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Research Article

Contextualizing Public–Private Partnerships in Heritage Conservation: An Australian Perspective

Journal of Heritage Management
1–18
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DOI: 10.1177/24559296261498285
journals.sagepub.com/home/hmj


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Abstract

Public–private partnerships (PPPs) have increasingly been adopted as a mechanism to support heritage conservation. However, similar to PPPs in other sectors, heritage PPPs face significant implementation challenges. This article addresses the limited understanding of these challenges by examining the obstacles affecting heritage PPP delivery and their underlying causes. A qualitative case study approach was employed, using triangulation through a literature review and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal interconnected challenges, including governance complexities, limited public support, prolonged negotiations, constrained decision-making, inadequate government support and difficulties in achieving expected financial returns for private partners. The study argues that heritage PPP effectiveness should not be assessed solely through conservation outcomes or financial performance but through the capacity to identify, understand and manage institutional, governance and financial challenges. It highlights the need for context-sensitive PPP frameworks that account for the distinctive characteristics of heritage assets.

Keywords

Public–private partnerships, heritage conservation, challenges, quarantine station, Australia

Heritage Conservation in the Light of Public–Private Partnerships

Over the past few decades, public–private partnerships (PPPs) have gained prominence as a critical approach to heritage conservation (Albertelli & Mignosa, 2026). The implementation of such arrangements has been facilitated by diverse actors at the international level[1] (Ferri & Zan, 2017; Macdonald & Cheong, 2014). Heritage conservation PPP arrangements typically involve run-down state-owned cultural properties that are leased to private developers and real estate entities attracted by potential profit opportunities. PPP arrangements have also been utilized for the revitalization of historic centres, as well as for the development and utilization of industrial heritage (Ferri & Zan, 2017).

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Various determinants significantly influence the interaction between the private sector and cultural heritage. The rising costs associated with conserving cultural heritage sites, coupled with the influence of global market forces, have prompted governments to relinquish some of their traditional responsibilities concerning heritage places. These determinants influence various aspects related to the privatization of heritage management and exert increasing pressure on both local and international private entities to provide support through PPPs (Starr, 2010).

Any assumption regarding the full capability of the publicly funded sector to safeguard cultural heritage is challenged by the fact that a significant proportion of cultural heritage properties are privately owned and preserved in various countries, including the USA, the UK, the Netherlands, Italy, France and most of the post-1989 Eastern and Central European bloc (Jelinčić et al., 2017; Seaman, 2013). Significant changes in the cultural policy framework in Europe have led to a reduced reliance on state support and funding (Srakar & Čopič, 2012). For example, the situation in Italy has changed considerably, with public dominance over heritage management receding in favour of a more prominent role for private partners. This shift has been reinforced by the introduction of new legislative frameworks aimed at identifying alternative sources of financing for the arts and culture (Klamer et al., 2006; Klamer, 2013; Ponzini, 2010).

Private sector participation in heritage conservation is not without challenges. These include cultural differences, complex legislative contexts, limited transparency among partners and lengthy project lead times. Further difficulties relate to bureaucratic procedures, dissatisfaction with intermediary project management, the allocation of corporate funds and limited control over their use (Starr, 2010). Examining PPPs in heritage conservation in Croatia, Abdou (2023) identifies additional challenges, including insufficient political commitment, limited understanding of PPP mechanisms among public authorities, the non-competitive nature of private operators, an unfavourable economic environment and the misrepresentation of PPPs.

The main objective of this article is to develop a nuanced understanding of the challenges encountered by heritage PPPs. Accordingly, a qualitative case study approach was adopted as the primary research strategy. This approach enables an in-depth exploration and interpretation of a phenomenon within its specific context (Rashid et al., 2019). Its adoption is grounded in the assumption that social reality is constructed through complex interactions and underlying mechanisms (Stark & Torrance, 2005).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with private-sector representatives responsible for managing the Quarantine Station (Q02 and Q04) and a member of the local community (Q06). A triangulation strategy combining interviews with a review of secondary sources was employed to enhance the robustness of the findings. Secondary data, including documents and reports published by local and state authorities and the private partner, provided valuable insights into the site's former condition, the rationale for adopting the PPP and its intended outcomes. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, an approach suitable when researchers seek perspectives from individuals with specialized knowledge and experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Merkens, 2004).

On the Meaning of Public–Private Partnerships

Governments, for centuries, have utilized private contractors to provide various public services, indicating a long-standing history of PPPs (English, 2006; Forrer et al., 2010; Hodge et al., 2018). More recently, significant transformations have occurred in the management and control of state-owned institutions and in the mechanisms employed by governments worldwide to deliver public services. The emergence of New Public Management (NPM)[2] has been marked by a notable interest in partnerships

between government and the private sector to deliver services that were conventionally provided by the public sector (English, 2006; English & Guthrie, 2003).

