

## **TIME, MEMORY, PLACE AND LAND: SOCIAL MEANING AND HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN AUSTRALIA**

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### **Introduction**

One of the challenges facing heritage conservation practice in Australia is how to deal with the forms of social meaning that different community groups, families and individuals attribute to places and landscapes through their lived experiences, memories and associations.

Conventionally, heritage conservation has focused on fabric with less emphasis on the non-material aspects of cultural heritage. There is, however, increasing recognition that intangible values play an important role in how people interact with their social and cultural environments and the importance of these values impact on the ways in which people respond to conservation needs.

In this paper we explore issues of experience, memory and time depth in relation to people's connection to place and landscape, based on our experiences of working in indigenous, colonial and migrant heritage across Australia. There are three main themes:

1. The integrating value of 'landscape' to connect tangible and intangible values.
2. The importance of privileging recent time and living memory
3. Respecting connections in place management.

We conclude with some emerging challenges in managing for all heritage values. We will refer to several case studies throughout this paper to illustrate these themes.

### **Changing directions in Australian heritage practice**

The conference theme - *Place - Memory - Meaning: Preserving intangible values in Monuments and Sites* - is a response to a collective recognition of a critical gap in mainstream heritage practice - that people's connection to place, through their cultural and social traditions and through their individual and collective practices of remembrance is integral to better understanding the role of heritage in our society.

In Australia, government recognition of the importance of heritage places emerged primarily in the 1970s, with national legislation followed by legislation at the State and local level. Australia's natural heritage first attracted government action to protect special places in reserves and parks. This is a common experience in colonial countries where nature is exotic and history is seen as recent, and therefore of lesser value than the richer history in the home of the colonising power.

The 1970s saw recognition of the natural environment, the Indigenous environment and the historic environment - referred to as 'the National Estate' places of importance because of their aesthetic, historic, scientific or social significance or other special value for future generations as well as for the present community. The phrase 'places that we want to keep' was coined to capture a sense of the national inheritance.

During the 1970s and 1980s, substantial listings of places in these three categories were compiled across Australia. But by the 1990s in Australia, a number of deficiencies had emerged, sparking debate amongst heritage professionals and academics.

First, there was a recognition of the limitations of documenting heritage places in isolation from each other, for the integrity of their fabric and assessed in terms of historical associations and scientific or research significance. As well, the dichotomy between natural and cultural places and values which underpins current legislation was questioned.

*The response has been increasing recognition that heritage places are located in cultural landscapes in association with other places, and that these landscapes are made meaningful by people through processes of memory, traditions, and attachments through personal and community experiences.*

Second, the increasing professionalisation of heritage practice, accompanied by the development of specialist education and training, resulted in the exclusion of the wider community and their values. At the same time, there has been increasing conflict over which places are 'heritage' and whose values count in their management.

The diversity of cultures and place-relationships within Australia is now increasingly recognised. Post-Second World War and recent migrant communities such as those from Italy, Vietnam, Lebanon, Macedonia and Greece have actively created their own heritage within Australia based not only on the translocation of cultural traditions and social practices but also on the processes of adapting to a new cultural landscape and negotiating cultural spaces within a dominant culture. Conventional heritage practice has tended to privilege places of the dominant cultural groups to the exclusion of places of value to 'marginal' groups (eg. migrants, women, and urban indigenous peoples).

*The response has been an interest in ways of understanding social significance, in active community engagement, and in understanding that heritage places embody multiple values and may have different meanings for different community groups.*

Third, what is emerging in Australian heritage practice today is a distinct movement away from heritage as built fabric and as "places we want to keep" towards a recognition of heritage *as an expression of social identity and as a location for community action* that incorporates both the tangible fabric of place and the intangible values of meaning, memory, lived experience and attachment. *This has resulted in the recognition of the value of recent places that form what has been termed the familiar past.*

One of the most important lessons to emerge from this period of reflection is that categorisation and division is not an adequate response to complexity. Heritage is the indivisible and valued creation that comes from people, culture and place together. It is both tangible and intangible, not one or the other.

