Reshaping planning with culture

Greg Young
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Imagine a different future. One where culture is at the table, a full member of the public policy team. This is the future that Greg Young envisages in his latest publication Reshaping Planning with Culture. He is well-known in Australian heritage circles as a planner and historian, having worked in government and the private sector. As the author of significant publications including Mapping Culture – A Guide to Cultural and Economic Development in Communities, the 1984 Environmental Conservation – Towards a Philosophy for the NSW Heritage Council and many papers, it is true to say that he is a significant heritage thinker.

For those who recall his earlier writings, this book represents a major step in his thinking, developing and exploring many familiar threads, weaving them together into what he terms a culturalised system: new principles for culture, a trio of cultural literacies and a research method.

Greg Young argues that culture is the most important foundation for strategic and spatial planning, and that planning itself is best seen as a tool or process of urban governance. The ‘culture’ that interests him is multi-faceted: culture as ways of life, culture as history, knowledge and practices passed down and passed on, and culture as expressed in the environment – in places and landscapes. His theoretical examination of culture – distilled into the dimensions of space, time, society – offers an interesting insight into the ‘beyond fabric’ world of heritage practice that is now emerging. In linking disciplines to these dimensions, he reminds us that in multi-disciplinary heritage practice, the richest insights may be gained at the interface of our many ‘heritage’ disciplines.

So in a culturised way of working, what will change? Young proposes that planning will change and that we will change. Of his proposed seven principles, I found the first – plenitude – to be the most challenging. Young argues that culture is plentiful and capable of renewal. He compares it to fragile ecosystems that today are neither. Cultural renewal is ‘a function of continuing creativity and cultural innovation’ where ‘new perspectives permit the rethinking and re-working of values, practices, knowledges, places and landscapes’ (p 101). But what of those cultures and cultural expressions that struggle under the weight of domination, intended or otherwise. Cultures that are vulnerable, marginal, endangered? Young argues that cultural that is damaged, forgotten or marginalized can be revived or reactivated; while I share his hope, I am less certain of the reality. But in combination, his seven principles seem robust and are certainly sufficiently engaging to create discussion.

The next element, the ‘planner’s literacy trio’ delighted me. The trio of literacies – cultural, strategic and ethical – each offer a rich space for professional and personal development. Cultural literacy brings together all the ways of reading the place – locality, city, region. It’s advancement as a core planning literacy is a significant proposition. Young argues that without cultural literacy planning is inadequate. I am reminded of the days before environmental literacy, and note the remarkable change across the whole community since the birth of environmental awareness (and multi-disciplinary environmental studies) since the 1970s.

Ethical literacy acknowledges the importance of having ethical foundations for our work, and strategic literacy asks that we seek to understand connectedness between communities, environments and histories, and across the domains of local, regional and national (pp. 84-88). Young comments on one of probably many limits on our ethical literacy when he notes that ‘the nexus between social justice and the distribution of conserved and interpreted heritage resources is rarely perceived, or even stated (p.106). Herin lies a topic that should prompt solid discussion.

The research methodology offered is equally rich, promoting the idea of integrated research as a combination of cultural data research, cultural collaboration (or collaborative planning) and cultural interpretation as the three research modes. Data research refers the processes of gathering and analysing all of the external data available to understand the nature of a community, its values, make-up and trends. Collaboration covers all of the ways of working together with a community to develop a richer and deeper understanding, tapping into what can only be known from within. Cultural interpretation methods bring the insights and knowledge developed from cultural theory to the task. As Young comments “the important thing in a planning exercise is that “no stone is left unturned”’(p.97).

And will there be a culturalised future? Let us hope and work for one. Culture is a valuable key to unlock facets of heritage practice that remain relatively unexplored. It also offers the possibility of shifting the current planning paradigm towards greater recognition of culture in all it many forms.

Reshaping planning with culture is an intriguing book. It asks many questions and proposes some new and very interesting answers. And it offers great challenges to heritage practice as well as to the wider domains of planning.

Chris Johnston
Chris Johnston is the Managing Director of Context Pty Ltd.

Heritage, Memory and the Politics of Identity; New Perspectives on the Cultural Landscape

Edited by Niamh Moore and Yvonne Whelan
Ashgate, 2007
ISBN: 9780754640080  RRP 50.00

Ireland lends itself easily to discussions of identity: a history of colonisation, of ethnic and cultural cleansing, of a diaspora tail-ended with a period of explosive economic growth. Heritage collides with the personal, with religions, class and capital.

