

Old Parliament House, Adelaide –

The practicality of the Burra Charter process

Andrew Klenke

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Background

This paper is a reflection on the usefulness of the ICOMOS Burra Charter in relationship to a single project, this being the redevelopment of Old Parliament House, North Terrace, Adelaide. There is no suggestion that this experience is unique and no doubt many others could tell a similar story with many other projects. While these are principles that we all apply almost subconsciously every day, the nature and extent of this project demonstrated for me how relevant they are in managing considerable change in even the most significant of places.

The place

Old Parliament House is the place where legislation which shaped the very nature of South Australia was formed and decided, and where important strides were made to enfranchise citizens, many of these ultimately adopted in the Australian Constitution. For this reason it is also included on the National Heritage List, the only building in South Australia to have this distinction. Its history and its resulting physical form are intertwined with the story of the evolution of our democracy.

The core principle of the Charter is to make decisions after understanding a place's significance. In this instance our understanding was developed as a result of the preparation of a Conservation Management Plan prior to any proposal to carry out work on the building. The history of the building seemed to have been well documented, and we had assumed that it would only be necessary to summarise this existing work. However, we soon found a number of inconsistencies, and despite the temptation to leave these unexplored, we commenced a review of the primary information that was to enliven the fascinating and complex story of the buildings' development.

This, together with a detailed study and understanding of the existing fabric, was to prove incredibly important to the subsequent redevelopment.

The building originated with the decision of Governor Captain George Grey, to spend £200 on constructing a meeting place for the first Legislative Council in 1843 (**Fig.1**).¹ Until this time the government had consisted of the Governor and his senior public servants, whom met in-camera in the sitting room at Government House (Coombe 2009:226). The new body, consisting of the Governor, three senior public servants and four appointed private citizens, was to meet in public (Pike 1967:247). Probably it was Grey's steadfast pursuit of his policy of economic restraint that led him to the fateful decision to make the new meeting place an addition to the existing Resident



Fig.1 – North Terrace 1845, looking west showing the first Council Chamber on the right (*ST Gill, Art Gallery of South Australia, reproduced in Stretton p.15*)

Magistrates Office, a timber framed building on North Terrace conveniently located just west of Government House. It was a decision which was to have profound implications on the shaping of the future of South Australia's Parliamentary buildings. The architecture of the relatively unpretentious brick room was not admired, it could have been mistaken for an insolvent Methodist chapel, wrote a visiting Sydney reporter *'too trim, and prim, and uniformly red in its bricks, for a barn; too mean for a church; too demure for a theatre; and too melancholy even for a private mad-house.'*² It was however to be the seed around which the building was to grow.

In 1851 an expansion of the Legislative Council to 24 members, two thirds of whom were elected, was made with the primary purpose of formulating a new Constitution for the Colony (Pike 1967:437-438). Despite the dramatic increase in numbers, the Council continued to meet in the humble brick room. While there were moves to erect a new parliament building in Victoria Square, nothing had come of the move due to the labour and financial crisis brought on by the discovery of gold in neighbouring Victoria. By 1853 when the financial situation began to improve, it was known that the future parliament was to be bicameral, consisting of upper and lower houses. To meet the imminent need to house such a legislature a second chamber was proposed as an addition to the existing building as a temporary measure, and the building was constructed on a cost plus margin percentage basis with the only contractor willing to take the work on.³ The end result was somewhat more elaborate than originally intended and comprised the portion of the building that today forms the North Terrace frontage. Described as Elizabethan, the style was perhaps chosen to emphasise the English origins of Parliament, indeed it had been identified alongside Gothic as suitable styles for the reconstruction of the Palace of Westminster after the fire of 1834 (Fredericksen 2000:101). Comprised of a new Chamber at first floor level intended to house the new lower house with an adjoining library, while offices and committee rooms were placed below.