The paper goes on to explore three themes and the ways of recognising and integrating tangible and intangible heritage that are emerging in Australia.

### Land, landscape and intangibles

Land and landscape are broad and encompassing ideas. These ideas can be used to help build a critical link between the tangible fabric of a geography of places and the meanings, memories, cultural traditions and social practices that form part of the suite of associated intangible heritage values. The notion of landscape encompasses connections - routes, links, events, stories, traditions - that cross the 'boundary' between intangible and tangible heritage, and offers opportunities for a more holistic understanding.

Landscape also has the potential to be the medium that helps in understanding the commonalities and differences in the ways that Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities perceive cultural heritage.

From work with Indigenous communities, it is clear that the intangible/tangible division is itself a western construct and does not adequately account for the ways in which indigenous people perceive the relationships between the land, their cultural practices and place. This has been described by anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (1996) in her book 'Nourishing Terrains', *Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country.*

*Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place.... Rather country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life' (Rose 1996:7).*

There is no part of Australia that does not have Indigenous creation stories, an Indigenous community connection, and associated values and meanings. The Australian landscape itself is, in part, a cultural creation, shaped by millennia of Indigenous land management and use. This Indigenous landscape is now beginning to be 'seen' and appreciated.

For the non-Indigenous communities, a sense of connection to place is also an important part of cultural identity, but may be spoken of quite differently:

*In explaining that he wasn't born where he now lives, the old man said simply "I belong to Wick" (a town in the far north of Scotland). Whatever deep sense of belonging Australians may have, they would not express it in that way. I, for instance, would never say "I belong to Tasmania". Yet many Scots that I met showed this kind of deep attachment to their town or district. And this attachment comes through in conversation, in music, in story and in the deep Scottish fascination with history. (Peter Grant, Inspirational Landscapes On-line Conference)*

These ideas about connection to land (or landscape) expressed as *belonging* or *attachment*, are of increasing interest in the Australian heritage dialogue. They are also a source of contention and conflict over contested places and meanings.

An iconic Australian example would be Uluru (also known as Ayers Rock). Uluru is a place that embodies both the longevity and continuity of Anangu law and cultural practice (Layton 2001). Uluru, the significant or sacred places within and around it and the surrounding landscape, teach and maintain the fundamentals of life for Anangu people. The significant places and the ancestral beings that created them teach Anangu people the right way to be in the world. The tangible and intangible elements of these places are inseparable, 'Each one of these places embodies a physical proof that the events of the *tjukurrpa* really did take place' (Layton 2001:16).

But as Ayers Rock, this place symbolises colonial exploration of the Australia 'outback'. It is the 'Centre' of the country; it is a place that inspires visitors to come, some still bent on the personal achievement of 'the climb', others to see the Rock in the afterglow of sunset.

These differences are profound, and create difficult management challenges. Physical impacts are visible, but impacts on intangible values and meanings may not be so easy to see. Uluru is a cultural icon of great significance, and its status within the Australia's emotional and spiritual landscape is being actively re-formed and re-interpreted, drawing on both Indigenous and settler stories. The challenge is to create a space in which complex and conflicting meanings can be revealed, and where different readings of the landscape are valued.

New work recently completed by the Australian Heritage Commission moves away from earlier approaches to landscape assessment which relied on visual analysis of the physical characteristics of the land. Instead, the idea of 'inspirational landscape' seeks to recognise that is both physical and intangible qualities that give some landscapes their power.

*Inspirational landscapes are places that inspire emotional, spiritual and/or intellectual responses or actions because of their physical qualities as well as their meanings, associations, stories and history.*

Indicators of inspirational landscape values have been defined and include landscapes that create a powerful emotional response; landscapes that are defining images or inspired creative expression; landscapes containing significant cultural stories; landscapes that provide important opportunities for contemplation, spiritual reflection or refreshment of the human spirit; landscapes known for inspiring spiritual insights and as the source for ongoing spiritual practice.

