

# USING HISTORICAL THEMES TO ASSIST IN THE IDENTIFICATION OF LOCAL HERITAGE PLACES

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## Key messages

Historic thematic frameworks can be a powerful tool in the best-practice identification of local heritage places in South Australia:

- they provide a vital structured approach to local heritage survey work;
- based on a good understanding of local history and tailored to the specific locality, these frameworks can guide both the survey work itself as well as inform the assessment of values of individual places as well as groups of places arising from a survey;
- they can help with understanding the specific history of places in a wider context, relating that specific history to broader historical themes in the local area, including whether such themes are more or less important, with many or few places related to the theme, and provide clues to the relative importance of specific places; and
- they provide a safety net to ensure consideration of important themes which are not always obvious amongst the readily-found and most obvious population of heritage places.

Without such frameworks, the risks are that heritage survey work becomes random or ad-hoc, lacking comprehensiveness and consistency, that it fails to recognise and understand local history, that important heritage places are overlooked, and that in assessing places the specific values are not well understood – with claimed values missing key aspects or understating them, or on the other hand with values being overstated.



**Lobethal Centennial Hall**

Source: Duncan Marshall 2015

## Introduction

This paper has been prepared in the context of the planning reform process currently underway in South Australia. In particular, the review of ways to recognise and manage local heritage places. As part of this process, a local heritage discussion paper has been released (available from [dpti.sa.gov.au/planning/planning\\_reform](http://dpti.sa.gov.au/planning/planning_reform)). A key suggestion raised in the discussion paper is use of historical themes as a tool in the identification of local heritage places.

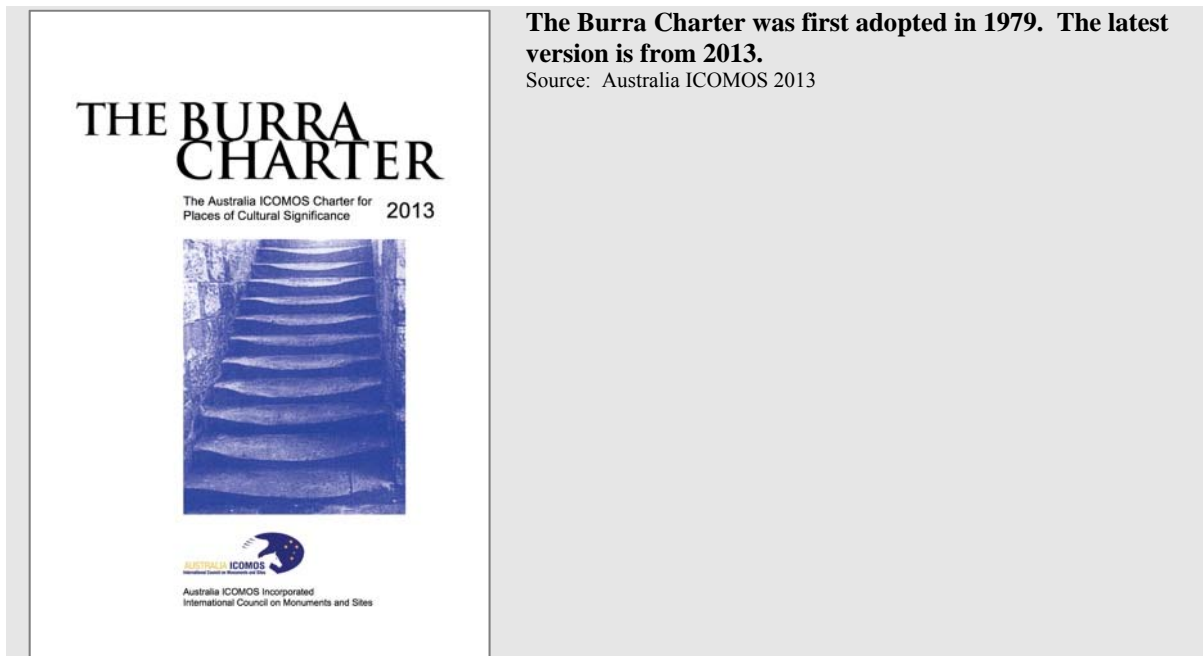
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This paper, while commissioned by the SA Government, is an independent contribution to the discussions about the possible use of historical themes.