The lack of provision of facilities for the proposed upper house which was to remain in the original chamber was perhaps a reaction against the restricted upper house foisted on the colonists by the questionable political dealings of the then Lt Governor (Pike 1967:468-469). However, these were recognised in time and the colonists managed to instigate a recall of the legislation before the Constitution could be enacted, and they were consequentially to make it one of the most liberal for its time (Pike 1967:476-479). This resulted in further consideration being given to the needs of the upper house, the Legislative Council, and not just those of the lower house, the House of Assembly. Initially a new wing was proposed requiring the demolition of the original building, but even so early after the completion of the expansion it was so little respected that the proposal was rejected as not being worthy of the expense. Instead a new permanent building was designed but in the meantime sufficient change was made to make the existing building workable (Swanbury Penglase 2010:21-22).

Despite the distain with which the occupants held the existing building and its intended 'temporary' nature, once entrenched there it became politically virtually impossible to consider a new building. The design for the permanent building was shelved, but within a few years the complaints were such that a new chamber was again proposed. However, after suitable review it was decided to hold an architectural competition for a permanent building on the adjoining site, but in the meantime the Legislative Council Chamber was enlarged to make it a more suitable auspicious space in 1865 as a temporary exercise (Swanbury Penglase 2010:26-27). Again, the politics were such that the plan for the competition did not progress. The building was further extended in 1875, again as a temporary move to cater for the enlargement of the House of Assembly. This pattern of 'patch on patch' created by fixing immediate problems by expending the minimal amount possible in the

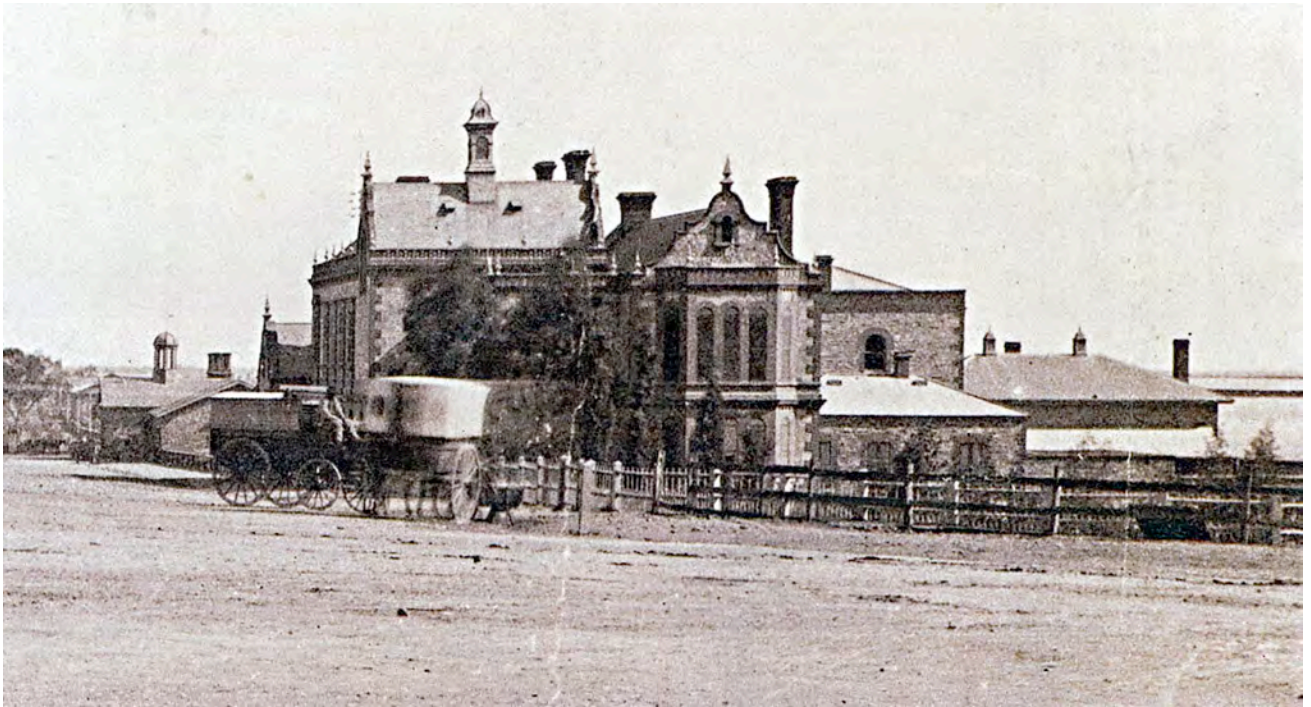


Fig.2 – View of Old Parliament House from the east, c1868 showing the growing collection of buildings, with the 1854-1855 section facing the street, the 1865 altered Legislative Council Chamber behind the associated single storey Smoking Room and the 1861 Refreshment Room on the right (*B1867, State Library of South Australia*)

