

THE NATIONAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA (NEW SOUTH WALES) POLICY ON SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

PREAMBLE

In 1946 the National Trust of Australia (NSW) was the first organisation to introduce a Register to list heritage items and places at the request of the State Government. This first Register was simply a list of buildings with no accompanying significance statements. In 1975 the Australian Heritage Commission Act defined the National Estate as comprising those places ‘that have aesthetic, historic, scientific or social significance or other special value.’”

In 1979 the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter set out guiding principles for conservation practice in cultural heritage: the same four categories of significance were cited. From this period onward Listing Reports prepared for the National Trust Register included Statements of Significance based on these four categories – aesthetic, historic, scientific and social significance.

Social significance is seen as “a demonstrable or special attachment to a place, event or landscape by individuals or a section of society”. Social significance has been described as the “non-professional point of view”, or “values outside academic values”.ⁱ As a consequence there has been a lack of accepted methodology for assessing social significance. This has led to social significance being sometimes ignored, understated and being given a local rather than state level of significance in statutory heritage listings.

Conventionally, heritage conservation has focused on fabric with less emphasis on the non-material aspects of cultural heritage. There is, however, increasing recognition that intangible values play an important role in how people interact with their social and cultural environments and the importance of these values impact on the ways in which people respond to conservation needs.ⁱⁱ The current approach of National, State and local lists contributes to a concept of a national ‘high culture’ which mitigates against recognition of social significance and enshrines state and nationally significant places with a “higher value.”

In recent Trust experience the campaign to save the Albury “Uiver” DC-2 Memorial demonstrated the failure of government to recognise the social significance of this memorial despite international letters of support and the intercession of the Ambassador of the Netherlands.

POLICY

1. The National Trust will urge the development of agency guidelines on social significance assessment in Environmental Impact Assessment and Heritage Assessment. Such a methodology must be capable of being adapted in recognition that every case and every community needs to be responded to differently. A checkbox approach is inappropriate.
2. As social significance reflects community values, the Trust will urge that it be given at least equal weight to other categories of significance.
3. The Trust will urge that “significant associations between people and a place should be respected, retained and not obscured” and that opportunities for the interpretation, commemoration and celebration of these associations should be investigated and implemented”ⁱⁱⁱ
4. The Trust will urge that “significant meanings, including spiritual values, of a place should be respected” and “opportunities for the continuation or revival of these meanings should be investigated and implemented”.^{iv}
5. The National Trust will continue to produce, maintain and review its own Trust Register listings as a key part of its advocacy for the recognition and retention of social significance.
6. The National Trust will urge and promote the concept behind the original administration of the Register of the National Estate carefully avoiding ‘thresholds of significance, in order to encourage a sense of a national community made up of many communities and encompassing a concept of cultural and regional diversity’.

Authors: Graham Quint, Director, Conservation
Approved by National Trust (NSW) Board: 30 July 2014

ⁱ *Social Significance – a discussion paper*, Denis Byrne, Helen Brayshaw & Tracy Ireland, Cultural Heritage Division, NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service, 2001

ⁱⁱ *Time, Memory, Place and Land: Social Meaning and Heritage Conservation in Australia*, Dr Annie Clarke (University of Sydney) & Ms Chris Johnston (Context Pty Ltd) Scientific Symposium, ICOMOS 14th General Assembly, 2003, Zimbabwe

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Burra Charter, The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance*, 2013 Article 24.1

^{iv} *The Burra Charter, The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance*, 2013 Article 24.2