

With a World of Heritage So Rich

Lessons from Across the Globe for U.S. Historic Preservation in its Second 50 Years

Collaborative Heritage Advisory Services - a cost effective mechanism for managing heritage at the community level – the Australian Experience

By Elizabeth Vines

Managing change to heritage places and resolving conflict is key to ensuring heritage values are retained. Heritage Advisory networks were first established in Australia (in Victoria) in 1977 and since that time (for 40 years in 2017) have developed across the country. They have proved to be the most cost effective mechanism for managing heritage at the community level.

Background

The first heritage advisory service in Australia was established in the small gold mining town of Maldon in Victoria in 1977, in response to the need to cut “red tape” associated with any development proposal in a newly declared “historic town.” The aim was also to promote the relatively new concept of “heritage conservation” on a more community-based level, following the completion of a Conservation Study for the town that outlined detailed recommendations for its future. This first service was initially modeled on the Heritage Officer position associated with Conservation Areas in the United Kingdom. However, subsequently these services were introduced into New South Wales (NSW) and then expanded throughout the country as a truly Australian initiative.

What are these services and why are they effective?

These services form part of a broader heritage program within the local government area (or council). Generally, councils prepare an over-arching heritage strategy and the advisor has a key role in implementing that strategy. A heritage advisory service provides a consultant heritage specialist (generally a heritage architect) to provide free architectural and general heritage advice to property owners to ensure that conservation of existing heritage buildings and insertion of new buildings in a heritage context are undertaken to an appropriate standard to retain cultural values of the site. Advisors also ensure that the town planning staff administering the relevant planning scheme is kept informed on heritage issues and practice. In some cases, the advisor can also assist with administering a local council heritage grants program and alerting owners to other external sources of grants funding as they become available. Advisors assist local government planners in the assessment of development proposals providing specialist advice.

Advisors can assist heritage property owners in planning alterations, additions and renovations that are sympathetic to the heritage significance of the place. They help avoid potential costly mistakes that compromise the heritage significance of a place and its market value. They understand technical advice from contractors and tradespeople, particularly in cases of conflicting advice.

Heritage education and advocacy are also key parts of their broader brief. Conservation guidelines and a local heritage committee can form part of the program, ensuring local input and

understanding of the character of the buildings in the area. These services reduce the complexity of the approvals process by providing free expert advice, making heritage best practice more accessible to the general public.

Advisors also help facilitate the implementation of recommendations from heritage studies and encourage their preparation where missing. They also assist with the establishment of an orderly collection of heritage resource material, including photographs, to assist local heritage conservation and promotion in association with relevant council departments, libraries and local historical societies.

Sources of funding and new challenges

For the first 20 years, the service expanded nationally and by 1997 most Australian states used these to assist with localised heritage management. At the end of this 20 year period, an evaluation report was commissioned, with Australia-wide workshops held to discuss the effectiveness or otherwise of these services around Australia.ⁱ By that time, services operated in 110 Local Council Areas, with approximately \$1.36 million of annual Government Funding (from Federal, State and Local funding). Since their commencement 20 years earlier, over \$6.1 million in funding had been allocated. The report confirmed *“Throughout Australia there has been unanimous support expressed, by State and Local Governments and the community at large, for Heritage Advisory Services. It was considered that these Services were the most cost effective management tool for Australia’s heritage assets since their progressive introduction across the country. A big endorsement indeed!!*

These services can facilitate applications for other funding sources such as regional arts funding, community development, festivals, tourism funds, and sometimes for projects like restoring a disused railway station for collaborative community projects. Larger funding for regional arts venues, interpretation centres and museums, regional and rural schools, and sports grounds can also be obtained due to the assistance of a heritage expert at the council level to help with grant applications.

Why are these effective?

A (generally) free localised service of professional advice to heritage property owners means that there are efficiencies with the development approval process – and property owners experience greater certainty about what is permitted for their heritage property. Owners are also alerted to external funding opportunities and grant funding facilitates building conservation projects that incrementally improve the built environment.

For the advisors themselves, associated training opportunities can be facilitated by the relevant state heritage agency, improving the skills base of these consultants. There are also facilitated networking activities (such as email chat groups and annual face-to-face meetings) that allow remote service providers (often sole practitioners) to work in a collegiate environment of sharing and knowledge transfer. The cost of these services is based on cost sharing between State and Local Government and a model of fund distribution where a proportion of funding is guaranteed for the first three years only for metropolitan councils, but is ongoing for more needy country councils, has proved an effective model. Metropolitan councils now have generally picked up sole responsibility for the running of these services once established. Budgets can also be scaled, e.g. 1 dollar State government, 3 dollar Local Government or matched where required in hardship cases.

