

## Keeping up Appearances: heritage values in house museums

Suzanne Bravery  
Museums and Galleries NSW  
43–51 Cowper Wharf Road  
Woolloomooloo NSW 2001  
Australia  
[suzanneb@mgnsw.org.au](mailto:suzanneb@mgnsw.org.au)

**Abstract.** Determining and valuing the intangible spirit of place has been a complex and varied exercise for cultural heritage curators. Using historic house museums Elizabeth Farm, Meroogal and Vaucluse House, all properties of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW, as examples, this paper examines the effects that physical methods of conservation and restoration have in the transmission of the spirit of the place. It looks at the role of the statement of significance as a guide to the spirit of the place. The pivotal roles and influences of individual curators, and their use of consultants, including educators, as mediators and determinants of the significance of the intangible elements of the spirit of the place are addressed, with a focus on the role that research-based decision-making plays in interpretation. The paper concludes that the uniqueness of a place can be captured in part by diverse approaches, and that it is valued and continuous.

The eighties in Australia were characterised by Bicentennial nationalism and a strong resurgence of interest in a collective colonial past. The rise of the new social history, the availability of tertiary-educated professional curators with specialities and a focus of government resources on cultural heritage combined to encourage experimentation in the conservation and interpretation of house museums. Whitewashed walls and green shutters, pretty cottage gardens and mannequin-dominated interiors were no longer acceptable as the standard physical representation of a house museum. No longer was the house museum seen primarily as a series of carefully arranged lessons for the betterment of its visitors.

Indeed, these approaches were replaced by objective, scientific terms such as ‘evidence’, ‘documentation’ and ‘significance’, as well as interpretative terms such as ‘engagement’, ‘interaction’ and ‘understanding’. The imperative of identifying the particular importance of a place was recognised; there was a researched and ordered approach to determining and valuing the spirit of the place and interpreting it through documentary sources including building fabric, provenanced objects, written and pictorial evidence and oral history and the character and knowledge of the principal interpreter, the curator.

These specialists naturally bring their own knowledge, skills and experience, as well as their individual interests, expertise and predilections to recognised and accepted practices. It is the responsibility of curators to have a strong, solid and unbiased knowledge and understanding of every aspect of their collection, including buildings, movable heritage, garden and grounds, but with particular emphasis on a detailed and accurate knowledge of the life, foibles and times of the property’s occupants. This knowledge is acquired through primary research of records and objects and

archaeological excavation of evidence both below and above ground. It is assisted by wide reading in the area of contemporary literature, manuals of domestic history, women's work, animal husbandry, garden movements and social, political and economic history and by conversations with colleagues and specialist consultants. It is a multi-layered and multi-disciplined approach. Every decision that is made about the conservation and interpretation of the house must relate to the known history of the house – to the actions that played out largely in the interiors. Every decision that is made is made in hindsight, with fragments of the past, the pieces that remain to which we have access – with the primary artefact the house itself.

Three of the house museums that came under the auspices of the Historic Houses Trust (HHT) of NSW in this proactive climate for cultural heritage activity are Vacluse House, Vacluse, Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta and Meroogal, Nowra. Vacluse House and Elizabeth Farm were transferred from other government departments and Meroogal acquired unusually from its owner. In each case, the curatorial approach was one of determining, in collaboration with colleagues and based on legislative requirements and documentary evidence, the Statement of Significance of the property, which would inform ongoing choices made about conservation and interpretation, from the sweeping to the most detailed.

Whilst the structure and approach in the determination of the significance and spirit of the place were consistent, the outcomes naturally differed and were indicative of the importance of valuing the individual qualities of the place through a reliance on accumulated knowledge, acquired through conscientious research, a thorough physical investigation and analysis, and robust discussion. [

Interiors are crucial to the creation and recreation, and therefore to our understanding of, the intangible spirit of place<sup>1</sup>, the recent past. The intangible spirit of the place is conveyed through a variety of approaches, beginning with a methodical approach to the physical investigation of the surfaces of the spaces, supported by textual, visual and more recently oral, documentation, and conveyed through the priorities and specialities of the curators and consultants. It offers a multi-layered access to our selective past.

