

MANAGING (CHANGE IN) THE BUILT CULTURAL HERITAGE

Derek Worthing BSc., M.Phil, MRICS

Principal Lecturer
School of Land and Property Management
Faculty of the Built Environment
University of the West of England, Bristol
Frenchay Campus
Coldharbour Lane
Bristol BS16 1QY
Tel 00 44 (0)117-344-3029 Fax 00 44 (0)117-976-3895
E-mail- Derek.Worthing@uwe.ac.uk

Karen Gwilliams. B.A, (Hons)B.Sc. (Hons).

C/o School of Land and Property Management
Faculty of the Built Environment
University of the West of England, Bristol
Frenchay Campus
Coldharbour Lane
Bristol BS16 1QY

ABSTRACT

In recent years the issue of the relationship between built cultural heritage and sustainable development has reinforced the need for a conceptual and practical approach to conservation planning which is both more integrated and more accepting of the need for the effective management of change. One component of the response to this challenge has been the development and promotion of the value of conservation plans. The drivers for the development of conservation include the desire of English Heritage to promote a model which will help achieve its goals of a more holistic integrated and participatory approach to caring for the built cultural heritage.

The main purpose of a conservation plan is to identify "Significance and Vulnerability." Conservation Plans are usually considered to be the precursors to more detailed management/ action plans.

This paper will review the emergence of the idea of conservation plans in the UK including the influence of ideas and approaches developed in Australia. It will consider why and how the idea has been developed in the UK and discuss some initial perceptions of the worth of conservation plans.

BACKGROUND.

In an address to the first Northern European Regional Conference of the Organisation of World Heritage Cities in 1988, Pam Alexander, the then Chief Executive of English Heritage stated that "... it is clear that the management of change in our cities is one of the most important political and intellectual challenges facing us at the end of the 20th Century". She went on to suggest that managing the historic environment of cities - their cultural landscape – necessarily forms part of this wider debate and that this management "has to be done with great sensitivity, and in a sustainable way, to meet today's needs without compromising the ability of

future generations to meet theirs. This will only be possible with widespread support and understanding.” She observed that legislation alone, even with funding to support it, would not be sufficient. What must come first, and is more powerful, is a shared understanding of what is interesting or important about a city, what gives it its identity. She went on to emphasise the importance of Management Plans for all World Heritage Sites as a means of reconciling differences and resolving future policies on a basis of partnership, but observed that “Plans were not an outcome in themselves but part of an overall process, requiring implementation by partners to be effective. In essence they were about the management of change in a sustainable way”

Although Pam Alexander was talking specifically about World Cultural Heritage Cities and sites, the acknowledgement that conservation of the built cultural heritage is about managing change, and that this can be achieved in part by “management plans,” has been the focus of much discussion, and some action, in the UK, in recent years.

In part the development of Conservation Plans is an acknowledgement that heritage, or at least the majority of it, cannot and perhaps should not be preserved untouched. In reality conservationists have long recognised this, (and the associated issue of trying to integrate heritage into the wider dynamics of urban evolution), both from a pragmatic viewpoint but more importantly from a philosophical perspective: the term conservation can be seen to as an holistic concept which implies identifying what is culturally important about a place and protecting those values whilst allowing the place to change and evolve i.e. conservation is a dynamic rather than static process - it is about managing change, albeit in the context of “do as little as possible, as much as necessary” (Australia ICOMOS1979). Indeed an English Heritage discussion document (English Heritage 1997) explored the possibility of conceiving the built cultural heritage as consisting of:

critical environmental capital – those elements of the historic environment that “are sacrosanct, and which we expect to be able to pass on virtually unchanged to our successors.

tradable environmental capital - those elements of the historic environment “ which society may have to be prepared to sacrifice in return for adequate benefits of other kinds”

constant environmental capital - (the majority of the built cultural heritage) where “ some changes may be sustainable if the overall character of the environment is unchanged.

The Management Guidelines for World Cultural Heritage Sites (Feilden and Jokilhto, 1993.) reflects this idea that the evidence of change and evolution is part of the value of historic sites in its reference to an ‘Historical Time Line’

It suggests that the relationship of a ‘heritage resource’ to time and history may be broken down into three phases:

- the first phase which resulted in the creation of the object;

- the second phase which extends from the end of the creation phase to the present time
- the third phase which is associated with the perception of the monument in our consciousness at the present time.