Experience and culture are vital ingredients in how we see landscape. And our interactions with landscape in turn shape us. 'Inspirational landscape' is therefore a potentially powerful new idea in heritage practice in Australia.

Another interesting angle comes from community approaches to archaeology and heritage where the cultural landscapes valued by Indigenous people are being documented. Conversely, archaeological sites, which have dominated indigenous site management practice, may be almost invisible in a contemporary Indigenous community context.

Through a close working relationship with a community group, the Indigenous community significance of archaeological sites may be recognised. In her study of Cape York archaeology and heritage, Shelley Greer recognised that places of community importance include picnic and weekend camps, places of personal memory, places where an unusual event took place, places where good fishing or hunting is found, places associated with deceased kin. The stone artefact scatters and shell middens eagerly sought by archaeologists are often noted, especially when they are incorporated into a current activity such as camping or hunting, but they are not generally accorded the same nostalgic value as other types of places.

In the case of Blue Mud Bay in north east Arnhem Land some of the shell mounds which are up to 2500 years old were not initially recognised as cultural places by the Yolngu community. People knew of the mounds, their location and that they comprised marine shells and yet were located a long way (8km) from the present coast. However, the sites were not immediately associated with remembered Yolngu history. It was only after much discussion and after a stone artefact was uncovered from the excavation that the mounds were seen as places relating to Yolngu history. The places we were initially shown as relating to the Yolngu past were sites of cultural and cosmological significance and places such as freshwater wells and fishing spots relating to the use of the landscape in the time immediately preceding the establishment of the homeland in the 1970s.

Through a community approach to the archaeology which involved people in all the stages and processes of the field project, the sorts of places important to Yolngu in terms of their history and heritage were recognised as being very different to those that interested researchers and archaeologists. It is as though each is looking at a different landscape of meaning overlying the physical land

#### **Privileging recent time and living memory**

Memory is the past in the present, it is nurtured and passed on, shaped and added to by each generation. Memory is transmitted in many different ways in Australia. Some communities (particularly indigenous communities) rely on oral traditions, and some on the written word.

The idea of conserving the intangible values of memory and experience also asks us to re-consider the way time and time-depth has been privileged in assigning scientific and historical significance.

The integration of intangible values into conservation practice, whether associated with place, landscape or both will require a fundamental shift from a somewhat static view of significance to one that recognises the dynamic and contextual nature of social meaning.

Age, time-depth and the proportional rarity of older places have tended to drive the process of conservation in the past. But a new focus on social value, memory and the role of communities brings to the forefront the importance of recent places, places that fall within community, personal and familial memories - places that form a familiar past.

#### **Groote Eylandt, and Blue Mud Bay, Eastern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory**

From ethnographic research in northern Australia and from archaeological research in eastern Victoria, in New South Wales and Cape York, it is now recognised that Indigenous people are more concerned with the recent past than the deep time of antiquity typically revealed by archaeological research. It is recent time, time which falls within the ambit of personal and community remembrance, and which is etched in the landscape through the associations of place, people and memory, that is given prominence in Indigenous constructions of history.

Archaeological fieldwork on Groote Eylandt in the Northern Territory (Clarke 2000; 2003) revealed a cultural landscape structured according to an Indigenous view of time and history. There is the landscape of the remembered past, associated with old people (deceased relatives and known ancestors) and with Macassans. There is also an older landscape beyond community memory that was revealed through the medium of archaeological research.

These temporal landscapes came into focus through the way that my questions about the past were interpreted by Indigenous people (Clarke 2000a). When I began to go out with family groups to locate archaeological sites, the question I asked was, 'Where did the old people camp?' In response I was taken around the coast to places which were known to have been old camping areas. In some cases these were still used on weekends and holiday periods and in others people no longer chose to camp in those same locations.

