

Things and Places, Hearts and Minds

Interpreting Heritage Interpretation in New South Wales

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Abstract. In 2005, the Heritage Council of New South Wales published the state's first policies and guidelines for *Interpreting Heritage Places and Items*. Developed in consultation with professional, industry and community stakeholders, this document recognises the vital role of interpretation in transmitting the Spirit of Place.

Drawing its illustrations from a variety of interpretive projects around New South Wales, the new *Illustrated Edition* seeks to extend the accessibility of its best practice principles and procedures to a wide audience – all those involved in preparing, commissioning, assessing or approving interpretation plans, with or without a background in the discipline.

This paper introduces the essential ingredients of successful heritage interpretation as set out and illustrated in the new edition and discusses their applicability to future audiences and new media.

What are we like? How have we come to be the way we are? Where and how do we fit in? Is there a way of looking at the world around us that can help us answer these questions?

The evidence accumulates in collections as diverse as palaeontology, social history or decorative arts. The natural environment is, likewise, a mirror of both our stewardship and our depredations. Our streets are lined with buildings, grand or humble, that both exemplify the circumstances and values of their builders and reflect, in their various states of preservation, neglect or demolition, our own perceptions and priorities. Our answers to those questions will depend on the insight with which we interpret that evidence.

All interpretation, whether of (or by) a language, a piece of music, a painting, a landscape, an artefact, or an experience, is an act of identifying or transmitting meaning.

Heritage Interpretation is a discipline that plans and provides physical, intellectual and emotive *access* to the cultural and ecological importance of places, objects and living things. Through appropriate technologies (“media”) and the responsible stimulation of ideas and opinions, it encourages their protection, preservation and appreciation by and for present and future generations.

More broadly, Interpretation contributes to our quality of life by helping us to situate ourselves on a trajectory – from past, to present, to future – and to realise that journey is largely determined by our own choices and behaviours. Interpretation shows us ways of reading our World.

In these ways, the opportunities and services delivered by Interpretation determine to a great extent the role of heritage places and things in the recreational, cultural and economic life of the community.

THE CHALLENGE

In 1999, the revised *Burra Charter* recognised the role of Interpretation in heritage conservation. Heritage agencies evinced a new interest the discipline as the key to popular and political support for their activities. Interpretation planning began to show up as a condition for the approval of development applications involving built heritage sites and precincts in New South Wales.

Before long, it was clear that there was no consistent view among those involved in the approvals process – proponents or consent authorities – about what constitutes Interpretation, let alone best practice in the field.

Now, this is hardly surprising in a field that boasts almost as many definitions as there are practitioners! How was a property developer, a project manager, a town planner, a local Councillor or even an interpretation practitioner to know what compliance with such a requirement might look like? How to write a brief for it? How to compare responses to the brief? How to tell whether the resulting plan would fill the bill?

The challenge was to create guidelines that would both define best practice *and* interpret Interpretation to people with little or no background in heritage conservation.

Combining the wisdom and work of more than 100 organisations, agencies and individuals, *Interpreting Heritage Places and Items* is the distillation of nearly 3 years' exhaustive research and consultation conducted on behalf of the New South Wales Heritage Council by two eminent practitioners, Elaine Lawson and Meredith Walker. During those years, the project was affectionately known as the '*Interpretation Guidelines*'. For the sake of brevity, I adopt that usage in this paper. The illustrated version, launched today, amplifies the accessibility of that document in a newly edited format with graphic examples of the principles and practices it advocates.

Those principles and practices originate in the evolving role of Interpretation as a conservation discipline and in the multiple contexts in which it has to function.

THE NEED TO KNOW

In the days when conservation of significant items was the exclusive preserve of the privileged classes, their monuments or collections were amassed on the basis of their tastes, hobbies or convictions and at their own expense. These aristocrats were under no obligation either to justify their pursuits or to share beyond their immediate circle whatever insights they may have arrived at in the course of their acquisitions and studies. These items were good and worthy because the "best" people said they were. End of story. Interpretation was no concern of theirs.