The country is the focus of much of the study within Heritage, Memory and the Politics of Identity; New Perspectives on the Cultural Landscape, edited by Niamh Moore and Yvonne Whelan.

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The 2007 book is the outcome of an earlier conference held in 2002 in Ireland and there is a rich lode of local material.

Unfortunately, in large part, the papers here mine this wealth haphazardly with shallow diggings into contemporary Dublin, ancient Tara or early 29th century Manchester.

One example is Mervyn Busteed's piece regarding rituals around the commemoration of the Fenian 'martyrs' in Manchester between 1888-1921. It looks at how parades and meetings changed their meaning over time and under contested stewardship but is confused in its account and fails to convince that there is much of interest here beyond the varying of parade routes and the influence on this of an Irish nationalist politics in flux.

Another is Niamh Moore's paper tracing the fate of the historic Stack A docklands warehouse in the face of rapid urban regeneration in Dublin and the commodification of heritage in the service of marketing place rather than preserving the genuinely shared memories of local people.

There are statements of the entirely obvious here – heritage values are manipulated by money. Who knew? It has been ever thus, from the re-arrangement of fragments of the Bastille into souvenir trinkets onwards – even earlier if one counts holy bones and relics of the True Cross.

Memory and identity studies as they relate to heritage has been such a dizzyingly expanding field of academic endeavour over the last decade that it is tempting to put some of this simplistic analysis down to an academic field still finding its feet. But the book has saving graces and one is an introductory chapter that reminds us otherwise: Tadhg O’Keeffe’ essay, Landscape and Memory: Historiography, Theory, Methodology which, with admirable clarity, sets out thinking in the field since the “cultural turn” almost 30 years ago that “secured as orthodoxy the view that the study of society is not objective.” He invokes, among other pioneers, Pierre Nora’s seminal Lieux de Memorie writings. [accent] and Raphael Samuel’s 1994 Theatres of Memory.

In particular he notes Nora’s observation that rupture is important in the generation of collective memory – moments of social stress or fracture igniting desires to collect memories that can be shared.”

O’Keeffe is also in accord with this writer’s view in stating that while landscape is a touchstone for memory, “however, and at whatever scale a collective is constituted, we have no collective capacity to share memories that are not in some way externally programmed for us.” That is, our responses are mediated by society and the historical moment.

Elsewhere, the book’s interest lies in case studies that improve the more distant their orbit to Catholic Ireland (perhaps local knowledge induced an elements of woods and trees myopia). Stephen Mills’ Moving Buildings and Changing History discusses the implications for heritage of open air museums and gathering historic buildings together for exhibition.

Tim Winter’s “Landscapes in the Living Memory: New Year Festivities at Angkor, Cambodia” results from interviews with contemporary Cambodians visiting the temple site and records their feelings about the place and its meaning to them. It brings a rare emotional engagement to the book – a touching desire by contemporary Cambodians to be part of a crowd. Feeling is otherwise notably lacking throughout the pieces – for instance, the cool analysis of Stack A where the desire to retain local memory seems a curiously passionless wish. This is surprising on a post-colonial island where there are still plenty of ructions whenever road planners threaten “Celtic” sites

Winter argues that, for Cambodians today, gathering at Angkor’s temples is important in “reclaiming collective memory.” There is an assumption here and throughout the book that the collective memory is a good thing.

Certainly in the face of colonialism or cultural cleansing, asserting indigenous identity through collective memory can be an essential strategy. Otherwise, the disadvantage of collective memory (and identity) is that it often also a means of establishing who belongs and who is the ‘other’ with an alien identity and alternative memories. There are ramifications for good and ill. Many contributions also seem to see collective memory as the same thing as collective identity but is it necessarily?

Curiously, a pioneering text in this field, Eric Hobsbawm’s The Invention of Tradition (1983), is not cited anywhere. Perhaps Hobsbawm’s Marxism didn’t sit easily with the “cultural turn” which also marked a move from modernism to post-modernism evident in the approach of many of the authors here. Raphael Samuel on the other hand is claimed for post-modernism despite being firmly a labour historian as well as a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles.

There are flocks of gold winking here and there in these chapters, but there are other books with richer seams of heritage material between their cover.