Context provides meaning. Interiors provide the context for the actions of the previous occupants and the objects within these interiors add to an understanding of those actions by providing physical evidence of those occupants. Provenanced objects placed within original interiors are the best means of fully understanding these occupants in their private and their contemporary environment and in each of these house museums, the physical investigation of the original interiors and a focus on the use of provenanced objects seek to access the intangible spirit of place.

Vacluse House has been in public ownership since 1911, when the property was 'saved' for public access to the harbour foreshore and as a shrine to the statesmanship of William Charles Wentworth. For sixty years the house was used more as a memorial to nationalism – to an ideal – the exteriors as a backdrop to historical re-enactments of gala occasions of Wentworth's occupation as a diversion from the Depression and the interiors

---

<sup>1</sup> Identification, protection and interpretation were identified as the key elements of intangible heritage. Report on the Workshop held from 24–26 October in Kimberley, South Africa prior to the Zimbabwe General Assembly: towards a declaration on intangible heritage, monuments and sites – notes taken by Robyn Ridett and Laura Robinson, 11 February 2004.

variously as access to the shrine of the ‘Great Man’ via a predetermined path of historically inaccurate and jarringly improbable vignettes for visitors, starting from the entrance and culminating in the ‘Constitution Room’<sup>2</sup> and later as a contrived associative backdrop to politicians’ aspirations. The house was an early example of furnishing an historic building without research or professional knowledge in an act of government/community preservation. Successive restoration and decoration schemes and attempts to interpret the house had by the 1960s robbed the place of much of its nineteenth-century detail and hindered an understanding of how the house functioned.

In 1980, the property was transferred to the HHT. Whilst the public use of the private spaces was acknowledged and valued in the collection of memorabilia associated with the place and in the documentation of changes, changes were made. The Statement of Significance determined that the primary significance of Vacluse House was as the family home of William Charles and Sarah Wentworth from 1827–53 and 1861–2 and as such reflects the aspirations of a prominent political family in mid-nineteenth-century NSW. It demonstrates the life of the Wentworths, their taste incorporated with the taste of their time, social standing and status. The Conservation Plan used this as the basis for the ongoing conservation and interpretation of the property, for the allocation of resources and as the focus for transmitting the spirit of the place.

The places are as important for what they are as for what they represent. They are the spaces within which William Charles Wentworth, his wife Sarah and their ten children lived from c. 1827–1853 and 1861–2 where the routine and minutiae of their domestic lives took place away from Wentworth’s very public achievements and controversial character.

Employment of a full-time Curator in 1981 and an historical researcher enabled a comprehensive search of the collections of Wentworth family business papers and personal letters held in public collections. Correspondence, accounts, inventories, auction catalogues and a detailed lease agreement from 1853 enabled valuable access to the routine activities and particular priorities, including fencing, of the Wentworth family.

A search for images brought forth critical pencil sketches detailing the exterior, looking towards the Servants’ Wing, and one of the Entrance Hall with provenanced furniture and patterned runner in situ. This enabled an historically accurate conjectural reconstruction of these views. An amount of provenanced furniture, paintings and personal items was still owned by the family and viewed, recorded and acquired as the items became available. The material garnered from the family collections and the family recollections was added to the extant provenanced family pieces in the Vacluse House collection. The return to, and placement of, these important pieces within their original contexts offer insight into the personal choices of the Wentworths. These were not necessarily reflective of the personal choices of the curators, and it is important that they are not. When the Wentworths returned from the Grand Tour, for example, their robust and ostentatious souvenirs of reproduction Classical paintings, ornate seat furniture and *objets d’art*, including *pietre dura* tables, reflect an aspirational family with the resources to support a *nouveau riche* taste.

---

<sup>2</sup> The ‘Constitution Room’ was the private study where Wentworth was thought to have signed the Constitution for NSW and contained an impressive desk, inkwell and chair, all purported to have been used for this purpose. There is no evidence to support this romantic scenario. A more logical explanation would be that the signing of such a public legislative document would occur in Parliament House in the city.