### **The broader context – Australian heritage conservation practice**

The modern phase of heritage conservation in Australia can perhaps be dated from the 1970s. This was the era of strong community advocacy, Green Bans, the first specific heritage legislation (in Victoria in 1974), the Commonwealth's landmark inquiry into the National Estate, followed by Commonwealth and other state legislation and specialised agencies to identify, protect, conserve and manage heritage places. The first South Australian heritage Act was in 1978.

This was also a period when considerable thought was given to the philosophy and tools needed for heritage conservation. The *Burra Charter* was first adopted in 1979, and systemic approaches to the identification of heritage places were also developing in this period. This included local, regional and thematic heritage surveys.



**The Burra Charter was first adopted in 1979. The latest version is from 2013.**

Source: Australia ICOMOS 2013

South Australia has a long experience with such surveys in the past though my impression is that historic thematic frameworks might have been a stronger feature in the past and in some surveys. However, they might play a weaker role in some more recent practice.

For example, I had a chance to look at a report called a local heritage review which had about half a page on history and historical themes for a local government area before it moved into data sheets for specific places. The data sheets contained history about the places, but these specific histories were, at least in some instances, disconnected from broader historical themes or context.

I understand that local heritage reviews have been quite common. And while they might follow on from a more substantial heritage survey report with a better integration of a historic thematic framework or thematic history, I wonder if such local heritage reviews have become too disconnected from any good thematic history that might have been prepared previously – if it was done at all.

To return to the broader context, Australia has a considerable international reputation for its thoughtful and structured approach to heritage conservation.

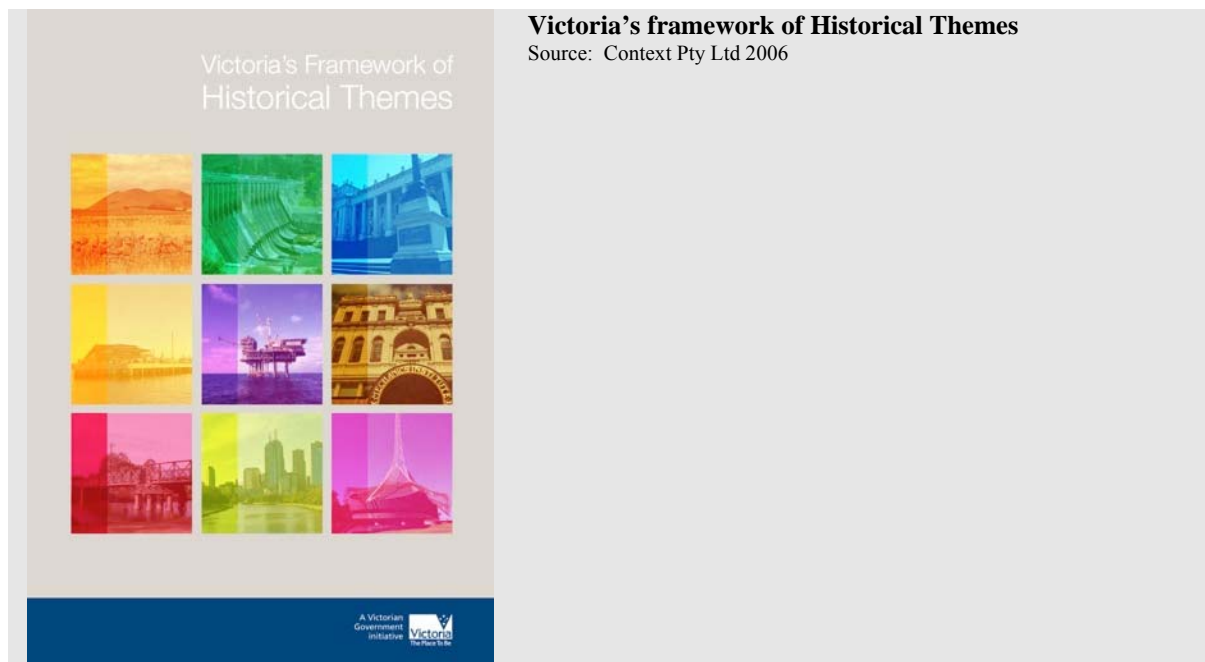
History and historic values have been fundamental in this modern phase, as they were beforehand. But the systematic, the structured, the thoughtful approach to heritage conservation has also shaped the way in which history has been integrated into modern heritage conservation. Historic thematic frameworks are perhaps the key tool which has been developed to give structure to this integration. Again, South Australia developed and used such frameworks from the 1980s but are they still relevant and are they actually being used comprehensively?