According to the guidelines 'The time line is irreversible....being the product of the specific cultural, social, economic and political conditions of the phases that contributed to its creation and evolution'. The guidelines also raise the related concepts of original and authentic by observing that:

"Generally speaking authenticity is ascribed to a heritage resource that is materially original (i.e. as it was constructed) and as it has aged and changed over timeThe contribution of all periods to the place must be respected. If a place includes the fabric of different periods, revealing the fabric of one period at the expense of another can only be justified when what is removed is of slight cultural significance, and the fabric which is to be revealed is of much greater cultural significance".

Of course one of the issues that has to be acknowledged is the extent to which recent or current change and evolution is considered to be, potentially, of equal value as changes that occurred in the 'distant' past.

In theory the statutory framework in the UK reflects this sense that cultural heritage will change and evolve. The listing system is intended to provoke a consideration of the consequences of any proposed change rather than prevent it. The purpose of listing is to provide "protection from unsuitable and insensitive alteration." (Department of the Environment and Department of National Heritage 1994). However it is probably true that many see the system as one which seeks to "fossilise" a building and prevent all change, irrespective of any benefits that such change might bring. The references in PPG 15. (Department of the Environment and Department of National Heritage 1994.) to preservation, as against conservation, only serve to reinforce this impression.

Instead of a dynamic system which evolves with increasing knowledge about historic places, designation is seen as static and resistant to change. (Carman,1996) argues that the process of designating assumes that the historical resource in question is already wholly understood, and so an evaluation process develops which cannot cope easily with changes in understanding of a known historic resource, or the identification, or creation, of new types of resource. It is even seen as necessary that the process does not change, in order that common principles are applied over an extended period of time. This conflicts with the view that historical material does not have a single meaning, nor a single kind of value; it is a subjective process dictated by the context, the point in time and the person evaluating the resource (Carman, 1996). Another issue is raised by Cherry (Cherry 1993) who sees a particular problem with listing for 'historic interest', as "every historic building needs to be set in context in order for it to be fully appreciated or understood", the implication being that listing will fail to protect the historic place in its entirety. Listing is thus seen to offer no assessment of the context of the building:

“buildings were looked at in isolation as if they were museum artefacts. The context was not fully realised and now, when the context is more fully appreciated, the law of listing does not allow us to fulfil the potential” (Cherry, 1993).

It has also been observed that systems of designation have not been sufficiently accountable or democratic. With the exception of the English Heritage campaign to win the public over to post-war architecture (English Heritage, 1995), little is published outside professional circles to explain or justify designation:

“too often ... arguments for the social, psychological and aesthetic significance of the conserved townscape are taken for granted and rarely addressed in any explicit manner, and the actual grounds for listing buildings remain unclear” (Hubbard, 1993).

Shanks and Tilley also identify a lack of democracy. As they see it, professionals exert control over the past by identifying what is worth preserving or excavating; the non-professional is simply required as consumer and ‘the effect is to deny people their active participation in history’ (Shanks and Tilley, 1992). They believe that a feeling of alienation and dispossession is the result. Tunbridge and Ashworth also see the role of the professional as problematic. Professionals are seen as a ‘sensitive minority of custodians’ or ‘self-chosen arbiters of public taste’ who are ‘decreasingly representative of an increasingly pluriform public taste’ (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996).

If the view is taken that historic places are an inheritance from our predecessors, the possibility of disinheritance emerges. As Tunbridge and Ashworth note, selecting any heritage for presentation to the public carries the risk of ‘disinherit[ing] non-participating social, ethnic or regional groups, as their distinctive historical experiences may be discounted, marginalised, distorted or ignored’ (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). This of course is to some extent an inbuilt problem with selectivity: some pasts are not selected and even when they are, their interpretation, and therefore their perceived value or significance, can be elitist.

It has been acknowledged that, although designation can only take account of the importance of a place at a national cultural level, a historic place has equal meaning to a group or individual:

‘the meaning of architecture and architectural styles is in the person and their interpretative mechanisms rather than being intrinsic to a set of physical characteristics’ (Hubbard, 1993)

but the subjective response to a place is beyond the capacity of systems of designation to accommodate (Shanks and Tilley, 1992).

There has been a growing acknowledgement that

‘heritage did not exist in a fixed and once-and-for-all endowed quantity that could theoretically be included in a comprehensive inventory, but was infinitely creatable in response to demands and expectations’ (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996)

and that systems of designation, whilst they may select historic sites for protection, do not assist owners or managers to manage change at the site or distribute resources between competing needs:

‘neither listing nor scheduling provides an owner or manager (or anybody else with a locus in the process) with much detailed information on what kind of merit different parts of a building or structure might be considered to have’ (Keystone Historic Buildings Consultants, 1999).