Some camps were associated with evidence of some form of engagement with Macassans. This included pottery sherds and pieces of glass and metal mixed in with shell midden remains. Sometimes former trepang processing sites were identified as places where the old people had once camped with the Macassans.

On other occasions I was taken to locations where no material evidence of cultural activities existed but which were places known and named as camping areas. Many of the areas remembered as old camping sites were obviously recent in age and on examination produced no evidence of archaeological deposits below the ground surface. These landscapes and places of memory were in contrast with the sites that I found through archaeological survey. Generally, the older sites, particularly those located inland from the coast and with radiocarbon dates of 1000 years or more were not active parts of the Indigenous cultural landscape, they were not remembered as camping places.

Archaeological research with indigenous Yolngu communities in Blue Mud Bay in North East Arnhem Land has also revealed different perspectives on heritage. From a Yolngu perspective, cultural practices help tell and continue the stories of these recent landscapes. For example, the way Yolngu stack and line up turtle shells along the back of the beach is an act of remembrance from the times when turtle shell was traded with Macassans for a whole suite of products. The customs of dealing with visitors who come to Yolngu territory via the sea is another example. In the past it is clear that Yolngu entered into negotiated relationships with the Macassan trepangers, with ethnographic and oral sources recording how personal names and kin terms were exchanged and how particular captains returned to the same places each year. Today, in Blue Mud Bay a Thai crab fisherman operates in a similar cultural context to that of a Macassan trepang captain. He has been allocated a semi-permanent campsite in exchange for a fee. He has a name and a kin relationship with the community. His camp is used as a place of visitation and acquisition of goods by Yolngu. Heritage in the Yolngu context has relatively little to do with physical fabric and material culture. For Yolngu, heritage is everyday practice, it is embodied and embedded in ritual, cosmology and prosaic subsistence practices. And yet heritage is recognised in conversation as legacy, as something to be passed on.

#### Lake Condah, Victoria

Lake Condah, in south-western Australia, is the traditional country of the Kerrup-Jmara people of the Gunditjmarra nation. The lake was created by volcanic lava flows around 10,000 years ago - that is, within cultural memory. The lake was a rich resource, and the installation of stone fish traps enabled easier harvesting. In the early colonial years (1830-40s) the rugged stony country became the perfect place for Aboriginal people to launch guerilla attacks on the colonisers. Eventually such resistance was defeated, and an Aboriginal mission was established on an old campsite over looking 'the stones'. Later, the land was taken back by the government and given to 'soldier settlers, but recently this has been reversed and Aboriginal people have regained title to most of this land.

Managing this place, and especially the mission, has proved complex. The first attempts were based on a more traditional approach to heritage places, with the primary period of significance recognised at being at the peak of the development of the mission, the 1880s. As a result, a missing building - the dormitory - was reconstructed to its 1880s form. Older members of the Aboriginal community were shocked by the result. It was as if their memories and their lives had been wiped away. This was not the dormitory of their childhood, and its form actively denied their existence. There were threats to burn the building down, to drag it off the site, anything to get it out of people's sight.

Why did this happen? The problem was a failure to recognise and give full expression to the importance of memory. The building was gone, but the memories and stories remained alive. Recreating the building denied living memory and replaced it with a un-remembered past.

A recent conservation plan for the Mission has recognised that this place is 'fundamental to the identity of the Gunditjmarra and Kerrup Jmara peoples'. It is a place to which 'people feel a need to return, to draw strength, to reconnect to their land and community'.

*It's a beautiful place and I always feel as though I'm home when I am there. The spirituality that's in the place for me, well nothing overcomes it. Nothing.* (Iris Lovett-Gardiner).

The new plan gives primacy to Aboriginal values, memories, uses and recognises its value as a place to celebrate culture and community, to share and pass on knowledge, and to respect memory.