However, Ferk and Ferk (2017) contest this claim, challenging the association between PPPs and modern development. They argue that concepts such as contracting-out[3] and concessions have deep roots, dating back to the Roman Empire. Such collaborations were characterized by long-term partnerships and risk-sharing between parties (Ferk & Ferk, 2017), although the latter was often implicitly implied (Hodge & Greve, 2017). Risk-sharing represents a relatively modern approach even within this historical context, aligning with contemporary conceptual standards of PPPs (Ferk & Ferk, 2017).

The relatively recent surge of PPPs can be attributed to several factors. For instance, there is a widespread belief that the private sector can bring innovation, creativity, efficiency and expertise (Chen et al., 2017; Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2021; Warsen et al., 2018). Additionally, PPPs are perceived as a means to improve timely and cost-effective project delivery and to enhance transparency (Reynaers, 2013). Hodge and Greve (2017) define PPPs as 'long-term contractual arrangements between the government and a private partner whereby the latter delivers and funds public services using a capital asset, sharing the associated risk'. Similarly, Warsen et al. (2018) describe PPPs as 'cooperation between public and private actors with a durable character in which actors develop mutual products and/or services and in which risks, costs and profits are shared'. The challenge of establishing a universally agreed definition of PPPs is linked to the existence of multiple models that vary across countries and sectors, as well as to ideological advocacy and conceptual ambiguity (Abdou, 2023; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2011; Mota & Moreira, 2015).

The Rationale for Using Public–Private Partnerships

One of the main tenets underlying the use of PPPs is risk allocation. In traditional arrangements, the public sector assumed various risks associated with financial and maintenance aspects. However, in PPPs, most project-related risks are transferred to the private partner (Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2015; Yescombe, 2007), which constitutes a defining feature of PPPs (Visconti et al., 2017). The sharing of risks and responsibilities between public and private entities enhances the responsiveness of each sector to social, political and market changes (Kim & Choi, 2018).

The primary objective of risk allocation is to incentivize the private partner to deliver high-quality and cost-effective services on time. However, when discussing risk allocation, a common misconception arises, namely that all risks should be transferred to the private sector, which may act as a deterrent to PPP adoption (Glaister, 1999). Effective risk management can reduce project costs, and risks should be allocated to the partner best equipped to manage them efficiently (Clark & Hakim, 2019).

Another key motivation for adopting PPPs lies in leveraging private sector expertise and innovation (Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2021; Warsen et al., 2018). A major advantage of PPPs is their capacity to encourage private partners to innovate in order to address unforeseen challenges or improve service delivery (Feigenbaum, 2019). Robert et al. (2014) argue that the private sector is capable of delivering higher-quality services due to its access to advanced technologies, thereby enhancing both project quality and service provision. The private sector is expected to generate optimal benefits when contractual agreements include facility operation and maintenance, thereby motivating it to employ innovative approaches across the project lifecycle (Yescombe, 2007).

Value for money (VfM) is another central concept in PPPs, referring to the optimum balance between whole-life costs and service quality in meeting public-sector requirements (Scott & Robinson, 2009). Rather than focusing solely on the lowest bid, VfM considers lifecycle costs, risk allocation and long-term performance. PPPs are therefore expected to demonstrate greater value than traditional

procurement (Kweun et al., 2018; Torchia & Calabrò, 2018). Key determinants of VfM include risk transfer, long-term contracting, competition, performance measurement, incentives and private-sector management capability (Torchia & Calabrò, 2018). By bundling design, construction, operation and maintenance, PPPs encourage efficient service delivery and innovative investment decisions that minimize long-term operating and maintenance costs (Chung et al., 2010; English, 2006).

The Rationale Against the Use of Public–Private Partnerships

When debates surrounding PPPs arise, complex contracts and hold-up problems are frequently identified as major criticisms (Ng & Loosemore, 2007). Hold-up problems occur when unforeseen circumstances or incomplete information undermine the self-enforcing nature of contractual agreements. The complexity of PPP contracts is further intensified by the difficulty of anticipating all future contingencies in large-scale, long-term projects, resulting in incomplete contracts and increasing the risk of time and cost overruns during negotiations (Alexandersson & Hultén, 2007). Moreover, the bidding process is often costly and time-consuming, with public-sector assessments potentially lasting up to 2 years and generating substantial transaction costs for bidders (Chinyio & Gameson, 2009; Pollitt, 2005). Kumar (2018) further argues that hold-up problems emerge when one party attempts to capture benefits beyond the original agreement at the expense of another. These situations are particularly likely when asset-specific investments generate quasi-rents vulnerable to opportunistic behaviour or when unforeseen circumstances are insufficiently addressed in contracts. In such cases, parties may exploit contractual ambiguities or gaps to pursue additional benefits through legal or renegotiation mechanisms (Kumar, 2018).