Robert Bevan
Robert Bevan is a Sydney-based journalist and author

References:


The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity
Brian Graham and Peter Howard (eds), Ashgate, 2008 ISBN 978 0 7546 4922 9 RRP 85.00

The invitation to review this Ashgate Research Companion came as I moved jobs from a heritage agency (English Heritage) into a higher education institution (University of York), with the opportunity to exchange heritage practice for heritage teaching and research. Already, after two months, I am seeing the heritage world in new ways: not that one is better or more forward-thinking or more dynamic than the other, but simply that priorities are different. I recognise case studies and examples of good (and bad) heritage practice not simply as stages on a professional learning curve, but as invaluable teaching resources: raw material for analysis and critical enquiry. One thing others tell me is that distance exists between those who teach heritage and those who practice it.
In the UK most people who teach heritage have not worked in the heritage sector, while most who work in it have no higher education experience, at least not beyond their degree courses. It seems I am one of few exceptions. In the past two months my main task has been to create next year’s core modules for the Cultural Heritage Management MA programme for which I am responsible. My own experiences with English Heritage and in the sector generally will form a part of that, hopefully to the benefit of students who come here. But I have also been reading far more than in recent years, including the Ashgate Companion to Heritage and Identity. It is within this wider context that this review is presented, balancing the realities of a practitioner, and the ambitions of a teacher- (and more active researcher-) to-be.

This Ashgate Research Companion is one of several books published recently which generate an overview of heritage research and practice by combining geographical, thematic and disciplinary perspectives. The Heritage Reader (Routledge, 2008) is one, whose content reflected what its editors (me included) felt were core texts for heritage teaching at that time. It is extraordinary (and encouraging) how many important papers, books and chapters have appeared since! The newly published (2010) Open University series of books, published in partnership with University of Manchester Press, is another, and one intended to support Open University’s heritage learning. And there are others. One might ask, with all of this research and publication activity, whether this Research Companion could make a mark. Is this a significant addition to the literature? Will it last? And more specifically, will I recommend it to students alongside the titles mentioned above?

The blurb on the dust cover describes this as an ‘outstanding companion’ which ‘offers scholars and graduate students a thoroughly up-to-date guide to current thinking’. I couldn’t disagree with that (except that its market might be wider – practitioners maybe?). But this is indeed outstanding, for its scope, its breadth, its vision. Its overarching theme is ‘the interconnections between two slippery and ambiguous yet dynamically important concepts, heritage and identity’ (p1), concepts at the very root of our interest in why heritage matters now, and why it is important for the future. The content is articulate and compelling, and comprehensive, with 25 chapters spread over four sections covering: the context of heritage and identity; markers of heritage and identity; heritage practice; and finally (looking forward) the challenges of a postmodern and post-colonial world. The index is thorough and effective, while the editors’ introduction provides a lucid and helpful overview of aims, outlook and content. What I particularly like about this collection is that – almost without question – it adopts the broader definitions of heritage which I favour, as exemplified in David Atkinson’s important contribution on the heritage of mundane places. ‘How’ he asks ‘can we hope for more comprehensive understandings of the complex social memories that pattern our contemporary world … without a sufficient focus on quotidian spaces?’ (p392). Take also David Harvey’s plea not to forget ‘small heritages’ alongside the ‘big heritage’ of officialdom, and as a form of resistance to it (p33). And third, John Tunbridge’s chapter on plural and multicultural heritages, which concludes with the recognition that ‘minority heritages not only diversify the heritage of mundane places. ‘How’ he asks “can we hope for more comprehensive understandings of the complex social memories that pattern our contemporary world … without a sufficient focus on quotidian spaces?” (p392). Take also David Harvey’s plea not to forget ‘small heritages’ alongside the ‘big heritage’ of officialdom, and as a form of resistance to it (p33). And third, John Tunbridge’s chapter on plural and multicultural heritages, which concludes with the recognition that ‘minority heritages not only diversify the cultural package on offer but can, and should, provide minorities with a stake in the enterprise, so making a bonus investment in local social equity and … social harmony’ (p312).

When I look at books like this, my first glance is often to the list of contributors; not so much for who they are but for their disciplinary backgrounds. The blurb claims here that heritage is viewed through a ‘number of disciplinary lenses’. Not half. Geography is fairly prominent here (cultural, human and historical), but also represented are (and I paraphrase for brevity): urban tourism, public policy, fine arts, museology, heritage studies, public history, Germanic studies, media and cultural studies, history of art, economic and social history and landscape theory. Without tight editorial control this might result in a mess of disconnected or entangled perspectives, without common ground or a consensus on scope and direction. But this is a cohesive and thoroughly focused collection, one that demonstrates the true worth of multi- (and inter- and trans-) disciplinary perspectives.

