

Port Arthur: Heritage, Home, Haven or Horror?

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Abstract. This paper explores the way in which places and senses mutually create/recreate each other. Emphasis is placed on how places are experienced, but are also created through conceptualisation and imagining: place is not only the physicality of being 'here', but also imagined through layers of memories, often of other places, and sometimes grounded in the memory of others. Specific reference is made to the Port Arthur Historic Site, which is conceptualised variously as convict heritage place (World Heritage nominated), community place, tragedy place and tourism place. The paper applies theoretical approaches combining philosophical and anthropological understandings of space and place, which explicate the multi-vocality of landscapes that enmesh people, place and time. It is shown that spirit and place become embedded in a flow of power and negotiation of social relations that are rendered in the physicality of tangible elements and the embodiment of imagination, memories and symbolic attributions.

1. Introduction

As this symposium is appositely addressing, heritage is not just the material 'things' around us, but is inclusive of aspects that are intangible, such as language, myth, ritual, custom, oral traditions, practices, knowledge and stories. It incorporates the symbolic manifestations of culture that are passed on (and changed) over time in a process that transmits ideas, beliefs, values and emotions. Intangible heritage is interlinked with the things we do and with what we experience. The process is one which links places, people and senses, which act to mutually create and re-create each other. It is through practices and experiences that people, memory, identity and place interact. An understanding of practices also reveals the ways that life is learned and passed on through processes of socialisation. The processes involved are integral to the creation and maintenance of identity and belonging, and of 'being in place', all of which reinforce how people engage with the 'spirit of place'.

An analysis of these engagements can valuably rely on a number of theoretical platforms, including the experiential understandings that can be gained through a phenomenological approach. The role of perception, both as constituted and constitutive, is integral to the way in which place, meaning, senses and action continuously interact in a process of creation and recreation. Individual lives and experiences are enmeshed in a web of social interactions and meanings that reach out from the immediate community and locale to engage with broader national and global influences. By complementing this approach with the understanding of life as a series of transformations, it is possible to understand the way in which material and social relations are situational and influenced by processes of change. Place, memory, community and identity are all mutable. Because all are reliant on social processes, they are also inseparable from power relations and the inevitable negotiations that accompany hegemonic encounters (Harrington 2004, 326).

2. Port Arthur

The Port Arthur Historic Site in Australia provides an excellent location to consider the relationship between the landscape, people, history, heritage, the intangible, and the Spirit of Place. The site has national heritage significance that recognises the role of convictism in the symbolic construction of Australian nationhood. It is Tasmania's most visited tourism destination, with the majority of visitor awareness acknowledging the site's convict heritage. It is a significant place for the local community as part of their lived, experienced and remembered landscape. In 1996 Port Arthur was the place of a horrific shooting by a lone gunman that resulted in the loss of 35 lives and injury of another 19 people. This tragic event imposed another layer of pain and suffering on Port Arthur and touched the lives of many.