As the interiors were gradually refurnished as fashionably as the Wentworths' tastes would allow, so incrementally the building fabric was investigated to determine contemporary fabrics and finishes to the walls, ceilings and where original, door and window furniture. These surfaces were scraped back to their mid-nineteenth-century paint finishes and through paint scrape analysis, wall finishes contemporary to the period of Wentworth occupation were determined and reinstated. This scientific and painstaking investigation has been informative and, at times, has offered contradictory evidence. The timber door and window finishes in the main public rooms of the house, for example, were determined in the early 1980s to be of oak graining and repainted according to that evidence, supported by contemporary extant examples. On further investigation it was later determined that the finish was a solid and somewhat modern deep cream and it was painted in that colour. More recently further deliberations have determined that there is a mix of oak graining and the door furniture wears a base coat awaiting another regraining.

It is in the nature of things perhaps that the public interiors were the first areas to be conjecturally reconstructed. The family spaces where the best furniture was used, the thickest fitted carpet, the more detailed inventory and the greatest number of contemporary images and extant comparative examples for analysis, as well as provenanced collection, survive. Despite its many uses and confusing layering, the Drawing Room at Vacluse House retains the Wentworth cornice mouldings and hand-coloured wallpaper frieze. Reproduction soft furnishings have been used on the windows and the ottomans, and an example of a Collard and Collard grand piano, known from an inventory to have been in the house, was added to show the primary function of the room as one of extravagant entertainment.

The focus of the initial curator was on the decorative arts, the removal of the accretions of twentieth-century museum use and on educational displays within the rooms. Elements of the intangible spirit of the place started to emerge with the return of Wentworth-provenanced collection to its original context, the return of many of the rooms to their Wentworth use according to an early-twentieth-century plan, and the use of flowers, fruit and vegetables, the lighting of fires and changes in soft furnishings according to the season, recreating mid-nineteenth-century conventions.

A decade later, a small curatorial team with design, education and fine arts backgrounds reinterpreted the garden and grounds as the Vacluse estate, recontextualising the house and its provenanced collection within its diminished acreage. Public programs focused on the use of the estate and the lifestyle of the Wentworths and included a Victorian picnic in the south paddock and a gentleman's mid-century card game by candlelight in the Drawing Room. Estate walks extended the spirit of the place beyond its existing boundaries and made available to a twentieth-century audience experiences such as the Wentworths may have enjoyed. [

In the 1990s the incumbent curator investigated the physical and documentary evidence of the 'invisible inhabitants', focusing on the servants. This curator's museological, education and fine arts training etched a social historical work emphasis. Using the Statement of Significance, which recognised the importance of the intactness of the Servants' Wing, resources were prioritised towards a detailed and more clearly articulated understanding of the nature and roles of the servants and their use of the place. It could be argued that the consistent and overarching contribution to the intangible spirit

of place is through these servants, who had access to all areas of the estate and close involvement in the daily routines of the inhabitants. Walls, door and window furniture were scraped, the scrapes analysed and paint colours and finishes determined accordingly. Floor coverings were researched for the Back Hall and Housekeeper's Room. Colours of the linen cupboard confirmed the original colour of a Wentworth-provenanced timber dresser which had been carefully stripped back, layer by layer, to determine its mid-nineteenth-century colour.

Another heavily japanned provenanced dresser and a meat safe were similarly stripped bare of their later accretions and interpreted in their Wentworth colours. This allowed a closer analysis of witness marks on the dresser, which accorded with others on an adjacent column and changed the furniture's function into a *batterie de cuisine* cupboard. Evidence of later finishes was retained in sequence for later reference. The Laundry opened for guided tour and the Stables' Men's Rooms were reflagged, limewashed and opened for the public to walk through. The Fruit Store was cleared of paint storage, racks were built based on contemporary evidence, and seasonal fruit was stored. A bolder plan for the return of office space to its original use as the Butler's Pantry was implemented in a staffing restructure, and the room was made visible to the public during the long, documented reconstruction.

Every attempt was made to determine and value the intangible spirit of the place and of all the mid-nineteenth-century occupants of the house. Fires were lit in the fuel stove, fruit and vegetables grown in the Kitchen Garden were prepared on the pine table, the role of the servants was caught in public programs and servants' areas previously roped off or closed were open to visitors.