It can be suggested that there is now a growing acknowledgement that Inventory systems of designation can be seen as static, elitist, and undemocratic, placing no value on the context in which the historic resource is found and devaluing the ordinary and the local.

THE RISE OF CONSERVATION PLANS.

The emphasis on managing change in the built cultural heritage has been given stronger emphasis in recent years by various documents. For example: ‘Power of Place’, the recent document produced by the Historic Environment Review Steering Group (English Heritage, 2000), stated that:

“Like people places have to evolve react and grow. We must balance the need to care for the historic environment with the need for change. But to succeed our approach to the conservation of the historic environment must stop being piecemeal....As in the natural environment the overall health of the habitat is as important as that of individual species”

There has also recently been a greater emphasis on the need to understand (and debate) why particular places are important and also to seek the greater involvement of a range of stakeholders in such discussions and the decisions that follow from them. As *Power of Place* states:

“Decisions about the future of the historic environment largely rest upon value judgements. These decisions must be consistent, transparent and never arbitrary. They need to be widely accepted. This means that they need to be understood. They must be made openly tested and refined by continuing debate. This debate must not be exclusive; everyone should be able to participate easily.....We need to understand better the character of places and the value and significance people ascribe to them.”

In part this emphasis on wider participation in decision making about the built cultural heritage was reinforced by the discussions about the relationship between built

cultural heritage and sustainable development. The discussion document “Sustaining the historic environment: new perspectives on the future (English Heritage, 1997) stated: “Sustainability for the historic environment therefore depends on taking a comprehensive and integrated view of the environment and accepting that the values ascribed to the historic environment include personal perspectives and perceptions. One of its central aims is therefore to take account of who makes the value judgements involved: experts, local residents, politicians or business people “.

Conservation plans are being encouraged because they are seen as a coherent management tool, which could help to achieve the objectives of integrated decision making (both horizontally and vertically) and wider participation and understanding. Power of Place (English Heritage, 2000), recommends that the Heritage sector “should continue to develop conservation and management plans as a methodology for evaluating significance and identifying opportunities and constraints.” Also “The Historic Environment: A Force for Our Future” (DCMS, 2002), a recent document from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, refers to the role of management agreements and conservation plans in assessing significance, deciding how to integrate changes and considering long term maintenance and management.

WHAT ARE CONSERVATION PLANS?

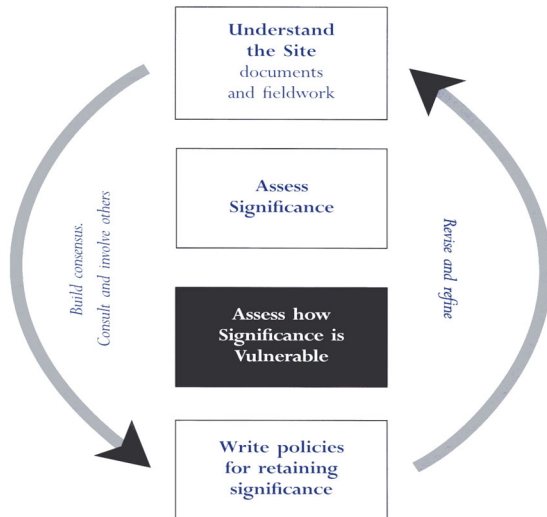
“Conservation is about the care and continuing development of a place in such a way that its significance is retained or revealed and its future made secure’ (Semple Kerr, 2000).

A Conservation Plan “identifies what is significant about a site and how that significance will be retained in any future use, alteration, development or management” (Clark, K .1999). Semple Kerr suggests that “ It is a process that seeks to guide the future development of a place through an understanding of its significance. The objective is to evolve policies to guide work that are feasible as well as compatible with the retention, reinforcement, and even revelation of significance. These twin concepts of compatibility and feasibility are the bases on which the policies are built.” (Semple Kerr, J. 1999). The Document “Conservation Plans for Historic Places” (Heritage Lottery Fund 1998) states that “A conservation plan focuses on the significance of a heritage asset and which policies need to be in place to retain this. It is part of the process of understanding the asset at the outset”.

