

THE GLEBE SOCIETY INC.

ABN 99 023 656 297

Conserving our heritage • Encouraging a sense of community • Working for Glebe's future

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Australian Heritage Strategy

Glebe is a history of early Australian urban architecture. As a townscape it is handsome, coherent, and largely complete. The scale and character have been little disturbed by modern intrusion. About one fifth of the houses have been acquired and restored by the Australian Government. Glebe seen as a whole is a significant part of Sydney's heritage and character. (former Register of the National Estate)

The Heritage of Glebe was saved during “*The Great Age of Demolition*”¹ from an outrage similar to “*the plans of the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority to raze the Rocks and hand the sites over to international hoteliers, bankers and insurance brokers.*” As was the case in the Rocks it was saved by “*an unlikely alliance of middle class professionals..... and ‘green bans’ imposed by the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF), under the leadership of Jack Mundey*”. The Glebe Society was established in 1969 when the Askin government had plans to cut freeways through the suburb and destroy its heritage.

The Society adopts an integrative view of heritage and notes particularly the connection between heritage and community. The Grattan Institute² has produced very clear argument and evidence that heritage is a powerful binding force for community with real social benefits. This is succinctly highlighted by the NSW Heritage Council, “*Conserving the natural and cultural assets of the existing environment is considered a key part of planning for sustainable development. Heritage places are an irreplaceable asset – a non-renewable resource – with benefits to society, the environment and the economy. For society, heritage places represent those places most valued by communities because of their contribution to the sense of place and identity of neighbourhoods and as tangible links to Australia’s past and its culture.*³”

The Australian Heritage Strategy must therefore recognise community and heritage as intertwined; declining heritage diminishes community; engaging community enhances heritage. Glebe is “*a significant part of Sydney's heritage and character*” and The Glebe Society is a significant part of any network of heritage organisations. It is within this context that we provide our current thinking on questions your consultation paper raised. We expect that all submissions will be publicly available.

¹ www.environment.gov.au/heritage/strategy/documents.html

² www.grattan.edu.au/publications/137-social-cities.pdf accessed 29 March, 2012

³ This is an extract from *Heritage Council of NSW submission to the NSW Planning System Review (28/2/2012)*.

In this submission we:

- ***argue that an expanded role for community organisations is needed;***
- ***address the questions set out in the consultation report and***
- ***use the Glebe Society as a case of what could be done and***
- ***how this might be funded and arranged.***

Recognising and valuing Australia's heritage

Your question “What is the community’s understanding of heritage?” suggests that there is one community with a one coherent answer. As your essayists show, there have been varying historical, cultural and influential views of heritage. There are multiple communities in the one space and their views vary contextually. The strong identifying features of Glebe for its short and long term residents and visitors are diversity, community and heritage. A crass marketer may say this is Glebe’s brand. But within that broadly truthful statement there is discord. It is trite to think that the poor, the rich, the indigenous, the student, the developer, the Glebe Society member all share the same view of heritage, nor deny that any one of them may be a member of several of these communities. Whilst we have actively encouraged many of the above Glebe groups to respond to the Consultation Paper, the Glebe Society is only legitimated to speak on behalf of its membership.

The Glebe Society’s view is that heritage is an intersection of the built, natural and cultural environment, history and the stories that underpin interpretation of an area. For example Glebe’s townscape and its history have special meaning against the tales of working class struggle and the fights for urban conservation. Properly commissioned research into areas such as Glebe is essential to discover the social, economic and environmental value of heritage. Bear well in mind though that there have been many studies of economic impact of heritage but little real acknowledgement in heritage discussions generally of individual’s and community’s sense of place and identity in neighbourhoods and the consequent impact of loss of iconic local heritage. It is instructive that the well-respected Grattan Institute’s⁴ recent work shows strong evidence that integrated study will reveal extra social benefits from heritage and paths to them. But the diversity contained within community must not be forgotten when studying heritage. The strategy must pay particular attention to segments in the community and their different needs in heritage. A significant example of this is Glebe’s relatively significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands people.