justification that the building was temporary was resulting in a confusing structure, one where ‘*a definite plan of what it really is becomes impossible to obtain.*’⁴ The building’s location was hated, while the structure itself was seen as an embarrassment, it was compared to a London poor house, while one member thought that at least they would be safe should a foreign power invade, as they would simply bypass the building assuming that it served some minor function.⁵ The resulting complicated and confusing building is however the embodiment of the complex, turbulent and evolving politics of the Parliament during this period (**Fig.2**).

While the House of Assembly were to relocate into the first portion of the long awaited and much debated permanent building in 1889, the original structure remained the home of the Legislative Council for the next fifty years. It was here that the legislation which instigated female suffrage was

debated and won consent in 1894, while the first draft of the Federal Constitution was prepared here as part of the first Australian Federal Convention in 1897. With the eventual completion of Parliament House in 1939, Old Parliament House was then destined for demolition but was saved by the advent of World War II.⁶ Post war shortages saw it used for various minor government purposes until its historical importance came to be acknowledged. It was subsequently conserved and reconstructed in the late 1970's to create a new museum of political history. This phase had not been researched previously. Of particular interest was a large collection of images which had been taken by the staff of the Constitutional Museum during the construction phase, these helping to confirm the nature and extent of some of those works and the degree of intervention which had taken place at the time (**Fig.3**).



Fig.3 – Demolition in progress on the upper west wall of the former Legislative Council Chamber c1978, showing the extent of intervention carried out at the time (*History SA*)

The problem

Parliament had resumed occupation of the building in 1995 having outgrown the adjoining Parliament House, and leading to the controversial closing of the Museum in the process. The

building however never suited its revived role. Circulation was tortuous and confusing; traversing rooms, narrow corridors, and existing historic but non-compliant stairs. With six different floor levels, most of the building was inaccessible to those with a disability. The building had inadequate facilities and services were at the end of their life, while there was deterioration of the fabric caused mainly by damp and a lack of access to carry out maintenance. Consequently the building was relegated to a lesser role in the operation of the Parliament, while historically significant spaces were divided and as a result largely indecipherable.

Parliament's desire was to address these issues and make Old Parliament House functionally integral with Parliament House. This required a major upgrade to ensure the building would meet the ongoing demands of the Parliament of South Australia. Although there was an acknowledgement of the buildings' significance, it needed nevertheless to be useful and meet their requirements to be appreciated and respected.

The proposal

Guiding the necessary change to achieve the desired outcome proved the usefulness of the Charter. The proposed works were intended to address the buildings major functional and operational problems by maximising its opportunities while respecting and working around its obvious constraints created by its significance. An initial strategy for addressing these problems had evolved from the formulation of the policy of the Conservation Management Plan. Of importance was the acknowledgement that the continued use of the building was not only compatible, but also one which was of cultural significance.

More significant works were confined to the post-1939 fabric, and particularly the post-1978 works, while attempting to reveal significant fabric and spaces. An important goal was to reveal the volume of the former Legislative Council Chamber, the modified 1843 core of the building that had been the home of the Council for almost a century. While it was not possible to fully reconstruct this space due to the loss of floor area this would involve and the structural implication, it was however cleared of the partitions which concealed its extent, while the concrete floor which divided the space into two vertically was partly removed to reveal a sense of the original volume. This also provided a focus for the two new Parliamentary committee rooms proposed within the space intended to return an important Parliamentary function to the space after seventy-five years of neglect and obscurity.

