

Is heritage history? History and the built environment

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Historical structures, buildings and even entire districts are often defined as heritage but what does heritage really mean? And is heritage history?

‘Our heritage is based on aspects of our past that we want to keep’. This definition (provided some years ago by South Australia’s Heritage Branch) is unlike the usual dictionary version which is ‘an inherited lot or portion’. Heritage agencies have stressed the community’s inheritance from the past, not the individual’s private inheritance, and they work to pass on this inheritance to future South Australians. This communal inheritance is central to the concept of heritage: we are concerned with things which are of significance to society as a whole, regardless of whether they are privately held or in public ownership. Nor is this heritage mere property or buildings. The South Australian Heritage Register includes many kinds of historical places besides buildings, such as mines, jetties, ruins, monuments and trees.

Defining heritage as ‘aspects of our past that we want to keep’ also sets heritage apart from history. Heritage is not history: it is not what happened in the past but what has survived from the past. These survivals include ‘intangibles’ such as custom and belief, but ‘heritage’ in this context more commonly refers to tangible evidence, for example, prayerbooks and church buildings.

This difference between history and heritage should be stressed, especially as there is an increasing tendency to confuse the two and to re-label history as heritage. Here are two working definitions of history: first, history is everything which has happened. That is, history is the past. This means everything which happened, even something which nobody knows about because no evidence for it seems to have survived.

The second definition is: history is the interpretation one makes of the past. That is, history is created by historians and others and it is a process of selecting facts, describing and analysing them and passing those interpretations on to a wider community. This means that the past will be constantly reinterpreted not only as new evidence is discovered but as opinion changes and according to the interests and power of different social groups. Reinterpretations of Australian history from the perspective of the Aboriginal landowners is one example of this process. We are also observing at present the excitement of people’s reinterpretation, even their rediscovery, of history in Eastern Europe.

It is clear from these two definitions how closely heritage and history are related. One could argue that heritage is everything which has survived from the past. As I wrote in 1979:

The definition of ‘heritage’ can be very broad. It may include natural areas as well as the human landscape, documents and oral evidence as well as structures and ‘prehistoric’ as well as ‘historic’ relics. While this study deals mainly with the human landscape in South Australia since European contact I have kept the wider definition of heritage, particularly ‘cultural heritage’, firmly in mind. [*South Australian State Historic Preservation Plan Historical Guidelines*, Department for the Environment, Adelaide 1980.]

Since then several other agencies in South Australia have gained or extended their

responsibility for different aspects of our cultural heritage. They include the History Trust of South Australia (now, History SA), State Records of South Australia and the State Library of South Australia. All are concerned with tangible heritage.

Use of the term 'historic places' also reflects the changing conception of built heritage in South Australia and elsewhere. This has broadened from the late nineteenth century buildings which predominate in South Australia's first Register of State Heritage Items to encompass wild places, landscape features associated with the Aboriginal people and with European settlers, aesthetically and architecturally notable buildings, 'places that are the tangible evidence of the State's social and economic development', shipwrecks, and whole areas and townships with distinctive historical character.

Public consultation carried out during planning reviews further broadened the concept of heritage and its significance. Heritage can no longer be placed in a box of its own labelled 'history'. There are also important quality of life issues. In the Adelaide region preserving a range of heritage structures which reflect the varied ways of life, land use and historical periods (including the recent past), illustrates the region's historical development and also helps maintain social mix, vitality and identity in all suburbs, old and new, rich and poor. Heritage is not simply a concern of historians at State level but is also essential to local identity and amenity.

This suggests another element in the broad definition of heritage. That is, heritage reflects both good and bad events and the varying experiences of a wide range of individuals and social groups. Heritage items should be preserved which similarly reflect this diversity of historical experience. Which history should be told through interpreting heritage, and whose history? The heritage we choose to keep should reflect changes in historical interpretation, such as the social historian's interest in the histories of ordinary people, the experiences of minorities, the failures as well as the successes, conflict and compromise.

History is thus integral to built heritage. What about architecture? Architecture is but one of many hundreds of aspects of human existence in the past. Most heritage items will have no architectural merit whatsoever or this will be merely incidental. This is the case even with most buildings, especially the modest homes which greatly outnumber other types of buildings in South Australia. Why, then, is architectural merit almost always stressed in heritage assessments of buildings? Even the historical assessment often presents little more than an architectural history. The main reason for this is itself historical. The popular movement to conserve the built environment arose from a longstanding interest of architects in the history of architecture, hence in buildings designed by architects or which have had a powerful influence on architects. In Britain (where such bodies as the National Trust originated) as in Australia, this meant that churches, noble residences and elaborate public buildings attracted their attention. Architects have gradually turned their attention to vernacular and industrial buildings and structures but the stress on architectural qualities remains.

This brings me to the question of what we choose to preserve of our heritage. The definition of heritage as things we want to keep relates to my second definition of history, as a matter of personal selection and presentation from the vast range of actual historical events. That is, while heritage may be everything which has survived it is more specifically those things we want to preserve.

How do we decide what is of heritage significance and what is not? Who decides

this? What happens if opinions change? South Australia's Heritage Places Act 1993 deals specifically with sites, buildings and structures. How does one keep a site? How does one, in effect, rescue items from history, from the usual processes of alteration, decay and destruction?

Why do we want to keep buildings and structures? Clive James once explained in an ABC radio interview that he 'submitted to culture' when he saw Florence. What a powerful cultural effect a total built environment can have. This is one of the strongest arguments for preserving a whole range of buildings and areas. We should not make the mistake of thinking that this is possible only in places like Florence. Most South Australians will never leave the State. They should be able to gain a sense of culture at home. When preparing the 50-year history of the South Australian Housing Trust I interviewed a teenager who had been brought up in a dreary Housing Trust district. He told me that he loved drawing. And he said:

I'm living now in Forestville, that's an old area with beautiful trees, lovely houses and that really appeals to my eye. Lots of times I see things, I say, 'Yes, I'd like to draw that on paper'. But I've never ever – I'm just thinking about this now – I've never thought about drawing anything in Mansfield Park. (S Marsden, *Business, charity and sentiment. The South Australian Housing Trust 1936-1986*, 1986, p 165).

He was responding to a whole inner suburb, and one which is in fact, unremarkable. Items which contribute to the identity of suburbs like Forestville should be protected by local heritage listing. However, do we keep only those sites, areas, buildings and structures designated as heritage items and areas? Our history is reflected in the heritage which stands all about us. At the 'Politics of Heritage' conference arranged by the History Trust and the Historical Society of South Australia in 1988, Jennifer Cashmore, MP, declared:

Finally, when we speak of the politics of heritage we need to remember the heritage of our politics. The settlement origins of South Australia are unique in Australia. People came here of their own free will to build a society based on values they held dear. Many of these values are expressed in the way we have planned and preserved our landscape... Notwithstanding our recognition of the importance of economic development, we will as a community, I believe, continue to insist upon preserving the building fabric which... gives us not just our sense of geography, but also our sense of time, memory and identity. (S Marsden and R Nicol, (eds) *The politics of heritage* 1990, p 17.)