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Submission to the Hon. Peter Garrett AM, MP
Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts

National Cultural Policy consultation.

8 February 2010

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Declaration of interests and affiliations	None of the contributors has any direct personal interest in the matters addressed by this submission.

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1. Submission to the National Cultural Policy consultation

1.1. About the Collections Council

The collections sector includes natural and social history museums, art galleries, libraries, archives, Indigenous keeping places and knowledge centres, historical societies and collections held in schools and universities, community and government organisations and businesses. Collections are an integral part of Australian life and play a role in documenting and interpreting Australian identity, values and achievement.

As the peak body for cultural and scientific collecting organisations in Australia, the Collections Council of Australia (CCA) was initiated and supported by the Cultural Ministers Council. We speak for collections in Australia, on matters of shared interest.

The Council's vision is to see all Australians and their governments committed to policies and practices that ensure Australia's collections inspire, amaze, inform and delight all Australians and the world forever.

Keys to achieving this vision include:

- Coordination of effort across the collections sector;
- Strengthening of links between the collections sector and other sectors such as community, education, industry, government and research; and
- Stimulation of greater awareness and use of collections.

Information about our full range of activities is available at www.collectionscouncil.com.au.

In October 2009 the CCA was notified of a Cultural Ministers Council decision to cease our funding after June 2010. The organisation will close prior to that date, but several CCA projects will be taken up and continued by new custodians. All CCA resources will remain available online for a period of time after the closure.

1.2. This submission

The CCA thanks the Hon. Peter Garrett AM, MP, Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, for the opportunity to contribute to the development of a National Cultural Policy.

The CCA believes that a comprehensive National Cultural Policy must include principles and commitments to the care of collections. The nation's collections, that are held by archives, galleries, libraries and museums, hold the historical evidence from which communities build their understanding of values, identity, culture, environment and scientific phenomena.

Collections provide the context, knowledge and basis with which communities and individuals inform their decision-making. Collections can inspire creativity and innovation for tackling contemporary and future problems. They can educate students, inspire artists and enrich the cultural vitality of the places where they are held.

The collections sector is a much larger industry than many realise, and contributes significantly to the Australian culture and economy. Governments spend more than \$2 billion on these collections each year. There are more than 50,000 paid and unpaid workers in the sector. There are more than 73 million on site visits to collecting organisations each year, while those collecting organisations record many millions of online visits.¹ Students from primary through to higher education make use of collections during school visits, while recent initiatives have seen the use of digital material sourced from collections in the classroom. Material sourced from collections is used in the Australian media, including film, television² and new media initiatives, and is used to represent Australia overseas³.

The CCA notes the Minister's affirmation, in his address to the National Press Club announcing this consultation, that 'all Australians, whatever their background' have a right to 'the benefits of cultural activity'. We were pleased to hear his explanation that 'Keeping culture strong' includes maintaining and developing the key institutions of our culture; our **galleries, museums, libraries** and major performing arts companies' (emphasis added). The CCA would like to remind the Minister that Federal and State funded and community **archives** are also storehouses of the nation's culture.

A strong commitment to the nation's collections in the National Cultural Policy could prompt improvements in standards of care, justify funding for their management and use, and reflect the significance of this major cultural sector.

The submission considers the Minister's key themes in relation to collections. Sections of the submission also identify relevant elements from the discussion framework. The CCA would welcome any opportunity to discuss this submission in greater detail.

2. Recommendations

The Collections Council of Australia recommends that the National Cultural Policy:

- 1. Explicitly state that cultural, historic, artistic and scientific collections are integral to the cultural sector in Australia. This statement should also acknowledge the importance of supporting diverse collections, reflecting the cultural diversity of our nation.**
- 2. Recognise that Australia's collections are not on a sustainable footing. To redress this deficiency it is necessary to scope long term strategies, underpinned by a national review of Australia's collections.**

- 3. Make a strong commitment to protecting, preserving, and making collections accessible for present and future generations. The Policy should highlight the enormous potential of well-coordinated, discoverable digital collections.**
- 4. Emphasise the value of collections in education and research, and in defining and promoting Australia here and abroad.**
- 5. Commit to best practice in the care and interpretation of collections; and commit to supporting participation of Australians and their expertise in the international cultural heritage community.**
- 6. Embrace the challenge of fulfilling and promoting our international obligations concerning cultural heritage, domestically and internationally.**

The reasoning and experience that informed these recommendations is presented in the following sections of this submission.