Competition-related risks represent another major criticism of PPPs. While concepts such as market-based competition, transparency and risk-sharing are considered essential for sustaining long-term PPP contracts and successfully achieving PPP objectives, these principles often remain elusive in practice (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2011; Mota & Moreira, 2015; Reynaers, 2013). Several factors hinder the development of innovative and long-term PPP arrangements, including deregulation challenges and barriers to competition (Bloomfield, 2006; Bovaird, 2010).

Regarding deregulation, PPP projects requiring innovative business arrangements may, in some cases, be incompatible with existing policies and procurement laws. Consequently, competitive procurement requirements may be relaxed to accommodate the distinctive characteristics of PPPs. This reflects the argument that PPPs should be ‘unencumbered by the multitude of regulations’ (Bloomfield, 2006). Bloomfield also illustrates this through the Plymouth, Massachusetts, case, where county officials secured legislative approval for a long-term lease agreement exempt from standard bidding and oversight requirements. While these exemptions increased contractual flexibility, they also reduced competition and financial oversight, allowing the private development team greater discretion in determining contractual arrangements, including billing rates and rules (Bloomfield, 2006)

Turning to competition, some scholars argue that developing PPPs within a competitive environment is inherently challenging (Bloomfield, 2006; Keränen, 2017). PPPs are frequently criticized for their limited ability to achieve transparency and cost savings (Keränen, 2017). Moreover, stringent selection criteria may restrict the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises, while the scale of PPP projects often limits competition to a small number of well-capitalized firms (Hueskes et al., 2017; Mutambatsere, 2017).

The frequent occurrence of stakeholder conflicts and lack of trust represents another significant criticism of PPPs (Torchia & Calabrò, 2018). Such conflicts extend beyond relationships between public and private partners to include interactions with other stakeholders, potentially affecting partnership

performance (Brewer & Hayllar, 2005). PPPs are particularly vulnerable to conflict due to their long-term nature, complex legal arrangements and the involvement of stakeholders with diverse interests and expectations. Common sources of conflict include poor communication, unrealistic expectations, resource constraints, ineffective management, inappropriate project design and inadequate contractual documentation (Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2021).

Public–Private Partnerships and Heritage Management in Australia

Australia has developed a mature PPP market, with nearly two decades of experience establishing PPPs as a major procurement mechanism for delivering large-scale infrastructure and related services (Cheung et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2014). Initially concentrated in a limited number of sectors, PPPs have since expanded across a broader range of infrastructure projects, particularly those involving integrated service delivery by the private sector (Cheung et al., 2009; Curtain & Betts, 2017). In Australia, PPPs refer to long-term contractual arrangements between the public and private sectors for delivering infrastructure and related services (Curtain & Betts, 2017). Their growth has been driven by governments' adoption of NPM reforms, efforts to limit public debt, increasing public expectations for service quality, resistance to higher taxation and Australia's large geographic scale relative to its population (English, 2005; English & Guthrie, 2003).

Although Australia has no dedicated PPP legislation, the National PPP Policy and Guidelines establish the principles, procurement processes and standard risk-allocation practices that govern PPP implementation. These operate alongside jurisdiction-specific requirements developed by individual states (Donnelly et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2014). Victoria is widely recognized as the leading Australian jurisdiction in PPP policy development (English, 2005; Sharp & Tinsley, 2005). Its Partnerships Victoria policy, introduced in 2000, later formed the basis of the National PPP Policy and Guidelines adopted in 2008, providing a common framework for infrastructure procurement across Australia (Curtain & Betts, 2017; Hodge & Duffield, 2010). Australia's statutory heritage framework operates through a three-tier system—Commonwealth, state and local government—responsible for identifying, protecting and conserving places of cultural significance (Amar et al., 2017; Lush, 2008).

The Australian Federal Government has demonstrated its commitment to heritage, particularly with the introduction of the Australian Heritage Commission Act (AHC Act)[4] in 1975 (Armitage & Irons, 2013). However, in an effort to establish a more robust framework for intergovernmental relations in environmental protection, the abolition of the AHC became necessary, leading to the introduction of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act), which came into force in 2000 (Amar et al., 2023; Lush, 2008). This EPBC Act broadened the original definition and scope of heritage in Australia (Armitage & Irons, 2013), ensuring legal protection for World Heritage-listed properties. Its subsequent revisions introduced measures for compliance and enforcement, as well as a framework for identifying and safeguarding nationally significant places and defining Commonwealth responsibilities (Lush, 2008).

