

Telling Tales: place, attachment and government action

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Abstract

Places are important in people's lives. They help connect us to the past, present and perhaps the future. Places are also an important focus of government action to protect heritage in Australia. But rarely are ordinary people's own experiences and stories about places part of government heritage assessment processes. Recently, social research techniques have started to be used to document a community's sense of attachment to specific heritage places. But while some government agencies are encouraging the use of these methods, others are skeptical. This paper will look at selected case studies that illustrate the method being used, other examples that demonstrate the diversity of responses to this work by government, issues arising and future directions.

In presenting this paper at the Folklife Conference, we acknowledge the Wurundjeri people, on whose traditional country we stand.

The importance of place

This paper is about the role of places in community identity, and how the protection of places through the heritage system is starting to address the connections between people, place and identity.

Places are important in people's lives. They help connect us to the past, present and perhaps the future. Places are also an important focus of government action to protect heritage in Australia.

Places help define who we are - as individuals, families, communities, cultures. Each of us has places that are special.

Places are experienced. Our lives are lived within places. This gives them great power to evoke memories.

Protecting heritage places

Heritage places are those that we value and want to protect and hand-on to future generations. Other places are disposable.

In Australia, community interest in historic places emerged in the 1950s, during the period of dramatic change following the Second World War. In Melbourne, the National Trust was formed with campaigns for the preservation of grand mansions such as Como. While some special places were saved, it was another twenty years before government took legislative action.

Public campaigns to protect heritage continued in the 1960s. One of the key campaigns was conducted by the Builders Labourers' Federation in conjunction with community groups and the National Trust. These "green bans" focused on historic and natural places under threat. The

union's campaign was also significant because it openly raised issues of amenity, character and the need to protect the living environments of ordinary people.

By the 1970s, and with the influence of a new environmental awareness, Commonwealth and State heritage and environment legislation started to be created. Today, an extensive framework of legislation, planning mechanisms and non-statutory incentives and grants programs operate to identify and protect the 'places we want to keep' at the national, State and local levels.

Place & Heritage

Heritage is not just places, it is all of the things that we inherit and treasure - traditions, stories, culture, folklife, beliefs and more.

In Australia, there are inadequate links between those who work to conserve "heritage places" and those who work on conserving and celebrating living traditions. The best links occur with Aboriginal cultural places where spiritual traditions are still strong.

Heritage places are typically investigated and conserved by professionals whose focus is the physical fabric of the place - architects and more recently archaeologists - rather than on the historical and contemporary relationships between people and places.

As a result, the legislation, structures and principles for place conservation are strongly oriented towards conserving the physical fabric.

Social value

Over the last 3-5 years, quite dramatic changes have started sweeping through heritage place conservation practice in Australia.

These changes have their foundations in debates going back over many years. Their best expression is seen in the debates at Australia ICOMOS Conferences and in the Burra Charter and its various explanatory Guidelines. For example the question "Whose cultural values?" was posed by the Australia ICOMOS National Conference held in Sydney in 1992, and a discussion paper on the concept of social value was published and distributed nationally in the same year.

The term social value or social significance has been part of the definition of cultural heritage values since the *Australian Heritage Commission Act* was created in 1975:

Places that have ... *aesthetic, historic, scientific or social significance or other special value for future generations as well as for the present community.*

The Act sets up the Register of the National Estate which includes the following assessment criterion for social significance: *Its strong or special associations with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons* (Criterion G).

Early heritage practice focused on assessing historical and architectural values for historic places. For Aboriginal places, the distinction between the professionally-assessed archaeological values and the Aboriginal community's own view of the significance of the place was recognised.

Interest in the definition and assessment of social value or significance in non-Indigenous historic places dates back to the mid-1980s, and particularly to Meredith Walker (Heritage Futures). As a result, in 1992 a discussion paper on social value which had originally been

prepared for the National Trust in Victoria was published by the Australian Heritage Commission. The discussion paper argued that:

Social value is about current attachment to place by a community or group - it is not about the history of a past attachment, meaning or association.

Community or group includes groups defined by ethnicity, culture, experience (etc) not just by locality - and such group must be able to be understood as a definable entity.

Social value assessment methods must be designed so that the value of a place is explored with the associated communities or groups.

One of the consequences during the 1990s was a desire by some heritage professionals to amend the basic principles that underlie practice in Australia - *The Burra Charter* (or *The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance*). The changes sought included:

recognition of people's associations with place - both social and spiritual significance

respect for knowledge that arises from people's culture, experience and traditions

recognition that the significance of a place is not just its fabric - its significance is also embodied in its use, associations and meanings

These changes happened at the end of 1999, after heated debate across Australia and several years of work by an Australia ICOMOS Working Group. The debate continues, and we will talk about some of the continuing issues shortly.

The rest of this paper will focus on the unfolding of these changes and the interests in people's relationship with place as part of heritage practice today.