### What are historical themes?

Heritage conservation systems in Australia have relied upon identifying heritage places, assessing values, and usually formal recognition on a register or list. History is one of the pillars in identifying and assessing places. The *Burra Charter* defines cultural significance as meaning,

‘aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations.’  
(Australia ICOMOS 2013, Article 1.2)

But it is perhaps fair to say that historic value is, or at least has been, one of the more dominant values in heritage conservation.



Historical themes are simply broader or more general aspects of history which move beyond the specific or individual. They often relate to communities, societies or humanity as a whole. Common general examples include economic history, colonial history, Aboriginal history, labour history and so on. The history shelves of every Australian bookshop are probably arranged thematically. *Victoria's Framework of Historical Themes* defines historical themes as,

‘The main activities, processes or subjects that have shaped the history of the region, issue or industry. They are identified through research and analysis as part of a contextual history. Historical themes

provide a framework for analysing collections and movable heritage, helping to identify significant objects and pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of collections.’ (Heritage Council of Victoria 2010, p. 63)

Themes can be very broad, as in the examples above, or very fine-grained. An example related to defence and the military is as follows (based on *Australian Historic Themes*, Australian Heritage Commission 2001, p. 5).

<b>Theme group</b>	Governing
<b>Theme</b>	Defending Australia
<b>Sub-themes</b>	Providing for the common defence Preparing to face invasion Going to war Building fortifications Training

There are a number of possible ways to construct such themes and sub-themes, and the sub-themes could be even more detailed than this example presents.



In trying to better understand the full range of Australia’s wonderful heritage, frameworks or a range of such themes has been found very useful as a way of structuring our approach. The *Australian Historic Themes* document includes theme groups like developing local, regional and national economies, building settlements, towns and cities, working, and educating (Australian Heritage Commission 2001, p. 4). *Victoria’s Framework of Historical Themes* includes connecting Victorians by transport and communications, transforming and managing the land, and building community life (Heritage Council of Victoria 2010, pp. i-iii). Again, the Victorian document defines a thematic framework as,

‘A set of themes relating to a subject, region, industry or activity which provides a framework or grid for analysing heritage places and objects.’ (Heritage Council of Victoria 2010, p. 63)

At the local government level, thematic frameworks have also been developed. In the case of the City of Stonnington in Victoria, it developed a thematic environmental history which,

‘provides an explanation of the themes and activities that have been important in shaping the present-day City of Stonnington...

It is important to understand that it is not intended as a complete social or political history of the municipality, but rather as a summary of human use and impact upon the landscape from the time of the arrival of the first Indigenous inhabitants. It is not a chronological record and has not been prepared in that way.

Rather, the history is organised according to themes so □as to provide a context to assist with the identification of heritage places that illustrate the rich natural and cultural history of the study area.’ (Context Pty Ltd, 2006, p. vii)

In the local heritage discussion paper for South Australia, the proposal is to develop a thematic framework enriched with/supported by historical context.

### **Historical themes as an important tool in the identification of local heritage places**

There are three different situations where historical thematic frameworks are important – in identifying places as part of survey work, and in the assessment of individual places or groups of places arising from a survey.

Identifying local heritage places can be undertaken in a number of ways. Perhaps a very common situation will be where, for example, a local older building is to be changed or demolished, and people within the community or an organisation promotes the case that the building has heritage value and should be protected. There will usually be some documentation to support this case, and perhaps the local government might undertake further research. These are case-by-case examples.

The other standard context for identifying local heritage places is through a survey project which might be geographically-based (eg. a town or a local government area), or the survey might be thematic (eg. railways or post offices).



In the case of survey work, a structured approach is vital, and this is exactly what historic thematic frameworks provide. When based on a good understanding of local history and tailored to the specific locality, these frameworks can guide both the survey work itself as well as inform the assessment of values. At one level, thematic frameworks can operate as a safety net to ensure consideration of important themes which are not always obvious amongst the readily-found and most obvious population of heritage places.

The thematic environmental history for the City of Stonnington includes the major theme and a chapter on settling the land. After 19 pages of history on this theme covering such matters as Aboriginal associations, pastoralism and land speculation, it then identifies a range of places which illustrate the overall theme as well as sub-themes, for example,

<i>Pastoralism</i>	Mansions and houses associated with pastoralists – <i>Carmyle, Como, Trawalla</i>
<i>Crown land sales</i>	Malvern Hill Hotel, houses and buildings associated with early crown allotment estates such as <i>Avoca</i> , subdivisions such as the <i>Gascoigne Estate</i> (Context Pty Ltd 2006, p. 49)

Such places would obviously be worthy contenders for local heritage recognition.

