central aspect of cultural landscape making. The exercise of power through planning decisions is central to managing the ‘vulnerability’ of cultural landscapes.

Although cultural landscape theory has underpinned several interpretive heritage studies, practice is still developing – particularly in relation to the management of contemporary pressures on cultural landscapes. Further efforts to operationalise the cultural landscape concept may help to address shortcomings in our management of social heritage values noted by Johnston (1994) and Kerr (2000). The adoption of a cultural landscape orientation offers the

potential to connect heritage conservation with the wider concerns of planning and the broader lives of communities, as called for by Harris (1990). As noted by Goodey (2003, p.87), the cultural aspirations of local communities “are more likely to be reflected in non-material, rather than material culture.”

The potential of the cultural landscape approach is explored below, following a brief outline of the strengths and limitations of Australian heritage conservation systems as they apply to the management of change in inner urban areas.

Urban conservation in Australia: foundations for practice

Australian urban conservation practice has developed over several decades. Heritage conservation principles, language and practice have been formalised in two highly respected guides. The *Burra Charter: the Australia ICOMOS charter for the conservation of places of cultural significance*, was adopted in 1979 (see Marquis-Kyle and Walker, 1992), and James Kerr’s (2000) *Conservation Plan* was first published by the National Trust of Australia (New South Wales) in 1982. Both of these documents have influenced heritage planning legislation in the various States, as well as practice by local government and conservation consultants.

Conservation as a dynamic concept

This paper adopts the terms, “cultural significance” and “conservation”, as defined in *The Burra Charter* (Marquis-Kyle and Walker, 1992). The Charter defines “cultural significance” as “aesthetic, scientific or social value for past, present or future generations” (p.21). Conservation means “all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance” (p.21). Conservation is a dynamic term, in contrast to the more physical and static connotations of preservation: “preservation” is limited to “maintaining the fabric of a place in its existing state and retarding deterioration” (Marquis-Kyle and Walker, 1992, p.22). The concept of conservation is arguably more embracing of urban change than is the stricter concept of preservation. In an urban area, the focus of conservation is on the particular attributes that give rise to cultural significance, and “conservation policy should allow that significance to be kept *while the life of the town goes on*” (p.20, emphasis added). ‘The life of the town’, may be as significant as – or even more significant than – the physical features of an urban cultural landscape, so the dynamic connotations of conservation are important if we are dealing with a rapidly changing urban cultural landscape.

Urban conservation areas

By 1982, The National Trust of Australia (New South Wales), a major community conservation organisation now having approximately 25,000 members, had listed 120 Urban Conservation Areas (UCAs) on its Register (Wyatt, 1987). The survey and listing process continued at a steady pace through the 1980s and 1990s. Although listing on the National Trust Register does not have legal force, many UCA listings have been taken up in statutory planning instruments in New South Wales (NSW) local government areas. There have been fewer UCA listings in Queensland, due to the lack of resources enjoyed by the National Trust of Queensland, and due to a more development-oriented ethos associated with an historical climate of less government restriction in planning (Fitzgerald, 1984; O’Hare, 2001).

Aplin (2002, p.125) states that “the main aims of a UCA are to try to maintain the overall nature of the area, to retain its heritage value, and to prevent unsympathetic or intrusive developments.” In NSW, a State with a large number of UCAs designated in local government planning instruments, conservation measures include development controls such as height limits, floorspace limits, restrictions on materials and form of infill development, and sometimes more detailed controls such as period colour palettes.

Urban heritage and urban character

In Brisbane and Queensland, the location of the South Brisbane case study, UCAs have not been so widely designated. In the limited cases where they have been recognised, as in inner-city Spring Hill, special Development Control Plans (DCPs – now known as Local Plans under the 1997 Integrated Planning Act) have been used to control redevelopment, with mixed success. Parts of South Brisbane and West End were designated as a UCA in 1993 (BCC, 1993a, 1993b), with limits placed on redevelopment, and with strong recommendations for detailed design issues such as “appropriate colour schemes”.

Since the mid-1990s, Brisbane City Council has preferred to designate “character housing areas”, in which planning consent is required for the demolition or renovation of houses built before World War II. This approach is problematic, both practically and philosophically: it focuses on residential areas rather than on mixed-use areas, and it implies that character is exclusively a positive quality based on age and aesthetics. On the other hand, the designation of “character areas” may be simply a pragmatic recognition that it is the ambience that is valued, rather than other heritage qualities. Nevertheless, the avoidance of mixed-use areas is not helpful in dealing with the diversity of older, inner-urban areas.

A policy language for urban diversity and dynamism?