⁴ Ibid

Leadership

We agree that there must be legislatively decreed and properly maintained lists or databases of heritage. Strategically the challenges are how to make this material easily available so that people can readily find out about the heritage of their place and how to infect the community with heritage. Within the last twelve months we have seen \$30million taken from the Federal heritage Budget, whilst in NSW we see staff numbers in the Heritage Office reduced by 25% as it is amalgamated into a larger agency. Significant funding reductions to heritage advocacy groups further sap the process so that heritage as a cultural and economic good fades as agencies look to their survival. Heritage is a national asset and the buck stops with the Federal Government. The Federal Government must accept its role as the strategic and transformational leader of heritage in this nation.

Thus the Federal Government must have powers to intervene if individual State governments act against heritage best interests. The NSW Government is the single owner of the Glebe Estate which constitutes about 20% of the conservation stock of Glebe and is recognised as strategically significant to Sydney's heritage. This whole estate was renovated by the Federal Government in the 1970s, and the State Government from 1984. Despite its significant initial investment NSW has been inattentive as a landlord. Many houses and rows are now in need of further serious attention and if decline is permitted to continue the State may see disposal as an option on a piecemeal basis; or even whole tracts being sold off to developers.

Other questions about harmonising legislation, clarification of roles, reductions of duplication are about transactional matters. No amount of transactional leadership will address the transformational issue that Spearitt highlights. He quotes Whitlam, whilst noting that ***the Australian Government should see itself as the curator and not the liquidator of the national estate***.

Within the transactional sphere there are readily identified problems. First the existing system is ineffective against any owner including government agencies who chooses demolition by neglect. Any strategic review must attend to this problem. Changed legislation may be needed. Second, whilst it is necessary to have a rigorous listing system this very rigour is a disincentive for some owners and custodians. This problem needs close examination. Direct funding to community organisations may be part of the answer to this. A community organisation that gains experience in listing will act more efficiently and support a neophyte owner. An alternative would be to fund the owner with a voucher. Thirdly as the economics literature is equivocal about nett benefits to listing, and listing is a public good, the Federal Government should investigate direct payment of bounties and annuities for listed properties or items. Fourth the broad context of heritage needs deeper consideration and a form of listing. For example streetscapes, tracts and in some instances, whole suburbs, require protection. The Glebe Estate has already been mentioned as an example.

Community participation

The first step to build a strategy for community participation is to identify, study and strengthen grassroots exemplars. By commissioning proper research as mentioned previously, a connected heritage network of community organisations can be built. Realistically communities can and must do more to protect their heritage, but the existing funding and organisational arrangements make that very difficult. Therefore the strategy should properly recognise and fund community organisations in a network that works towards achieving the strategic aims.

As we have said before, The Glebe Society is one of multiple groups in the communities of Glebe. This is a conservation area and its residents and visitors want to know more about heritage but lists and databases do not live in a community. They are not present when people walk around. Any community needs access through smartphones, e.access points and the like. Projects which infect the community with heritage are needed and these come from community organisations but need significant direct Federal Government support and funding.

The Glebe Society developed the Glebe Walks <http://www.glebewalks.com.au/> by its volunteers working with a City of Sydney grant and where necessary commissioning professional assistance. These are the major way that we make known Glebe's heritage to the wider community, as well as to our own members. This is a powerful example of innovative presentation that improves community access to heritage and is gained through grassroots volunteer knowledge, close relations with government, such as the City of Sydney and leveraged funds. We have had several grants of this nature and work closely with resident groups in Balmain and Pyrmont and the Dictionary of Sydney. .

Networks and partnerships

A significant strategic challenge is how to build an achieving heritage network. Much of the hierarchical structure is there in government agencies, but the network needs a substantially boosted grassroots base. As the population ages, voluntary labour increases, which can be effectively employed within a well-researched, well-funded network. Indeed the heritage network would be an obvious project for new finance as is seen in NSW Social Impact bonds, UK Big Bank, USA Social Initiatives Fund⁵.

