

National Trust Heritage Festival 2009 Lifetime Achievement Award

At the discretion of the judging panel, the Lifetime Achievement Award may be presented to an individual or organisation whose body of work has furthered heritage conservation and its reach.

The recipient of this year's Lifetime Achievement Award is Meredith Walker. Here is her acceptance speech, delivered by Kylie Winkworth, on Meredith's behalf.

Thank you very much for this award. I am deeply honoured to have my contribution recognised in this way.

I am very sorry not to be here with my friends and colleagues: hearing about what people have been doing in heritage, and enjoying the presentations and the excellent food.

It's a true-ism, that nothing much of consequence is done on one's own. Certainly it's true of action to recognise and sustain our heritage. People are inspired by one another. No one acts on their own or, if they do, at some point others need to agree with them before something happens.

My own activities as a community heritage advocate all involve others – as inspiration or encouragement, and as collaborators. Sometimes, others have agreed with my suggestions, sometimes not.

I was very pleased when the National Trust went along with my suggestion to list the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1974. (I also suggested listing the Opera House, because of their close relationship, but the Bridge was only 38 years old, and listing it was considered to be pushing the boundaries far enough.) The listing was timely, a few years later there was a proposal to add another road level to alleviate congestion, and in the lengthy discussions, no one ever questioned that the Bridge was heritage. In listing the Bridge, as in so many campaigns, the Trust had its finger on the pulse of community sentiment. As the Trust has found on many occasions, it takes guts and fortitude to translate community sentiment into action.

My approach has been to focus on issues that made sense of heritage conservation. Stated another way, this means that if these places were NOT kept, the system and its impacts would not be legitimate, or would be a sham. The saving of the First Government House site was such an action. What would be the point of the heritage system if the site and its inset remains were not kept? Why should lesser places be the subject of control when very historical places are not? Fortunately, the Government changed its mind, but not without protest. Many of our most treasured places have required protest to keep them.

Like many others, my interest in heritage is motivated by an interest in reading the landscape, understanding the forces of change, technology and taste that make our cities, towns and landscapes the way they are, and in passing on the stories of people, places and objects.

Our heritage system has been a success. But sometimes we confuse the MEANS with the ENDS. Listing, and the development controls that follow, is only a means to an end. It's like an apron. It provides protection for the object behind. We need to pay more attention to the ends - explaining why places are important and to passing on the story.

Thanks to Energy Australia and National Trust for this event and the award.