

# Trip Report: ACT Region Heritage Symposium

*Mark Grundy, August 2024*

The [ACT Region Heritage Symposium 2024](#) was a one-day event held in August at the Australian National University in Canberra. My Bendora hut-partner Ela Majocha and I attended as two of seven local KHA members. Our other attendees comprised KHA Secretary Tony Grimmer, Mike Baker (caretaker for Westerman's Homestead), along with Giles and Elspeth West (caretakers for Brayshaw's Homestead), and past president Simon Buckpitt. The KHA kindly paid for registration, and Ela and I thank the KHA for this support. We also thank other attendees for their comments, encouragement and assistance in the preparation of this Trip Report.

The symposium was held in a lecture theatre of the extraordinary wood-decorated Frank Fenner Building, part of the [Fenner School of Environment and Society](#). As someone who'd given lectures in that theatre in a former life, I found it novel to sit up the back, listening, thinking and taking notes while others up the front did the work instead (although I was oddly disappointed to see none of the accustomed paper aeroplanes on the day.)



This event was sponsored by the ACT Government and supported by [ICOMOS Australia](#) – the Australian arm of the International Council on Monuments and Sites, was supported by the [Canberra Archaeological Society](#) and by the [Canberra & District Historical Society](#), and was coordinated by the [National Trust ACT](#). I estimated attendance at about 80, which seemed healthy for a regional symposium. The speakers hailed from the ACT, NSW and Victoria. Ela and I were impressed with their knowledge and experience, with their passion for heritage and with the engagement of the audience, so both quality and quantity of participation got big green ticks from us.

The symposium was thought important enough to the ACT Government that it was opened by the Minister for Heritage, and a ministerial advisor sat throughout the symposium taking (apparently copious) notes, so this was not just a gabfest but potential compost against which future ACT heritage policy decisions may be taken.

### **Planning for heritage**

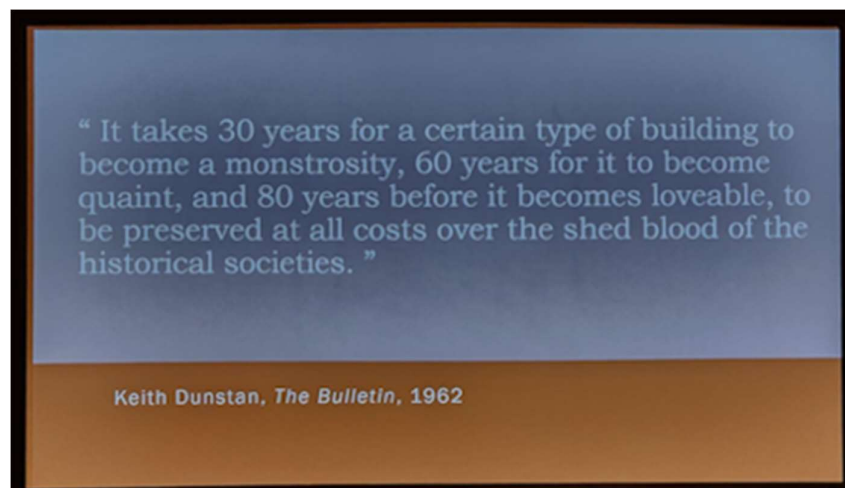
A symposium is a conference with a central topic. The topic for this one was ‘Planning for Heritage’. Key themes included the changing role of planning in management and preservation of cultural heritage; the role of heritage in helping planning outcomes; of prospective partnerships for development and conservation; of residential and community involvement and facilitation; of preserving First Peoples history and culture; and of lessons to be learned from previous planning exercises in the ACT and from other jurisdictions.

While not every KHA member will be concerned about heritage policy, it might be worth suggesting why it matters. The following is just my take.

### **How we engage our history**

If history is our understanding of the past, then heritage is our active engagement with it. If historical sites are the ‘what’ then heritage is the cultural and political ‘why’, which helps inform the economic ‘how’.

History is built on facts, and we don’t have to feel any way about facts unless we were there. But heritage informs the way that we acknowledge and embrace how history has shaped us, the way that we learn from past successes as well as our past ignorance and errors and is also how we preserve such insight and wisdom for future generations to experience and reflect on. Historical places, documents, stories and museum artefacts all form part of heritage, so of course the alpine huts are all at once remnants of history, emergency refuges, destinations for environmental adventure and part of our national legacy.