At the national level, the Department of the Environment and Water Resources is responsible for identifying, assessing and managing places on the World, National and Commonwealth Heritage Lists, while state Heritage Councils administer state heritage legislation and maintain State Heritage Registers (Amar et al., 2017; Lush, 2008). At the local level, heritage protection is implemented through planning systems, although approaches vary between jurisdictions. Local councils identify, assess and manage heritage places through development plans, heritage schedules or planning overlays, depending on state legislation (Amar et al., 2017; Lush, 2008).

The Case Study: The North Head Quarantine Station

The North Head Quarantine Station has played a significant role in Australia's history (Anderson, 2012). It operated as a quarantine station for travellers arriving by sea, and later by air, between 1828 and 1984 (Figure 1). During this period, the Commonwealth owned the site under the Quarantine Act 1908. Following its closure in 1984, ownership was transferred to the New South Wales Government, and the site became part of the Sydney Harbour National Park (Clarke et al., 2010; Goh & Williams, 2011).

The station's heritage significance is reflected in its buildings, structures, artefacts and historical associations. As Australia's first quarantine station, it played a central role in the country's immigration history and continues to serve as an important resource for education and research. Its social significance stems from its historical function and contribution to Australia's development (Figure 2). Consequently, discussions about the site's future have focused on balancing heritage conservation with adaptive reuse. The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has explored alternative uses that respect the site's historical significance while ensuring it remains an active heritage place rather than a static museum (Darcy & Wearing, 2009; Wearing & Darcy, 1998).

The site's significance is further enhanced by its status as the oldest, largest and most intact quarantine station in Australia. It documents changing scientific approaches to quarantine and evolving social and racial attitudes, while illustrating broader themes of immigration, governance and social development. The site also possesses important Aboriginal heritage values through culturally significant places and archaeological remains (Darcy & Wearing, 2009; Wearing & Darcy, 1998).

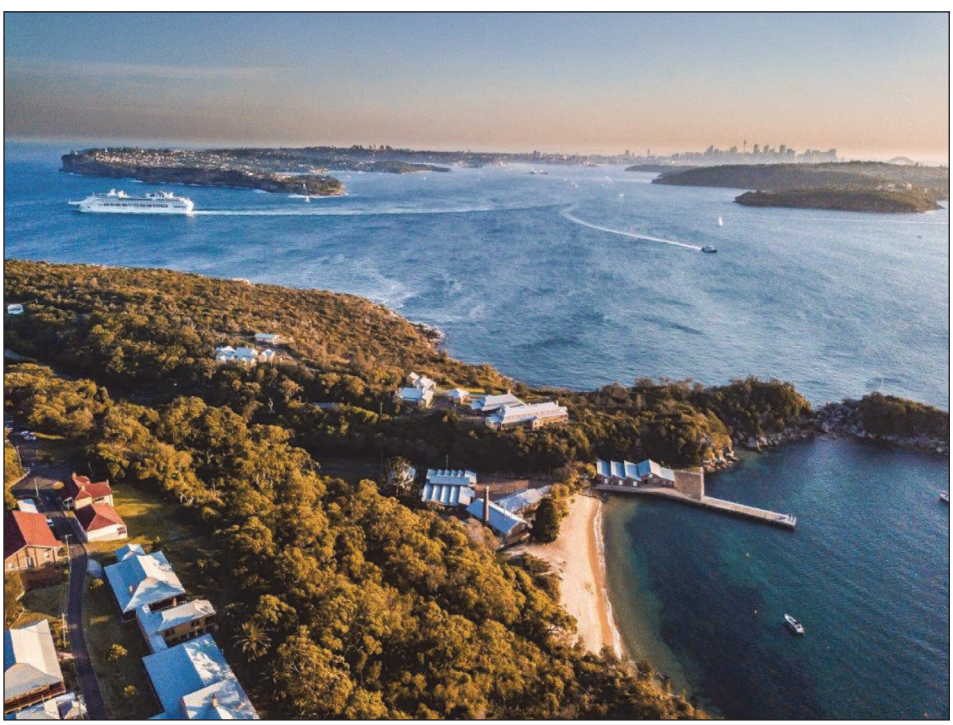


Figure 1. View of the North Head Quarantine Station. The Mawland Group.

Source: The photos' source is the represenative of the Mawland group who shared this photos and other files during the interview process.



Figure 2. Inscriptions Illustrating the Importance of the Site. The Mawland Group.

Source: The photos' source is the represenative of the Mawland group who shared this photos and other files during the interview process.

The New South Wales Government and the NPWS used the site for conferences, accommodation and guided interpretation programmes. However, revenue from these activities was insufficient to fund its ongoing conservation and maintenance. These financial pressures led the NPWS to seek alternative funding arrangements through a long-term lease awarded via an expression of interest process (Goh & Williams, 2011; Wearing & Darcy, 1998).

