HISTORIC VESSEL PROJECTS

This guideline has been produced to assist individuals and groups who are considering alterations to Historic vessels. It aims to stimulate discussion on what are considered appropriate conservation policies when dealing with original historic fabric. What are the heritage terms used to describe a range of actions including restoration, replicas and reconstructions: how to achieve a “best-practice” outcome.

Surviving heritage vessels are a priceless gift from the past. You have a responsibility as a steward to protect them. While endeavouring to ensure long term survival by continuing the vessel’s memory, use and enjoyment, you have many decisions to make. Decisions can have a really positive effect on the significance and preservation of the item. A successful project can be measured in many ways, including authenticity, retention of original materials, return to working condition and in terms of public appreciation.

Similarly, work on an item can be poorly planned and undertaken, having a detrimental effect on the integrity of the original item in your care. This usually occurs when established heritage conservation guidelines are not followed or planned out.

Understanding these attributes assists in developing respect for them. The Burra Charter, 1979, is an important guiding document that provides guidance on conserving significant places and items. That Charter identifies the need to understand the importance of an item before you can decide how to care for it.

Historic vessels, unique items of Movable Heritage as described by the NSW Heritage Act 1977, retain differing layers of significance. They may have heritage significance, perhaps because the vessel is linked to an important event, person or because they represent a unique or special type.

They can hold archaeological potential by holding specific information on construction, operation and life on board. This can be identified through material evidence of the hull and fittings, but also through relics and organic deposits. Historic vessels can have social value because of links to particular communities or themes, while having aesthetic qualities in terms of form, appearance and enjoyment offered to the spectator. They are well established as having recreational value, the popularity of riverboat festivals and heritage charters demonstrating their popularity and tourism potential. Vessels can be important to a local community, within the State, nationally or unique on the world stage.

Historic vessels may have one of these attributes or a combination of values. It is important that those applicable to your vessel are identified and management decisions made that are not incompatible to retaining those unique qualities.

The Burra Charter identifies the need to “do as much as necessary, but as little as possible”, when altering a heritage site or object. This is an important guiding principle: keeping as much as possible of the original fabric and fittings helps to retain the story and its importance. Keeping detailed records of all work undertaken to an object is equally important in telling the story of change, the reasons for that intervention, and for later interpretation.

The Charter identifies different levels of intervention that might be employed towards an Historic Vessel. These can be
grouped as preservation, restoration and reconstruction. Each has a definite meaning and a different approach, each with its own impact on the heritage significance of the item.

Preservation means maintaining the entire fabric of a place or structure, in its existing state, and retarding deterioration.

Restoration means returning the existing fabric of a place or structure to a known earlier state by reassembling existing components, without the introduction of new materials. This is an important distinction and the term is often used incorrectly (ie: “I have restored this vessel”, even though the work actually involved extensive replacement of original materials - more correctly identified as a reconstruction activity). A restoration process usually describes returning an object back to its original form by removing inappropriate additions, etc.

Reconstruction means returning a place or item as nearly as possible to a known earlier state and is distinguished by the introduction of materials, new or old, into the existing fabric. It is often used to complete missing parts where the form can be deduced from what survives. However, reconstruction carries a great risk of destroying the authenticity of an item. The Burra Charter stresses that reconstruction is not an appropriate action if the majority of original fabric is replaced.

Loss of original fabric, surface appearance, range of associated fixtures and fittings, can all have a major impact on the heritage character and faithfulness of the item.

Preserving the significance of heritage items, like historic vessels, often requires a combination of skills and perspectives. This is not limited to engineering and shipwright skills though these are acknowledged as highly important. Members of the Heritage Council of NSW, the Heritage Office and heritage consultants, have a wide range of experience and expertise in relation to maintaining historic significance, heritage interpretation and archaeology. Over the years, many successful and unfortunately some less than successful projects have been observed.

