

Through the Fog, the Hut – Retaining the Essence of Memory in Conserving Historic Places

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INTRODUCTION

I acknowledge the traditional owners of this place, and offer my respects to their elders past and present. I was born, grew up and still live on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation – the place now called Melbourne - and I acknowledge them also.

Our memories are elusive. Places connect us to the past – to our own past – not to some generalized, historical landscape but to our own lives and our own experiences.

The connection between people and place is fundamental. We all live and die within a place – a space, a landscape, an environment. Likewise, we are all part of communities – communities created around shared experiences, family, locality, ethnicity, culture and more.

This paper looks at ways of understanding the relationship between people and the places that are important to them – particularly the places that are part of a community's familiar past – part of its memory.

Underlying this paper is the view that tapping into memory and story is essential to understanding and conserving the full heritage significance of a place, and that keeping valued places is essential to sustaining communities and cultures.

This paper is titled ... Through the fog, the hut – retaining the essence of memory in conserving historic places

The title is a metaphor. The hut is archetypal. Bachelard, writing in 1958 in *The Poetics of Space*, an exploration of the deeper psychological meaning of places, identifies huts as symbolic of safety and home. He relates the image of the hut in the wilderness:

... the hut appears to be the tap-root of the functioning of inhabiting ... When we are lost in darkness and see a distant glimmer of light, who does not dream of a thatched cottage or, to go more deeply still into legend, a hermit's hut?

The hut is the place to which we can retreat, a place that holds our memories safe.

But huts are also real places - simple vernacular structures, designed to serve a purpose, and built 'by hand' by those who will be the primary users, using available materials and drawing on the skills and traditions known to the builders. Huts therefore potentially express the most intimate of connections between people and place, and are a strong expression of localness in materials and setting. In a real way, huts and other places where we establish intimate connections hold our memories, or at least offer us the opportunity to reawaken them by being again in that place or by travelling there in our minds.

The fog is perhaps the generous shroud of memory, offering windows into some parts of our past but covering things we'd rather not see again. The fog is also enveloping and comforting, embracing our memories of past places and holding them close.

And when we see a glimpse of a past place, what is the breeze that blows away some of the enveloping fog?

In offering this paper, I need to explain where I come from. I work in the field of cultural heritage conservation, specifically on places – sites, landscapes and buildings - and for the last 10 or more years I have been very interested in understanding why some places are

important to each of us, and why some are important to whole groups of people – to communities. I work as a consultant not an academic and my views have been shaped by practice rather than theory. My favourite task is to work with communities and groups of people to try and help them articulate why a place has special meanings and associations for them.

STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

There are 4 parts to this paper:

- First, a quick dip into the practice of heritage conservation, so that you can see how the field of heritage conservation has come to be interested in something as intangible as memory. I will also touch on the idea of social values – or social significance – as one of the heritage values.
- Then, I'll look at the emergence of some heritage methods to help us understand the strong or special connections that can exist between people and place.
- I will quickly move to examples of places that relate to attachment to place and memory
- I'll conclude with some issues and challenges.

HERITAGE QUICK DIP

Recognition that Australia had a cultural heritage emerged in the 1950s largely as a reaction to the development that followed the Second World War, a period marked by the demolition of early colonial and nineteenth century buildings. As a result, National Trusts (voluntary non-government organisations) were established in most States and Territories starting in the early 1950s. It was not until the 1970s and 80s that governments around Australia started to bring in legislation to protect historic and Aboriginal heritage places. These early legal definitions recognised 'aesthetic, historic, social and scientific values', however most attention was paid to understanding the physical qualities of the place - its fabric and setting – and conserving these qualities.

The last 10-15 years has witnessed a major change in approach. The idea of social significance has been promoted as a way to understand how ordinary people – rather than heritage experts – value places. This is now being reflected in guidelines, legislation and practice, but is still a small part of the heritage scene.

In Australia, *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS charter for places of cultural significance* has been the primary guide on the conservation and management of places of cultural significance (cultural heritage places) since 1979. It is derived from the *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites* (Venice 1964), and aims to reflect contemporary practice in Australian heritage conservation.

Since its creation, there have been several revisions to the Charter, with a major revision in 1999 that acknowledges the significance that can arise from associations between people and place. The previous version, signed in 1988, focused strongly on the fabric of the place (ie its physical material).