North Head Quarantine Station and Public–Private Partnership

After a prolonged negotiation and planning period of approximately 15 years, involving several interested private contractors, the NPWS entered into a 'Conditional Agreement to Lease' with the Mawland Group in 2000. The PPP arrangement and the associated approval processes continued until the contractual agreement was finalized in 2006 (Goh & Williams, 2011).

The Mawland Group explained that the adaptive reuse proposal was designed to generate revenue for the site's conservation while improving public access, marketing and interpretation. It was also expected to provide financial returns to the NPWS to support conservation activities across Sydney Harbour National Park. As part of the agreement, the Mawland Group undertook a comprehensive assessment of the site's physical condition, previous conservation works, public access and interpretation and prepared an economic impact assessment as part of the environmental approval process (Darcy & Wearing, 2009).

Despite the lengthy negotiations between the NPWS and the Mawland Group, the partnership has been recognized as a leading example of heritage conservation through adaptive reuse in Australia. The project transformed a deteriorating heritage site into a major cultural tourism destination while improving opportunities for interpreting its historical significance (NSW, 2017). The Mawland Group managed the Quarantine Station as a heritage tourism precinct, incorporating a visitor centre and museum, accommodation, guided tours and a restaurant (Goh & Williams, 2011; NSW, 2012).

The project has been widely recognized for successfully conserving both natural and cultural heritage. No major environmental impacts have been reported; the site's heritage fabric has been preserved, and public access, interpretation and educational services have improved. These achievements have established the Quarantine Station as one of Australia's leading PPP examples in heritage conservation, earning several awards (Macdonald & Cheong, 2014). Nevertheless, this success has been tempered by challenges that emerged during both the planning and implementation phases.

Discussion

Despite the widely recognized significance of the Quarantine Station partnership and its successful conservation outcomes, closer examination reveals several challenges encountered throughout its implementation. These challenges extended beyond operational and administrative issues to encompass broader governance, institutional and financial dynamics that shaped the partnership. In particular, limited public acceptance, prolonged negotiations, complex decision-making processes and constrained economic returns emerged as key factors affecting the project's effectiveness and long-term viability. The following discussion critically examines these interconnected challenges in relation to the empirical findings and the broader PPP literature.

Governance and Public Acceptance

The challenges encountered in the Quarantine Station PPP highlight the centrality of governance and public legitimacy in heritage partnerships. While PPPs are often justified on the grounds of efficiency and resource mobilization, this case demonstrates that their success is equally contingent upon public acceptance and perceived legitimacy. In this regard, the findings resonate with governance theory, which emphasizes that the effectiveness of PPP arrangements extends beyond contractual efficiency to include accountability, transparency and societal acceptance (Brewer & Hayllar, 2005). The project faced significant public opposition to leasing the site to a private partner, reflecting concerns that the site's irreplaceable cultural value could be compromised under private management and control (Interviewee Q06)

Public opposition to the leasing of the site reflects a broader tension between commercialization and the preservation of cultural value. This tension is consistent with the wider PPP literature (Starr, 2010), which highlights the challenges of aligning market-based mechanisms with public value objectives. The opposition expressed by the local community was not simply directed at private-sector involvement, but reflected broader concerns regarding accountability, transparency and control over heritage assets. This supports the argument that public resistance to PPPs is often driven by governance-related concerns rather than purely cultural considerations (Brewer & Hayllar, 2005). However, the findings also suggest that in heritage contexts these concerns are amplified by the symbolic and irreplaceable nature of cultural heritage.

Wilson et al. (2009) further argue that PPPs are often associated with the commercial exploitation of heritage properties at a time when heritage sites are already under pressure from unsustainable management, excessive visitation and environmental hazards. Consequently, concerns arise that prioritizing profitability over protection may undermine the values and attributes that define heritage sites (Wilson et al., 2009). In response, the Mawland Group adopted measures to strengthen community acceptance, including providing local employment and volunteering opportunities, maintaining public access and enhancing heritage interpretation (Interviewee Q06). These initiatives sought to address concerns surrounding private-sector involvement while reinforcing the site's public value.

From a governance perspective, the case underscores the importance of inclusive stakeholder engagement in heritage PPPs. The initial lack of public support suggests that the partnership suffered from limited participatory processes during its early stages. This observation aligns with the view that PPP governance should incorporate deliberative and participatory dimensions rather than relying solely on formal contractual arrangements (Torchia & Calabrò, 2018). The subsequent revision of management plans and the Commission of Inquiry (Macdonald & Cheong, 2014) demonstrate how insufficient early engagement can lead to institutional delays and increased transaction costs, providing empirical support for governance-based explanations linking limited stakeholder integration to implementation challenges. Furthermore, the findings reveal that public opposition acted not only as a constraint but also as a corrective mechanism within PPP governance. Although it prolonged negotiations and increased uncertainty for the private partner, it also resulted in stricter conservation conditions and stronger safeguards for public access (Interviewee Q06). This dual role can be understood as a form of informal accountability, where societal pressure compensates for potential shortcomings in formal governance arrangements. Accordingly, stakeholder opposition should be viewed not only as a barrier but also as a governance mechanism capable of enhancing accountability and improving outcomes in culturally sensitive contexts.