3. *Keeping culture strong*

3.1. *Defining Australian culture*

Culture is a broad and elusive concept to capture. Determining National Cultural Policy is an exciting challenge, and can bring together conversations about art, performance, heritage, language, custom and diversity. In all of these areas, Australia's collections can and do make a contribution to culture.

The circulated Discussion Framework discusses culture in terms of values, traditions, attitudes and creative expression, enriching our quality of life and defining Australians to ourselves and others.

Historic, artistic and cultural collections help us understand our past, and interpret our present. They play a role in our national identity. Most Australians understand the significance of Ned Kelly's helmet from the State Library of Victoria, the remains of the *Batavia* in the Western Australian Museum's Shipwrecks Gallery, *The Aboriginal Memorial*, by Ramingining Artists in the National Gallery of Australia, and the *Hong Hai*, a boat in which 38 Vietnamese asylum seekers arrived in 1978, now in the collection of the National Museum of Australia. Frederick McCubbin's triptych *The Pioneer*, from the National Gallery of Victoria, the 1894 petition for women's suffrage submitted to the South Australian Parliament, and the Victoria Crosses held at the Australian War Memorial and in other collections are all easily identified as objects that contribute to our understanding of what it means to be Australian. These are objects which we use to tell ourselves a story, to 'define us to ourselves and others' (Discussion Framework #5).

While some objects can be immediately identified as objects of national significance, our cultural collections are also made up of generations of

agricultural machinery and household wares that tell of life in the early days of European settlement in the regions, historical objects from goldfields around the nation, traditional Indigenous tools and paintings, as well as contemporary Indigenous artworks. Collections include records of migration, mementoes of war, material from the protests about Indigenous rights, the Vietnam War, and women's rights. Audio-visual archives include footage of momentous events, such as the 1983 America's Cup win and the Corroboree 2000 Bridge Walk for Sorry Day, as well as footage of ordinary Australian life. These things considered together build our understanding of ourselves.

Collections also preserve historic records, including planning documents, records of decision making and policy, migration, housing, business and trade records. They hold records of our natural heritage, including specimens of animals now extinct, and climate records. They hold records of our great innovators, inventors and artists. An understanding of Australia today is built on this foundation of knowledge about where we have come from.

Australian art is recognised as unique and is something of which we should be proud. Our art collections care for centuries-old Indigenous art, internationally significant works, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous art from the last 200 years, right up to today. This canon traces the thread of changing Australian experience. We are lucky to have this context which can inform our understanding of contemporary arts and culture.

Collections are well used by visitors, students and users who access them digitally. They need a strong commitment from governments and appropriate resourcing to continue to play this role in our community. Diverse collections, including archives, galleries, libraries and museums preserve and promote Australian history and culture, and are an opportunity for many Australians and others to access that culture.

3.2. Regional collections

A new National Cultural Policy must recognize the breadth and diversity of culture in Australia's regions. While national collecting institutions maintain world class collections, the unique and varied regional collections must not be neglected. Supporting the diversity represented in the nation's smaller collections helps avoid homogeneity in the Australian cultural story. Australian culture reflects diverse strands of history, arts, population patterns, customs and trends that are impossible to reconcile in a single national institution.

It is equally important that these diverse collections are maintained in their locations. In *Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of collections* the importance of context is explored, with authors stating that 'Keeping items in their place of use, and understanding their context within it, and also in relation to wider social and historical movements and events, broadens understanding of their significance'.⁴ The significance of individual objects or other articles is increased by their relationship to other objects in the same collection, their physical location and the environment in which they are interpreted and exhibited.

Regional collecting organisations, historical societies and organisations managed by local government care for objects that are of national and international significance. Examples of this include the collection of megafauna fossils at Goyder in regional South Australia⁵, the Kelly Sash held by the Benalla Costume and Pioneer Museum⁶ and the medieval art and artifacts held by the Abbey Museum of Art and Archaeology.⁷

Support for small and regional collections should be included in a National Cultural Policy.