Equally important was the need to improve the circulation by creating more logical paths to the various parts of the building, all centred on a new external lift to resolve the multiplicity of levels. The opportunity was also taken in the process to create a new foyer threaded in the narrow space between the building and Parliament House to form a new compliant public entry point to both. It was also to provide a more direct connection to the redeveloped courtyard at the rear of the building, the only outdoor space for the Parliamentary complex. This all needed to occur within the restricted space and the significant mature palms in the courtyard to the rear, and all structurally independent of the existing buildings. New openings at logical and previously modified locations connect to the interior with these treated in a manner to differentiate them from the early openings. This helped to provide more logic to the previously confused internal circulation and allowed important rooms to be bypassed when in use. Path finding internally was also helped by exposing the edges of the various separate sections of the building so creating new external views in the process to enliven what were otherwise narrow and uninviting spaces. A new compliant stair was

also proposed which would allow the existing significant stairs to remain without disfiguring works that would be required to make these compliant.

The building also previously had inadequate toilets and additional facilities were necessary to make the building compliant with the current building code. These were placed in the area where the original washroom was located and where toilets had previously been retrofitted. A new access toilet was also required and this proved to be more difficult due to the strict spatial requirements and was located in an addition to the upper level to the rear elevation requiring the removal of a portion of the early roof.

The introduction of new services was also critical to support the Parliamentary use of the building, particularly advanced recording and security systems. All of these had to be fully integrated with the adjoining Parliament House for the building to become the integral part of the Parliamentary process as intended. The mechanical systems were particularly important as the previous floor mounted fan coil system was too noisy for recording of proceedings, while the plant room was located in one of the most significant parts of the building. This was moved into an area that had been reconstructed as part of the 1970s work allowing for more modification to suit the purpose and greater space for the new equipment. A displacement system was adopted for the conditioning of the building, as it was best able to meet the strict acoustic requirements, although a challenge to integrate into such a significant environment.

A host of other works were also required, including rectifying issues of rising and falling damp which were exaggerated by a lack of roof access to carry out maintenance activities such as gutter cleaning. Due to the extent of the planned works, the building also required to be seismically

strengthened. Ironically its level of significance required the protection offered by a greater degree of augmentation which typically made it more invasive.

The work

Despite the degree of inconvenience the closure and decanting of the occupants involved on the already overcrowded Parliament House, the building was vacated and handed over to the project team. The range and nature of the work carried out to the building was broad and only a few of the more unusual can be highlighted within the limits of this paper.

Although a thorough understanding of the significance and nature of the fabric had been developed through the Conservation Management Plan process, there were various assumptions that could not be tested without further exploration. This was carried out through a number of early packages to remove the more recent and low value fabric, such as floor coverings, plasterboard ceiling linings and partition walls to reveal the more significant fabric. A number of hatches were carefully created in floors to allow for the inspection of the sub floor spaces that were critical to the delivery of services. While this largely confirmed our earlier assumption, the results of this process did inform and allowed for modification of the design to minimise impacts, as well as allowing the documentation to accurately reflect the actual work required.

The proposed works very much relied on the degree of previous intervention to the floors as a result of the reconstruction works carried out in the late 1970s, as it was accepted that these later boards could be modified. The need for planning any subsequent works to be reversible, not just in theory but also in practice was reinforced as this work commenced. To carry out the extensive underfloor services work the plan was to remove sections of the late 1970s boards while leaving the areas of

early boards untouched, with the removed boards being reinstalled on completion. It was found however that these had been fixed using a high tensile flooring screw that proved impossible to remove from the hardwood joists and these boards needed to be replaced as a result. The seismic stabilisation works also largely relied upon the installation of plywood around the perimeter of various areas at first floor level. The extent of these works originally planned was modified when areas of early boards were revealed to prevent these being disturbed. This very much relied on the experience of the structural engineer in understanding historic buildings, as well as their confidence to accept a less than perfect structural solution for the sake of the historic integrity of the building, a fairly uncommon skill base on experience.