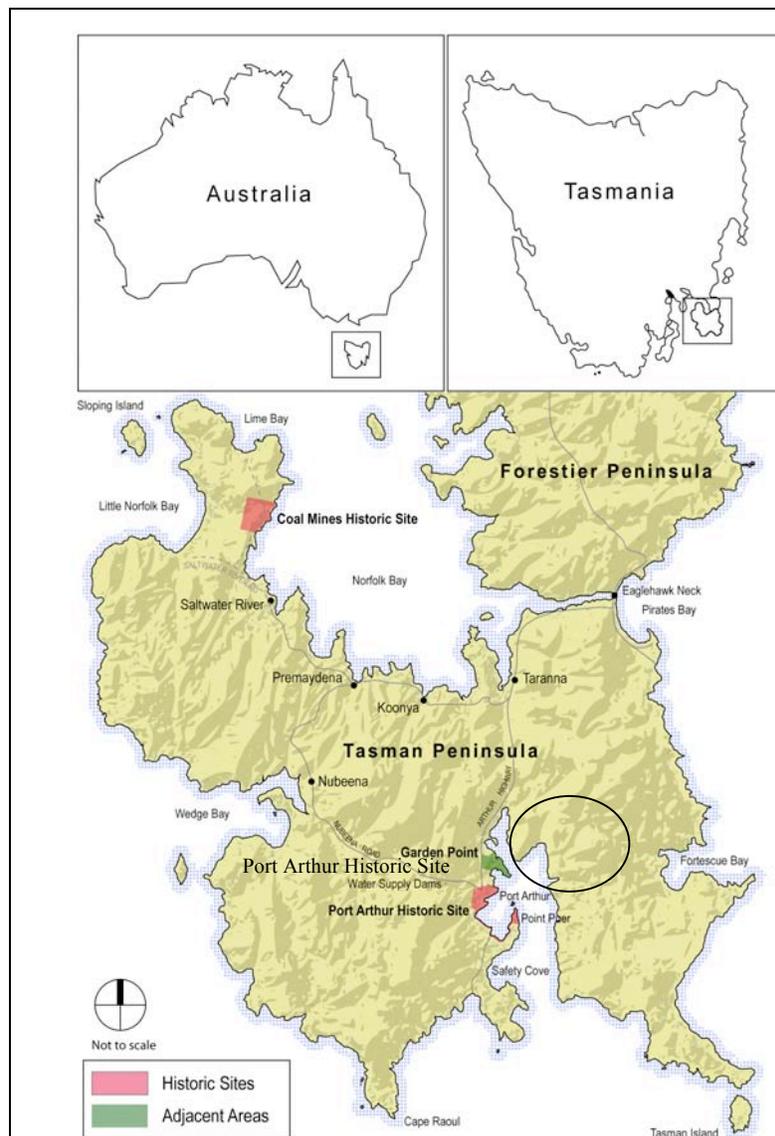


Figure 1. Location and context of the Port Arthur Historic Site.

2.1 HISTORY

The Site comprises 98.1 hectares on the Tasman Peninsula in the south-east of the island state of Tasmania (Fig. 1). Archaeological evidence suggests that the Peninsula has an Aboriginal history at least 5400 years old, but it is probable that it was occupied much earlier. The penal station of Port Arthur had its origins as a convict timber camp in 1830. In 1833 Port Arthur became the focus of the secondary punishment system in Van Diemen's Land. The convict settlement saw various stages of expansion over the next 40 or so years until the establishment was closed for convict purposes in 1877.

Following this, the land was parcelled up for private sale and a township grew among the ruins of the penal settlement. A burgeoning tourist trade saw the area devoted to a combination of tourism, agriculture and timber-getting. Visitors were initially mainly Tasmanians, keen to see first-hand the 'horrors' of a penal station, but soon the site was attracting increasing numbers from the mainland and overseas. Ironically this was aided by the quintessential Australian phenomenon – bushfire – which in multiple destructive events served to create a landscape of ruins and to impose an 'instant' picturesque Gothic quality (Young 1996, 37).

Recognition of the Site's importance prompted the Tasmanian Government to create the Scenery Preservation Board in 1915, which took the management of parts of Port Arthur out of local hands. By 1948 most of the township was reserved as a historic site. The National Parks and Wildlife Service took over management in 1971, by which time the entirety of the site was government-owned. In 1986 management passed to the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority.

On Sunday 28 April 1996, a lone gunman shot and killed 35 people and wounded 19 others in and around Port Arthur. In the years following the event, a memorial garden was established, which includes the partially demolished ruins of the Broad Arrow Café, where many of the victims lost their lives. As a result of this event, national gun laws were introduced, which included a general ban on the private ownership of automatic and semi-automatic firearms (PAHSMA 2007, 21-33).