The preamble to the 1999 Charter responds to the question 'why conserve?' with:

Places of cultural significance enrich people's lives, often providing a deep and inspirational sense of connection to community and landscape, to the past and to lived experiences. They are historical records that are important as tangible expressions of Australian identity and experience. Places of cultural significance reflect the diversity of our communities, telling us about who we are and the past that has formed us and the Australian landscape. They are irreplaceable and precious.

The Charter now recognises five values, with the addition of the word *spiritual*. It explains that the cultural significance of a place is contained 'in the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, *associations*, *meanings*, records, related places and related objects' and that 'Places may have a range of values for different individuals or groups' (Article 1.2).

Associations are defined as 'the special connections that exist between people and a place' and the types of associations recognised include 'social or spiritual values and cultural responsibilities for a place'. A *meaning* refers to 'what a place signifies, indicates, evokes or expresses. Meanings generally relate to intangible aspects such as symbolic qualities and memories (Articles 1.15 and 1.16).

The Burra Charter (1999) guides that:

- conservation is based on respect for the existing *fabric*, *use*, *associations* and *meanings* (3.1) and can include actions designed to retain an association or meaning (14).
- Conservation, interpretation and management of a place should provide for the participation of people for whom the place has special *associations* and *meanings*, or who have social, spiritual or other cultural responsibilities for the place (12)
- Significant *associations* between people and a place should be respected, retained and not obscured. Opportunities for the interpretation, commemoration and celebration of these associations should be investigated and implemented (24.1)
- 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 (24.2)

Several years ago, the Australian national government introduced new legislation to enable national heritage values associated with places to be recognised and protected through the National Heritage List, a list of places or groups of places with outstanding heritage value to the nation:

These places have values or characteristics that have special meaning for Australia as a whole; in other words, they have a significance that extends beyond a particular state, territory or community...

We may value these places because they help define critical moments in our country's development. They may reflect the achievements, joys and sorrows in the lives of Australians. They may represent part of Australia's extraordinary natural heritage. We may value them for how they inspire us, what they tell us, or how they reflect our beliefs. (DEH 2004)

The new **National Heritage List** criteria - following on from the criteria established in 1975 by the Register of the National Estate and adopted by most Australian states and territories - refer specifically to a place being valued by a community or cultural group:

e) the place has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of the place's importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural group;

(g) the place has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of the place's strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons (DEH 2006)

EMERGENCE OF METHODS

So how do we try and understand what "communities and groups" see as strong or special associations for them, or a place with particular aesthetic characteristics that they value?

When I wrote *What is social value: a discussion paper* in 1991, I was strongly influenced by my own background in social research and group work. I felt that we needed to offer some

simple ways in which people from communities and localities could come together to speak about the reasons they valued their environment – their locality – their places.

I define communities as groups of people who share a locality, ethnicity, culture, experience. They are groups in the sense that an ‘outsider’ could recognise them as a definable entity (and I would expect that they recognise themselves what they share).

One of the first approaches, developed for a Commonwealth government’s natural resource planning process on forests, was tagged a ‘community heritage workshop’ at which people from all parts of a local community were invited to come together to talk about what heritage means to them and which places were special. The results were impressive and demonstrated that people were both able and willing to talk about what was important to them. What’s more they knew about their places – their knowledge overwhelmed the results achieved by outside heritage experts.

At the time, these workshops ran counter to the prevailing view, in the community and amongst most of the profession, that heritage was the domain of experts.

In my work I have continued to work with groups of people rather than individuals, seeking to reveal what is shared within a community, rather than what is only one person’s special place. Sometimes people are surprised that their special place is loved by others. But more often, people know which places are held in high esteem across their community.

And so for example, we work with groups of people who:

- Have worked together - for example at the Maribyrnong Defence Site/ Explosives Factory; White Bay Power Station
- Have shared a culture and a lifestyle – Kosciuszko National Park huts; Upper Mersey landscape and huts
- Have played together – many local recreation sites
- Come from the same locality – for example, Port Arthur Conservation Plan
- Have shared experiences, good and bad – for example Lake Condah Mission; Mt Penang.

I will talk a little more about three of these places: White Bay Power Station, Lake Condah Mission, Mt Penang, Kosciuszko and the huts.