This ‘outstanding companion’ is indeed a key text on the core heritage modules I am about to begin teaching – it will be highly recommended to students, and it will last, in as much as anything in our fast-moving heritage world lasts. Better to say this is a significant landmark publication, one that marks a point in time, and gives a clear vision on future priorities and research directions. It highlights and promotes all that is good about heritage research, and why it is relevant to society. For all of these reasons this is essential reading and I recommend it to heritage students and practitioners alike.

Dr John Schofield
John Schofield is the Director of Studies, Cultural Heritage Management at the University of York, UK

Valuing Historic Environments

Edited by Lisanne Gibson and John Pendlebury,
Published by Ashgate Publishing, 2009
ISBN: 978-0-7546-7424-5 (Hb) 978-0-7546-9043-6 (eBook)
RRP 50.00

In this set of contributions on valuing historic environments, the editors have found a diverse group of professionals willing to challenge the status quo. Although primarily an English publication, the Australian contributors and case studies show the breadth of experience and discourse within the heritage community. You will not find any quantitative solutions arguing for heritage conservation. These are not essays analysing numbers but an essential critique of how heritage professionals and community interact when attributing value to heritage.

The editors begin from the position that meaning is a cultural construct and therefore value is externally imposed on a place, landscape or object. The contributors then delve into the ramifications on the significance, interpretation and understanding of heritage. Within this, the authors are able to question the very root of how experts and professionals connect and negotiate value to heritage places. The discourse surrounding this imposition of value, its effect on fabric and place and how this is seen by the surrounding community leads to some interesting questions.

The conversation is guided under three sections: Values and Heritage Stewardship; Cultural Landscapes; and The Heritage of Housing. In introducing the topic, the editors question the politicisation of heritage. The editors emphasise that heritage processes are as much if not more connected to the present than the past. This is as a reaction to the physical and political threats of the present and by the action or activity undertaken by the ‘modern’ heritage profession. The nature of how
heritage is decided has changed, whether it is through the development of governmental authority or because of concessions made to source funding.

Within Values and Heritage Stewardship, the contributors cover a collection of perspectives on museums, sites, conservation processes and the role of the profession. Peter Howard questions the role of the profession in working with diverse meanings and values in the community. The four roles of the expert as he sees it, Invention, Authentication, Contextualisation and Education, are just as diverse and depending on your situation, may be innovative or routine.

Within a museum context, the reasons how and why objects and places are delivered into the public realm of significance, interpretation and cultural tourism are questioned. A critique by David Lowenthal, of the contemporary visitor-centric role of the museum as opposed to its past role as collector, conservator and researcher seems relevant to all museums and the management ethos. Likewise, the contribution by Laurajane Smith on the social values attributed to classified heritage places, specifically country houses in England delivers a serious critique of the organisational structure of heritage protection. Her explanation of the ‘Authorised Heritage Discourse’ and the appraisal of the Burra Charter is a must for those contributing to the revision of the document and its guidelines this year.

The discussion of Cultural Landscapes also identifies controversial issues within the public realm. Some difficult relationships between some indigenous and non-indigenous Australians are discussed by Lisanne Gibson in relation to memory and memorials in the landscape. John Schofield challenges the experts to take a symmetrical approach to heritage practices giving tangible results to the intangible meaning. The World Heritage potential of novelty architecture is the topic embraced by Walton and Wood in Blackpool while Tracey Avery found controversy when the National Trust of Australia (Vic) proposed street art as a significant part of Melbourne’s streetscape.

The final section, The Heritage of Housing also looks at the community voice when how heritage is protected. In consecutive chapters by Borsay and Pendlebury, Townshend and Gilroy respectively, each with a valid argument for significance, they show that value is simply a matter of perspective. Pendlebury et al highlight the complexity of heritage discussion with community and the flexibility needed in the professional language of heritage. It is Malpass’ commentary on Housing as the coalface of heritage that identifies the most controversial area of heritage protection. Her explanation of the ‘Authorised Heritage Discourse’ and the appraisal of the Burra Charter is a must for those contributing to the revision of the document and its guidelines this year.

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So the book leaves as many questions as answers although it is an incentive to think outside the box for more creative, connective and negotiated solutions on value. The book is best taken in bite-size pieces but if for those interested in challenging the role of expert and community or questioning heritage as a construct in history, this will provide an interesting read. The book is part of the Ashgate series on Heritage, Culture and Identity.

