

## COMMUNITY IDENTITY AND EVERYDAY HERITAGE

*Notes for a talk by Brian Samuels, Principal Heritage Officer, Heritage Branch, Department for Environment and Heritage, at the 17<sup>th</sup> State History Conference, Changing Places: Changing Lives, organised by the History Trust of South Australia 1-3 August 2008. The views expressed in this document are his own and should not be read as representing the views of his employer.*

### Purpose

- To elucidate the meaning of the word 'community' and then focus on one aspect of community, locality-based community, and its interrelationship with heritage.

### Defining 'community'

- I like to define 'community' as being where you feel a sense of belonging.
- You can find it at home, at work, at play, with family, with friends, and through membership of organizations such as sporting or special interest or service groups.
- It can be local, regional or extend nationally or internationally, and be maintained by face-to-face contact or letters, phone calls, emails or other electronic forms of communication.

### Local communities

- In other words, the sense of belonging that you may or may not feel about the locality you live in is just one form of community.
- Given that a sense of belonging can be found in several places, the tendency to focus on a romanticized 'community' as something found in small areas where 'everyone knows everyone else' can often lead to confused discussion.
- When you stop to think about it, it's obvious that even in smaller settlements there is not one community but lots of smaller communities, albeit with some overlapping memberships.
- Nevertheless, the common use of the term 'local community' or referring to someone as being a 'local identity' are evidence of this tendency to want to keep alive the idea of a single local community of interest.

### Local identity

- I'll now focus on that type of community which for convenience's sake we call 'local community'.
- A feeling of belonging to your locality in part derives from the local relationships that you have.
- These relationships can in turn relate to your use or membership of local 'institutions' – libraries, shops, sporting and recreational clubs, service organisations and churches.
- A feeling of belonging can also derive from local landmarks – familiar features of the local area that 'have always been there' – for example older hotels, prominent buildings, parks and reserves, tree-lined streets and character homes.

### Protecting built heritage

- Heritage listing is only part of the answer and has its limitations
- We need to acknowledge what heritage listing can't do. For example, it can't sustain businesses that are no longer viable. Nor is it always very effective in addressing the preservation of industrial complexes.
- There is also the issue of the heritage listing of individual buildings leaving the remainder vulnerable, which is why precinct-level protection – State Heritage Areas, Historic (Conservation) Zones and Historic Policy Areas, which are all created under the provisions of the Development Act – is needed.

- They in turn need to be supplemented by character protection, which is also best addressed through the planning system
- Another need is for people to be pro-active about identifying 'threatened species' of buildings and finding new uses that are a good fit with their heritage significance. For example, without an appropriate new use some of the State's very significant heritage interiors may well lose much of their value. A current example is Foster's Emporium, an old style store in Quorn with well preserved counters and a 'flying fox' money system, which has been vacant for a considerable time. Working at the local level may give the best chance of success through being able to tap into local networks of people who collectively can deliver a solution.

### Protecting everyday heritage

- Is typically taken for granted because you grow up with it, and familiarity can breed contempt.
- The generation moving into middle age may often look back and regret the major changes that have occurred, but feel powerless to stop them – for example, the decline of SA country towns that has been occurring since the Second World War; the decline of corner stores in the metropolitan area as car ownership increased and large regional shopping centres were created; the loss of country rail passenger services.
- The succeeding generation doesn't miss what it hasn't experienced.
- The challenge lies in deciding what it is both desirable *and* feasible to retain. That in turn depends on the resources you can muster, the lateral thinking you can engage in, and where you take your stand on the continuum between 'development at all costs' at one extreme and 'save everything' at the other.

### The value of history

- To gain the greatest benefit from living in a locality you need to consciously seek out what's there – the natural and man-made resources and the considerable variety of organizations that most communities develop. Conducting a 'community audit' has been the common terminology in recent years.
- Seeking out the added dimension that *history* provides helps you to understand how that present environment came to be as it is.
- Furthermore, it's only through developing an intimate knowledge of how your locality came to be as it is that can you fully appreciate which of its current features should be retained for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations.
- An added benefit is that to save things you often need to band together with others, which is always a good way to learn more about both yourself and the others. 'If you don't stand for something you fall for anything' as a desk calendar once told me.
- So researching history and saving heritage places and character are not activities off to one side, but are a fundamental aspect of sustaining a sense of community in a world which might just happen to need it more urgently than some might have thought. Another way of approaching the matter is to ask yourself, if I don't engage with my local community, who will?