When we gather people together to talk about places, sometimes we meet at the place and walk around, talking as we go. Other times we meet around a table – perhaps in a local hall or even a kitchen table. Sometimes we go out into a public place and interview people who are around or passing through. Surveys are useful when people can’t come together.

As well, we have tried to understand the social significance of some places for Australians as a people – Port Arthur Historic Site in Tasmania, The Rocks in Sydney, the huts of the Kosciuszko National Park in NSW and currently, Parliament House Vista and Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra. So web-based surveys and discussion forums are useful tools, as are public images, art and published writings about the place.

EXAMPLES

I will now move to some examples.

1 FINDING OUR WAY

Places help us understand ourselves and our place in the world. They help us find our way around, they act as signatures and symbols.

White Bay Power Station in Sydney was built in 1912. The Power Station is located on the edge of the edge of Balmain, near the Glebe Island Bridge. It is a large and imposing industrial structure.



White Bay Power Station (Image Source: Context Pty Ltd)

As part of a process to determine what aspects of the site should be conserved, we talked with former workers and the local community. For those who lived nearby, literally in the shadow of the power station, the building marked the entry to their local place. In their words:

It is a symbol of Rozelle and the people of my home and the part of my life living here and raising my children

Its been here for the life of most people, it has become a bit of an icon, and I think people are very fond of it

Its part of Balmain and it's a very strong memory for me. It was part of the route I travelled to school by every day

The locals had not been allowed into the power station until we ran the open day. For them, the place was its 'outside'. For those who had worked there, many who had worked all their lives in different power stations, it was the inside and the people that counted:

In the old days we would have been flying the place by the seat of your pants. You get attuned to all the noises whereas in a modern power station you are in a soundproof control room ... it's a different feel altogether

It was a happy station. A happy place. There were about 500 or 600 people there. There were concerts and social clubs, the kids were looked after at Christmas ... I liked the place because of the strong sense of community

So how do you retain memories that are partially related to bricks and mortar and partially to people and memories? For the locals, it meant keeping the overall form and scale, but for the workers it was about retaining and demonstrating the technology that they worked with, and the challenges they faced. They wanted to see parts of the power station 'operating':

I'd like to see a whisper of steam coming out of White Bay again

But they also want an acknowledgement of the dangerous working conditions and the early deaths of their workmates.

Our recommendations included recognising that parts of the fabric (especially elements of the technology) were important to former workers, and that some uses which may involve changes to the internal layout or machinery would require discussion with them. An oral history project was recommended to document people, processes and stories.

2 KNOWING WHO WE ARE

Places can function as markers in our sense of identity – who we are individually or as a community. The existence of a place and its remembered form says that we were there – at that place. It confirms our existence and enables our memories to be sustained, shared and passed on to new generations.

Lake Condah

At the Lake Condah Mission, a strongly remembered place was the dormitory, a building demolished probably in the late 1940s/early 1950s but remembered fondly.

The Mission was closed in the late 1940s by a government anxious to close the Mission and move everyone out so the land could be handed on to soldier settlers after the Second World War. The only remains of the dormitory were the old stone fireplace to mark the site – and of course, strong and powerful memories of living there!

But rebuilding of the dormitory in 1983/84 didn't create the place of memory. Instead it created an earlier form of the building, with the aim of interpreting the Mission at the height of its development as a Mission, the late 1880s. Another way of seeing, says that this decision celebrated the success of the Mission period and the missionaries, and denied the living memory of the elders who grew up there (and who had helped fight for the return of this land to their community as traditional owners).

Lake Condah Mission is of outstanding importance to Aboriginal people of the Gundidjmarra and Kerrup Jmara clans...

The Lake Condah area is fundamental to the identity of the Gundidjmarra people. It is a place to which people feel a need to return, to draw strength, to reconnect to their land and community.

The Mission is a place close to the hearts of many Gundidjmarra and Kerrup Jmara people. It is a place with memories and stories. (Context 1993)

Or in the words of Richard Frankland, a Gundidjmarra man, and acclaimed singer/songwriter:

*Have you heard of Condah mission,
Have you heard of my homeland,
There were killings, there was blood
And the blood flowed into this land.*

The decision to rebuild the dormitory denied the essence of memory. It actively denied the existence of the living people for whom the place was so important.