Opened to visitors in 1984 by the HHT as a house museum, Elizabeth Farm, a modest late-eighteenth-century bungalow, incorporates the infamous John Macarthur story of encroaching madness as one of its many narratives, by capturing its audience in an engaging series of domestic scaled interiors focused on the Macarthur family. The intangible spirit of the Macarthur inhabitants of the place is captured in a series of deliberately atmospheric interiors and of the wife of John, Elizabeth Macarthur, through the conjectural and fragrant reconstruction of the remnant garden. The theatre of a pared-down set with critical early-nineteenth-century reproduced Macarthur family provenanced objects, reconstructed wall and floor finishes and documented fabrics, sets the scene for visitor interaction with the heritage values defined by the Trust in its Statement of Significance for the property, played out in the conservation philosophy and curatorial practice of restoration and 'fakes'.

Material from primary research through the transcription of family papers in the public domain, investigating building fabric and through building restoration, has been used to recreate the interiors. Significant stories are told through key focused props. Each object has been chosen with an interpretative purpose in mind, and tells a specific family story. Documentary soft furnishings 'soften' the appearance of the interiors and offer another dimension of historical and aesthetic narrative.

The treatment of the Elizabeth Farm interiors reflects both a compromise in choice of interpretation – the building was stripped of its twentieth-century evidence by an earlier government department and restored to the Macarthur period of the early nineteenth century and a determined effort was made by the Trust to use faithfully reproduced provenanced Macarthur objects and documented soft furnishings to interpret

this period of which little physical evidence remained. The decoration is based on detailed research of the Macarthur family's archives and contemporary documentation. As an 'open access museum' in a theatre set, this sparsely recreated domestic interior in an historic icon challenged traditional concepts of heritage.

The primary significance of Elizabeth Farm is its association with major figures, in particular John and Elizabeth Macarthur, who were prominent in the early-nineteenth-century agricultural, political, cultural and architectural development of the colony. It contains part of the oldest surviving European construction in Australia.

The Trust aims to interpret the property, according to the Statement of Significance by, amongst other things, 'Devising methods of presenting the house to the public in a way which is indicative of the early inhabitants, their way of life, and their contribution to the development of the colony.'<sup>3</sup> Consciously, this is a determining and valuing of the intangible spirit of the place and no building fabric pre-dating 1850 should be interfered with in any substantial way. Wear patterns in stone flagging and thresholds reflect the pattern of usage over the years and should not be altered. The domestic character of the estate should be emphasised using material from the period of Macarthur occupation: provenanced, generic and reproduced.

The house is brought to life involving as many senses as possible, including smells (fire, flowers), and sounds (fire, cooking), and textures (mats, rugs) in an imaginative, evocative and representative way of the early nineteenth century.

The speciality of the first curator of Elizabeth Farm was colonial architecture and an attitude towards the importance of recreating houses not in their generality, but in their detail, in their individuality through rigorous historical research, in an impassionate and objective way. His approach to the conservation and interpretation of the house, in which the interiors encourage a physical and evoke an intellectual access, has been little changed by subsequent curators. Furnishings have been replaced through wear and tear and the extensive public program, aimed to offer visitors similar experiences to those of the Macarthurs, whether sheep-shearing, colonial paint-mixing, cross-hatched letter-writing or dining on colonial fare, expanded to embrace more of the community. An Education programs focus on the building construction of the house and on the lives of the servants, each using original research and the statement of significance as resources.

A more recent curator has used personal experience in the exploration of universal themes in colonial society with birth and death. Each curator has undertaken building maintenance and used the opportunity to further research the building fabric through physical analysis. The interiors and the collection have altered little since their inception as a series of easily digestible and mostly enjoyable lessons on colonial domestic life, the recreation of an environment to evoke a past era.

Interiors are about context and connection – they provide a physical and intellectual structure for accessing the past, they are spaces in which actions of the past/occupants took place, they are evidence of decision-making – place, taste and tradition; as an important and inviolable primary source for research, recreation, restoration, conservation, preservation and interpretation. Interiors are a three-dimensional primary source for researching the past for enabling access to the intangible spirit of the place. Building fabric, i.e., walls, floors, ceilings, the carcass of the building, is evidence of decisions and actions taken within and about the space which they contain.