#### Respecting connection

Although the earliest cultural heritage legislation in Australia recognised four key values - aesthetic, historic, social and scientific - it took many years before social significance began to be recognised and assessed. Social significance encompasses people's attachment to place, the meanings and associations built through history, direct experience and cultural memory, often across generations.

When the Burra Charter was revised in 1999, this new interest in associations between people and place was incorporated into the Charter. The reasons for conserving places were seen as including:

*A deep and inspirational sense of connection to community and landscape, to the past and to lived experiences* (Preamble: Why conserve?)

The Charter now recognises the *associations* and special connection between people and a place, the importance of engaging those people in conservation, interpretation and management, and the need to be proactive to retain valued associations and meanings:

(24.1) *Significant associations between people and a place should be respected, retained and not obscured. Opportunities for interpretation, commemoration and celebration of these associations should be investigated and implemented.*

(24.2) *Significant meanings, including spiritual values, of a place should be respected. Opportunities for the continuation or revival of these meanings should be investigated and implemented.*

These changes have presented a major challenge to heritage conservation practice in Australia. Understanding social significance uses social research methods, rather than architectural and historical research, and involves identifying and working with the people or communities that value a place or places. This requires us to understand their experiences and memories and to clarify the ways in which their connections with the place are evident in tangible and intangible ways, and the conservation actions that therefore arise.

#### Painful places

Some of the recent work on social significance in Australia has focused on painful places, places such as Port Arthur in Tasmania, or Mount Penang in New South Wales. At Port Arthur, the tragic events of 28 April 1996 became headlines worldwide. For the local community, many of whom have worked at the historic site for decades, and for those who were visiting on that fateful day, their memories and the place will always be inextricably entwined.

*The Broad Arrow Café has cultural significance primarily for its social value as a place of remembrance of those who died and were injured in the tragedy. For survivors, friends and relatives and others touched by the tragedy, the place has become a memorial evocative of the events of 28 April 1996.*

The development of a conservation plan for Port Arthur involved working with several quite distinct communities to appreciate the nature of their associations and attachments. These included trying to understand the place of Port Arthur in an Australian and Tasmanian sense of identity:

*Port Arthur is regarded as an Australian icon, probably the best-known symbol of our convict past for Australians.*

*For Australians, Port Arthur is a place to reconnect with their colonial roots, real or imagined.*

*Port Arthur symbolises Tasmania's convict past, a powerful and, at times, denied foundation of the Tasmanian identity.*

And for the local community of the Tasman Peninsula, many still grieve the loss of their town Carnarvon which became recognised as an historic site, with the result that the community had to move out. Their expressions indicate a strong sense of continuing connection:

*Port Arthur's history is ongoing. People grow up, live, die and the story goes on. It did not end in 1877 when the convict settlement closed.*

*It's the heart and soul of many events that have taken place over many years.*

*Port Arthur was a village for longer than it was a convict settlement. Port Arthur is part of the Peninsula, it's ours.*

At Mt Penang, a boy's detention centre (prison) in NSW, closure of the centre and proposed reuse of the site and buildings for festivals prompted a study of heritage values. Group discussions were arranged with those who were detained there or worked there over the years and up to the present day.

Mount Penang contained indelible memories for those who had been detained there. Working with some of these men, they wanted us, the researchers, to see the barracks in which they slept, the corner of the room that was theirs so that we can understand their memories and their experiences, but when they look at the place, it is again filled with the people who were there at the time. For us as visitors, it is enriched by these men's stories, but does not have the power over us that it does over them.

*Mt Penang is very important to the many boys and young men who were detained there over the course of nearly a century. For most detainees, Mt Penang is a place where unforgettable experiences occurred - experiences which strongly influenced their course of their lives.*

Port Arthur and Mt Penang both present significant challenges on how intangible connections can be respected and retained. In both instances continuing access is important so that people can reconnect to the place and to their memories, reflecting the importance of place in the creation of personal and social identity.

