



Threads of Conservation

Social fabric • Fabric and place • Conserving fabric

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Robyn Christie

BA (Hons) University of Sydney, BA (Architecture) University of Technology Sydney, MA Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, MHerit Cons University of Sydney, MArchitecture University of Technology Sydney. Robyn has run her own heritage consultancy, House Histories, since 1994. She was a Board member of the National Trust of Australia (NSW) from 2001 to 2014. She has been on the executive committee of the Hunters Hill Trust since 1992, and was the Trust's President from 2011 to 2014. She was a member of the National Trust's Urban Conservation Committee from 1996 until 2009, when the Committee amalgamated with the Historic Buildings Committee. She has been the Trust's representative on the Hunters Hill Conservation Advisory Panel from 1999 to 2014. She undertook a degree in architecture later in her professional career and is currently enrolled in a PhD in the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Sydney.

Old Fabric, New Fabric and Problems of Authenticity

Paper Abstract

This paper will explore the relationship between old fabric and new fabric within the conservation movement and the associated problem of authenticity. From a heritage perspective there is a perceived difficulty in achieving good design outcomes within historic environments - infill or new interventions that respond to and respect the existing character of a place. This is despite numerous guidelines produced by heritage bodies, the planning sector and urban design manuals all of which aim to assist with the design of new development both within and outside of areas designated for their heritage significance.

The architectural profession has also questioned the ability of contemporary design to acknowledge an existing environment in developing a new built language, and key figures have canvassed the merits of different stylistic architectural responses. These are perhaps neatly encapsulated with the terms juxtaposed, deferential and imitative, with the range of contemporary outcomes affected more often as much by an individual aesthetic as contextual considerations.

This paper will focus on understanding the evolution of the need to distinguish new from old fabric within the conservation profession and what has emerged as an ancillary problem, that of authenticity. It is clear from a heritage point of view that while new fabric should be distinguishable from old fabric, it is also valid that new fabric should not obscure the reading of old fabric, rendering the reading of the past meaningless.

So when does this distinction between new and old become apparent? Before the eighteenth century, while historical fragments were treasured and often venerated, they were equally subject to an element of creative interpretation as there was no scientific rigor concerning their understanding and conservation. Ruskin and his theory of Anti-Scrape was the first outspoken expression of the need to distinguish new from old. The paper will trace the history of this belief that, as might be anticipated, is neither linear nor straightforward. It will trace the problem of new design within historic contexts through the international conservation literature and focus on the interpretative changes that have evolved within the various editions of the Burra Charter.

There is, however, one caveat. The evolution of the conservation discipline has raised problems of which we must be wary. With the growth of our understanding of authenticity, one that does not relate just to fabric, and with our broadening of the matter of heritage to include “soft” as well as “hard” forms, there is a real risk that we devalue the importance of the physical to such an extent that we inadvertently allow both its substitution and its destruction.