---

<sup>3</sup> Bravery, Suzanne. 1996. *Elizabeth Farm Conservation Plan* Sydney

They are ‘witness marks’ to those who created and lived within their spaces. Unlike objects which can be moved from place to place, interiors are stable and consistent. Their appearance and function may change, but records are taken (for example, floor plans, samples of wall paper finishes, manuals of historic ornament and trade catalogues, oral histories and paintings and the very occasional photographs). These investigations can reveal former uses and colour schemes of interiors, including the nature and placement of fitted (such as plate rack or sideboard) or often-used furniture and enable reconstruction or interpretation accordingly. The evidence from these interiors offers options for a better informed and more historically accurate, interpretation and understanding of the intangibles. Using the known, the tangible, in objects and buildings, to access the intangible – the past.

Meroogal was acquired in 1985 because of the relative intactness of its largely untouched later-nineteenth and some early-twentieth-century interiors, furnishings and collection. These stand as evidence of a century of consistent and overlapping occupation whereby functional and sentimental belongings were consciously handed from one generation of Thorburn or Macgregor women to the next, and where the middle-class owners practised the forerunner of conservation housekeeping techniques.

The Trust focused on ensuring that the interiors and the movable cultural heritage collection were, as far as possible, invisibly conserved without being restored, usually through minimal intervention, and respecting the 1985 appearance of the property (with some minor amendments). Whilst consistently maintaining the intention of the ICOMOS Burra Charter conservation approach to the property, each successive curator has focused on an area of professional expertise, including housekeeping, decorative and fine arts, all valuing the interests and actions – part of the intangible spirit of the place- of the Meroogal women and men. The interiors and the collection, and the individual contribution of the occupants, are acknowledged and celebrated whilst traditional concepts of heritage are challenged. In the interpretation of the house, the importance of all periods of the interiors as created by the occupants is acknowledged, rather than intrusively removing layers to reveal a ‘moment in time’, however tempting and aesthetically pleasing that might be.

Before the Conservation Policy was determined, Meroogal appeared to favour the 1920s for recreation. During this decade, electricity and water were connected, a collection of furniture was donated to the Thorburn women; and this is when the former owner’s memories are the strongest. The garden has been returned to this time, with reproduction edging tiles, the English cottage garden planting and the fence returned to its earlier configuration.

As the Trust cleaned and catalogued the 3,500 objects, interviewed former residents and neighbours, transcribed ten years of early resident Tot Thorburn’s late-nineteenth-century diaries and delved into the documents in the collection, the wealth of information on every generation of family residency was slowly uncovered. It became increasingly apparent that to take the house back to a particular point in its history meant the removal and destruction of the valuable present layers of occupation. The primary significance of Meroogal was agreed ‘as an artefact of history and its evidence of the lives of four generations of one family who lived in the house, their history and its evidence of taste and circumstances.’ And that it is ‘of outstanding cultural significance. The property together with associated documents and the recollections of previous

occupants, provides a remarkable opportunity to understand and demonstrate aspects of the relationship between a family and its individual members and their material culture.’<sup>4</sup>

The philosophy of ‘as much as is necessary, but as little as possible’ adopted by the occupants and acknowledged in the property’s significance, has been adapted by the Trust to ‘keep up appearances’, and so to unobtrusively maintain the interiors as found. These largely preserved interiors are also an example of contemporary conservation and social history theories of the early 1980s and reflective of state government heritage initiatives.