The strategies adopted by the Mawland Group to mitigate public opposition—particularly through community involvement in employment and volunteering—demonstrate the practical importance of securing social acceptance in heritage PPPs. This concept is closely aligned with broader governance frameworks that emphasize the need for sustained public trust and acceptance. The study thus suggests that, beyond formal contractual arrangements, the long-term viability of PPPs depends on their ability to maintain ongoing societal approval through meaningful stakeholder engagement.

These governance challenges and competing stakeholder interests also affected the partnership's implementation, contributing to the lengthy and complex negotiation process.

The Long Negotiation Process

The Quarantine Station PPP was characterized by a prolonged and complex negotiation phase, reflecting a broader structural feature of PPP arrangements, particularly in heritage contexts. The negotiation process spanned from 1993 to the finalization of the contractual agreement in 2006, demonstrating the lengthy preparation period often required for complex, long-term contractual arrangements in which uncertainty and asset specificity are high (Alexandersson & Hultén, 2007; Pollitt, 2005).

From an empirical perspective, the private partner perceived this prolonged process as burdensome and resource-intensive. As noted by Interviewee Q02, the negotiations were 'highly intricate and exhausting', requiring substantial financial and organizational investment. Legal and consultancy costs reportedly reached approximately AUD 1 million, illustrating the significant transaction costs associated with PPP formation (Interviewee Q02).

The findings indicate that heritage-based PPPs, unlike conventional infrastructure projects, require detailed conservation requirements, regulatory constraints and diverse stakeholder interests to be incorporated into contractual agreements. In this case, the Mawland Group was required to demonstrate its capacity to preserve the Site while complying with a wide range of regulatory conditions imposed by public authorities. This involved engagement with multiple regulatory bodies and additional agreements, including those associated with the Commission of Inquiry (Interviewee Q04). As explained by Macdonald and Cheong (2014), these obligations included preparing detailed site-wide plans covering conservation activities, interpretation, visitor management, landscape, movable heritage and infrastructure. The government also required a revised conservation management plan, area-specific conservation management plans, a species impact assessment and the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry. Consequently, the leasing and approval process extended over 8 years, increasing costs, delays and risks for both partners (Macdonald & Cheong, 2014).

The prolonged negotiations also reflect governance challenges associated with allocating risks between the public and private sectors. PPP theory emphasizes that risks should be assigned to the party best able to manage them efficiently (Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2015; Yescombe, 2007). However, in heritage PPPs, safeguarding cultural significance often necessitates extensive contractual conditions and evaluation procedures. While these measures are essential for protecting heritage values, they increase regulatory complexity and may reduce the attractiveness of such projects for private investors.

The findings also highlight an imbalance in the allocation of responsibilities during the negotiation process. While the public sector retained regulatory authority and oversight, the private partner bore substantial upfront costs associated with preparing proposals, complying with approval requirements and sustaining prolonged negotiations without guaranteed returns. As Interviewee Q02 observed, such processes often overlook the financial limitations of private operators, who must commit significant resources before any revenue generation is achieved. These prolonged negotiations extended beyond the formation stage, delaying revenue-generating activities and affecting the project's financial viability. This demonstrates that negotiation inefficiencies are not merely procedural challenges but have direct economic consequences for PPP performance.

Decision-making-related Challenges

The decision-making process within the Quarantine Station PPP emerged as a significant challenge, particularly in relation to the speed and coordination of project implementation. From the perspective of the private partner, delays in decision-making were perceived as a major constraint on operational efficiency. As highlighted by Interviewee Q02, the private sector typically operates within a framework that prioritizes rapid responses and timely execution. In contrast, public-sector processes are often characterized by procedural rigidity and slower administrative timelines. This divergence reflects a broader structural tension identified in PPP literature (Chinyio & Gameson, 2009; Pollitt, 2005) between the efficiency-oriented logic of private actors and the rule-bound, accountability-driven nature of public institutions.

Heritage management systems and legislative frameworks in Australia, as contended by Amar et al. (2017), are often associated with slow and complex decision-making processes. In the Quarantine Station case, these complicated dynamics delayed conservation and rehabilitation activities, as multiple approvals and regulatory requirements had to be satisfied before work could proceed. This observation aligns with existing literature (Liu et al., 2014; Rybnicek et al., 2020), which highlights how formal regulatory frameworks and procedural requirements shape organizational behaviour and slow decision-making in PPP environments.