Government responses to change

Most government heritage legislation allows for recognition of some aspects of social significance. Aboriginal heritage legislation strongly respects social and spiritual associations.

At the national level, the Australian Heritage Commission has led the way in the areas of social value and community association with place through commissioned studies as part of the joint State-Commonwealth Regional Forest Agreements. These studies have included:

Community heritage workshops in each RFA region, enabling local people to put forward places of importance to them. This has added greatly to the collective knowledge of the heritage places of each region.

Social significance assessments of heritage places, using data from the workshops combined with further community surveys. This enabled a broader definition of heritage to be considered as communities often do not recognise the distinctions between natural and cultural places which are created by legislation and policy frameworks.

Aboriginal heritage projects done in close consultation with Aboriginal communities that incorporated contemporary Aboriginal places and values in both place identification and management.

Aesthetic values studies drawing on the community workshop data and information from similar workshops with forest and parks managers.

Across the states and territories, the strength of support for these new directions is not as clear. NSW has the best developed guidelines for assessing all aspects of heritage significance, having adopted a criterion similar to that used at a national level, and defined inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Include	Exclude
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is important for its associations with an identifiable group • Is crucial to a community's sense of place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is only important to the community for amenity reasons • Is retained only in preference to a proposed alternative • Has little educational potential

In Victoria, the social significance criterion is more narrowly defined, does not indicate whether it refers to contemporary or historical associations, and does not mention spiritual values. (Heritage Victoria: Criteria for Assessment of Cultural Heritage Significance).

A quick check of the Register of the National Estate and the Victorian Heritage Register reveals that *social significance* is acknowledged as part of the heritage value of registered non-Indigenous places in a relatively small number of cases, and when it is mentioned, it is usually a contributory value alongside stronger arguments for architecture, engineering or history.

Register of the National Estate: about 6% out of 12,600 places include reference to social significance.

Victorian Heritage Register: about 6.5% out of 1940 places on the Register make some mention of social significance.

However, checking a sample of places indicated that often the term *social* referred to an aspect of *social history* rather than a *contemporary attachment to place*. It is therefore reasonably safe to say that places with strong social associations are likely to be under-represented in these heritage registers!

The case of two football grounds

The Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) and Waverley Park (formerly VFL Park) are two of Melbourne's important football venues. And Australian Rules Football is an important part of Melbourne's sporting and cultural life - loved by many, and loathed by others (viz Keith Dunstan's Anti-Football League).

Both have been assessed by Heritage Victoria, and both are recognised as having social (as well as other) significance. In both cases, however, social significance and historical significance are strongly intertwined, with the focus being the importance of these places in the social history of Melbourne.

While Waverley Park has generated a strong community campaign seeking its protection and continuing use for football, it is the MCG that is recognised as a contemporary icon:

The MCG is socially significant as a living icon, a focus of attention in which importance lies in participating in events as well as experiencing the place itself.

The National Trust, a community heritage organisation, includes a strong statement about the contemporary social significance of Waverley Park:

Socially, Waverley Park has established an important meaning to many people's lives, and a strong sense of attachment, especially amongst football followers from the south-eastern suburbs and beyond, despite its perceived failures. This value has been clearly expressed by the outpouring of criticism and despair generated by the closure of the ground.

The polarity of opinions on the ground reflects the dichotomy in the Melbourne community between an attachment to the suburban ideal, and the increasingly popular inner city lifestyle. The passions aroused by the debate over the ground throughout its life are symbolic of the Victorian obsession with sporting spectacle, especially football.

So, why do these assessments differ? And, how were they done? The next section looks at how social value is assessed, and includes some examples.

Identifying Social Value

Identify one or more communities that may have strong associations with the place.

Communities may be defined by locality or geography (such as a town, valley, region), but can also be defined by ethnicity, religion, shared interest/activity or life experience, etc. An understanding of the current and past uses of a place is usually needed to define the communities that may have important attachments and associations.

Consult with associated communities

Talking with people from communities associated with the place constitutes the primary task of social value assessment. This can be done through focus groups, visits to the place, follow-up questionnaires, analysis of a community's literature and artistic references to the place. Photographs, maps and other visual materials can be used to assist people to identify the places that are important to their communities, and to describe their important features, their extent and setting. In many cases, we are recording people's personal experiences and stories about a place and its meanings. Collecting these in a small group setting allows members of the community to contribute to the stories and for the collective nature of the community associations to be determined. Sometimes, there will be some overlap with oral history, folklife and social history – all these can contribute to an understanding of social values (although they are not the same).

Identify the nature of community associations and attachments to the place

Many places will have social significance to more than one community – and so their social significance may be multi-faceted. Writing a concise statement of the social significance of the place will enable good decisions to be made about its future – such as the important physical features and uses to retain during times of change.

