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Australia ICOMOS Submission on Australia's National Cultural Policy

There is much to celebrate in *Revive*. It reflects a powerful ambition to reposition “Australia’s arts, culture and heritage as central to Australia’s future”. Yet future national cultural policy would have much greater strength and meaning for all Australians if it took a more contemporary, integrated and connected approach to culture, the arts and heritage. Such an approach would better recognise the centrality of a broad and inclusive understanding of cultural heritage to Australia’s creative and cultural ambitions, in view of its powerful role in storytelling, innovation, resilience and the future.

While *Revive* acknowledges the importance of managing “all components of Australia’s heritage,” this broad definition is not yet consistently reflected in policy design, funding mechanisms or implementation pathways. As a basis for future policy, *Revive* offers too few actions, opportunities or commitments to properly celebrate and support a broader, more inclusive approach to heritage as a foundational component of Australian culture. We make detailed suggestions about such matters below.

We hope the policy will recognise cultural heritage as a core part of Australia’s cultural and creative ecosystem and acknowledge its contribution to broader national priorities, including placemaking, economic development, social inclusion and wellbeing. Heritage is not peripheral to these goals; it helps drive innovation, supports jobs and infrastructure reuse, and strengthens community connection and resilience.

About Australia ICOMOS

Australia ICOMOS is the peak professional body for cultural heritage in Australia and globally. We have a longstanding role in advancing best practice in heritage conservation, including through the Burra Charter, which is internationally recognised as a foundational framework for understanding and managing cultural heritage. Australia ICOMOS has a diverse membership of practitioners, researchers, artisans and policymakers working across the cultural heritage sector, and is therefore uniquely positioned to contribute to national cultural policy.

Cultural heritage in Australia is a diverse and busy sector, embracing a wide range of individuals and organisations in the voluntary, public and private sectors. Heritage practitioners work with governments, community groups, volunteers, and private sector organisations. Their contributions embrace a wide variety of activities involved in caring for our diverse cultural heritage, from storytelling, placemaking and development, to public outreach programs and legislatively mandated heritage protection activities.

Our interest in *Revive* reflects our commitment to ensuring that cultural heritage is fully recognised as an integral component of Australia’s cultural and creative ecosystem. In particular, Australia ICOMOS advocates for a more inclusive and coordinated approach that reflects the full breadth of Australia’s heritage—tangible, intangible, First Nations, and multicultural—and that positions heritage within broader policy domains including planning, sustainability, wellbeing and economic development.

The February 2026 progress report, *Progress under Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place*, provides a clearer account of heritage achievements to date, while also highlighting gaps that this submission believes the policy should now address.

Pillar 1 – First Nations First

Revive appropriately prioritises First Nations cultural heritage and advances a First Nations First approach. Achievements such as the First Nations Languages Policy and commitments to repatriation are important steps in recognising living and intangible heritage.

However, stronger protection of First Nations cultural heritage remains essential. National State of the Environment reports have consistently highlighted the vulnerability of First Nations heritage. Without strengthened cross-agency coordination, legislative reform, and sustained investment across all aspects of heritage—tangible and intangible—progress risks remaining symbolic rather than structural.

Pillar 2 – A Place for Every Story

Revive recognises the importance of place and cultural identity, and articulates a vision of cultural transformation across First Nations, colonial and multicultural narratives. However, the mechanisms through which this transformation will be achieved remain underdeveloped, creating a disconnect between ambition and implementation.

A key issue is the reliance on the Natural Heritage Trust as a primary mechanism for heritage protection. While there are strong connections between natural and cultural heritage, the Trust is primarily focused on environmental outcomes. As a result, current settings may not adequately support the breadth of Australia’s predominantly urban, colonial and multicultural heritage. This creates a funding imbalance that favours environmental and rural contexts over many of the urban settings in which cultural heritage is located.

To address this, the policy should expand and better align heritage funding mechanisms. Existing programs such as the Australian Heritage Grants Program and First Nations Heritage Grants Program could be reconfigured to support all components of heritage. This includes extending coverage beyond National Heritage List places, making First Nations grants permanent, and improving coordination across Commonwealth and State programs. Partnerships with organisations such as Australia ICOMOS, universities, museums and industry bodies would support a more coherent delivery model.

More broadly, heritage remains insufficiently embedded in related policy domains. For example, the National Urban Policy creates openings for cultural heritage but does not yet articulate a robust account of how heritage contributes to placemaking, sustainability and inclusion. Given Australia's highly urbanised context, the policy should more explicitly position heritage within urban and regional development frameworks.