Once upon a time, the popular Australian conception of heritage was all about colonial buildings, bush myths, goldmining and sports. But today's approach to heritage can't be separated from environmental policy, from First Nations reconciliation, from commitment to multiculturalism or from our recognition of the incredible waves of change that have shaped Australian history, and which still shape it today.

Yet heritage is selective. What we choose to preserve, experience and learn from shapes our future, while what we neglect, we forget. So deciding what to keep shapes our collective memory, deciding how to preserve it chooses what we'll understand about it, and deciding how to use it colours how we'll feel about having it around.

### **Heritage and huts in the ACT**

But of course, heritage in the ACT is more than just alpine huts. The whole of the Australian Capital Territory has its own heritage as both a national capital and as a centre of Australian democracy. What the ACT does about heritage is also jurisdictionally different from what New South Wales and Victoria do with the heritage of their High Country – but together they define the future of alpine heritage for Australia.

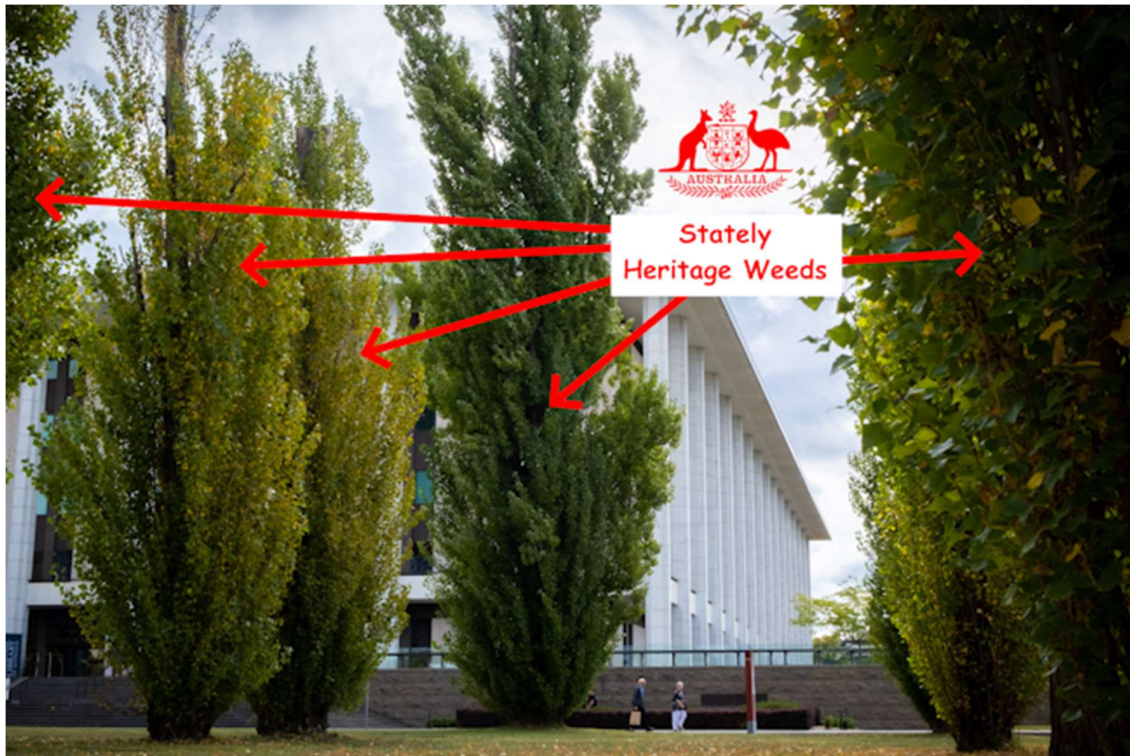
ACT heritage is also unusual because of how the territory was created and administered. Self-government was only established in 1988 and exists within federal legislation that keeps anything to do with national government a federal matter. So there are places and buildings in the ACT that the ACT government has nothing to do with, alongside places in the ACT that the federal government doesn't administer, so long as it's managed within federal legislation.

Consequently, [Blundell's Cottage](#) for example (shown on the right below), is managed federally because it's located on federal land, while [Lanyon Homestead](#) (on the left below) is managed jurisdictionally because it isn't – never mind that they were both built in the State of NSW, both now exist within the ACT, both have buildings dating from the 1860s, and that the people who built them knew each other.