Test the assessment with the associated communities

The draft statement of social significance and the inventory of significant individual features and uses are returned to the focus groups and communities that contributed to the initial analysis. We ask people if we have captured the importance of the place to them and to reflect further about what should happen (or not happen) at that place in the future for its social value to be retained. Because people have often shared intensely painful or special aspects of their lives with us, it is essential that they see the draft assessment and contribute to its amendment and validation.

Draft conservation policies

Retaining the stories and meanings about a place through interpretation, writing and the arts is often a key to keeping the social value. Clearly identifying specific built features, aspects of the setting of a place, and spatial relationships within the place (or between a series of related places) will often be needed to retain social value. Continuing cultural practices, uses and community access often feature as important conservation policy issues too.

Issues & Directions

Attachment to place is personal - our tools are crude - the support is limited

Working with communities and individuals about places they care about is potentially intrusive. While the social science disciplines offer many and different ways for working with and within communities, there is little funding support for more in-depth methods.

Our work typically relies on a combination of group discussions, surveys and individual interviews, but often this takes more time and costs more than developers or heritage agencies want to spend (there are some notable exceptions!). Ensuring that all associated communities are identified and are heard in the assessment may require a range of methods to be tried.

Integrating social value assessment with other forms of heritage analysis and planning can ensure a more holistic and 'best practice' outcome. For example, the Commonwealth government's proposal to redevelop parts of the Villawood migrant hostel (now in part a detention centre) and the NSW government's proposal to reuse the site of the Mount Penang boy's juvenile justice centre have both included social value assessment as part of a wider cultural heritage assessment process.

Social value - positive or negative?

Social significance generally arises from personal experience of a place. Some have suggested that social significance is only about positive experiences of a place, but recent work in a number of places has confirmed that this is not the case. Places may be significant even if the meanings that they represent are harrowing, and reflect experiences of personal harm. One example is the Broad Arrow Café site at Port Arthur.

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.

However, responses to the question of whether or not to conserve such a place are more complex. In the case of the Broad Arrow Café, some associated people wished to see the building obliterated - to remove forever the place because it acts as a constant visual reminder. Other people wanted it retained as a memorial to those affected by the tragedy.

The social value assessment of the building was undertaken to assist the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority to determine its future. After partial demolition, the café has been conserved as a ruin and set within a memorial garden with a reflection pool. The timber memorial cross, originally located in a more central part of the historic site, was moved to the memorial garden several months ago, by persons unknown.

Assessing social value for places of importance to a large community is very difficult

Social value assessments have been undertaken for Port Arthur (Tasmania) and The Rocks (Sydney) as part of heritage planning and management processes for these important places. Understanding the meaning of each place for a wider Australian or even international community was very challenging, requiring us to draw on a new range of sources such as:

Published writings by social commentators, historians, novelists

Published and commonly photographed images and views

For example, for Port Arthur our analysis included phrases such as:

Port Arthur is an important foundation for Tasmanian's shared sense of identity ...

For Australians more broadly, particularly those of Anglo-Celtic background, Port Arthur is a place to reconnect with their colonial roots, real or imagined, and reflect on the meanings of the past ...

Port Arthur and the Tasman Peninsula have contemporary social significance for Tasmanian Aboriginal people ... based on the existence of known sites and the qualities of the natural landscape... which enable a connection between the present day Aboriginal community and its past.

There is professional skepticism about social value assessment

There is still great uncertainty about the assessment of social value from within the heritage profession. Concerns include:

The methods used are regarded as lacking rigor, failing to provide predictable outcomes, and (at worst) being merely a popularity poll.

It is anti-professional, and down-grades the value of professional/technical assessment (of course it also introduces a new discipline area - the social sciences - and new professions).

It is politically suspect. Such values are viewed as easily 'manufactured' by the community for other motives, especially to oppose change.

It is politically uncontrollable and opens a 'Pandora's Box'. How to put a limit on what might be of heritage value?

There is a need for a broadly agreed approach.

While the Australian Heritage Commission's work and publications have established a framework for assessing social significance, some State heritage agencies are not using this framework, leading to confusion.

As well, some heritage practitioners are using curious surrogates as indicators of social significance: for example, the argument has been put that a place listed by the National Trust is of social significance because the Trust is a community organisation. No doubt the Trust doesn't agree with this view!

So why assess social value?

In summary, the development of a debate and a practice of assessing social value has dramatically changed how we in Australia understand and conserve heritage places. It has already resulted in:

A better recognition of community associations and attachments to place, starting to counter earlier pre-occupations with technical, stylistic, and fabric-based assessments.

A closer focus on the meaning of places for local communities, and the potential consequences for a community when places are lost.

An opening up of the question of what is important to a wider/more diverse range of people.

As well it offers the potential to:

Establish closer links to some related aspects of heritage that are presently outside the "heritage place" system: such as oral history, neighbourhood character, folklife.

Address community tensions about change by clarifying what it is that people value about places, landscapes, neighbourhoods.

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