Speaking at a UNESCO seminar entitled 'Man and Landscape' held in Canberra in 1974, art historian Bernard Smith expressed it more profoundly than I have when he observed that:

*Psychologists tell us that we do not see that which we do not know. It follows therefore that in order to perceive our own environment as an historical and contemporary reality, we need much more exact knowledge about it. And since we are in part moulded by our environments, a knowledge of one's environment is an aspect of self-knowledge; and conversely an incapacity to perceive one's environment becomes an incapacity to perceive an aspect of personal being.*

*So that these matters should not be thought of merely as pleasant ways of filling in leisure time, for those who possess leisure time. No matter how active people are, how wide their obligations to their businesses, their professions, their trades and callings, they should be encouraged to give a tithe of their personal time towards improving the quality of life in their own communities. This is a question of no small importance. For the daily activities of many highly important and very busy people frequently involve them in the spoliation and destruction of communities wherein they themselves do not live. This may help to explain their relative lack of interest in their own communities. But we all have to live somewhere. A better understanding of our own neighbourhoods may possibly help us to respect or at least not destroy those of others. - B Smith 'On Perceiving the Australian Suburb' in B Smith *The Antipodean Manifesto* (OUP, Melbourne, 1976), p 94.*

### **A reality check - acknowledge the impact of societal trends on your community**

- The information overload that we live with today can make people feel overwhelmed and powerless.
- Whatever its positive features, the mass media can also serve to trivialise life and drain emotional energy that might once have been better directed to addressing local issues.
- Overall trends in society such as both partners working, people marrying later and being caught in the middle of demands from teenagers and ageing parents, high rates of divorce, the extension of retail trading hours and the casualisation of the workforce - to name just some - can all impact on how much time people have to get involved in local affairs.
- The extent to which it's possible for people to both live and work in the same locality also affects how connected they feel to it and the extent of their networks through which they can exert influence.

### **Some positive trends**

- On the narrow historical and heritage front, there are some well established positive trends. Historical walk brochures, interpretive signage and local history collections in libraries are continuing to proliferate, while local histories are appearing more frequently than they once did, as are smaller booklets on more specialized topics. A few days holidaying in Quorn last month introduced me to the substantial histories produced for Quorn and Hawker's 125<sup>th</sup> anniversaries. Such histories are very useful, not least because if local histories are to serve as a tool for understanding how communities have evolved, it's really important that we don't wait 50 or 100 years to update them. My time in Quorn also reacquainted me with the impressive achievements of the Pichi Richi Railway Preservation Society, a fine example of living heritage and, like the work of many other transport history societies, an extraordinary testament to what volunteers can accomplish.
- More broadly, the State's network of Visitor Information Centres, another field where volunteers make a significant contribution, now provides a very good basis for visitors to discover an area's attractions and heritage, as do the many walking and cycling trails that have and are being developed.
- On a more sobering note, the current difficulties that rural communities in particular are experiencing as a result of the drought, climate change and poor water management by the powers that be, may also serve to weld local communities together, as crises often do.

## In conclusion

- In *A Christmas Carol* Charles Dickens has Scrooge say: 'I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach'.
- We need to study **the past** to fully understand what's important in our communities. We need to audit the **present resources** of our communities and manage, conserve and interpret some of them for the benefit of both present and future generations. We need to plan for **the future** by engaging with others, so that we can lift our sights beyond the problems of the present and find hope and encouragement in what might be achieved in the future. But, I hasten to add, this must not be a form of escapism – grand visions which are not grounded in reality.
- At any point in time life is a mixture of continuity and change. It may be that the best plans are often evolutionary rather than revolutionary – combining a close analysis of what is with a clearly articulated vision of how to get to a desired future state.
- And, as I have written elsewhere, one of the advantages of working at the local level is that you have a better chance of adopting the holistic approach that is needed to produce plans of real merit. In concluding my article '30 Years of Heritage Acts – Where to Now?' in the *Heritage South Australia Newsletter* of March 2008 I wrote:

*The last 30 years have seen commitment to and interest in heritage conservation grow steadily. The challenge is to demonstrate its value to a broader audience. Much as it suits us for some purposes to break up the world into separate compartments – the environment, the economy, private life, working life, and so on – our commonsense tells us that they are all inter-related. Choosing to engage with issues at the local level is a good way to experience the fundamental importance of a holistic approach.*

- Rather than some of our opinion-makers endlessly engaging in ultimately unproductive public debate that revolve around false dichotomies – forward-looking v/ backward-looking; growth v/ stagnation – we need them to admit that all change is not progress, that our lives are a mixture of continuity and change, and that the challenge is to find the right balance between the two.
- Irish American master musician Martin Hayes has some insightful things to say on this issue, and I also used this quote in my *Heritage South Australia Newsletter* article. He is talking about music, but his insights apply equally to society as a whole.

*In Irish music today there is much debate and division on the issues of continuity versus change and tradition versus innovation. I think it is a mistake to divide these issues as the music is capable of containing all of these parts at once. The real battle is between artistic integrity and the forces that impede creative expression. Traditional Irish music has always experienced change and been enriched by innovation, while at the same time maintaining continuity. The issue that is of utmost importance is that innovation, change, tradition and continuity all be tempered by integrity, humility and understanding. (From the liner for his compact disc *The Lonesome Touch* - downloaded from <http://www.martinhayes.com/music.htm>)*

- Finally, while considering the future, the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formal European settlement of South Australia is not far away. So far there has not been much sign of any major State Government initiatives. With less than two and a half years before the commencement of the terquasquicentennial year, perhaps it's time for the voluntary history movement to take the lead and join with local government to develop worthwhile ways of acknowledging the milestone in local communities across the State.