In another example, the building of the National Library is a federal matter while its grounds are an ACT matter. The trees planted around the National Library are listed as part of its heritage, but those trees are poplars, which in the ACT are now listed as an invasive plant because of their impact on waterways. So as the original trees aged and

died, in effect the federal government had to politely ask the ACT if they could please replant their decorative weeds. Yes you can, said the ACT politely back – presumably because of limited impact on waterways, and because these are *heritage* weeds.



That’s the kind of heritage context in which the ACT’s huts are considered – in Namadgi National Park they’re thought about in an evolving context of depastoralisation taking place within the emerging heritage context of the National Capital itself.

In any case, every jurisdiction can learn from every other. A case-study session on heritage planning in NSW and Victoria also offered great food for thought.

### **What we learned**

Heritage can be presented as a blind glorification of the past, as a [Nimby](#)-brake on property development, as meaningless rules impinging on property ownership rights, as a competition with other concerns like environment, liveability, multiculturalism or reconciliation, or as the province of professional academics and bureaucrats rather than of engaged community.

Yet if we think of heritage as planning for what the future shall inherit and how it can be adapted and used, then there’s no conflict – all these facets are just parts of the same question. The symposium not only had strong support for this view – I don’t think speakers saw it any other way, and within the ACT at least, there may be no other effective way to discuss it.

In any case, heritage interest is alive and well in the ACT, at both professional and community levels. A full quarter of the symposium was spent exploring case-studies of community engagement. And although participants were frustrated that there wasn't even more community involvement, when virtually every major ACT reserve has an active community volunteer group caring for it, I don't think they fully realised just how good it already is. There is plenty to engage here and learn from.

From a practical KHA perspective, recent changes to ACT planning legislation now present a tiered approach for environmental assessments and for Development Applications. This should help streamline the hut rebuild process in the ACT and yet it's frustrating that the post-bushfire rebuilds still linger in backlog. Simon Buckpitt is most across the detail and implications, and I include some comments from him below.

In other KHA benefits, at a work party that Ela and I attended for Frank and Jack's Hut in April this year, the team of KHA volunteers and rangers was visited one morning by three artists staying at [Ready-Cut Cottage](#) for a residential workshop. Exploring the area for inspiration, they wanted to know what the hut was about, how we were restoring it, and what it was doing out in the middle of Namadgi National Park in the first place (perhaps an ironic query as they may not have realised that Ready-Cut was also restored by the KHA.)

I shared what I knew of the hut's history and significance, and tried to explain how heritage must be more than just some historical facts that we know: it must be something that we can see, *relate to* and *do*. I also tried to explain that preserving memories of the region's pastoral history is neither glorifying it nor condemning them – it's simply incorporating memory as part of a broader understanding that also includes indigenous history and environment.

I tried my best on the day but felt that I'd struggled to explain the complexities of heritage in a ten-minute chat. Yet having had a chance to reflect after the symposium and to begin discussing with other attendees, I now feel that I'd do better.

### **The importance of KHA engagement with the heritage community in the ACT**

Ela and I are still learning who's who in the regional heritage community and are still mapping out their interactions with the KHA. However, I knew that Simon had been championing this facet of KHA engagement and invited his comments, which I quote below. Simon writes:



The ACT does not have the well-developed heritage processes of NSW NPWS, nor the staff with the requisite heritage knowledge and understanding of heritage. To overcome this the KHA needs to dedicate much more time and effort to engaging with senior parks staff and government to achieve positive outcomes. This means at levels well above the Tharwa depot (Namadgi Visitor Centre), with which we have traditionally engaged.

Furthermore, because of strong forces antagonistic to huts in the ACT, KHA needs to be proactively engaged with the broader ACT heritage community. It is from the broader heritage community that we can garner support for huts and their values. It was support of the interim chair of the Heritage Council, the National Trust, and support of the first nations representatives (because of our whole of cultural landscape approach), in addition to the public campaign that achieved a positive decision by Government (although we are yet to see any progress).

Engagement in the broader ACT heritage community is an absolute necessity for the future of huts in the ACT, and attendance at the Annual Heritage Symposium is a very time-effective way to further our understanding and make connections.

## **Conclusions**

In a recent KHA newsletter, President Pip encouraged interested members to attend this symposium. Ela and I were glad to go, appreciated the opportunity, and feel that it has deepened our understanding of the region's history, of the role of the KHA, of the way that the KHA's work connects with broader heritage interests in the area, and of opportunities for future interactions. The symposium runs annually, and we commend it to interested members.