Poignant rather than nostalgic, the interiors are important for their honest and seemingly unstinting portrayal of the cumulative taste and circumstances of family life over four generations and a hundred years. The rich, diary-like layered interiors celebrate the everyday, the ‘ordinary’, and the idiosyncratic as important; and provide a counterpoint to previously accepted notions of the historically valuable and culturally significant. Interpretation focuses on the daily lives of the inhabitants, their interactions with each other, their extended family and their rural community. The interiors have been conserved as at 1985, regarding the layering of physical evidence of occupation as significant and static. The original fabric is protected from wear and tear by a series of reversible conservation measures that include protective booties on visitors’ feet, coverings of thresholds, blackout blinds when the house is closed and a limit on the number of visitors in the house at any one time. As surfaces wear out, they are left in situ and covered with visually similar, sometimes materially different, reversible substitutes, e.g., canvas flooring covering the congoeum in the Kitchen, replacement cane chairs on the verandah – robustness. The idea of layering for protection of the original copies that of the Meroogal women but differs in that the layering is obvious. There is no wish to ‘play house’, rather to conserve the existing collection using methods that accord with the Statement of Significance. The early form of conservation practiced by Meroogal’s last inhabitant has been continued.

The ongoing involvement of June Wallace, the last occupant of Meroogal, has informed curatorial conservation and interpretation in whole and in detail and enabled access to the intangible spirit of the place through detailed information on the lives, characters and routines of the former inhabitants, through a detailed knowledge of the individual objects in the collection, an engaging oral history program and discussions about the people who called the house their home within the spaces themselves. Aspects of these highly personal and quite complex narratives inform the guided small-group tours by which the interiors are accessed. Visitors enter the house via the front door as family guests have for generations.

Time and distance, domestic scale and familiarity add to a deeper understanding of the spirit of this place, but may also mean that the house is not viewed as different or special enough to be retained. This always sparks controversy.

Contemporary concepts of feminism are consciously developed through the once sub-theme of the property ‘The Women’s History Place’ and women’s based programs such as the annual ‘Meroogal Women’s Art Prize’, a competition developed for women artists resident in the Shoalhaven region to creatively interpret themes of the house; and the celebration of International Women’s Day every March. Whilst deriving inspiration

---

<sup>4</sup> Walker, Meredith..1986 *Meroogal Conservation Plan*, Sydney

from the significance of the house and its interiors, public programs take place in the garden and grounds and in the wider region.

These interiors clearly reflect changing heritage values. Initially the family home of the Thorburns and then the Macgregors, for the two decades prior to its acquisition by the Trust, Meroogal was used by female descendants for regular, short stays. The rooms, whilst substantially unaltered in fabric and furnishings, were neither stripped nor overly modernised by their occupants, and so show a clear layering of use by family and individuals, and of their taste and circumstances.

As a short-stay house, and with a need for extra accommodation, the Drawing Room became a bedroom with the addition of a modest bed and wardrobe. When interpreted by the Trust, these objects were placed in storage, where they remain – and so part of the story of the house – the heritage of its interiors – has been made temporarily unavailable to the public. This decision accorded with the wishes of Mrs Wallace, who stated that those pieces of furniture should have been moved prior to the house going on the market. How valid is this curatorial interpretation in the confusion of permanent residence/short-stay place? With a deliberate focus on the interiors reflecting a post-modern gender-based theme, have other, shared heritages been neglected in the interpretation of the interiors? Or, in carrying out the wishes of the previous occupants, has the Curator shown professionalism in honouring these wishes and supporting the showing of another occupant in the decisions made regarding the interiors and by resisting the temptation to impose another, external hand?

House museums capture and process some of the individual and intangible heritage values within their walls, but they particularly focus on a shared and primarily tangible heritage – the intersection of cumulative dialogues. Interiors are about context and connection – they provide a physical and intellectual structure for accessing and understanding the past.

When capably and meticulously conserved and interpreted, house museum interiors facilitate physical and intellectual access to the spirit of the place – to the people who created, valued and occupied them, to the layering of their uses, to their societal context and to their reason for existence. Interiors are primary documents which clearly articulate and record change and so provide a context to the narratives of these occupiers, to the involvement of curatorial workers and to the engagement of the public.

## REFERENCES

Davison, Graeme and McConville, Chris (ed.). 1991. *A Heritage Handbook Australia*: Allen and Unwin.

Donnelly, Jessica Foy (ed.). 2002. *Interpreting Historic House Museums*. California: Alta Mira.

Peter Marquis-Kyle and Meredith Walker. 2004 *The Illustrated Burra Charter*. ICOMOS Australia.

Watts, Peter. 1986 *Vaucluse House Conservation Plan including stables and outbuildings*. HHT Sydney.