Similarly, initiatives supporting multicultural heritage are welcome, including funding for community institutions and the *Towards Fairness* policy framework. While *Towards Fairness* is not itself a heritage policy, it provides a strong basis for more explicit treatment of multicultural heritage within the policy, particularly in relation to representation, participation and the recognition of diverse cultural narratives.

Pillar 3 – Centrality of the Artist

Revive emphasises the central role of artists within Australia's cultural sector. However, a significant gap remains in the treatment of the cultural heritage workforce within associated policy frameworks. This is evident in the Creative Workforce Scoping Study, whose sectoral scope does not clearly encompass heritage workers within its defined creative sectors.

This exclusion reflects a broader conceptual separation of heritage from the creative economy. In practice, heritage professionals—including conservators, curators, interpreters and craftspeople—play a vital role in cultural production and transmission. Failure to recognise this workforce risks undermining sector capability, particularly in the context of identified skills shortages.

Pillar 4 – Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Revive includes important commitments to cultural infrastructure, including support for national collecting institutions, legislative reform, and improved significance assessment frameworks. However, heritage is inconsistently integrated into governance, funding, and data systems.

For example, proposed intergovernmental cultural meetings should explicitly include ministers responsible for heritage to ensure appropriate representation and alignment with international commitments such as the G20 Rome Declaration.

Similarly, while *Revive* acknowledges the economic importance of heritage, heritage is not yet sufficiently visible or coherently captured in Australian Bureau of Statistics frameworks used to inform policy and investment. Without stronger representation in official data systems, the economic and social contributions of heritage risk remaining undervalued in decision-making processes.

There is also a need to clarify the relationship between heritage and cultural infrastructure investment. Collections and buildings supported through national funding programs are often themselves heritage assets. The policy should more clearly embed heritage conservation within broader infrastructure planning and investment.

Pillar 5 – Engaging the Audience

Heritage plays a crucial role in engaging audiences through festivals, public programs, interpretation, and tourism. While *Revive* supports audience engagement through a range of initiatives, the role of heritage remains insufficiently explicit within related strategies such as *THRIVE 2030*.

The limited visibility of historic and multicultural heritage within visitor economy strategies constrains their effectiveness. Heritage is a major driver of both domestic and international tourism and plays an important role in shaping visitor experiences and national identity.

Recommendations

Key issues identified include:

- A lack of **operational clarity** regarding what constitutes cultural heritage beyond formal listings and institutions
- Limited **integration of heritage across policy domains**, including economic, social and urban policy frameworks
- Insufficient **alignment between stated ambitions and delivery mechanisms**
- Fragmented recognition of heritage within workforce, data and governance systems

To address these issues, the policy should:

- **Recognise cultural heritage as a core part of Australia’s cultural and creative ecosystem**, rather than a supplementary policy concern.
- **Adopt a broader and more operational definition of heritage** that includes tangible, intangible, First Nations, multicultural and everyday heritage.
- **Strengthen cross-agency coordination, legislative reform and long-term investment** to better protect First Nations cultural heritage.
- **Reform heritage funding programs** so they support all components of heritage across urban and regional contexts, not only listed places or environmentally focused programs.

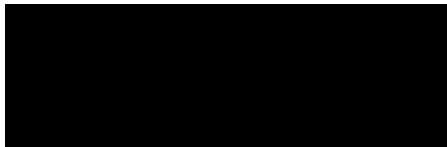
- **Embed heritage more explicitly within related policy domains** including urban policy, sustainability, wellbeing, tourism, economic development and social inclusion.
- **Include the cultural heritage workforce** within creative sector definitions, skills strategies and workforce planning.
- **Ensure heritage is represented in national governance and data systems**, including ministerial coordination and official economic and social statistics.
- **Embed heritage conservation in cultural infrastructure investment and audience engagement strategies**, including tourism and public programming.

Conclusion

Across all five pillars, a consistent pattern emerges: cultural heritage is recognised in principle but not yet systematically embedded in policy design, funding mechanisms, data frameworks, or workforce definitions. This limits the ability of heritage to contribute fully to national priorities, including wellbeing, economic development, and social inclusion.

Addressing these issues requires a coherent policy framework in which heritage is treated as a core component of the cultural and creative ecosystem, rather than as a supplementary or peripheral concern.

A recent example of such an approach is New Zealand's *Amplify* strategy, which demonstrates that a coherent, system-level alignment of arts, culture and heritage is both feasible and effective. The policy would benefit significantly from a similarly coordinated model, ensuring that cultural heritage is fully recognised and mobilised as a central contributor to the nation's future.



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