INTRODUCTION

Heritage items can be viewed as three-dimensional ‘documents’ — the fabric telling an evocative story about a cultural heritage which cannot be gained from records alone. This physical evidence provides an accurate record of what happened rather than what was intended or believed to have happened; and it is for this reason that places of heritage are conserved.

The term *fabric* refers to all the physical material of a place, including its surroundings and contents (Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, articles 1.1 and 1.3). This means an investigation needs to concentrate not only on the visually-pleasing aspects of the item, but consider all the details of its structure, and services such as plumbing.

The original 1830s Rose Bay Cottage by John Verge was compromised by a first floor addition in 1911. Evidence in the fabric, together with archival documents, allowed the house and remnants of the garden to be reconstructed. Photos: Alan Croker.
When investigating the significance of a heritage item, information which can be gleaned from the fabric includes:

- approximate date of construction, fabrication or the planting of designed landscape elements
- approximate date of changes to the item and what these changes may have entailed
- how the item was constructed, fabricated, laid-out and finished over the years, and what materials and techniques were used
- the present and past relationship between the item, adjacent items and the surroundings
- original or previous uses
- how the item was used, managed and/or valued in the past
- the research potential an item may possess
- who may have been involved in, or influenced, its creation, change, use or management.

HOW TO INVESTIGATE THE FABRIC OF AN ITEM

Background Knowledge

A knowledge of historical periods and of similar types of heritage items is needed to achieve a useful level of interpretation. The process of interpreting an item’s fabric is made easier when combined with the interpretation of archival documents such as old photographs, drawings and written descriptions. Collect as much of this background information as possible before you begin. See Investigating History in the NSW Heritage Manual.

Plan Your Investigation

Many questions will be left unanswered by the documentary evidence of a heritage item. Before you begin write down some of the questions which you hope the fabric might answer. Familiarise yourself with the item and list the tools needed for your investigation, for example, base plans, camera, tape measures, clipboard, ladders and protective clothing.

The Context of the Item

The way an item ‘sits’ in its surroundings can say a lot about its cultural importance. Try not to think of the item in isolation from its neighbourhood. Is it like its neighbours? Was it one of a group or part of a larger complex of items? What sort of people are, or have been, involved with the item? What is the surrounding environment? How did the surrounding environment influence the placement, form, materials, changes or current condition of the item? For further reading see Heritage Curtilages (DUAP/HC 1996).
Drawings can include a location plan, site plan, floor plans, roof plan, elevations and a number of sections and details. They can show how the fabric has changed over the years, by using graphics to differentiate the phases of development.

Photographs should be recorded on catalogue sheets and can include overall views from a number of different angles, each interior and exterior elevation and a number of details.

**Disturbance of Significant Fabric and Archaeology**

Preliminary investigations should not intervene in the fabric or excavation (article 24 of the ICOMOS Burra Charter). Such disturbance could destroy important evidence, before significance has been assessed and appropriate policies put in place. Exceptions to this rule are: where the fabric is being lost through deterioration, as part of emergency conservation works, or prior to an approved demolition. Such investigations should always be supervised by heritage professionals.

Excavations that will disturb relics should always be preceded by an archaeological assessment and a permit under the *Heritage Act 1977*.

Looking at Styles and Fashions

Analysing the style of a heritage item can be an enjoyable way of putting it into an historical context. It can also be useful to identify later changes to the fabric. Care should be taken though, as elements of one style are often carried over into the subsequent fashion. A good reference for the exterior of buildings is *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture* (Apperly et al 1989). The National Trust booklet *Identifying Houses* helps to date exterior detail and interior detail such as window joinery.

**Dating Fabric**

Accurate dating of the overall heritage item on the basis of materials and components is usually impossible, as materials are normally manufactured and used over a number of years. The most we can say is that the particular component or material is no older than the known date of its creation or first importation (for example, corrugated iron roofing was first used in Australia in the 1850s). Nevertheless, it can help your understanding of the heritage item to be aware of the nature and provenance of its
various parts. Sources for establishing the provenance include: patents and registered designs; brands, trademarks and dates on the actual items; and tradesperson’s marks and signatures. Original design and construction drawings and specifications are a useful starting point, but remember items were not always completed as they were planned.

Investigating Earlier Decorative Schemes
Learning about earlier decorative schemes that relate to a heritage item can help piece together some of its history and inspire redecoration. Apart from researching early plans, photographs, drawings and descriptive written materials you can often find evidence of early decorative schemes in the fabric itself. Care needs to be taken — earlier surface finishes are, in themselves, an archaeological record and ideally, should not be totally destroyed. The interpretation of these earlier finishes requires an analytical approach and experience.

The first step is to seek a surface that has been hidden, thus having avoided repainting. In a house, this may be inside built-in cupboards or behind electrical conduits, mounting boxes and the like. For information on how to remove layers of paint to uncover earlier layers, see *Paint Finishes*, Maintenance Information Sheet No. 2.

For references on particular building materials see *Heritage References* in the NSW Heritage Manual.

REFERENCES


