

## **Untangling the intangible and tangible heritage web**

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**Abstract:** In this paper the author considers his long held view that the tangible illustrates and illuminates the intangible and uses two Australian examples to develop and challenge his preconceptions. The examples are the University of Sydney and the road corridor opening the areas south of Sydney. This is carried out by defining the origins and subsequent development of the places, identifying interested parties, investigating the tangible and intangible values over time and closes with a discussion of the merits of the preconceived view and alternatives. The author concludes that his previous view was with merit but by far too simplistic and explores a more appropriate approach through the use of matrices based on interested parties and physical entities. A conclusion is reached that envisages a single entity within which the tangible and intangible are embedded and entangled and needing the experience and skills of the heritage professional to analyse.

### **Preamble**

“Spirit” is a highly emotive word conjuring up many different meanings. To quote an acquaintance looking at the conference theme “A bit philosophical isn’t it?” So, before starting my paper I would like to offer some thoughts on “spirit” to cogitate on. The following quotes come from work by Prof. Mark Johnson who is Knight Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Oregon, Eugene appearing in New Scientist magazine of 12 January 2008 pp 46,47.

“From birth to death, discovering, creating and communicating meaning are our full-time job as humans. Meaning helps us make sense of both our private world and our public intellectual world. But what do we mean by "meaning"? Can we hope to understand it? “

“meaning emerges (mostly) automatically and without conscious awareness from the way we - as bodily creatures - engage with our surroundings. The fact of being embodied means that we are all

subject to biological and physical events that move us, change our body states, and constrain thoughts and actions.”

In our case is “spirit” in fact meaning? I suggest that it is and in all our considerations on the “spirit of the place”, it is vital that we remember that meaning of a place, whether it derive from the tangible or intangible, is understood and interpreted by people with all the complexities, brilliance and limitations of the human brain.

### **Introduction**

Let me introduce you to two quite different places which feature on Australia’s heritage listings and which I will refer to in the paper. In an international sense these are quite modern and pragmatic but very much part of Australia’s heritage.

The University of Sydney was established in 1850 being Australia’s oldest university. It occupies a site of some 80 ha in a prominent position on the eastern fringes of the city of Sydney; the eastern wing, clock tower and Great Hall being iconic buildings in Sydney.



Fig.1 The University of Sydney Quadrangle

Initially occupying premises in another location it moved into its true home in the early 1860’s The University started academically in a small way albeit in an impressive, if inefficient, building and the emerging independent feelings in the colony probably ensured that it was the institution Sydney had to have. The University’s growth has followed major social / political issues and is broadly as follows:

- The initial aims were directly related to leadership and the professions.

- By the 1880's there was pressure to make the curriculum more relevant and new chairs in medicine, law and engineering aided this push.
- The post WW1 boom saw a major push for aesthetic unification of the campus and additional buildings doubling its size.
- Following the 'Great Depression' and WW2 there was another massive and rapid expansion from 4,000 to 10,000 students utilising hastily built 'transient' buildings.
- As government funding increased a further major period of expansion was seen in the 1960's and 70's with a new campus adjacent to the existing.
- Towards the end of the century 'small government' and 'user pays' principles resulted in little change.
- This changed dramatically in the new millennium with a new business approach funding major new works.

On a different scale is a small stone arch bridge at Towrang on the route from Sydney to the major sheep country developed around 200 km to the south of Sydney from the 1820's.



Fig.2 Towrang Road Bridge

Initially the route took the easiest route for carts however this also exposed them to the problems of river flood plains. The colonial government put substantial resources into both the western road over the Blue mountains and the southern road, including the bridge being referred to, to facilitate settlement. The bridge and related stone culverts were a major piece of infrastructure enabling the southern road to be routed on high ground and remained in use until the advent of modern motor trucks necessitated a stronger bridge. It now forms a tourist heritage feature of a roadside stop on the main highway between Sydney and Melbourne.