A review of local government documents regulating land use and development in five diverse Queensland case study areas (Laurens, 2001) suggests that a clearer understanding of the concept of cultural landscape could assist in conservation planning. For example, Laurens’ (2001) critique of the *Gold Coast Heritage and Character Study* (Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle et al., 1997) provides evidence of a shortage of adequate terms for explaining and managing valued qualities of the everyday human environment. In that study, and in Brisbane City Council current draft provisions for South Brisbane’s “character housing areas” (BCC, 2001), it seems that the idea of cultural landscape may offer a more adequate concept on which to base the planning of valued urban areas. The Brisbane and Gold Coast examples provide evidence that ‘heritage’ is not popularly understood to include the recent past and dynamic environments (cf. Lynch, 1972; Lowenthal, 1985). Indeed, ‘history’ seems to be accepted as a remote and static concept disconnected from contemporary events and values. Perhaps ‘character’ is the term chosen when what is needed is a better understanding of ‘cultural landscape’, particularly in “a city whose ethos has traditionally been one of change and growth” (Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle et al., 1997, p.17). In attempting to conserve and manage ‘character’, both the Gold Coast and Brisbane City Councils are attempting to conserve and manage diverse and dynamic cultural landscapes. Urban dynamism is much less threatening within a cultural landscape framework than within current conceptions of ‘heritage’. The inner-urban area of South Brisbane provides an appropriate case study to illustrate this argument.

South Brisbane as an urban cultural landscape

The South Brisbane 'peninsula' is bounded by the Brisbane River immediately south of the Brisbane city centre (Figure 1). The embrace of the River imparts a strong sense of identity by defining South Brisbane as a peninsula. A scarcity of cross-river links has enabled the physical and perceptual characteristics of a peninsula to be maintained over nearly two centuries of urban development. This area comprises several inner suburbs and localities. Given historical interconnections with adjoining suburbs, the 'land boundary' of the study area has not been impermeably defined for the purposes of this paper.



Figure 1: View to South Brisbane from Brisbane City Centre

The cultural significance of the South Brisbane cultural landscape has been defined in a major study of Queensland's cultural landscapes, *Contested Terrains*, undertaken jointly by Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and the Cultural Heritage Branch of the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency (see O'Hare, 2001). The South Brisbane cultural landscape is summarised here by means of a 'statement of significance' in line with Australian heritage conservation standards established in Kerr's (2000) *Conservation Plan*.

The South Brisbane peninsula as a cultural landscape is considered to have high heritage value as a whole, as an area of physical, socioeconomic and cultural diversity in which many different groups interact. As one of Queensland's oldest and densest inner urban areas, the peninsula demonstrates Brisbane's history of development from colonial outpost to postmodern capital city. The distinctiveness of the cultural landscape results from the area's changing economic fortunes and image over more than 170 years of development and redevelopment, during which the area has maintained a mix of uses, built form, economic values and ... socioeconomic groups. (O'Hare, 2001, p.132)

The summary statement of significance is expanded below, with minor refinements, from an earlier version published by O'Hare (2001, p113).

The South Brisbane peninsula has high levels of heritage significance for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. For Aboriginal people, the area has been a place of meeting between different groups both before and since European settlement. The peninsula was one of Queensland's earliest sites of intensive interaction with, and resistance to, the European settlers of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century it has continued as a site of resistance. The continuing importance of this role is evidenced by the presence of numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in the area and, for example, their campaign to gain control of at least part of Musgrave Park in the 1980s-1990s.

The area is significant as one of the earliest European settled areas of Queensland, and one of the State's oldest urban areas. The area's contribution to the economic development of Brisbane as the State capital is demonstrated by remnants of the South Brisbane port (in particular the 1881 graving dock and the remnants of the Woolloongabba coal rail terminus); remnants of the Stanley Street commercial-retail strip; the South Brisbane Railway Station; the presence of a substantial industrial area; and the siting of hallmark events (Expo88) and major cultural facilities in the area in the 1980s-1990s (Queensland Cultural Centre, Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre, Queensland Conservatorium of Music, South Bank Parklands).

The area demonstrates an important stage of the history of local government in Brisbane before the amalgamation into a greater Brisbane City Council in 1925. The former South Brisbane civic hub at the junction of Stanley and Vulture Streets retains its visual and symbolic importance in demonstrating South Brisbane's brief municipal history, from 1888 to 1925. The former South Brisbane Town Hall (figure 2) was an important administrative base supporting the Australian and US contribution to the final stages of World War II.



Figure 2: Former South Brisbane Town Hall

The layout and built form of the peninsula contains areas that are among Brisbane's and Queensland's most densely developed inner-urban areas. South Brisbane and West End contain built up main street commercial strips, small lot housing, some terrace housing, and a variety of forms of residential flat buildings (Figure 3). The residential flat buildings range from former mansions converted to boarding houses, to contemporary high rise apartment buildings that demonstrate a renewed interest in the value of proximity to the city centre and the River.