These heritage advisory services have stimulated local economic bases and have positively impacted the economies of country towns with heritage character. Case studies indicate that the provision of free heritage advice has facilitated revitalisation of once depressed towns with historic character, giving the area new focus and direction. The provision of associated financial incentives such as Local Heritage Funds for conservation works has also benefited local communities and in some cases has been quantified as multiplying initial government allocation to these funds by between 11 to 15 times in money spent in the local community. The economic “spin-off” from this State and Federal Government financial investment has been attested to in many country towns. Many locations within Australia have been assisted with this initiative, the local economy boosted and the amenity and liveability of the town considerably improved.

The current and future situation

Since their introduction, the nature of these advisory services has evolved and changed. Given their success, and the reality of reduced external funding (in all states except New South Wales) local authorities have pursued this model with funding from within local government. There is always a concern that there are never sufficient financial resources, but these services do continue to effectively provide assistance at the local level particularly at the early stages of a proposed development, and assist with conflict resolution and promoting the benefits of heritage conservation for the general community.

Scarcer resources have meant that use of technology is relied on more, (such as Google Earth images) and planning permits are emailed and assessments undertaken by advisors remotely on line from anywhere. Completion of assessment reports is now quicker and cheaper than before. The advisor’s role has also broadened to include both tangible and intangible heritage just as heritage management has shifted to include broader aspects of cultural heritage. Essential to the success of these programs is the camaraderie built up through advisory networks where these exist, and the sharing of experience and knowledge has been very effective. The “heritage chat” e-group is considered invaluable and advisors coming together for seminars and training, when provided, are also a motivator for private practitioners to gather and exchange with their professional colleagues. Such initiatives for skills training are not expensive to implement.

Many local councils with heritage assets now employ an advisor to assist with heritage management at the local level. Unfortunately, due to budget cuts (at both the federal and state levels), these services are generally now fully funded at the local government level, except for New South Wales, which is the only state now that actively jointly funds and facilitates these services. However, Heritage Advisory Services have continued to play an important role, and proactively continue to stimulate conservation at the local level.

Can this model apply elsewhere or is it a purely Australian initiative?

This model is considered very applicable to other countries and the United States. There is a lot of resource material on the internet providing examples of how these services are run, and the reporting requirements. This process of localising heritage advice is used extensively in Britain (conservation officer positions) and other European and Asian countries that have heritage offices associated with their significant heritage sites. The Australian system (as still coordinated in NSW but operating at local government levels elsewhere) continues to encourage and facilitate appropriate heritage management outcomes at the local level.



Figures 1 and 2: Before and After. Broken Hill, (New South Wales), has an ongoing advisory service established in 1987. This is a typical example of a corner former hotel building that had the verandah reconstructed to early photo details at the direction of the local heritage advisor. The council has established a successful Verandah Reconstruction Program where an incentive package allows an 80% loan and 20% grant contribution to facilitate new verandah construction in the commercial main streets.



Figure 3: Ballarat (Victoria) has benefited from a Heritage Advisory Service. No longer funded by the state government, free advice can still be obtained from the council who now fully funds this service. Heritage guidelines and a local heritage committee are used to ensure a high standard of conservation projects and compatible new development in the city.

References

The 1997 assessment and evaluation of the services (McDougall & Vines, Heritage Advisory Services: Towards Best Practice – see <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/ahc/publications/commission/books/advisory-services/>) concluded that Heritage Advisory Services were: “The most cost effective funding programs for heritage management in Australia.”

http://www.dtpli.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/219185/Heritage_Advisory_Services_Handbook.pdf

New South Wales Environment and Heritage (Government) website

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/heritagebranch/heritage/funding/guidelines-local-gov-heritage-advisor.pdf>

Heritage Advisory Services Handbook

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/heritagebranch/heritage/HCOANZHHandbook.pdf>

How to establish a Heritage Advisory Service

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/heritagebranch/heritage/infoHeritageAdvisorService.pdf>

http://www.dtpli.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/244864/HERITAGE_ADVISORY_SERVICE_BRIEF_2014_August.pdf

<http://www.dtpli.vic.gov.au/heritage/local-government/heritage-advisors>

General heritage guidelines for advisor services – including framework of annual report preparation.

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/Heritage/publications/>

Funding levels in New South Wales (*existing service – figures provided by the New South Wales Heritage Branch*)

- \$543,450 in Local Government Heritage Advisor grant funding - approved to 90 Councils for use during 2015/16
- \$511,000 in Local Heritage Places grant funding - approved to 79 Councils to run small grants programs during 2015/16



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ⁱ <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/ahc/publications/commission/books/advisory-services/>)