2.2. PORT ARTHUR TODAY

The Historic Site retains evidence of all its phases of use and occupation, from Aboriginal occupation, penal settlement, township, and its gradual transformation into an internationally recognised historic site and tourism destination. It is included on the National List and the Tasmanian Heritage List and is one of 11 sites in the pending Australian serial convict World Heritage nomination. The Site is the most visited tourist destination in Tasmania, with

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some 300,000 visitors a year. The Authority is today the major employer on the Peninsula, reinforcing the Site's traditional role as a centre of economic activity. The Site retains strong links with the community, not only as a place of employment, but through powerful and enduring associations and meanings as a landmark and as a symbolic centre.

A number of families have long term connections with Port Arthur, dating to the township period. In some cases, these families lived in houses now within the Port Arthur Historic Site, which were subsequently restored or demolished. For many members of today's community, the Site was once the place they called home, worked in, went to school, farmed, had children and simply lived. Their ongoing involvement is one that involves a sense of attachment and 'ownership' (PAHSMA 2007, 41–42).



Figure 2. Port Arthur Penitentiary Building. A Tasmanian icon.

3. The Spirit of Port Arthur

3.1 HERITAGE AS ENDURING PRACTICE

Port Arthur typifies that what and who we are is entangled with the place we occupy, whether this is for a brief moment or a longer period of time. But it does not preclude that our engagement with places can also be one of memory and imagination. The co-existence of the material and the imagined of place together act to articulate identity at various levels. For a place such as Port Arthur, this arises through multiple and overlapping experiences: a place of

memory, of home and belonging, of work, of nation building, of punishment and rehabilitation, of pain and suffering, of sadness, of history, of learning and fun, a place of tourism. At Port Arthur, the past and the present are variously engaged, re-engaged and re-presented, formally through heritage interpretation programs and more informally through the memories and stories that create multi-vocal landscapes.

One of the historical layers of Port Arthur lies in its early establishment as a historic reserve and as a tourism destination. The conferring of heritage values and the evolution of Port Arthur as a tourism destination have been established by punctuated but persistent processes since the penal settlement closed in 1877. Both have served to reinforce the wider cultural appreciation of the Port Arthur landscape as encompassing both paradox and mystery (PAHSMA 2003, 19). This ‘history of heritage’ has implicated the site in the evolution of heritage discourse and practice in the Australian context and more broadly. One result has been a relationship with several generations of heritage practitioners, for many as a professional ‘rite of passage’. Through various modes of heritage interpretation and practice, the Port Arthur landscape has accrued another set of layers, providing an anticipated, experienced and multi-valent landscape that links a ‘practised’ heritage in a meaningful way with people in the present. In this sense, the practice of heritage – and the people involved with that practice – has become part of the field of social relations that link identity, place and the social practices that make place.

3.2 HERITAGE AS MEMORY

In 2007 a contemporary art exhibition (the Port Arthur Project) was installed at the Site. The intent was to engage with the history and culture of Port Arthur using a collection of site-specific artworks. Artists were encouraged to uncover under-recognised elements of the landscape, or to reinvestigate conventional readings of history. One installation was based on the poignant notion of memory and representations of death, loss and mourning. The artist’s work consisted of a series of photographic prints of various headstones on the Isle of the Dead, the small island used as the cemetery during the time of the penal settlement. The installation highlighted that even here at ‘the end of the earth’ people tried to inscribe an eternal memory of the dead. The work illustrated the poignancy and futility of such actions in the face of nature and time. Of the 90 gravestones, 68 have the word *memory* inscribed upon them. However, ‘rather than perpetuate the life they honoured, the slow disintegration of the gravestones create a *momento mori* or premonition of death and decay ... reflect[ing] the fading away of these exquisitely rendered headstones’ (Frankham & Clark 2007, 10).

This astute artistic rendering of a major conservation problem exemplifies one of the goals of any conservation program: to work to ensure that the multiple memories, stories, attachments and meanings – and the ways of reading them – are not allowed to disappear from the landscape. Complementing efforts to protect the fabric of the cemetery, the continuation of

memory is enhanced through an ongoing association by many who identify themselves as descendents of those buried there, both convict and free persons.