In the case of individual assessments, either arising as part of survey work or otherwise, thematic frameworks can be highly useful in the assessment of values. They can help with understanding the specific history of the place in a wider context, relating that specific history to broader historical themes in the local area. Whether such themes are more or less important, with many or few places related to the theme, may provide clues to the relative importance of the specific place.

In the City of Stonnington example regarding pastoralism, the history provides a clear indication about the importance of the sub-theme both within the local government area and more broadly, and the relative current rarity of places associated with the sub-theme,

‘The study area is **important within the metropolitan area** for its associations with many of the important early pastoralists who played **an important role in the development of Victoria**. While **many of the mansions and houses associated with pastoralists have been demolished, those that survive include *Carmyle, Como, and Trawalla*, which provide important evidence of the wealth of the pastoralists and their position of influence in society.**’ (Context Pty Ltd, 2006, p. 49, emphasis added)

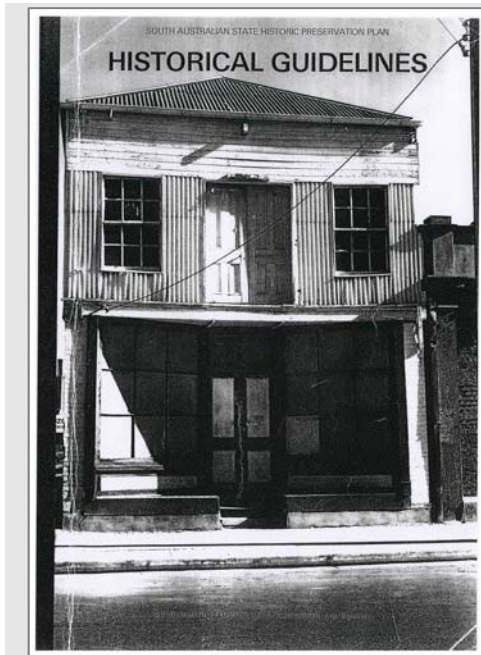
However, frameworks must be used with care,

‘Themes are webs we weave to better understand the history and storylines of a place. They are not rigid straitjackets into which we must place our heritage assessments.’ (Joan Domicelj, 1991, quoted in Australian Heritage Commission 2001, p. 4)

It should be noted that there have been debates about specific themes, frameworks, or indeed the overall approach utilising thematic frameworks, especially in the early years of their development. While such debates are a healthy sign of intellectual endeavour, there is today general support for thematic frameworks, at least in the heritage sector and amongst a number of historians working in the sector.

As noted above, historic thematic frameworks have a long history of use in South Australia. *Historical Guidelines*, under what was then called the South Australian State Historic Preservation Plan, and they were first developed in 1980 (Marsden 1980). These have been used in the past for local government and regional surveys. Whether they are still widely recognised and appropriately used, and whether they remain fully relevant are important questions that I don’t have answers to. But the local heritage discussion paper implicitly seems to be offering answers – that historic thematic frameworks for South Australia need substantial refreshing and reinvigorating as a central tool in local heritage.





**The 1980 Historical Guidelines developed for South Australia**

Source: Marsden 1980

**Further information**

Australia ICOMOS 2013, *The Burra Charter, the Australia ICOMOS Charter for places of cultural significance*.

Australian Heritage Commission 2001, *Australian Historic Themes, a framework for use in heritage assessment and management*.

Context Pty Ltd 2006, *Stonnington thematic environmental history*, City of Stonnington.

Department of Planning, Transport & Infrastructure 2016, *Heritage reform – an exploration of opportunities, local heritage discussion paper*, [dpti.sa.gov.au/planning/planning\\_reform](http://dpti.sa.gov.au/planning/planning_reform)

Heritage Council of Victoria 2010, *Victoria’s Framework of Historical Themes*.

Marsden, S 1980, *Historical Guidelines*, South Australian State Historic Preservation Plan, SA Department of Environment & Planning.

**About the author**

Duncan Marshall is Canberra-based heritage architect and consultant with over 30 years experience in the government, non-government and private sectors. He has worked across Australia and overseas in heritage conservation. Duncan has extensive experience in the identification and assessment of heritage places, both at a policy and practical level. He is a former Chair of the ACT Heritage Council. In 2015, Duncan was awarded the inaugural Bathurst Macquarie Heritage Medal.