In time, the care of these buildings, landscapes, scientific or artistic collections outgrew the enthusiasm or the means (or both) of their collectors and they were, for the most part, fostered upon governments or institutions of

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learning. Still others underwent a gradual and precarious transformation from ‘building stock’ to ‘built heritage’. With this change of management, came at least a rudimentary acknowledgement of accountability and a new régime of professionals whose expertise validated the demands of conservation on the public (or the patron’s) purse. Their conception of interpretation, accordingly, focussed on the demonstration of expertise. These items were good and worthy because initiates into some specialist field of knowledge said they were. Interpretation generally took two forms: the label (indoors, item in a collection) and the plaque (outdoors, place or monument).

An extreme example of the former, sublime in its opacity, could be seen as recently as 1990, at the National Gallery in Canberra. It proclaimed its associated artefact to be, “Reliquary, in the form of a chorten (stupa)”.

This is expertise rampant, deployed not to elucidate significance but to assert authority. The humble visitor, untutored in Buddhist iconography, Tibetan or Sanskrit, knows only that this intriguing thingamajig has been acquired, conserved and displayed at his or her expense and is an object of élite veneration. End of story.

A bronze plaque extolling, in 2006, the virtues of a heritage bridge in northern New South Wales advises us that the structure’s designer, “... approximated the correct cardioid curve by six circular arcs of varying radii.”

A recent display on the banks of the Parramatta River, not a hundred meters from my office, begins its celebration of a newly installed fish-ladder with this ray of enlightenment – “Common Jollytail are catadromous fish.”

The remarkable thing here is that these examples are so recent.

Today, it takes more than aristocratic *cachet* or professional expertise to underwrite the public investment that much heritage conservation demands. If that conservation is to receive the popular and political support – the votes and the money – that it needs to continue, significant resources had better signify not just to the experts, but to the people who are paying the bills. They need to know.

So, there is a hardheaded, pragmatic reason for getting good at interpretation. If we want to conserve, we’d better interpret. As never before, heritage conservation has to sing for its supper. Interpretation is the way it sings.

OF MEANS AND END

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But there’s more to it than that. We have blithely asserted above that conservation of significant objects and environments is a public benefit. Yet there it stands – the timber bridge, the grand estate, the very sword, the humble hut, the ancient vista – and just what public benefit is it delivering, and how? Here is a question that goes to the very root of the conservation agenda: Why do it?

The answer leads us back towards Interpretation. I’m going to suggest, with tongue not altogether ensconced in cheek, that any conservation effort that fails to culminate in some positive transaction with the public consciousness is not only a doomed but a futile exercise.

This argument is perhaps easier to sustain on behalf of cultural heritage than of natural resources or landscapes, which have clear ‘indirect use values’ that are independent of public access. ‘Green’ parks embody a

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tangible ‘ecological function value’ contributing positively, for example, to air and water quality and to the biodiversity of plant and animal species. Their ‘option value’, as recreational or research opportunities, contributes to the ambient quality of life in their regions. They do this just by being there, whether the public actually visits them or not. Just the same, the votes and the money that support their continued conservation will be forthcoming only from a public that is aware and appreciative of these benefits and derives satisfaction from the ‘existence value’ of these resources.

Some historic structures, of course, can deliver a range of direct use values. The old bridge will get you across the river; the old building can provide shelter, office accommodation or storage – the whole panoply of adaptive reuse. Heritage places can offer public amenity, in terms of recreation and leisure opportunities, or pleasant and prestigious venues for special events. They may also generate financial benefits and other positive economic impacts for owners, lessees and concessionaires, or for neighbouring communities that provide services and infrastructure to visitors. But these benefits of historic heritage conservation are *incidental by-products* of the process of conservation: they are not its purpose.