### **A heritage of displacement**

In the upper mountainous reaches of the Mersey valley in northern Tasmania, 150 years of summer grazing and winter hunting have built strong links between the local communities and this rugged landscape. A rich history of stories is shared across these communities, so much so that some people who never been there can describe the places vividly, and tell their stories.

The landscape, through their eyes, is peopled with legendary men who worked this harsh terrain, local place names tell these stories and the boundaries of grazing and hunting runs are clearly seen.

The threat of displacement from this landscape came in the form of a National Park and then a World Heritage Area declaration, based on outstanding natural values. The historical land uses were banned, as were horses and dogs, based on a desire to protect natural values. Feeling 'locked out', local people protested, and then sought a study of their connections with this place which concluded (in part):

*The Upper Mersey Valley is of profound significance for the local communities associated with this place. It is a symbol of their identity and of a distinctive contemporary way of life that values and encourages continuation of traditional land uses and activities associated with the valley. It connects people to their personal, family and community past, creating links that are fundamental to community identity. Continuity of use over many generations combined with shared experiences and stories continue to reinforce these significant connections.*

Conserving these values starts with recognising these communities, their history and the importance of this landscape in their shared identity. It means allowing associated communities to continue to visit and use the area, giving them a voice in management of the tangible cultural and natural values, and being open to the celebration of their history, stories and memories. The past response would have been to exclude these communities, to devalue their connections to the place and to speak of them as the destroyers of this 'pristine wilderness'.

### **The emerging challenges of managing for all heritage values**

The challenges that face Australian heritage practice in relation to managing intangible and tangible values as an integrated whole are great. While our understanding is developing rapidly, mainstream heritage practice is not very actively engaged in these issues.

Australia is a complex cultural landscape, with many overlain and interwoven values some well-articulated and others still to find expression. Giving a voice to these unspoken values will be very important. And finding ways to bring these voices into the management processes is another challenge.

Working with people, understanding their places and associations is a complex and time-consuming task. It will require resources and skilled heritage professionals. It will also require support for communities that are asked to engage in these processes, especially when such research is driven by a public or private desire for change or development.

Finally, the challenge is within each of us. To appreciate and understand our own intangible values, and to work with others to help them do likewise. This requires our intellect and our hearts, requires us to respect others, their experiences and their values. This is an enormous personal challenge, but offers an exciting prospect for a renewed appreciation of heritage as an indivisible creation, a living experience.

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## ABSTRACT

One of the challenges facing heritage conservation practice in Australia is how to deal with the forms of social meaning different community groups, families and individuals attribute to places and landscapes through their lived experiences, memories and associations.

Conventionally, heritage conservation has focused on fabric with less emphasis on the non-material aspects of cultural heritage. There is increasing recognition that intangible values play an important role in how people interact with their social and cultural environments and how these values impact on the ways in which people respond to conservation needs.

However, the idea of conserving the intangible values of memory and experience also asks us to re-consider the way time and time-depth has been privileged in assigning scientific and historical significance. The integration of intangible values into conservation practice, whether associated with place, landscape or both will require a fundamental shift from a somewhat static view of significance to one that recognises the dynamic and contextual nature of social meaning.

In this paper we will explore these issues of time, memory, experience and connections to place and landscape from our experiences of working in indigenous, colonial and migrant heritage across Australia.

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Ms Chris Johnston is a heritage consultant who specialises in investigating the special meanings and associations that exist between communities and their places. She has a national profile for her work in developing methodologies in this area, and has written extensively on the subject. Her work has included community heritage workshops across eastern Australia as part of the Australian government's planning for protection and use of forests. She has worked with many urban and rural communities to identify important meanings and associations with place and ensure these are included within heritage planning and protection for these places. Her consultancy practice, Context Pty Ltd, specialises in active community participation in all heritage and environment.