3.3. Indigenous cultures

As explained in the Minister's Discussion Framework, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is significant in Australian identity, and 'brings meaning to our nation with a culture unbroken in song, dance and stories over millennia' (#6). Indigenous communities have a fraught history with collecting organisations, but in recent decades this has become much more positive. Collecting organisations now play a role in preserving traditional objects, educating about the numerous Indigenous groups in our nation, maintaining Indigenous languages, and educating about traditional practices and the experience of those communities.

Indigenous collections are part of a living culture, and there are examples of collected objects being used to reinvigorate traditional practices. Collecting organisations also participate in the Government's *Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records* program, and support Indigenous Knowledge Centres in some parts of the country. These organisations also hold important records of some of the tragic historical events that define the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities over the past 200 years, and that *must* be remembered as part of the tumultuous history that defines our nation.

3.4. A sustainable collections sector

The CCA is aware that Australia's collections are not on a sustainable footing. Accordingly, in September 2009 the CCA outlined a plan to develop a 'sustainable collections sector model' that would address the challenges facing the sector. This solution was developed in response to a principal recommendation arising from the CCA's sector-wide Roundtable consultation in May 2008: to conduct an inquiry into Australia's collections.⁸

The announcement of plans to develop the CCA's model was circulated and re-published widely in the newsletters and updates of collections sector peak bodies, the email lists of professional associations, and in online and hard copy publications concerned with culture and the arts. This broad circulation and the resulting supportive feedback indicate enthusiasm in the sector for the CCA's solution, and awareness of the need for urgent action to preserve Australia's collections.

The proposed model was scoped to:

- facilitate better alignment between arts, heritage, environment, science, tourism, education and innovation policies so that Australia's collections are actively used to build Australia's sustainable future;
- identify new ways of recognising and sustaining Australia's Distributed National Collection;
- re-frame the structural and financial systems that support the collections sector.⁹

Recent decisions by the Cultural Ministers Council (CMC) to cease funding the CCA, and by DEWHA to close the Culture Portal, indicate a worrying shift away from strategic support for Australia's collections. This withdrawal of support is particularly concerning when the uncertain future of the Collections Australia Network is also taken into account. This is happening at a time when there is emerging recognition of the unexplored research, innovation and cultural potential of collections, and when the collections sector is facing unprecedented challenges in regard to digital issues.

The decision to cease funding the CCA means that the proposed model is not being developed to address common needs across the archive, gallery, library and museum collecting domains.

The short life cycles and under-resourcing of organisations like the CCA conspire to sideline collections: such organisations can only rarely engage with the much longer funding cycles of bodies such as universities and government departments.¹⁰

In October 2009, Dr Terry Cutler called for a 'national review of collections along similar lines to the pioneering 1999 Nugent review of the Performing Arts in Australia'. He proposed this review because his earlier recommendations encouraging the use of cultural collections as part of Australia's innovation agenda have not been acted upon. Cutler's proposed review would 'examine the best way forward for the national coordination and utilisation of Australia's collections, including the examination of new funding models'.¹¹

Cutler's speech, and the non-funding of the proposed HASS capability in the Strategic Roadmap for Australian Research Infrastructure, have helped the idea of a review of collections to gain greater momentum. The CCA has demonstrated that such a review has broad collections sector support. We believe that a review of Australia's collections has great capacity to contribute to a well-researched and fair National Cultural Policy for Australia that will be valued nationally and that will also position Australian culture well internationally.

4. Engaging the community

4.1. Supporting the use of collections

Collections are at their most valuable when they are well used by the community. They can be used for research, leisure and entertainment purposes.¹² They are a favoured destination for domestic and international tourists, and can provide activities and learning opportunities for children. Collections delight, amaze and inspire audiences of all ages. In order to be well used, collections must be well cared for, and interpreted. These are activities that require resources and support.