Figure 3: Mixed uses, housing types and density

The physical diversity of the built form and land use of South Brisbane peninsula has historically been matched by greater social diversity than has been common in most urban areas in Brisbane or Queensland. The area is significant for its accommodation of diverse socio-economic and cultural groups throughout the twentieth century. Since World War II, West End has become increasingly known as a multicultural community with large Greek and Vietnamese populations who were attracted by low-cost housing close to employment and by the development of immigrant support networks and organisations. The religious and social facilities and businesses of these and other groups are significant in the built form of the area (Figures 4 and 5). The historical availability of low cost housing and commercial premises has also contributed to the area's reputation as a centre for social activism and alternative social and environmental philosophies. Along with the Aboriginal groups, these non-mainstream groups contribute to the reputation of a contested terrain, particularly with the increasing gentrification of West End and South Brisbane at the turn of the twenty-first century.



Figure 4: Hellenic Club, West End



Figure 5: Vietnamese precinct, West End

Managing integrity and vulnerability, or diversity and dynamism?

Individual buildings and groups of buildings identified in the South Brisbane Heritage Study (BCC 1993a) and other conventional heritage surveys can be conserved using the existing mechanisms of the Queensland Heritage Act and the Integrated Planning Act, providing that public demand is clearly heard. The broader overall characteristics of the South Brisbane peninsula, however, are more difficult to articulate and to transform into conservation policy. There is potential to contribute significantly to heritage conservation knowledge and practice, by demonstrating that 'heritage' is not restricted to discrete and 'precious' elements of the physical environment. Cultural landscapes are produced, and maintained or transformed, by numerous environmental management decisions - individual/ collective, private/public,

formal/informal, major/incremental. Because of the breadth of concerns embodied in the South Brisbane peninsula cultural landscape - and many others - it is necessary to generate planning strategies that are tied into the broader processes of environmental management and decision-making.

The South Brisbane peninsula cultural landscape is considered vulnerable to the homogenising potential of current trends toward the gentrification of the residential, commercial and industrial areas. It will be challenging to sustain South Brisbane peninsula's socioeconomic diversity and cultural inclusion if these trends continue. The unintended consequence of gentrification is only now beginning to be addressed in Australian urban conservation, whereby the designated urban area becomes more valuable, "prices rise, and the original inhabitants can no longer afford to live there" (Pearson and Sullivan, 1995, p.317).

As the physical form of the area changes, it will be challenging to maintain the narrative of South Brisbane as an area of diversity in culture, demographics and built form. It will be necessary to develop planning strategies that sustain occupation and use of the area by a broad socioeconomic and cultural demographic range. For example, to maintain a variety of lot sizes, building types, building ages, property values and rentals; and to articulate the key cultural landscape characteristics in terms of the language of the Integrated Planning Act (1997), which focuses on 'valuable features', 'desired environmental outcomes' and performance indicators. Conservation of cultural landscapes requires measures beyond the conservation mechanisms of State Heritage Acts, which list special elements of the physical environment and control them by Conservation Orders and other very specific formal means usually targeted at individual properties rather than whole communities. Urban conservation at the local government level similarly needs to be thought of more broadly than the specific heritage conservation provisions relating to particular properties and physical features.

Conserving the physical and the narrative landscape

South Brisbane displays the complex and antagonistic debates that frequently surround major decisions regarding valued cultural landscapes. These debates – particularly when polarised and bitter – are an important means by which the valued qualities of cultural landscapes are defined (O'Hare, 1999). Much of this occurs through an ongoing myth-making or story telling process, where the valued attributes of the place are articulated, defined, repeated, reinforced and/or refined.

A review of international planning and land management documents, in the Queensland *Contested Terrains* study (Avery, 2001, p.37), concludes that cultural landscapes can be conserved, "if they can be defined in terms of features that can be physically managed". This raises some problems for how the myths and stories of cultural landscapes such as South Brisbane can be adequately recognised and addressed in conventional planning and land management. Urban cultural landscapes need to be simultaneously managed on two (hopefully) complementary levels: the legal and physical level, and the intangible and mythical level. Optimism is provided by Avery's (2001) observation that Australian and Queensland planning and heritage conservation legislation is reaching a point where the objects of acts are broad enough to encompass the concept of cultural landscape put forward here. Further work is needed, so that cultural landscape management can be overtly linked to socioeconomic and cultural strategies, such as Brisbane's recently launched *Creative City* document (BCC, nd). The development of a cultural landscape orientation may help us move towards "sustainable conservation" (cf. Delafons 1997).

Although the existing legislative and planning framework is not clear-cut in how it provides for cultural landscape management, cultural landscapes can and should be managed in the existing web of legislation. Everyday land use planning and resource management is, in fact, cultural landscape management.

Conclusion

The concept of cultural landscape needs to be integrated into the practices of heritage conservation and urban planning more generally. The development of theory and practice in cultural landscape offers potential for a broader understanding of heritage and its relationship to contemporary urban life. Cultural landscapes cannot be managed by the discrete mechanisms of heritage conservation legislation alone. Cultural landscapes are diverse, contested and continuously being made and remade as circumstances and values change. Every land management decision is a cultural landscape making decision, and so cultural landscape planning requires engagement in the full range of 'everyday' urban management legislation and practice.

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