Contrasting as these may be you will see as the paper progresses how they illustrate the theme of the conference.

### **Ideas As A Younger Man**

Australian heritage has been largely been driven by the ‘restoration’ of the more attractive colonial buildings and infrastructure and local history groups. This was exacerbated by a burst of funding and interest in the Australian Bicentennial year (1988). With the advent of the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter a slow education process has seen the heritage ‘industry’ in Australia become far more ‘conservation’ conscious with legislation grudgingly following.

Working in the heritage arena from the owner / occupier aspect I provided a stewardship role for them managing the projects on their behalf and advising on how best to meet their objectives within the wide range of constraints including heritage values. Working as the University of Sydney’s manager for the preparation of the conservation plan for the Quadrangle Building and Great Hall I became very concerned at the almost non-existence of any indication of why the buildings came about; in fact as the first permanent buildings the question of why the University came about seemed quite relevant. This led to requirements to identify social (including peoples’ memories and feelings about the place) and environmental aspects related to the built and use this information for analysis of significance when the later conservation plans were prepared. At this point I did not consider peoples memories and feelings as more than an opportunity to acquire information about the built and operational aspects; their remained a rather negative attitude ‘ if it is not tangible it must be intangible’!

### **The Intangible Concept**

From my Australian heritage background the intangible was not specifically recognised as such until recently albeit the substance of the intangible was generally recognised in the assessment criteria used. The result was that the assessment was relatively circumscribed and in particular social aspects and people (unless ‘famous’) were

ignored. The impression was always that unless the place had visual merit it would not have heritage significance. This may well reflect the relatively the short European heritage in Australia.

As with the tangible the intangible can have heritage significance in its own right or it may be supportive of another item of heritage significance.

The intangible covers an extensive range which would be impossible to explore in this paper so examples from the two places previously mentioned will suffice to enable the development of the theme of the conference.

The first is from the University, an example most people had trouble coming to grips with. In the immediate post WW2 period the government introduced a “Reconstruction Training Scheme” which saw enrolments jump from 4,000 to 10,000 in a short space of time. To cater for this new flood of students ‘transient buildings’ were built using steel frames and sheet material cladding which helped the immediate need and still serve in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Aesthetically they have little going for them and it would be fair to say that most people would be happy to see them gone!



*Figure 4* University of Sydney – Transient Building Example

However, from a heritage viewpoint how do you present this important phase in the University’s history, important not just from the numbers and size viewpoint but maybe more so from the further extension of the University education to the lower income groups. Whilst I still consider this to be fully relevant it says nothing about how people felt about the place which, in itself, raises an intriguing question of the relevance of negative feelings about a place.

An example on a different scale is the Towrang Road Bridge, in its time an important piece of infrastructure for accessing the southern inland grazing areas of eastern Australia. From a built viewpoint it is

a reasonable example of a coursed stone arched bridge which would have moderate heritage significance in its own right from age and rarity values. I would argue for a much greater heritage value based on two intangibles, the first being its value illustrating the access difficulties of the area. The other value is that of the site, rather than just the bridge itself, which illustrates the increasing traffic demands seeing the original horse and bullock hauled carts and drays replaced by motor lorries needing a new much stronger bridge on to current demands with a fill on culverts for a multi lane highway.

In both examples little is said about how people perceive the place.

### **Introducing The Concept Of Spirit**

It became obvious to me during the work on the University conservation plan that the intangible aspects may not have been as finite as the tangible evidence was but nevertheless it was generally unambiguous; most people would register any item the same way. People and their relationships to the place simply did not fit.

Thinking about the two examples previously discussed, they both generate a range of personal opinions which, for people who have been at the University in particular, are driven by a combination of how the appearance and function affect them now and how the memories of their past interactions affect them. Arguably the sum of this represents the spirit of the place as perceived by any particular person.

