

ARCHITECTURE

Guilty as charged

As world heritage status embraces notions of a shared identity across cultures, Australian sites are growing, writes **Robert Bevan**.

When 11 of Australia's historic convict sites are nominated for UNESCO World Heritage status, you know the convict stain has been well and truly scrubbed away.

Although Port Arthur became a morbid tourist attraction for boat-trippers within a week of its closure in 1877, many other physical reminders of early penal settlements have been thoroughly erased. Records were burnt, buildings demolished or deliberately neglected and sites ploughed over – places to forget rather than celebrate.

Now, in a committee room in Paris's seventh arrondissement, heritage advisers to UNESCO are weighing up the pros – and the cons – of inscribing Fremantle Prison, Sydney's Cockatoo Island and the fragments of nine other sites of penal suffering on the World Heritage List.

You don't have to be beautiful to be included – although luminous monuments such as the Taj Mahal and Versailles form the armature for its 851 sites – but you have to

be significant. Wonders of nature qualify, too.

“Outstanding universal value” is UNESCO's criterion. Your fellow Carpathian villagers may join you in cherishing a monument to brotherhood, unity and Havgrad the Goat Strangler, but unless the

whole world, or at least the parties to the 1972 World Heritage Convention agree, it will not make the global grade.

Some 17 Australian sites have passed muster. In contrast to the list as a whole, where all but 166 entries are at least in part “masterpieces of human creative
Continued next page

From previous page

genius”, Australia's contributions are the likes of Kakadu, the Great Barrier Reef and Uluru – natural phenomena all.

So far, the only man-made artefacts from Australia on the list are the Sydney Opera House (surely the youngest member of the world heritage family) and the architecturally gauche Royal Exhibition Hall in Melbourne, with Carlton Gardens thrown in for good measure. The hall is included mainly on the grounds that it is one of the few surviving great exhibition buildings from the 19th century.

Earlier this year when Minister for Environment, Heritage and the Arts Peter Garrett announced that the convict sites nominations were on the way to Paris, he described them as a living record of one of the greatest penal experiments in world history – “the transportation of more than 166,000 men, women and children to a vast and largely unknown land”.

The 11 sites, say the government, are of “outstanding significance to the world as an important type of forced migration – global convictism – a crucial stage in human history. In part this is a story about the dark side of human history – the isolation, the punishment, pain and subjugation of one part of humanity by another.”

It may not sound an enticing argument for inclusion until you realise Auschwitz is on the list, as is Senegal's slave island of Gorée from which hundreds of thousands were transported in shackled misery across the Atlantic.

This is not about promoting “dark tourism” to rubbernecks who relish macabre places. These

“sites of shame” often don't survive moves to destroy them by the perpetrators of violence, in the interests of covering their criminal tracks, or by victors remodelling the architectural record in their own image. Only rarely do they become sites of penitence and remembrance. Heritage isn't always pretty or even welcome but it is a material witness to history.

Places such as these also suit the World Heritage Committee's Global Strategy since the mid-90s of broadening the list beyond the Western monumental canon (although Gorée was included in 1978). Which is why the government deserves a smattering of applause for getting around to the nomination some 30 years after Senegal submitted theirs.

The benefits beyond national prestige and the potential for increased visitor numbers are few and, in theory, the responsibilities are many. Not just the protection of the sites from damage or unsuitable development (in Australia the level of protection is in effect no different from that for places on the national heritage list) but to avoid damage to another country's cultural and national heritage and to help protect it – this is the world's shared patrimony after all.

The reality has been that World Heritage Site designation did not stop the shelling of Dubrovnik in the Bosnian War or restrain the Taliban from levelling the Bamiyan Buddhas. It remains a moot point, however, whether the world's attention was drawn with a certain urgency to this blasted destruction because of their special status.

The same attention has not been given to the ongoing silent death of the Great Barrier Reef by climate change and agricultural run-off.

UNESCO can sometimes get snitty, however, if sites on its list are treated in cavalier fashion. Germany has recently been taken to task over plans to build a bridge across the Elbe valley; Russia for a planned Gazprom skyscraper 28 metres higher than the Empire State Building in low-rise neoclassical St Petersburg (which has brought protesters onto the streets); Israel for crass and nationalistic archaeological digs around Temple Mount; and the UK for insensitive development planned around the Tower of London and on Liverpool's waterfront.