The *indirect* use values of historic heritage incorporate no tangible components. Its ‘option values’ – as opportunity, vicarious experience, bequest, or for future research – may be of the same kind as those of natural heritage, and, yes, some heritage items do sequester a certain amount of carbon. But a conserved structure, place or object, however significant, confers little public benefit – call it ‘cultural function value’ – just by being there. Whether they are visitors or not, the public at large only values such resources when at least the potential *experience* of the place and its *significance* are perceptible. As phenomena in themselves their ‘existence value’ is nil.

The public benefit of conserved historic heritage thus derives entirely and directly from the public’s physical, intellectual and affective *access* to it. The consummation of the conservation agenda – its end product – is *not* the conserved thing. It *is* that transaction with the public consciousness.

This accounts for the *Guidelines*’ emphasis on understanding audiences as well as places or items.

OF HEARTS AND MINDS

In some quarters, there is resistance to the suggestion that formulating conservation messages should be influenced by the characteristics of the audience to whom they’re addressed. There is concern that any perceived relaxation of expert rigor in communication may lead to trivialisation of the weighty insights of history, archaeology, architecture, biology or engineering. And we *do* love our chortens, our cardioid curves and our catadromous fish!

The *Guidelines* also suggest that engaging the audience entails, in addition to the treatment of an item’s fabric and its appropriate use, choosing the right combination of media to convey our messages.

For the arsenal of Interpretation has expanded mightily beyond the label and the plaque. This is not to denigrate either of those two venerable media, but to acknowledge that they now share the field with other print, film

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and broadcast media, digital interactives, soundscapes, lightshows, virtual reconstructions, iPods and cell phones.

Any medium of communication in fact is potentially an interpretive tool. Each brings with it its own strengths and limitations, its own production values, and often its own audience. Add to this the infinite flexibility of a skilled human guide or presenter and the potential to convey heritage significance is immense – as is the potential to go astray.

Little wonder that some, nurtured in more traditional, authoritarian styles of communication, fear that new, ‘virtual’ media may replace measured logic with flashy sensationalism and informed conjecture with special effects.

It may be, however, that rather than ignoring or rejecting these powerful tools, the solution is to harness their power with the kind of reasoned, principled discipline offered by the *Guidelines*.

Indeed, given the momentous technological, demographic and cultural changes that already characterise the 21st century, the future of heritage conservation itself depends on our ability to do so.

The End of the Alphabet

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Purporting to speak for Generations X and Y, those now between the ages of 15 and 50, Sheppard sums up their view of heritage as, “...not impressed ... We don’t give a hoot about memorial plaques...we move through space with filters erected to screen out any excess information.” “There is not much that is cool about traditional interpretation.” She recommends, “Use new technologies and give us a forum to talk ... it is all about making the message medium go both ways” (Sheppard, 2007). Sheppard and Watson in a presentation to the 2007 Interpretation Australia Association national conference, posit that ‘traditional forms of interpretation fail to transmit a message to Generations X and Y’. They point out that young people are accustomed to interactivity in communication, not just passive reception. This reflects the Constructivist insight, at once subtle and obvious, that we are the ‘authors’ of our experience. “Generations X and Y will respond more positively to a catchphrase that they can Google later” (Sheppard & Watson, 2007), than to a panel of print ‘in their faces’.

The website, *Generation Z* (McCrinkle Research Pty Ltd., 2008), describes “the world’s first 21st Century generation’ - the digital natives, the dot com kids, Generation Media.

“Generation Z are those people born from 1995 to the end of 2009. They are today’s children and students, and tomorrow’s employees and leaders. Currently, and until 2015, every student in pre- and primary school will be a Gen Z. For high schools, as Generation Y complete their secondary education and ease into further study and the workforce, the Gen Z’s will begin to move in. Generation Z’s will continue to be the dominant generation in high schools into the 2020’s. For tertiary and technical educators the Z’s will be the dominant generation until the 2030’s.