4.2. Education

There is enormous educational potential to be harnessed in collections. Collections provide ‘the intellectual and imaginative ground for broad understanding and connections’ (Discussion Framework #3), and presently play an important educational role. Traditionally, museums or galleries are perceived as good destinations for out of classroom learning opportunities. More recently, there has been some investment in generating digital learning resources from collections.

The scope of digitisation projects has been mostly limited to large collections that receive some level of funding. Some organisations have integrated digital initiatives into their existing education programs, while The Learning Federation’s Online Curriculum Content Initiative¹³ developed digital learning material from the collections of some major institutions. Ideally a strong commitment to regional collections in the National Cultural Policy would encourage small and regional organisations to make their collections digitally accessible, and guide resources to strategic areas making that possible. As explained above, diversity in regions’ collections should be appreciated, and the stories told through those collections benefit from the local context in which they are presented.

While digital resources are an excellent way to bring otherwise inaccessible collection items into the classroom for incorporation in the curriculum, they remain a ‘surrogate’ for the authentic object. Collections are able to provide primary source material for the study of history, art, science and culture at all levels. The CCA feels that it remains important to treasure our collections, and value the authentic object, while working to make collections digitally accessible.

Visits to local collections can equip students with the tools for further inquiry, extending their classroom experience. Engaging experiences at school level can educate students about the value of collections, and demonstrate the accessibility of these public organisations. They can encourage lifelong engagement with culture that can have positive social inclusion outcomes, and can have excellent cultural outcomes. As explained in the Discussion Framework (#3), ‘an education rich in culture and arts provides a strong foundation for learning, social engagement and skills development’.

The educational potential of collections is not limited to school aged children. Collections can provide primary reference material for those interested in science, art, history, genealogy and many other issues. Collecting organisations can be spaces to explore contemporary issues such as cultural diversity, climate change and land-care challenges, and biodiversity. These resources can be integrated into higher education programs, and can inspire original and innovative research. Well interpreted, freely accessible collections are open to all, however, and can inspire informal, non- traditional learning in people of all ages.

4.3. Digital initiatives

Digitisation offers an incredible opportunity to provide a new form of access to collections. Developing technologies give collecting organisations new options for interpretation and exhibition. Links can be created across different collecting organisations and regions, even across international borders. Layers of interpretation and research can be provided at the click of a button. Digital access to collection items can reduce handling, and open doors to objects, documents and photographs that might be rarely exhibited.

Digitisation is best undertaken in a coordinated fashion. The development of forward-thinking, high quality standards and metadata will make collections more discoverable, and reduce the risk that digitisation will need to be revisited in the future.

The coordinated digitisation of material held in public collections is an excellent opportunity to present authentic, quality Australian material online, which is a major contributor to this nation's image on the world stage. Countries such as New Zealand¹⁴, the European Union¹⁵, United Kingdom¹⁶ and Canada¹⁷ have invested in coordinated digitisation programs in acknowledgement of this opportunity. The Canadian Heritage Information Network was established to 'engage Canadian and international audiences in our shared history and heritage', and their *Virtual Museum of Canada* attracts millions of visitors annually, from more than 200 countries.¹⁸ The New Zealand Government is tackling the challenge of getting local cultural content online with *New Zealand's Digital Content Strategy: Creating a Digital New Zealand*.¹⁹ The goal of the strategy is described as 'making New Zealand visible and relevant in a connected digital world. It aims to ensure that we are innovative, informed and capable in telling our stories, experiencing our heritage and cultures, and creating our digital future'.²⁰

In 2009 Mark Scott, the ABC's Editor-in-Chief, described the 'soft diplomacy' opportunity that has arisen as digital media makes it possible to 'broadcast' across international borders. He explained that integrated ABC content accessible via broadband delivery systems would 'giv[e] Australia a truly global platform to promote itself'.²¹

In his discussion of Canadian cultural policy, John Ralston Saul explained that 'Canada's profile abroad is, for the most part, its culture ... not being a player in international communications today implies disappearing from the planet. It isn't

simply a lost cultural and financial opportunity. It is a major problem for foreign policy'.²²

The development of a National Cultural Policy must consider the value of culture in terms of foreign policy, marketing, promoting and characterising Australia in the global community. Making collections digitally accessible is an essential element of that policy, and an excellent opportunity to provide high quality, locally-sourced digital content about Australia. This resonates with several points in the Discussion Framework, including the statement 'Australian culture speaks to our identity, it is an important area of common interest which enriches our quality of life and defines us to ourselves and others' (#4), and that culture 'attracts students and tourists, provides valuable exports and is essential to sustainable economic activity' (#7).