The complexity of decision-making was particularly evident where conservation requirements conflicted with operational and safety considerations. According to Interviewee Q02, the private partner frequently encountered difficulties when undertaking necessary interventions to heritage buildings, particularly where modifications were required to meet contemporary safety standards. For example, the installation of handrails—now considered a basic safety requirement—became a subject of debate among public authorities and stakeholders. This illustrates the challenge of balancing functional adaptation with heritage conservation principles, a recurring theme in the literature (Bullen & Love, 2010; Friedman, 2018).

The presence of multiple public agencies further complicated decision-making, as these entities often held various views regarding acceptable conservation practices. Disagreements arose over whether new additions should be introduced to heritage structures or whether the original fabric should remain untouched. Thus, the private partner was required to reconcile conflicting directives while awaiting final decisions from public authorities (Interviewee Q02). These delays affected project timelines and increased operational uncertainty, reflecting governance challenges identified in PPP literature, where multi-actor involvement and overlapping responsibilities contribute to coordination failures and procedural delays (Torchia & Calabrò, 2018).

These challenges can also be understood through established conservation principles, particularly those outlined in the Burra Charter (Armitage & Irons, 2013; Kayan, 2015). The Charter advocates minimal intervention while respecting the cultural significance of original fabric and ensuring that new additions remain distinguishable from existing structures (Australia ICOMOS, 2000; Conejos et al., 2016). In the Quarantine Station case, these principles established strict parameters for permissible interventions, contributing to prolonged stakeholder deliberations and demonstrating how professional conservation standards can limit the flexibility required for adaptive reuse within heritage PPPs. Nevertheless, these principles are fundamental to safeguarding the integrity and authenticity of heritage values. Resolving this tension ultimately required negotiated compromise. As noted by Interviewee Q02, the Mawland Group was eventually permitted to introduce essential safety features, provided that these remained distinguishable from the original heritage fabric.

Financial Uncertainty During the Operational Phase

The financial dimension of the Quarantine Station PPP reveals a fundamental tension between the economic logic of PPPs and the intrinsic characteristics of heritage conservation. While PPPs are typically justified based on value for money and efficient risk allocation, this study illustrates the challenges faced by private partners in achieving satisfactory financial returns in heritage contexts, where revenue generation is influenced by uncertain demand and operational constraints. Hence, it is important to distinguish between project-level success and private-sector financial performance. Although the project achieved significant conservation and public access outcomes, the financial returns available to the private partner remained limited, revealing tensions between heritage objectives and commercial expectations.

According to Interviewee Q02, the Mawland Group was unable to fully recoup its investment of approximately AUD 20 million, illustrating the financial pressures experienced by the private partner. These pressures were compounded by recurring obligations, including annual site rent of approximately AUD 450,000, in addition to taxes and staffing costs. Together, these expenses demonstrate the substantial financial burden associated with maintaining commercial viability within a heritage PPP (Interviewee Q02).

A central issue concerns the allocation of financial and demand-related risks. In this partnership, these risks were largely transferred to the private partner despite the uncertain revenue streams associated with

heritage sites. PPP theory emphasizes that risks should be allocated to the party best able to manage them efficiently (Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2015; Yescombe, 2007). However, this case suggests a misalignment between this principle and its practical application, as private operators were expected to absorb risks largely influenced by external tourism conditions.

Income generation at the Quarantine Station relied heavily on tourism-related activities, including accommodation, events and hospitality services, making revenue particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in visitor demand. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed this vulnerability by significantly reducing visitor numbers and intensifying financial pressures on the private operator (Interviewee Q04). This raises broader questions regarding the extent to which demand-related risks can realistically be managed or shared within tourism-dependent heritage PPPs. The challenge is not the transfer of demand risk itself, which is common in PPP arrangements, but whether private partners possess sufficient capacity and contractual mechanisms to manage risks driven by external tourism conditions. Although PPP agreements commonly include force majeure provisions for extraordinary events (Nugraheni, 2022), the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the limitations of anticipating the scale and duration of such disruptions. As Casady and Baxter (2020) argue, these events raise important questions regarding whether such risks should remain solely with private partners or be more equitably shared between public and private sectors.

Moreover, the absence of adequate government support mechanisms further constrained the project's financial position. Unlike many heritage organizations that can access grants or public funding, the Mawland Group remained ineligible despite its responsibility for conserving a site of significant cultural value. The absence of incentives such as rent reductions, tax relief or financial subsidies suggests a structural imbalance in which the private partner was expected to fulfil both commercial and conservation objectives without sufficient institutional support (Interviewee Q02).