An archaeological permit was required for all excavation work on the site, included that under the floors for the installation of the mechanical services. The resulting survey of the planned excavations under the floors did not limit those works, but elsewhere on the site evidence was uncovered of previous portions of the building that had long been demolished. This included the kitchen block



Fig.4 – Service excavations revealed the footings of the former east bay window which required diversion of the services (Swanbury Penglase 2012)

removed in the early 1970s and the bay window to the east elevation removed in the 1880s for the construction of Parliament House (**Fig.4**). The discovery of these caused various services, including a major stormwater line, to be redirected to prevent further damage of those remains.

Parliament's security requirements were high, including the need to have clear separation between public zones and those for members and their staff. An electronic lock system had already been implemented within Parliament House and this needed to also be integrated throughout. Although it was helpful that very little early door hardware remained, the locks themselves provided numerous challenges for the remaining early doors, including their size, finish and limitations on furniture. Components needed to be especially modified for the project, while numerous repairs were necessary as a result of this change. Fortunately the doors displayed a history of such change and a model for how these should be carried out, but carrying these out within impacting on the early door finishes was a cause of many site meetings.

The provision of suitable lighting was also a challenge. A number of substantial converted gas fittings which had been introduced as part of the late 1970s works were retained and rewired, while generally minimalist continuous suspended lights were introduced in the place of the previous use of recessed downlights. In particular the lighting of corridors and the significant stairs proved more difficult, and here new lights were especially commissioned from an Australian lighting designer using locally hand blown glass to provide a suitable presence without dominating the spaces.

Portions of the ventilation system designed by the architect EJ Woods and first installed in the House of Assembly Chamber in 1875 and modified in 1884 to address its terrible atmosphere were

found to remain in the ceiling void. This was the forerunner of the sophisticated system of ventilation Woods installed in the Chamber in Parliament House in 1889 (Woods1894:11, 16-21). Considerable time and planning were necessary to ensure that the new mechanical system installed in this area left this fabric undisturbed. Similarly the new maintenance walkway required a degree of thought and planning beyond its importance to thread through this network of complicated spaces, structure, original and new mechanical plant – the result being a wonder but one which few will see. This and walkways added to the other roof voids provided new access for plant, as well as the various roofs which were provided with discreetly placed roof access systems to provide safe and regular access for gutter cleaning and roof maintenance.

The works in the former Legislative Council Chamber also revealed a number of challenges. One of the most significant elements of the 1865 room was the lath and plaster ceiling, which in our view had been disfigured by the introduction of a large number of recessed downlights, but it was also displayed extensive cracking. These were stabilised by injecting with acrylic from below, which allowed the original