5. Powering the young

5.1. Education and engagement

This submission has earlier explored the educational potential of collections. Collections are also able to inspire, and provide a safe space for discussion and debate on Australian history and identity. The solid foundation of well managed and interpreted collections can act as a test-bed for ideas. Young people can be inspired and explore their cultural understanding against the backdrop of collections, and contribute to Australia's cultural life in a well-informed manner.

5.2. Opportunities for the young, and intergenerational exchange

The increasing use of Web 2.0 technologies by collecting organisations provides opportunities for young people, and others, to use digital objects sourced from collections, to learn in new ways, and to contribute to discussion prompted by collections. Emerging digital technologies are being taken up by all generations as a new way to interact with and use collections.

Collecting organisations are often sites of empowerment for young people. Such organisations offer stimulating volunteering and work experience opportunities. They can also mentor young artists, conservators and others in specialist fields. Collections encourage intergenerational exchange, as they attract volunteers and users of all ages. An excellent example is the CCA's own *Now and Then* community heritage wiki, a website that has facilitated digitisation of objects from the Mallala Museum which is run by a committee of older volunteers.²³ The wiki platform uses Web 2.0 technology to make the collection digitally accessible, and to prompt comments, sharing of information and involvement from different generations. This innovative way of using a collection has attracted attention from a vibrant community of participants, and praise from bloggers and online communities.²⁴

6. Other issues

6.1. International commitments and global culture

Australia is a party to numerous UNESCO Conventions to do with culture. Some make particularly strong commitments to movable cultural heritage. These include the *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict 1954 (The Hague Convention)*, *Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage 1972*, *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property 1970*, and the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions 2005*.

The National Cultural Policy should consider ramifications for these commitments for Australia, and their impact on and role in Australia's international relations. Australians work internationally in defence and humanitarian roles, and participate in international business, trade, and cultural heritage communities. Australia should abide by these commitments and advocate for the principles of those Conventions. Australian professionals should be supported to contribute to international best practice in cultural heritage.

6.2. Cultural heritage and emergency management

The CCA supports the submission from Blue Shield Australia that reinforces the importance of a strong commitment to the protection of cultural heritage in the new National Cultural Policy.

Such a commitment should encourage practices in disaster response, and awareness of cultural heritage considerations among Australians working in emergency services, defence or humanitarian roles. During 2009 and 2010, several events have reminded us of the risks associated with natural or human-caused disaster, including Queensland's floods, the catastrophic Victorian bushfires, which have threatened and destroyed collections²⁵, while internationally the Gaza Museum was severely affected by nearby Israeli air strikes²⁶, and Germany's Cologne archives building collapsed, showing how easily and suddenly important parts of a nation's treasured collections can be lost.²⁷ Emergency preparedness and awareness of best practice in response and recovery are the best protection for cultural heritage. Specialised cultural heritage training should be encouraged for emergency services personnel, and there is a need for more widespread emergency management for cultural heritage professionals and volunteers.

6.3. Artists' careers

The CCA applauds recent initiatives of the Australian Government to improve support for Australian artists, with the *Resale Royalty Right for Visual Artists*, the *Indigenous Australian Art Commercial Code of Conduct*, and the *Indigenous Australian Art Charter of Principles for Publicly Funded Collecting Institutions*.

A National Cultural Policy should acknowledge the role that public galleries and other institutions play in the careers of artists. Inclusion in curated exhibitions at public galleries is a career boost, while the purchase of a work for a public collection is a major coup for a living artist, and increases the market value of all their work.

The National Cultural Policy Discussion Framework commits to supporting creative and artistic expression. Supporting creation of new cultural and artistic material requires an accompanying commitment to collecting organisations as the place where these expressions are most commonly accessed by the public, and which eventually house and care for them, for the enjoyment and information of future generations.