Considering the 'transient' buildings at the University, probably the majority of people see them only as an eyesore as they are unaware of their background. It is only the minority, like myself, who see in these buildings the germ of the socially disparate community we now have. Conjoined with the sight of the thousand of students and academics around campus a powerful image is produced which is indelibly imprinted in my memory. This socially and ethnically diverse community is a major part of the spirit, or meaning, of the university to me and one I know from my interaction with the academic community in particular is held by many others.

The Towrang Bridge can generate a surprising amount of feeling in a variety of people. Visiting the site recently for to take photographs this paper I met a small party of early teenage students and their teacher visiting the site for an assignment. We had a very interesting discussion about the bridge particularly looking at why the

bridge was built with one of the students telling us about his great grandfathers bullock drays, one of which they still had at the family property, and about photographs of them stuck in the mud and crossing rivers with borrowed teams to help. He could really relate to why the bridge had been built and took a large number of photos; it has really become an embedded memory.

For the local population it is one of relatively few built items from the earliest days and is proudly spoken of in the context of how old their areas is, a common theme in Australia's relatively short history. I feel this again represents the spirit, or meaning, of the place to them.

My arguments in relation to spirit lead me to a view that spirit is a living thing which lives within the individual. There will be exceptions to this in relation to religion or similar social beliefs where a person perceives the spirit of a deceased person or some supernatural being to physically lie within something built or made. This latter raises the interesting question with the spirit of a place of what degree of commonality is there between the people who have a feeling for the place and also to what degree do casual visitors to a place generate their own spirit.

The question of how the spirit will change over time both as the place may change and the individual may perceive the place and change themselves.

What is very clear to me is that spirit is a living thing within individuals and as such will be very variable and not always easy to establish a useful consensus for managing the place; a real challenge for the heritage professional.

### **Alternatives**

In considering where the spirit of the place may lie it is important to remember that we must consider this from the viewpoint of any person who may have an interest in the place and not just from the heritage professionals' viewpoint. I cannot perceive of any options wherein the spirit itself is inherent in the fabric of a place. What I do see is that the tangible and intangible evidence contains the stimulus needed to help people relate to the place and understand the spirit, or meaning, for themselves.

### Linking the Tangible, Intangible and Spirit

As a preliminary to this discussion I suggest that we need to recognise that whilst the boundaries of the tangible and intangible can be well defined there will be an element of subjectivity in the boundary of the intangible and the spirit. We also need to recognise that information is of no value in itself but required analysis to produce useful knowledge.

Diagram 4 indicates visually the relationships of the tangible, intangible and spirit.