The document goes on to suggest that they are particularly relevant for:

- places of exceptional heritage merit
- places in split ownership
- places with more than one type of heritage major monuments and their settings (e.g. cathedrals)
- large complex objects such as ships
- historic sites with associated collections

The Conservation Plan Process



(Heritage Lottery Fund 1998)

The Conservation Plan process begins with understanding the site and moves logically through an assessment of significance, to understanding how that significance might be vulnerable and thus what policies or guidelines are needed to retain that significance. (Clark,K. 1999)

Conservation plans then are based on the rather obvious truism that in order to manage an historic building or site you first have to know what it is that is important about 'the place.' It is clear that the simple concept behind conservation plans masks a potentially powerful management tool. The use of conservation plans, at least in an explicit way, are a relatively recent phenomenon in the UK. In part their rise can be seen as a response to the need to manage change in historic sites and buildings but the Heritage Lottery Fund has also had a significant influence (albeit in connection with a limited range of sites) because it requires the production of a conservation plan for some funding bids.

According to the Heritage Lottery Fund guidance (Heritage Lottery Fund 1998) a Conservation Plan is a document that explains:

- why the asset is significant or has heritage merit
- how that significance is vulnerable or sensitive to change
- what policies you will adopt for retaining that significance in any future use or development.

The production of a Conservation Plan is usually seen as the precursor to action, in the form of perhaps a management plan. Clarke (Clarke, K. 1999) asserts that “Once a conservation plan is in place specific strategies or actions can follow.....The Conservation Plan can be the first stage of a management Plan but not vice versa.” The Heritage Lottery Fund guidance reinforces this by stating that a Conservation Plan is the first step in:

- preparing management proposals
- planning any major repair or restoration schemes
- planning any new development
- managing a programme of regular maintenance

THE EMERGING IDEA

The basic idea of conservation plans is not new and certainly in Australia for example they have been developed and applied for some time now. This is perhaps not surprising given that it is possible to see the basic ideas of a conservation plan (identifying significance and vulnerability) embedded in The Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS 1998) a document that was produced in 1979 and stimulated by a need to produce “ an Australian version of the Venice Charter- the Venice Charter being a Eurocentric document more applicable to ancient monuments than antipodean structures” (Semple Kerr, J.1995). Burra was perhaps the first charter to articulate a coherent management approach to the care of the historic environment and is, according to Burman, “the most useful document a practical architectural conservator can have in his (*sic*) hand” (Burman,P. 1997). Burra, in comparison to say the Venice Charter, refers to place rather than buildings and highlights the overarching need to establish cultural significance. It also attempts to set out a methodology for managing sites in the way that it concentrates on setting out principles and suggesting a logical order of work. The charter embodies some key ideas that can be seen to have influenced the way that conservation plans have developed. An example of this can be seen in its insistence that the place itself is important and there is a need to understand the significance of the place and that significance should guide decisions:

“cultural significance means aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value for past, present or future generations..... the cultural significance of a place is embodied in its fabric, its setting and its contents; in the associated documents; in its use; and in people’s memory and association with the place.....the cultural significance of a place, and other issues affecting its future, are best understood by a methodical process of collecting and analysing information before making decisions.....
(Australia ICOMOS 1998).

There is also an implicit link between the thinking behind conservation plans and some of the discussion documents that emerged in the late 1990s on the link between sustainable development and the conservation of the built cultural heritage. Some of this work (in, for example, ‘Sustaining the Historic Environment’ (English Heritage 1997) drew on ideas from the natural environment (see for example ‘What Matters and Why’ (Environment Agency 1997). We can see, for example, the ideas

of environmental capital and environmental capacity being recontextualised in relation to the built cultural heritage. There is also a growing recognition that much can be learnt from the way environmental Impact assessments have been used (Clark, K. 2001).

REFLECTIONS ON THE VALUE OF CONSERVATION PLANS- AND SOME CONCERNS.

Conservation Plans have come to be seen by some as essential in situations where major development is being considered, as Cox identified in the brief for a plan:

‘successful redevelopment means ensuring that elements of opportunity and constraint arising from the importance and character of the site are clearly understood at an early stage, [and] can be readily communicated to all interested parties and implemented ...The conservation plan will be the key document in the process’ (Cox, J.2000).

A proactive approach has been adopted at English Heritage (in relation to sites which they manage), where sites facing development or some other form of threat have been identified as requiring a conservation plan (Steene, 2000, pers.comm.¹). Where appropriate, Semple Kerr advocates using a scaled down version of a plan as a ‘rescue operation’ to prevent an adverse outcome. However Clark (Clark, K. 2001) comments that there is a degree of risk in making major decisions based only on a conservation statement.

