



POSITION PAPER

Levels of Heritage Significance

NATIONAL TRUST INVOLVEMENT

In his seminal *The Conservation Plan* James Semple Kerr discusses levels of significance –

“The way degrees or levels of significance are expressed in a conservation plan is important. Neutral terms such as ‘high’ and ‘low’ or those on the ladder above should be used. These relate only to the assessment process. There is a current fashion for the use of ‘local’, ‘regional’, ‘state’ and ‘national’ as this enables some government agencies responsible for heritage to say that places of local significance must be administered at a local level and so on. Relating such management issues to the assessment process leads to administrative muddle and a loss of integrity in the process, particularly as government policies and political convenience will require places to be moved from one administrative level to another and back again. In assessing levels of significance it is better to avoid the terms local, regional, state and national altogether as they now come loaded with meanings irrelevant to the assessment process.”

In March 2003, conservation architect Sean Johnson presented a talk to the National Trust in the Wyatt Conservation Series entitled ‘The Geographical Fallacy in Heritage Assessment.’ The talk highlighted issues associated with attributing ‘state’ and ‘local’ heritage significance to places. It was Johnson’s view that the ranking distinction reflected administrative jurisdictions rather than the true level of significance.

For places of State significance listed on the State Heritage Register (SHR) their development is managed by the Heritage Council of NSW through the Heritage Act 1977 in conjunction with local government. Places of state and local significance are included on heritage schedules in Local Environmental Plans and unless state significant items are also on the SHR, their development is managed by local government through the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act, 1979.

Johnson concluded his talk calling for a more neutral grading system, properly recognizing significance levels, independently of the tier of government administering development control.

NATIONAL TRUST POSITION

The Trust believes that it is time to revise the current NSW system of assigning ‘state’ or ‘local’ heritage significance to places.

The Trust considers that adopting the above position will result in improvements to the heritage management system, where all heritage items, reflecting their level or ranking of significance, will have the appropriate level of statutory protection.

ACTION TO PROMOTE THE TRUST’S POSITION

The Trust will continue to promote its views on the protection of our heritage - Aboriginal, Non-Aboriginal and Natural with heritage professionals and their respective Institutes, educational institutions, elected Commonwealth, State and Local Government officials and their advisors, government departments and agencies, local government and the media.