Furthermore, these financial pressures reveal structural limitations in the financial design of heritage PPPs. Unlike conventional infrastructure projects, heritage sites operate within conservation frameworks that may restrict commercial adaptation and revenue-generating opportunities, creating a trade-off between maintaining heritage values and pursuing commercial objectives. At the same time, private operators remain responsible for substantial fixed costs, including maintenance, rent and staffing obligations. These conditions suggest that heritage PPPs require more nuanced financial structures that recognize heritage assets as both economic resources and public goods. Achieving conservation outcomes while generating sufficient financial returns may therefore remain difficult without appropriate risk-sharing mechanisms and public-sector support. These financial challenges also complicate conventional interpretations of PPP success. Although the Quarantine Station project has been recognized for its conservation achievements and enhanced public access (Macdonald & Cheong, 2014), the limited financial returns available to the private partner reveal a more multidimensional reality. This supports the argument that PPP success should be assessed not only through heritage outcomes but also through financial performance and the distribution of risks and rewards among stakeholders (Hodge et al., 2018; Johnston & Gudergan, 2007).

The Mawland Group's decision to sell the lease before its expiration may be interpreted as a consequence of these financial constraints, including both explicit factors such as retirement intentions and implicit concerns related to limited returns and incentives (Interviewee Q04). More broadly, the case highlights the importance of balanced risk allocation and supportive policy frameworks in sustaining long-term private sector participation in heritage PPPs. Inadequate incentives and uneven responsibilities may reduce the attractiveness of such partnerships, underscoring the need for context-sensitive financial models that reflect the distinctive characteristics of heritage assets.

The four dimensions examined in this discussion—governance and public acceptance, negotiation processes, decision-making dynamics and financial performance—should be understood as interconnected

rather than isolated challenges. Governance and legitimacy concerns shaped negotiation processes, which influenced contractual arrangements and decision-making during implementation. These institutional and procedural challenges were subsequently reflected in financial pressures affecting the private partner's ability to achieve expected returns. Their interdependence highlights the systemic nature of challenges in heritage PPPs and the need for integrated approaches that address governance, institutional and financial dimensions simultaneously.

Conclusion

Various governments worldwide have utilized PPPs to deliver public projects across multiple sectors, with their application in heritage conservation increasing in recent years. However, as this study demonstrates, heritage PPPs involve significant challenges, including governance-related issues and limited public support, prolonged negotiation processes, decision-making constraints, insufficient government support and difficulties in achieving expected financial returns for private partners.

This study highlights the need for further comparative research to identify recurring challenges across different heritage PPP contexts and develop more robust analytical frameworks to support their assessment and implementation. A better understanding of these challenges can help partners and stakeholders manage competing interests more effectively. Nevertheless, achieving a universally 'successful' PPP remains complex, given the diversity of stakeholder expectations and the multiple criteria through which success is evaluated.

The findings extend PPP literature by demonstrating that heritage contexts introduce distinctive governance, institutional and financial complexities that limit the direct application of conventional PPP models. Consequently, future heritage PPP frameworks should adopt more context-sensitive approaches based on balanced risk allocation, participatory governance, diversified financing mechanisms and stronger stakeholder engagement. Such approaches recognize heritage assets as both economic resources and public goods, providing a more resilient foundation for balancing conservation objectives with long-term private-sector participation.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr Jan Schnellenbach for his meaningful insights and comments on an earlier version of this article. I am also indebted to the Mawland Group for their generous contribution and the data they provided for this research, as this study would not have been accomplished without their invaluable assistance.

Data Availability Statement

The data sets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. For example, the Council of Europe has called for the establishment of guidelines outlining best practices for PPPs in heritage conservation. Similarly, UNESCO has recognized partnerships in the cultural sector as a pivotal means of bridging funding gaps in the public sector, while also providing attractive investment opportunities for private partners (Ferri & Zan, 2017).
2. According to Ferk and Ferk (2017), NPM emerged in the UK during the 1980s under the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major. The concept has since been used to describe a broad range of public management reforms implemented worldwide (Schedler & Proeller, 2002). NPM can be understood through three interrelated dimensions: as a set of actions guided by specific beliefs and aimed at achieving particular outcomes; as a field of academic inquiry; and as a collection of practices embedded in contemporary public sector reforms (Dawson & Dargie, 2002).
3. In the traditional contracting-out model, the government defines the terms and conditions of service delivery. The public sector specifies its requirements and desired outcomes before initiating a competitive bidding process. Private contractors are then invited to submit proposals that meet the predefined criteria and constraints, with a strong emphasis on cost-effectiveness (Forrer et al., 2010).
4. The AHC was a statutorily independent advisory body responsible for identifying and advising on places of historic, natural and Indigenous significance in Australia, while maintaining the Register of the National Estate (RNE). Although the RNE recognized the cultural significance of places at local, state and national levels, the national heritage legislation provided limited protection, as the AHC Act did not establish civil or criminal penalties for breaches (Lush, 2008).

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