The UN body can put a place on the list of threatened world heritage sites but UNESCO's only realistic sanction is to shame a nation by taking a damaged site off the list. Which rather defeats the purpose. Vladimir Putin, for one, is unlikely to be quaking.

To avoid bad publicity, previous Australian administrations appear to have adopted the sly tactic of letting shoddy development around a heritage-worthy place go ahead first and then only later nominating a site for national or world heritage status. What would the Parisian

Continued next page
From previous page
committee have made of the Toaster building as a suitable new neighbour for the Sydney Opera House?

Interestingly, landowners on Norfolk Island have been reassured by the feds that the world heritage listing of convict sites at Kingston and Arthurs Vale (one nomination) will not lead to restrictions on what they can do. If not, why not?

The most damaging instance so far of this avoidance tactic has

been on the Burrup Peninsula, where the world's largest and oldest collection of rock art – it's been called "Australia's Stonehenge" – won national heritage protection only after Woodside Energy was allowed to excise the crucial piece of land where it wanted to build a gas plant, clearing 30,000-year-old carvings in the process.

Melbourne Cricket Ground, the oldest part of which dates waaaaay back to 1992 (some railings excepted), was protected ahead of the Burrup. And after it, too, was rebuilt.

Despite its global importance, Australia still hasn't nominated the Burrup to the World Heritage Committee. Perhaps the MCG will get there first. There's no denying the importance of sport to Australia's sense of itself but such a prioritisation at national level is indefensible. When viewed from a worldwide perspective it's embarrassing.

It is a series of decisions that go to the core of the meaning of heritage and notions of a shared identity across cultures. What is preserved tells us a lot about what a society values.

In Australia, there are multiple cultural legacies within the nation that are worthy of protection but successive governments have prioritised romanticised empty landscapes and colonial relics ahead of indigenous history. Is rock art less important than convict sites and cricket grounds? Why did the flower beds of Carlton Gardens take priority?

Although Garrett in his speech talks of "globally-acclaimed Aboriginal cultural heritage sites" such as Kakadu, Uluru, Willandra

Lakes and the Tasmanian Wilderness – all on the World Heritage List – these areas were nominated largely for their landscape values.

This privileging of the natural runs contrary to the man-made list majority but historically Australia has valued the natural world over the created – the architectural or the archaeological.

Next up for nomination by Australia are WA's Ningaloo Reef, the Kokoda Trail and areas of the Kimberley – the latter two both threatened by resource extraction.

The federal government has now embarked on an assessment of the whole of the Kimberley with a view to world heritage nomination "several years down the line", a government spokeswoman says.

Ahead of this, a decision will be made about where, on the Kimberley's pristine and fragile coast, to place a processing site for the offshore natural gas industry to share.

No doubt this site will be excised from any future heritage nomination. It's hard to decide whether this is sensible planning or a cynical manipulation of heritage protection.

In Australia we might prioritise the natural over humanity's creative genius, but Barrier Reef or Burrup, we still don't seem to care overly much even though we say we do.

What would be really shameful is for these sites to be accepted as part of the world's collective heritage, then immediately be placed on another list – the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger.