Protecting and managing heritage

From a community organisation perspective we agree that that "*Australia has a range of well-resolved processes for the identification, protection and management of our heritage*", but note that the *Australia state of the environment 2011* report found that our heritage is under resourced with a

⁵ www.aph.gov.au/senate

significant gap *identifying* a need and achieving a heritage result. Community organisations are best placed to find issues within the strategy defined but do not have the funds and expertise to do as much as required. These organisations need to be strengthened by direct federal funding and a network organisation with links to the Federal Department. Consider how close Glebe is to major universities and Sydney TAFE College, which do have resources that could be applied with us in joint projects like heritage artisan development, heritage inquiry and development. Within the strategy, government must enhance the capacity of community organisations and help them through the maze of institutions.

Summary

1. Heritage is an intersection of the built, natural and cultural environment, history and the stories that underpin understanding of an area.
2. It is experienced locally and protected nationally.
3. The diminution of government spending must be reversed and a dynamic and effective network of heritage community organisation developed.
4. Federal Government must use its powers to ensure State governments do not act against the interests of heritage.
5. The Federal Government is the curator of the national estate and must gain increased funding and provide transformational leadership to the sector.
6. The first step to build a strategy for community participation is to identify, study and strengthen exemplars of grassroots heritage community organisations.
7. The approach should be that communities participate in heritage and the perspective should be shifted from the institutional to the community. Fund projects that provide diverse groups with improved access to heritage information (e.g. <http://www.glebewalks.com.au/> smartphone apps, geopoint projects) and watch them infect others.
8. Establish an achieving heritage network with a substantially boosted grassroots base.
9. Address issues of demolition by neglect, the disincentives of listing, and the narrowness of listing. Investigate funding community organisations and owners to list; list streetscapes, tracts and suburbs; direct payment of bounties and annuities for listed properties or items.

Strategic Implementation

How might these ideas work out in the implementation of an Australian Heritage Strategy? Our broad thrust is that more needs to be achieved in and by the community. We offer Glebe and The Glebe Society as cases of what could be done and how it might be funded. Since 1969 The Glebe Society has continuously been involved in planning, environment, heritage and community issues and worked closely with local government as well as state and, to a lesser extent, federal governments and their agencies across a wide range of matters. It has earned a solid reputation for its professional approach as a community advocacy group.

The Glebe Society is constituted to work towards the following aims, which taken together embody heritage:

- improve the amenity of Glebe by opposing development detrimental to heritage values or contrary to community interests;
- preserve and enhance the natural and architectural character of Glebe;
- encourage sound town planning, architectural and conservation practices;
- stimulate interest in the history and character of Glebe, and foster study of and research into the history of Glebe and its environs.

Our example sees it (and like groups) becoming part of the Community Heritage Network. It would qualify by satisfying criteria set out in the strategy and therefore receive ongoing as well as project-based funding from the Federal Government. As part of its ongoing heritage task it would act closely with owners and the City of Sydney to prepare new listings and report regularly on the state of heritage properties in the conservation area. As a project it would identify and establish geo-points and smartphone apps of heritage items in Glebe.

It is strategically timely to conduct this review now as economics, demographics and technology make possible a grassroots network of heritage. Economically, government funds have declined and require improved efficiency. At the same time a new social economy is emerging which could provide funds for heritage directly. Demographically Australia has a larger stock of potential volunteers than ever before as Baby Boomers retire. They will work voluntarily in properly funded ventures with worthwhile purposes. Technologically, the confluence of communications and computing makes heritage networking, informing and recruiting easy.

Our view is that the existing structure of heritage in Australia represents a hierarchical form of organising that ensures rigour and control. These facets are necessary but insufficient for a strategy that engages Australians with heritage. There will always be competition for scarce government funds. We deplore the lessening of funds to heritage but we do propose an alternative model. The model we propose recognises community organisations as parts of a national heritage network. Each of these may take a different form but it is likely that some will be social enterprises partially funded by the new social economy. Our submission has recognised the value of rigour and control but added to it the vital facet that the Australian Heritage Strategy should emphasize community engagement by establishing a Community Heritage Network. We have argued that heritage enhances community and that the community organisations within the network should be directly funded to achieve specific aims set out in the strategy. We present a different paradigm to heritage implementation: one that shifts some of available funding to community organisations and makes them accountable to deliver results.

Yours truly

Mairéad Browne

President