One of the more poignant places within the landscape of the Historic Site is the Memorial Garden, created following the tragic 1996 shooting. Its installation involved an intensive project of community consultation. The feelings of the community varied (and continue to vary), and include strong polarised opinions arising from the highly emotional nature of the tragedy. The Broad Arrow Café and Memorial Garden have become a symbol and focus of remembrance for those who died in, were injured by or assisted during the tragedy and is a place of memory, remembrance and mourning for many visitors, survivors and relatives of those who were lost (Lennon 1998). It is a particular place of remembrance for the community of Tasman Peninsula, a number of whom were working at the site on the day, and some of whom are still involved with the site.

It has been argued that memory is not simply a process of recalling the past. Instead, it remains a complex process of 'selection, negotiation and struggle over what will be remembered and what will be forgotten. [It] involves remembering and forgetting, changing and restructuring one's perception of the past so that it both supports the needs of the present and projects a logical future' (Natzmer 2002, 164). Memories also act to create interpretive frameworks to help make experience comprehensible and can become deeply implicated in contemporary matters. These include the truth of memory, history and culture, who owns them and their roles in identity, hegemonic relationships and nation building. They can tear a community apart, but they can also bring a community together (Cattell & Climo 2002: 4–5). The Memorial Garden has become a place of remembrance for many, and a place of healing and recovery for others. For some it remains a place of mourning and one that is kept separate from their embodied experience: it is a sad place for its horror and sorrow. It is also a place of significant interest to visitors who are curious as to how the 1996 tragedy has been remembered. Over time, a challenge will develop in ensuring that the event and the memories are not subsumed in a process of objectification and artefact making; that is, that the tangible remains at the site of the Broad Arrow Café do not take on a greater significance than the memories of the event itself and the meaning of the memorial as a symbol of resilience and remembering.



Figure 3. Memorial Pond and Garden.

3.3 COMMUNITY HERITAGE

One of the strongly expressed sentiments of the Port Arthur community is that the Historic Site is not ‘Port Arthur’, and that Port Arthur is a larger township within which the site is located. This fact is one that confounds many visitors – and compounds the need for local assertions of ownership. Port Arthur is a small town in its own right, with some 200 permanent inhabitants, many of whom have a multi-generational connection to the area.

The Site clearly cannot be, and will not be, separated from the voices of the local people: it remains a focal point in their areas of interest. Many of these relate to ongoing practices associated with the environment: fishing, farming, gardening, relationships, all of which incorporate processes of learning that are both practical and social. These are the things that tell us who we are, what we need to do, how to do it, and where we belong. In a rural environment they include place-specific environmental information, are related to ways of using the land, of climate, agricultural practices, the best places to fish, and the right times to do so. They also include an awareness of dangers, which are particularly relevant in a sea-based environment. These practices and processes are significant components of the way a community creates and reinforces meanings and relationships. The transfer of knowledge between generations is also one that reinforces belonging and notions of stewardship in contexts that are simultaneously practical, spiritual and emotional (Crumley 2002, 41). For today’s Port Arthur community, many of these practices were learned during the period of earlier occupation of the township, before the land was taken over

by the government, or have been passed on through memories of that time. A number of community activities are still part of practices and engagement with the Site. Local fishermen continue to access a jetty within the Site and a small fishing fleet is moored close by. One of the enduring local traditions and an integral part of the heritage of the Port Arthur community is the boxing day wood-chops, held in the Site grounds. The chops, which sees competitors pitted against each other in various timber-cutting activities, are the remaining event of the Port Arthur sports day, which commenced in 1863 and is believed to be the longest running sporting event in Australia. Held annually, it attracts competitors and spectators from across Tasmania.



Figure 4. Boxing Day Woodchops.