A lesson for heritage practice is to listen to those who know, whose memories will be sustained (or destroyed) by the decisions made.

The good news is that this community, the Gundidjmarra people of western Victoria, are passionately committed to this place and continue to celebrate their history and culture at the Mission site and throughout their traditional country, parts of which they have now acquired again.

Mount Penang

Mount Penang was an open prison for boys and young men in NSW. We talked with former detainees, present detainees as well as past and present staff. The most powerful impressions were from detainees:

The former detainees, many who had really suffered while detained here, wanted the truth to be told. For them, the memories, even though intensely painful, needed to be kept and the stories told. Keeping the place and telling their stories was what they 'were owed':

Every building means something to someone at Mount Penang. It tells things that I couldn't tell if I weren't here. Makes the story able to be understood.

And in the words of a current detainee:

They can take it all away, but we will still know where everything was. We will never forget it ... I could get to any place in Mount Penang blindfolded, I know it so well.

Their words evoke the idea that places can be deeply burned into people's memories. How then to tell a story that is almost too painful to tell. And yet for some of the former detainees, now adult men, they want their story told – somehow. And they want to be able to go back to the place where they slept – their bunk. And they wanted the bad things that happened there to be countered by it becoming a good place devoted to helping young people.



Mt Penang Operation Centre (Image Source: Context Pty Ltd)

3 MAKING THE PAST FAMILIAR

The familiar past is one that is shared, able to be talked about and relived. It is close to us today, even though many years have passed. Going back to places helps connects us to that familiar past, making it seem ever-present.

Kosciuszko National Park is a large high country landscape covering 690,000 hectares and containing Mt Kosciuszko, the highest mountain on the Australian mainland. The National Park established in 1967, resulting in the removal of summer grazing of stock, brumby running (wild horse catching), mining, and for recreation such as skiing and bushwalking.

Huts were built 'as needed' by those using the landscape and were connected by networks of paths and tracks, many following the routes used by Indigenous people to access the resources of the high country areas and for ceremony.

Progressively, some huts associated with pre-National Park land uses were removed, and some were damaged or demolished as a result of internal fires. In 2003, a bush fire burnt out a large part of the park, destroying 19 huts, and leaving '64 huts and standing ruins remaining in a landscape that contains evidence of hundreds of former huts' (Ashley & Johnston 2005).

As a result, a study was commissioned to look at the heritage values of the huts. Part of the work involved understanding the meanings of the huts today to the Australian community as a whole, recognising that 'the Kosciuszko huts are ... symbolic of the Australian mountain hut, an iconic image in Australian traditions, folklore and art, and are a part of a much loved alpine landscape type'.

The major task was to understand the importance of the huts to the people and groups who, through their direct experience of these places have established close cultural associations with these places, often over many years and sometimes spanning several generations.



Kosciuszko National Park hut (Image Source: Kosciuszko Huts Association)

In our work, we met with many people who had built and lived in these huts, some were families connected to the mountain cattle grazing era and others to skiing and bushwalking.

For those involved with cattle grazing, their memories were written across a broad landscape. They see the landscape still peopled with the other families who were up there with them, each staying in their own hut. They know the tracks that connect the huts.

In the Nungar Plains area for example, there was a community of families that ran stock across this area. The surviving huts, stockyards, fencelines – the whole landscape – evokes a past when there were people staying in each hut and where families would help and support each other. People who lived there go back to visit their hut if they can – to pick fruit from the old trees, picnic with family, introduce younger family members to this place.

One of the huts that was burnt in 2003 was Pretty Plain, a hut with long associations with grazing families and then with bushwalkers and skiers.

Pretty Plain was built in 1934-35 as a seasonal grazing outstation, located on the site of an earlier hut, the second building being a log-construction. It retains connections with a number of families associated with Khancoban Station.

For bushwalking and skiing, Pretty Plain was a meeting place, a centre over many years, and holds important memories for a wide network of people.

Pretty Plain, the site of many happy gatherings and memories. A feeling of safety and security to sleep inside such a substantial and remote structure ... a feeling of peace when there.