7. Endnotes

- ¹ Data aggregated from Australian Bureau of Statistics publications.
- ² Including *Australia's Heritage National Treasures*
<http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/learning/heritage/>
- ³ Some examples include: artworks from the Australian Government's Artbank collection that are exhibited in diplomatic missions around the world; The National Gallery of Australia's *National Indigenous Art Triennial: Culture Warriors* exhibition opened in Washington DC, USA, in September 2008; and the works generated by the Canning Stock Route Project, now owned by the National Museum of Australia, were exhibited at the Beijing Olympic Expo in 2008.
- ⁴ Russell, R and Winkworth, K, *Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of collections*, 2009, p. 34.
- ⁵ <http://www.goyder.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=301>
- ⁶ <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~benmus/kelly.htm>
- ⁷ http://www.abbeymuseum.asn.au/vi_about_the_museum.htm
- ⁸ See
<http://www.collectionscouncil.com.au/Portals/0/Round%20Table%2021%20May%202008%20-%20Summary%20of%20discussion%20notes%20-%20FINAL%207%20July%202008.pdf>
- ⁹ Full details available at
<http://www.collectionscouncil.com.au/latest.aspx?articleType=ArticleView&articleId=133>
- ¹⁰ A recent example of the mis-step of these different organisation types is the CCA's relationship with the Australian National Data Service (ANDS) regarding the research value of collections. Just when that grant program is reaching a stage of considering 'public data' (such as is found in archives, galleries, libraries and museums), the CCA as peak body is closing its doors. Australia's researchers will be short of a valuable resource because the task of coordinating Australia's diverse collecting organisations, and speaking for the collections sector as a whole, appears to be too complex for other peak bodies which operate, at best, across two collecting domains.
- ¹¹ Cutler, Terry 'The Role of Cultural Collections in Australia's Innovation System', address to a forum organisations by the University of Melbourne's Centre for Media

and Communications Law, Intellectual Property Research Institute of Australia and the State Library of Victoria, 23 October 2009.

- ¹² The CCA has developed a list of the many uses for collections; see:
<http://www.collectionscouncil.com.au/Portals/0/Uses%20of%20collections.pdf>
- ¹³ <http://www.thelearningfederation.edu.au/default.asp>
- ¹⁴ *Creating a Digital New Zealand: New Zealand's Digital Content Strategy* at <http://www.digitalstrategy.govt.nz/Resources/New-Zealand-Digital-Content-Strategy/>;
- ¹⁵ Europeana www.europeana.eu
- ¹⁶ Culture Grid <http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk/culturegrid>
- ¹⁷ Canadian Heritage Information Network and Virtual Museum of Canada
<http://www.rcip-chin.gc.ca/>
- ¹⁸ http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/description_mvc-about_vmc/index-eng.jsp
- ¹⁹ *Creating a Digital New Zealand: New Zealand's Digital Content Strategy* at <http://www.digitalstrategy.govt.nz/Resources/New-Zealand-Digital-Content-Strategy/>
- ²⁰ Ibid. p. 5.
- ²¹ Full lecture available at:
http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/Bruce%20Allen%20Lecture_91109.pdf
- ²² Full article available at http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/articles/sovereignty_identity/culture_policy.cfm
- ²³ www.nowandthen.net.au
- ²⁴ Comments appear at:
<http://www.onlinecommunityconsultation.com/2009/09/community-heritage-wiki.html#links>, <http://manexus.ning.com/profiles/blogs/now-and-then-community-wiki>, <http://keystone.collectionsaustralia.net/publisher/Outreach/?p=3136>.
- ²⁵ Note the loss of the Marysville Historical Society collection in Victoria's February bushfires, as described at <http://www.theage.com.au/national/marysville-lives-on-but-without-its-collective-past-20090415-a7ha.html>
- ²⁶ Accounts of the damage are available at <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/article.asp?id=16827>
- ²⁷ The Cologne Archives collapse in March 2009 is understood to have been caused by local construction work, their losses are described at <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,4072655,00.html>