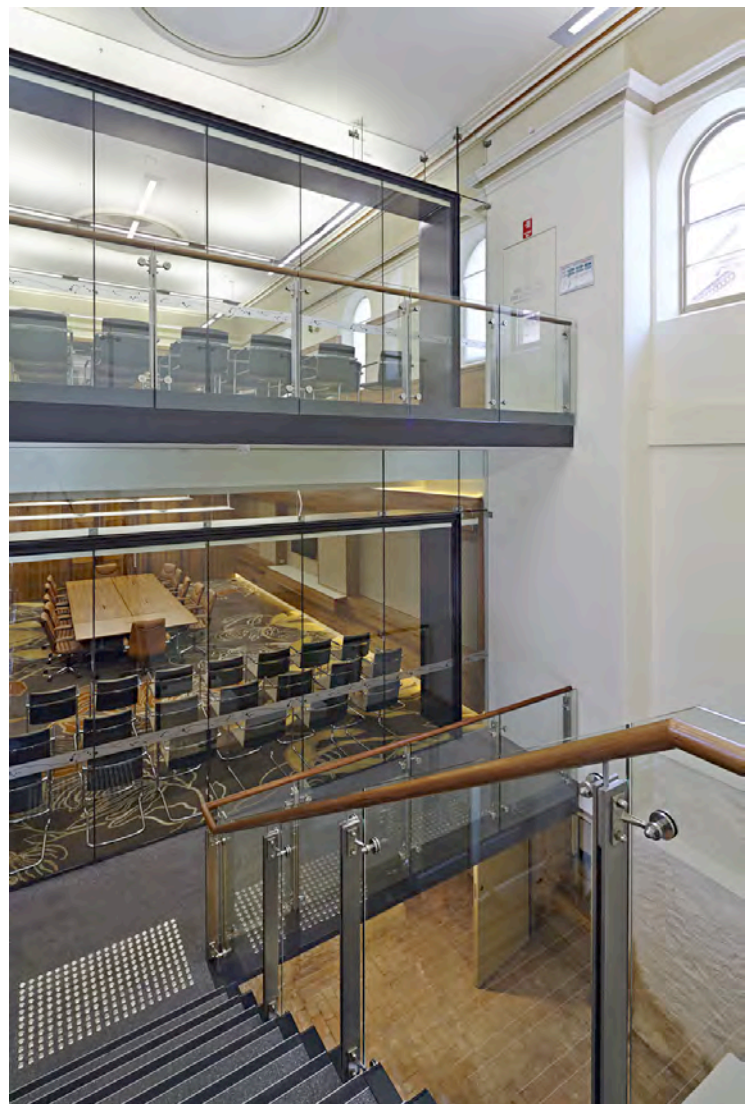


Fig.5 – Former Legislative Council Chamber on completion of the works showing the two new committee rooms (David Russell 2014)

charcoal thermal insulation to remain in place above despite the initial reaction to remove such a potential flammable material. Our chosen detailing method to distinguish our interventions did prove difficult in this space, as the walls proved to be considerably out of square, and erecting the new steel and glass which formed the division between the meeting rooms and the circulation and interpretation void was a constructional challenge (**Fig.5**). Panelling was introduced within the meeting spaces due primarily to help achieve the high acoustic requirements, but this also helped to conceal the unsightly columns needed to support the 1962 concrete floor slab which divided the space, as well as the new services, particularly the air conditioning system. This also co-opted the original ceiling vents which retain their original roof mounted Boyle ventilators.

The works did also reveal significant fabric that had previously been concealed. Some of this had been anticipated, such as the remains of the back of the 1843 building, but equally other fabric came as a surprise and helped to demonstrate the complex evolution of the building. This was particularly the case within the former plant room at the north end of the former Legislative Council Chamber. Here was a confusing but wonderful collection of fabric, including the base of the President's dais, as well as the remains of a series of French doors of what is thought to be the early 1850s Smoking Room, complete with its remnant wallpaper. These have been conserved and have been displayed for further interpretation (**Fig.6**). Remnant of a green paint colouring here also helped to inform a change of the paint colour within the former House of Assembly Chamber where no such evidence remained as a result of the works carried out there in the late 1970s.

All of this work was carried out while respecting the contribution of those who came before us. This included the conservation and reconstruction works carried out in the late 1970s. These works were executed in an environment before the Burra Charter, with some interesting decisions as a



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consequence and itself an important record of the evolution of conservation practice. The most intriguing was the decision to remove the lath and plaster ceiling installed in the former House of Assembly Chamber in 1858 to address the room's woeful acoustic and thermal problems. This was to reveal the original trusses that had been a feature of the room. The only problem was that where the Chamber was extended in 1875 there were no trusses, and hence several new trusses were replicated to complete the appearance of the room. Conscious decisions were made to leave as much of the fabric from this period as possible, even though considered to be of low significance, for future discovery, analysis and record of the buildings life. For example speculative reconstructed skirtings were left in place behind new panelling and sections of earlier carpets retained in out of the way areas.

The result

Now housing ministerial offices and a suite of meeting spaces used by the Parliamentary committees, the building forms a valuable addition to the facilities available to the legislators – the most satisfying being the return of an important legislative role to the former Legislative Council Chamber, a space which previously was indiscernible is now both useful and much sought after. Despite the challenges, logical and compliant access is now provided to all levels of the building and Parliament House, while meeting the stringent security requirements. The form and materials of this new work are appropriately respectful and subservient to the existing buildings. A high level of new services to meet the unique requirements of Parliament have been integrated throughout with minimal impact on the significant fabric while also maintaining acoustic privacy.

We believe the redevelopment is an excellent demonstration of how the process outlined in the Burra Charter can help to achieve excellent outcomes in even the most significant context. We consider ourselves privileged to have had the opportunity to play a part in the ongoing life and significance of this important building.

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