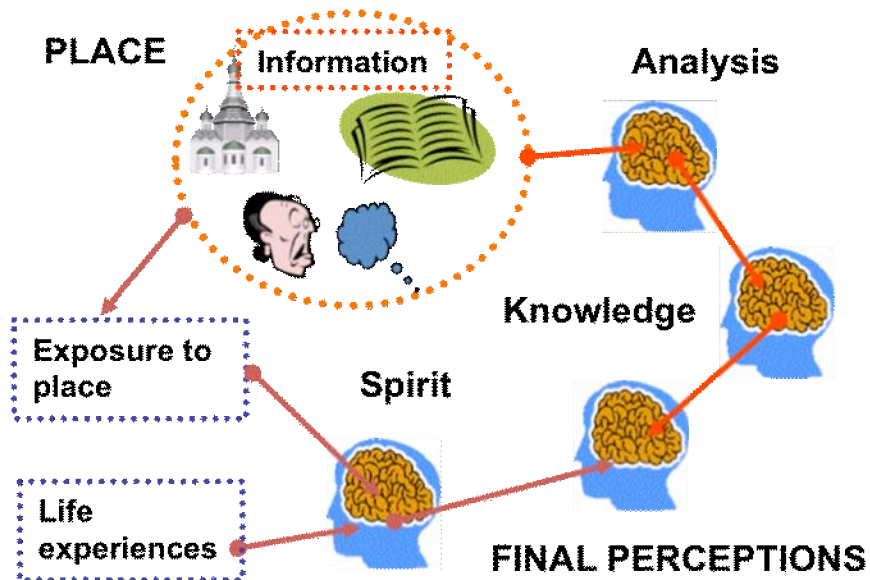


Diagram 4 Integrating the tangible, intangible and spirit



**How To Do It**

The big question is how to identify and carry out the necessary investigations to gain the knowledge of the spirit of the place that we need to have to enable the proper conservation now and long term. As with the tangible and intangible the spirit is not a single entity, neither is it constant over time. Diagram 5 shows both the logic flow and the Action of each phase in principle and suggests three major ‘hold’ points where the project should be subject to major review.

This is readily presented as a working document in matrix form utilising time on one axis and evidence (tangible, intangible, people and groups associated with the place) on the other. From the evidence quantifiable notions of the absolute and relative values of significances can be obtained.

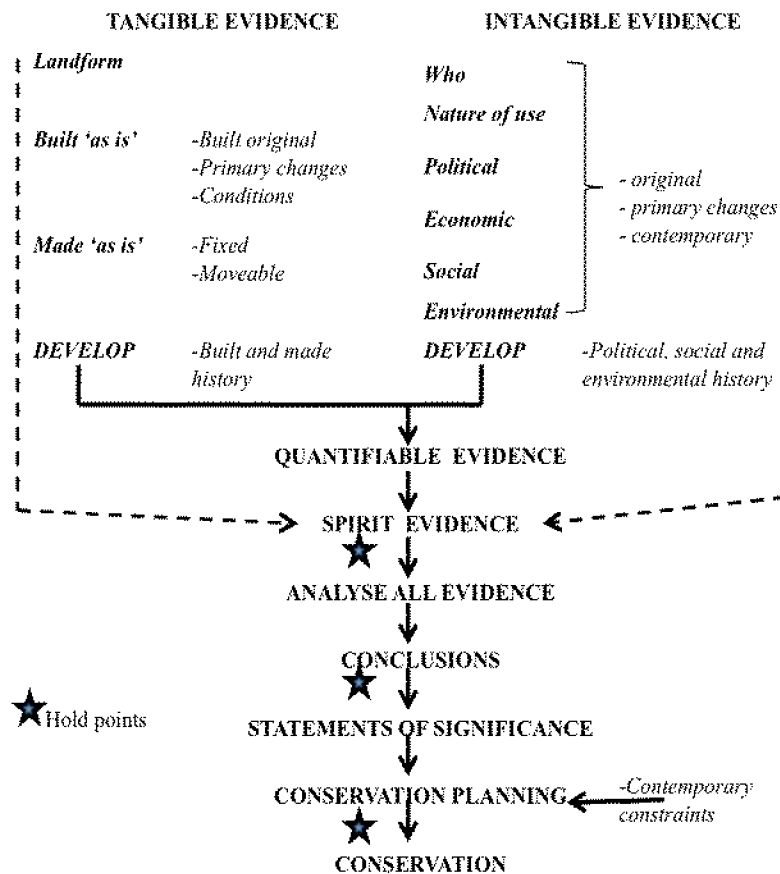


Diagram 5. Logic / Action

### **Conclusion**

To answer the question in the theme of the symposium, “wherein lies the spirit of the place?” my experience, as articulated in this paper, would suggest the following.

The tangible you touch, for example a stone wall; the intangible you observe, for example the records of who used it; and the spirit you feel. Inherent here is the ‘first person’; it is the individual who uses their experiences, relationships, and physical, visual and other cues for how they perceive a place ie the spirit of the place for them. Hence the spirit of the place is the sum of the tangible and intangible elements embedded in the consciousness of an individual becoming evident in conjunction with their experiences and knowledge and using their cognitive ability

This poses a great challenge to the heritage professionals charged with finding the heritage values of a place and articulating them in a manner not only clear to their peers but also the the community at large.

It is through this broadest understanding that appropriate conservation measures can develop.