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THE SITES

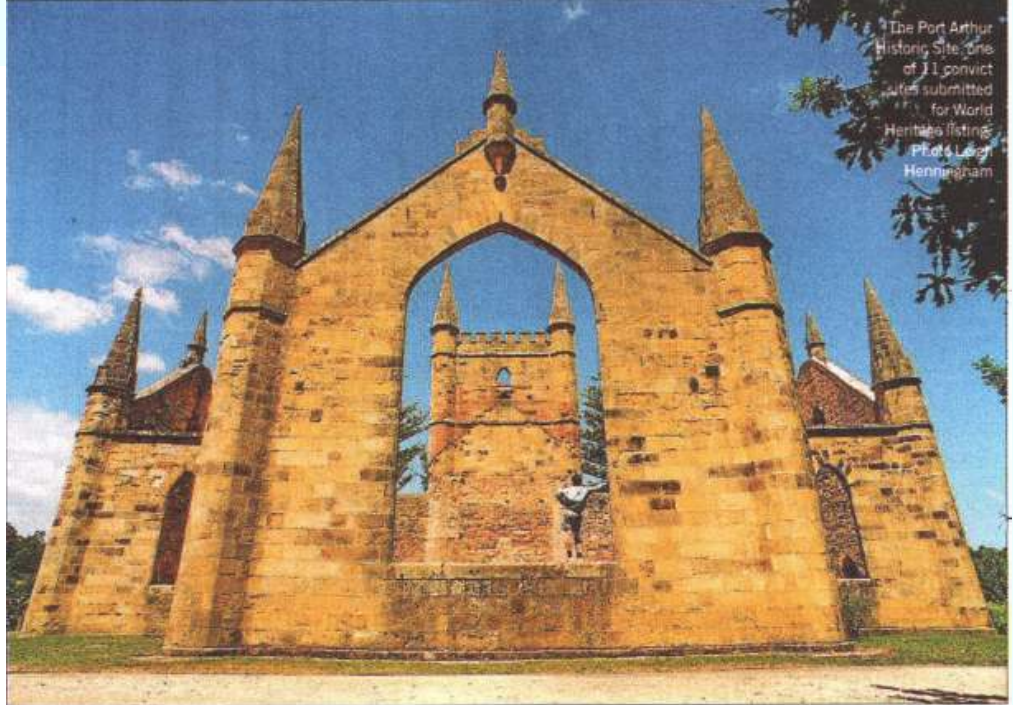
Eleven convict sites have been nominated for Unesco's World Heritage listing.

Fremantle Prison in **Western Australia** is one of 11 nominated sites. The others are:

in **NSW** – Old Government House and Domain (Parramatta), Hyde Park Barracks (Sydney), Cockatoo Island Convict Site (Sydney) and Old Great North Road (near Wisemans Ferry);

on **Norfolk Island** – Kingston and Arthurs Vale Historic Area;

and in **Tasmania** – Port Arthur Historic Site (Tasman Peninsula), Cascades Female Factory (Hobart), Darlington Probation Station (Maria Island), Coal Mines Historic Site (via Premadegna) and Brickendon and Woolmers Estates (near Longford).



The Port Arthur Historic Site, one of 11 convict sites submitted for World Heritage listing. Photo: Leigh Henningham

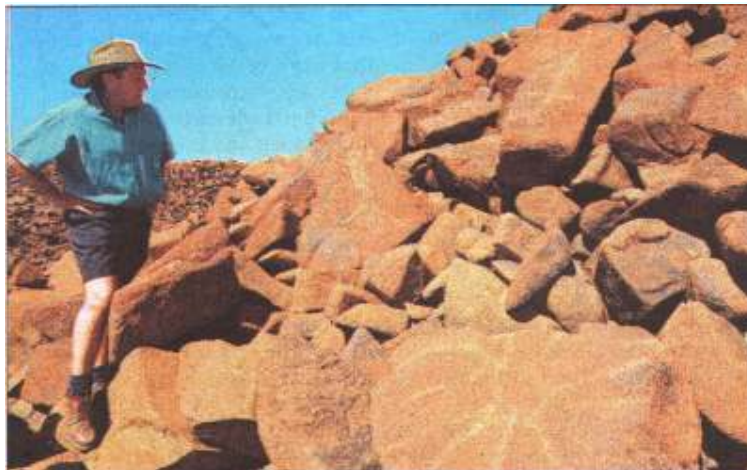


Fremantle Prison, right, and, below, Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour.

Photo Janie Barrett



The sites were described as a living record of one of the greatest penal experiments in world history.



Time and timing : Left, the 1819 clock in Hyde Park Barracks tower, and, below, "Australia's Stonehenge", Aboriginal rock art at Burrup Peninsula in Western Australia, which was nominated for national heritage listing only after development around the site had been approved
Photos Robeart Pearce and courtesy Western Australian Tourism Commission



What would the UNESCO World Heritage Committee have made of the Toaster building as a suitable new neighbour for the Sydney Opera House?
Photo Quentin Jones