Other uses of Conservation Plans include the assessment of complex sites with more than one type of heritage; sites in multiple ownership; where major works are being contemplated or where there is a history of many small applications for consent (Clark, K. 2000).

Comparison has been made between conservation plans and other forms of assessment and management, such as management plans, conservation area appraisals and local plan policies, in so far as some attempt is made in each of these to identify the significance of a place. The difference is seen to be one of process and emphasis (Clark, K. 1998). A logical progression is followed from understanding the place, and expressing its significance, to a formulation of policies to retain that significance; the emphasis throughout is on understanding the site and translating this into policy. It is the process, the intellectual exercise, which is seen to confer benefit on the place and its stakeholders:

‘The value of conservation plans lies not in their format, or even in their content, but in the process they oblige us to go through, a process with value for everyone involved in the practical management of the historic environment’ (West, J.1999).

¹ Interview with Tim Steene Of English Heritage , South West Region.

Conservation plans have been identified as part of a trend towards 'increasing emphasis on the management of the historic environment as a whole, exemplified by countryside *characterisation* rather than classification and grading' (Drury, 1999), and their place can thus be seen alongside statutory systems in promoting positive change at individual sites. According to Suhr, conservation plans produce 'a holistic approach to conservation that statutory designation has for so long oppressed by failing to recognise context' (Suhr, 1998).

The process should be an open one, with participants required to be accountable: "they make managers be explicit, transparent and open about their assumptions. They make those assumptions available to be tested" (West, J. 1999). As a consultative exercise, a conservation plan can bring groups with conflicting interests together to achieve a consensus (Semple Kerr, J. 1999). In the end, a holistic view of the site is developed which encompasses a variety of disciplines: archaeology, architectural history, landscape history, ecology, science and technology and the social perspective (Clark, K. 1998).

A further benefit of the process is seen to be the facility to incorporate both tangible and intangible elements of importance: "it also allows us to take into account the atmosphere of the place" (Clark, K. 1999).

Some concerns

An increasing level of standardisation, in both briefing and the plan itself, is seen by some as one of the principal obstacles to the full expression of the unique nature of the site and the values that it represents. The flexibility of the methodology is thus compromised. The conservation plan has been described as a 'one stop shop' for the Heritage Lottery Fund, with the model brief and template for a plan introducing a level of standardisation which has been criticised. As Semple Kerr sees it:

"the type of place, needs of owners, range of problems encountered and skills available all mean that the scope and approach must be flexible if the contents are to be both useful and succinct" (Semple Kerr, 2000).

The potential dangers of over-standardisation can be seen to include the possibility that policies are developed that are generalised and ineffectual (Brooks, 1995).

Other issues have been raised concerning the extent to which a conservation plan can express the range of values which a historic place holds for stakeholders, and produce policies, which respect those values. For the most part these relate to how the plan is produced and to what extent issues of sustainability, including stakeholder involvement, are addressed in the process and the plan.

Even before an assessment of significance is made, the process of trying to understand the site can present problems. It is essential that sufficient time be allocated for understanding before any assessment of significance is made. As Steene (2000, pers.comm².) observed, in relation to a conservation plan he

² *ibid*

commissioned for an English Heritage site, simply understanding the site took three people six months. Problems associated with understanding the place can include an overemphasis on one aspect of the site, a lack of attention to chronology or a presentation which is poorly illustrated (Clark, K.2000). Historic sites in Britain will very often will be 'old, deep and well documented' (Clark, K.2000) necessitating a lengthier process and greater consultation than is the case at the Australian sites on which Semple Kerr developed his ideas about conservation plans.

Views differ on whether a team or individual effort produces the best results in a conservation plan. Semple Kerr (Semple Kerr, J. 1999) believes that "the more disciplines and people involved, the more difficult it is to evolve a coherent product", resulting in a fragmented view of the place. In the UK, however, a team-based, project management approach is often adopted (Wood, 1999) based on the assumption that the more viewpoints included, the more objective the end result (Drury, 1999).