Rebecca Fleming
Portland Heritage Services

PASTORAL AUSTRALIA FORTUNES, FAILURES & HARD YACKA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW 1788 TO 1967

Michael Pearson and Jane Lennon
ISBN: 9780643096998  RRP $69.95

Pastoral Australia was developed from a thematic study commissioned by the Australian Heritage Council and funded by the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. This comprehensive book aims to provide the historical context for the selection and assessment of places of heritage value to the nation relating to the theme of ‘pastoralism’. It is divided into seven chapters and structured according to time periods, and is accompanied by two useful indexes, one general, the second being the pastoral stations mentioned in the text. It is an essential source for heritage practitioners working in the hinterland of Australia and includes an extensive bibliography.

Pastoralism is “the pervasive creative force that has permeated almost everything that has happened in Australia since 1788”. The book examines the spread of cattle and sheep across Australia, and the resultant wealth brought to this expanding frontier. It looks at the associated stock minders, the development of different breeds suited to the largely arid environment (through much trial and tribulation) the necessary associated transportation routes for the delivery of stock (including an Australia wide map showing the early long distance stock routes) and the fluctuations of markets dependent upon the seasons. Drought is the ever present constraint.

The centre of the book incorporates an interesting pastoral expansion timeline, a ‘summary at a glance’ of the various time periods, which includes additional information such as: the opening of Essendon and Mascot Airports in 1921; the commencement of CSIRO in 1926; and the reference to the abandonment of the White Australia Policy in 1973 (outside the timeline of the book), all to provide contextual time references. Each chapter ends with a useful summary describing the spread of pastoralism during this period, the rise of population, the numbers of sheep and cattle and key developments. The book also quite rightly acknowledges the strong contribution of Aboriginal people as part of the Australian pastoral industry, including Alexander Harris’ advice to new settlers in the 1840s that ‘the blacks should be kindly treated, as they are of a great service in stripping bark, showing new runs, tracking lost bullocks and sheep…’.

The inclusion of some images including Aboriginal women sorting fleece in a shearing shed, and the photograph of Aboriginal workers at Momba Station in the 1860s are poignant reminders of their working conditions.

Sadly, on many occasions the layout of the book dictated photographs being included at such a small scale that they are hard to decipher. All the photos in this book are of interest, and many are frustratingly small.

The book describes in detail the breeding of the merino to withstand the wet and dry, with the introduction of the high wool yielding Vermont strain from the USA. The distinctive undulating skin/fleece was appreciated by flies (!), hated by shearsers, and hard to eradicate from flocks where they had...
been cross bred. The reduction in shepherding once fencing could be rolled out (after the introduction of wiring in the 1860s) was part of the evolution of attendant helpers on large properties.

The emphasis of the book is on ‘the geographical spread of pastoralism and the places that relate to it’. However, the excellent description of the expansion of pastoralism is not accompanied by a description of the places that the early pastoralist, shearsers and squatters occupied. As an architect, I would have enjoyed more discussion of the resulting structures (homesteads, shearing sheds, cattle and sheep yards, etc) which evolved and developed over time, from basic bush carpentry origins to highly developed and sophisticated buildings - sometimes of enormous proportions.

The book clearly explains the ongoing challenges of increased distance between productive land and markets, as settlement expanded into the interior of the continent. There were logistical difficulties of transporting stock and wool, but the arrival of river steamers at Bourke in 1859 and the soon to be developed Murray-Darling settlements resulted in a new period of expansion down the rivers. Huge loads could now be carried to the rail heads such as at Echuca from the late 1850s onwards. The book also outlines the relationship between mining booms. Towns developed rapidly where gold and other resources were discovered, and along with this the markets for livestock.

The book stops at 1967, chosen at the time when changes occurred in the pay and conditions of Aboriginal workers which profoundly impacted on the future direction of the pastoral industry. The book left me with questions as to what has happened in the last 40 years. Almost all Aboriginal labour left the stations, and in response pastoralists needed to improve and mechanise their stations to become less labour intensive. The book posed the question how well has our pastoral history been recognized in heritage registers? The inclusion of either the early colonial or later grand structures appreciated for their architecture has provided a skewed representation, whilst poorly represented are the more ephemeral and less obviously structures, many relating to the development of technology. Certainly this book will help inform a reassessment of the heritage values of our broader pastoral industry and hopefully do much to assist with broader representation of pastoral places on all heritage lists (National, State and Territory Registers).

The publishing of this book by CSIRO may assist with the distribution of this very worthwhile publication - however the high price of the book at $69.95 will discourage many purchasers, particularly as it is a largely black and white format. As part of a proposed two volume publication, it is disappointing a more eye catching book design was not developed. Fortunately the content rises well above this shortcoming.

Elizabeth Vines OAM
Elizabeth Vines is a Partner in McDougall & Vines Conservation & Heritage Consultants