The purpose of legislation such as NSW Heritage Act 1977, and key guiding documents such as the ICOMOS Burra Charter, is not to prevent initiatives but to ensure that options and alternatives are considered prior to actions that are often irreversible.

Archaeological relics have also been seen as an invaluable resource when it comes to interpreting old or forgotten technologies. Sometimes the archaeological remains, eg a shipwreck site, are the only source of information on how something looked, worked and was made. In periods supported by written and other records, the archaeological remains corroborate what was being recorded, and provide new insights. Shipwreck sites, including abandoned vessels, have often been regarded as important because of these reasons. While working vessels of various types might have been plentiful during past eras, today they can represent one of only a few known examples, or the best preserved of those examples. They are also important for their historic links to individuals, places and events. Because of these heritage ties, shipwrecks have sometimes been seen as an appropriate source for restoration and replica projects.

In some cases, shipwreck sites, even though protected as Historic Shipwrecks under the Heritage Act 1977, have been illegally recovered from their in situ location and ‘restored’. In most cases, the work is undertaken with little understanding of basic conservation principles, as exposed in the ICOMOS Burra Charter. The extensive deterioration of archaeological sites usually means that the wreck is totally and irreversibly altered.
When attempts are made to transform these fragile remains to working original order, most of the original fabric is often replaced with new. The significance of the site is irreversibly lost, the amount of material discarded often not recorded, or the new materials added unsympathetic to the original in composition, method of manufacture or fastening. These projects are often contrary to established conservation principles.

While the finished product might be functional and true to original form, the uniqueness of the original material and the information that it contained is lost. The result is a reconstruction. The vessel cannot be said to be the original any more, and the loss of the original is irreplaceable. In these instances, it would have been far more appropriate to record the physical details of the original wreck site, leave it intact and undisturbed, and to build a replica true to the archaeological data obtained. In this case, the original is retained for interpretation and research, while the replica can be used to promote the history of the vessel and the era.

Further reading:
Australia ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance (the Burra Charter). 1979


Grandfather’s Axe
Finding and ‘restoring’ obsolete vehicles, aircraft, trucks, railway engines and ships has been an inspiration for enthusiasts for many years. Rebuilding the rusting, overgrown FJ Holden lying a back paddock, the old stream engine abandoned on a disused piece of railway track, the old steamer once again proudly sounding off its steam whistle as it slices through the harbour waters it once new so well. It is the stuff of romance. The old restored to new. Rebirth. New beginnings. A legend lives on. Or is it all simply a myth?

Grandfather’s axe’ is a much used but relevant analogy to ‘restoration’. The same axe handed down from generation to generation. The broken handle replaced. The head eventually discarded when it became so worn as to be ineffective - but it still cuts timber as cleanly as the day Grandfather bought it! Bought what? The handle? No. The Head? No. This is not Grandfather’s axe.

It is good to have an axe that works. It is great to keep Grandfather’s memory alive. It would be appropriate if the new axe was the same shape as Grandfather’s so that we know just what sort of axe he used. But to claim that it is still Grandfather’s axe is to create and perpetuate a myth.

By keeping the broken handle and the worn out head, we and future generations can maintain knowledge of the actual timber and metal that Grandfather held. Displayed in pride of place, it provides a great backdrop to the shining new axe, modelled on the old, and fulfilling today’s needs. Grandfather’s legendary axe lives on and the wood still gets chopped. The outcome is greater enhancement for both the replica and the original item.

To some extent the decision to restore or to replicate is dependent on the extent of the surviving remains and the level of documentation that exists. If the old FJ in the paddock consists of no more than a half of a very rusted chassis – no wheels, no engine, no body, no decoration, then ‘restoration’ could be fairly impractical and pointless. Even so, it might still be technically possible, given the wealth of documentation (plans, specifications, etc) that exist for such vehicles. If it is substantially intact, missing a few decorations, hub caps and upholstery then restoring the car to working order may be a much more valid option.