At its best, the process should be 'a creative integration of efforts and skills by both client and practitioner' (Warr, 1995). Clark has said that an outside consultant is often essential to 'cast a fresh eye over the site' (Clark, K.1998). This has been questioned by Emerick, however, who observes that conservation plans "have become tainted in some quarters because they have been perceived as a developer's charter, nearly always written from the outside looking in". (Emerick, K. 1998)

The process of briefing a consultant might introduce constraints through being too prescriptive:

'the brief should ... describe the scope and intensity of the work but not ... the structure, criteria and hierarchies of significance which will finally be used in the report' (Semple Kerr, 1995)

or too general:

'It is no longer appropriate for heritage authorities, property owners or project managers to call for a conservation plan to be prepared in accordance with the *Conservation Plan* and *The Burra Charter*. Briefs must be more specific, to identify the circumstances of the case, the issues to be addressed and the extent of detail which must be covered' (Brooks, 1995).

Several authors have suggested that the use of a plan to support an existing scheme will place an unwarranted constraint on the expression of significance and the resulting policies (Clark, 1998, Warr, 1995). Semple Kerr suggests that significance should be assessed 'away from extraneous pressures and without regard to those practical requirements, which must subsequently be taken into account when developing policies'. He recommends a two-stage process for this very reason, separating the evaluation of significance from the development of policies. (Semple Kerr, J 2000). Warr (Warr, A.1995) also suggests that a plan should be allowed to 'evolve in an independent manner'.

However, it is recognised that financial and commercial pressures will prevail, and the majority of plans are triggered by a proposal for change. Suhr (Suhr, M. 1998) argues that, so long as the process is regarded as iterative, with a mechanism for review built in, then the integrity of the plan will not be compromised by pre-existing proposals. Clark (Clark,K. 2000) suggests that, if a scheme has already been put forward, it is essential to stand back from the process, to let the scheme influence the scope of the plan but not the policies, and to carry out an impact assessment on the scheme once the plan is completed.

The degree of sustainability inherent in the process is also an area of concern. In the context of a conservation plan, the key issues involved are whether the process:

- takes a long term view
- Looks at the place as a whole
- Achieves sufficient public involvement
- Decides which elements of the place are important at various levels
- Avoids permanent damage to the historic place
- Obtains the best possible information to inform decisions, and adopts caution where there is insufficient information

(adapted from Fairclough, G.1999:)

The need to produce a 'long term commitment to the stewardship of the site' has been noted (Drury, P.1999). A conservation plan can be seen to contribute to a sustainable historic environment in so far as it achieves an:

'understanding and appreciation of the historic environment and its values ...[which identifies] the present and likely future forces for change affecting the resource' (English Heritage, 1997).

thus the identification of the vulnerability of elements of the site can contribute to a sustainable process.

The holistic approach to a place within a conservation plan is identified as another aspect of sustainability and both natural and built heritage concerns should be incorporated (Clark, K. 1998).

There are conflicting views regarding the participation of the wider community in the development of a plan. Where a conservation plan balances the inherent significance of the place with its significance – cultural, aesthetic, economic etc – for all stakeholders, then sustainable policies are likely to ensue. As Fairclough (1999) notes, the needs and understanding of the community should be regarded as at least as important as the resource itself. The National Trust have admitted that this has not always happened in practice:

'it [the National Trust] has placed particular emphasis on surveys which reflect specialist views of archaeologists, nature conservationists, architectural historians. It has tended to place less emphasis on local people's judgements of what is significant and must now consider how to restore the balance' (National Trust, 1995).

Warr (1995) believes that a plan 'can be a good tool for involving the community in the development and protection of heritage property', but this is not seen as one of our strengths in the UK, as another delegate to the Oxford Seminar observed:

"the North Americans are amazed by the strength of our legislative provision, but appalled by our inability to find and draw in members of the public with any kind of community vision" (Clark, K. (1999).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A conservation plan can be seen to be a rigorous approach to understanding of place and the identification of significance, although subject to constraints introduced both by the process and the subject matter. The extent to which Conservation Plans are taken up more widely, is clearly linked to a continued debate about where they are most appropriate, but also to practicalities such as cost and the extent that they are seen by those with direct responsibility for historic sites and buildings to have value - particularly in situations where they are not required in order to receive funding. However it seems clear that an approach to managing the built cultural heritage based on an understanding of significance and vulnerability will continue to be an important concept in future considerations of how the historic environment can be protected, and enhanced, whilst at the same time managing change and integration. As Power of Place observes:

"An integrated system of planning and conservation controls based on character appraisal and conservation plans would provide a simpler, more efficient system for everyone"

English Heritage (2000)

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