The ongoing tradition of such practices at Port Arthur is a reminder that the meanings, experiences and local stories of the community are reinforced in places of meeting, interaction and exchange. The wood-chops as a modern-day practice also provide an unbroken connection with the origins of Port Arthur as a timber-getting camp. Cultural and social activities – whether organised events or just day-to-day recreational experiences – enhance community identity and reinforce the closely intertwined relationship with the broader environment, both natural and constructed, and with historical connections. For many communities their cultural and social values are inseparable from their knowledge, experience and understanding of place, and of the broader

landscape within which community and home are conceptualised and understood.

4. Conclusion

The multiplicity of places, spaces and meanings and their resonance in the concept of landscapes have attracted substantial philosophical debate. For Heidegger (1993, 349), we inhabit the earth in a way that reinforces the habitual nature of experience. de Certeau suggests that sociocultural production and socioeconomic order act to (re)appropriate space through the practices of ‘everyday life’. We use places through activities such as frequenting or dwelling in a place, and to provide ‘the many ways of establishing a kind of reliability with the situations imposed on an individual, that is, of making it possible to live in them by reintroducing ... the plural mobility of goals and desires’ (de Certeau 1984, xxii). Bourdieu (1977, 72) relies on the concept of *habitus* as a set of principles that ground and explain practices in both specific and general sociocultural contexts. Experiences, including the processes of heritage, can hence be seen to merge into habitus – or social norms – for those who engage with them as a set of professional principles, as a way of knowing, and as a way of being known. They can also be seen to act on the way people reinforce identities, and imbue with attachments and meanings the landscapes and places that are complicit in this reinforcement.

A place is contextually constituted by differing human experiences, attachments and involvements. It is what people do – through a process of social participation – that serves as a form of mortar, bonding the features of a landscape together. These bonds act to provide a model for the multiple systems of social relationships and governance (Olwig 1995, 317). The material remains of the past can be considered as an imprint of the normal, the banal, habitual but nonetheless socially and culturally specific environment in and through which people negotiate their lives.

The Port Arthur landscape is complex, intricate, and worked-upon; for many it is an experienced, remembered and lived-in place. If, as Bender (1998, 7) reminds us, ‘we continue to try to create, not *the* past, but *our* past’ through landscape interpretation and conceptualisation, it becomes clear that there are multiple created, interpreted and conceptualised pasts in the Port Arthur landscape. All landscapes have the conceptual capacity to contain, hold and preserve experiences and memories and to represent that which is ‘the familiar, the small, the “in place”, the dense with meaning, sensation and memory’ (Bender 2003). This is not to deny the relevance of material ‘things’ in place, but to acknowledge their capacity to draw memory and place together in a significant way. This can also be people who have lived, experienced, played and worked together, all of whom construct a consciousness of their social world out of their engagement with and conceptualisation of lived experience and their relationship with others.

Landscapes do not have ‘voices’ as such, nor are memories written across them. These belong to the people who interpret them, creating a complex

relationship between the object and the narrator/interpreter (Bender 1995, 15). Values arise out of the interrelationship of places, the interpretation of landscapes, or the attachments that impart a 'spirit of place'. The shared experiences of those who have worked, lived, visited or imagined Port Arthur act as a component of the bricolage from which communities variously define and identify themselves.

There is ongoing discussion of the way in which landscapes, buildings and places have lost, or are in the process of losing, their meaning and significance – particularly in Western and capitalist society. A landscape that is stripped of sedimented human meanings can be considered to be irrelevant, and becomes 'set apart from people, myth and history, something to be controlled and used' (Tilley 1994, 21). It loses its spirit of place. To varying degrees a combination of heritage approaches, tourism and development are influencing the lives of many communities, and the community at Port Arthur is not divorced from these same global processes. One particular challenge is reconciling the broader stories and spirit of Port Arthur with the overwhelming identification of Port Arthur as a penal settlement by most visitors to the Historic Site. The necessity is to avoid the marginalisation of contemporary community meanings, particularly those that arise through practice and experience, and to ensure that the multiple attachments and engagements that together create and reinforce the spirit of place are not compromised.

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