“This internet-savvy, technologically literate generation has been shaped to multi-task. They have only known this wireless, hyperlinked, user-generated world where they are always only a few clicks from any piece of knowledge.”

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There is little in either the form or content of traditional interpretive media to appeal to this burgeoning audience. On-site, the prevailing interpretive techniques of label and plaque, sign and panel, are the outward and visible signifiers of the outmoded, the irrelevant, the boring. They do not reach out to touch the intellects and emotions of the people who, in a few short years, we will ask to fund the conservation effort. Identifying ‘heritage’, however inaccurately, as the concern of old, rich men and dull-but-worthy documentaries, school excursions or history books, they are unlikely to win today’s young people to our cause.

New Hearts, New Minds

Another significant segment of our audience is made up of first- and second-generation immigrants. Cultural diversity is no longer the exclusive preserve of post-colonial societies like Canada’s or Australia’s. Central Asia, Africa, the Middle and Far East, Latin America, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean all contribute to the rich cultural tapestry of life in New South Wales, North America and Europe. How are these newcomers to engage Australia’s Aboriginal rock art, its convict sites, its sandstone mansions or its shearing sheds – the castles, cathedrals and cobblestones of Europe – l’Anse aux Meadows, Grand Pré, les Plaines d’Abraham, or South Moresby Island – not to mention the items and precincts of our more recent past?

Will those places be perceived as the heritage of Them, but not of Us, as belonging to Their past, but having no role in Our future?

Just how evident is it to their children that these places exemplify the circumstances and values that built the lands that drew their parents across the seas?

This matters because it is this insight that empowers heritage places to gladden the hearts of all who know how to read them. It also matters because popular and political support – the votes and the money – to sustain heritage conservation will ultimately come – or not – from both these constituencies.

INTERPRETING HERITAGE PLACES AND ITEMS

I have deliberately avoided the temptation to paraphrase or summarise the *Interpretation Guidelines*. In discussing aspects of their background and of the multiple contexts in which they need to operate, I have tried to suggest the magnitude of the task they undertake. I also hope to have excited some curiosity about what to expect from the publication itself.

The first part outlines the social and statutory contexts of heritage interpretation. It then explores the occasions, opportunities and options for making it happen. It suggests among many other things that, “Planning for interpretation should start at the *beginning* of a conservation project and then be integrated into each stage: in investigations leading to the preparation of a Conservation Management Plan, and before, during and after completion of conservation works.”

The second part presents the essential ingredients – the attitudes and practices – that are the hallmarks of excellence in the planning, preparation and presentation of interpretive experiences and insights. It also offers

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detailed, practical guidance about how these ingredients can be applied. The list is deceptively succinct:

Ingredients for Best Practice Heritage Interpretation

- 1: Respect for the special connections between people and items
- 2: Understanding the item or site and its heritage significance
- 3: Understanding context
- 4: Reasoned choice of themes, stories and strategies
- 5: Research, records, and resources
- 6: Understanding the audience
- 7: Engaging the audience
- 8: Sustaining authenticity and ambience
- 9: Maintenance, evaluation and review
- 10: Using appropriate skills & knowledge

Of course, a list of ingredients, however appetising, is not a meal. If you want to cook the dish itself, you have to read the recipe. That its examples and illustrations are drawn from current practice in New South Wales will add, I trust, an element of exotic allure to the menu.

CONCLUSION

At its best, heritage interpretation provides a model of interaction between significant resources and the informed imagination. From such experiences people can take away not just greater knowledge about – and appreciation of – particular places or things, but also new insights into ways of reading the world around them, ways of discovering both instruction and delight in ‘familiar’ environments. When this occurs, they may also discover themselves to be not just ‘consumers of heritage’, but truly heirs to a wondrous legacy – with all the privileges and responsibilities that inheritance entails. And that is, in fact, the reality.

That is the banquet to which Heritage Interpretation invites one and all. We know the ingredients. We have the recipe. Let’s get cooking!

Je vous souhais bon appétit!

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