The Kosciuszko Huts Strategy recognised, through a framework of policies that the significance of the huts, individually as a collection may be embodied in fabric, setting, use and associations, meanings, objects and memories. In terms of social significance, the Strategy established some clear principles

3.1 Community esteem: *Respect identified associations and provide opportunities for associated communities to visit these huts and to participate in decisions about and actions towards in their conservation and interpretation.*

3.2 Community wellbeing: *Recognise the importance of associations in community wellbeing, and conversely the impact of loss and disconnection. Act to help maintain and recover connections and mitigate the impacts of loss.*

3.3 Community identity: *Recognise and respect the importance of huts as an element of collective identity for each associated community.*

3.4 Strong and multiple association: *Recognise strong and multiple associations, assisting these associated communities understand and respect each other's values and perspectives so as to achieve conservation of all values without undue emphasis on one value over others.*

Another way that memories remain is through story telling, and retelling, and where this happens at the place it is even more powerful. But sometimes, decisions that are made about conserving heritage places means that it is difficult for this to happen. This was one of the challenges in this project too.

The principles I have outlined created a framework for more specific policies to assist associated communities retain their connections, for example:

- Recognising that associated communities may need 'special access' rights so they can drive to huts that were now only accessible on foot, and that
- There should be special opportunities for use by associated communities in a way that reflects their history of use, for example sleeping in the huts (something that is not allowed to the general visitor).

One of the most challenging areas for the project was to address the impact of the 2003 bushfires and to recommend whether any of the huts that were destroyed or damaged at that time should either be rebuilt, or not rebuilt but commemorated in some manner.

During the project, and through consultation, it was agreed that the significance of the huts would be a key factor in any decision to rebuild.

An important part of the discussion was the recognition that while the fabric-based values are lost when a hut is destroyed (eg. aesthetic qualities of the craftsmanship), social and cultural landscape values may be retained for some time - being less tangible, and not necessarily attached to physical remains. This represents a significant shift in thinking.

And if a decision is made to rebuild, what should be rebuilt? The Strategy does not answer this question, but suggests a process for making this decision. A key factor will be the views of those with close associations with the place. I expect that many will want to use the rebuilding process to pass on traditional 'bush' building skills to younger family members, probably using the traditions that are alive today and not trying to introduce skills that have already been lost. The rebuilding process will be a powerful opportunity to re-experience the place, to tell stories, to establish new relationships, to create memories.

CONCLUSIONS – ISSUES, DIRECTIONS, CHALLENGES

So what are some of the challenges facing those who work in heritage conservation in Australia when we thinking about retaining ‘the essence of memory’.

Through the examples I have shared some of the projects that I have worked on and raised some issues and challenges.

One important step for heritage practice is to assess social significance as a routine part of assessing cultural significance – aesthetic, historic, scientific, spiritual and social. This will enable us to recognise these strong and special associations – and recognition is a vital first step.

This means:

- Acknowledging that assessing social significance involves particular skills – oral history, social research, anthropology etc - and engaging people with the right skills to effectively engage communities and interpret the data
- Overcoming fears – for example, that communities will manipulate the outcomes; that it will take too long and cost too much; that won’t help with conservation policies and decisions; and perhaps that it will run count to the professional views
- Establishing clear guidelines for use by heritage organizations and professionals
- Some assessments of social significance are not based on engagement with the potentially associated communities – so no evidence/data collected

Second, it will mean developing new skills in managing the intangible as well as the tangible qualities of places.

Third, it means sharing management responsibilities with the communities that have a significant association with a place. For example, involving them as collaborators when decisions may impact on the social significance of the place.

Fourth, resourcing communities to participate in assessing significance and managing places.

To do all of these things, heritage professionals and place managers will need support - guidelines, good examples to use as models, and opportunities to learn from our experiences.

And from the perspectives of people and the places that I have spoken about, what conservation actions have been the most important in “retaining the essence of memory”?

- First, recognising and respecting the connections between people and a place – this is so powerful, especially for people whose voices have been unheard for a long time.
- Second, recognising that that special connections needs to be sustained. How this might happen will vary, depending on the circumstances, but often it means simple things such as:
 - Being able to go to that place
 - Spending time there, often without other unconnected visitors there at the same time
 - Continuing to look after the place, or to recreate it if the place is lost
 - Sharing and passing on stories and traditions

I look forward to seeing how these challenges will be met and to the ongoing discussions at the conference as I know that here these ideas about memory and place are truly ‘at home’.

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