Community expectations and capturing community values in conservation management plans

Alexandra Dellios*
Abstract

This paper explores the interaction between strong community expectations and industry-approved conservation management planning. It draws on a case study of Benalla Migrant Camp in regional Australia and the community of ‘camp kids’ that rallied for its conservation. In doing so, it explores issues associated with values-based heritage management approaches, the role of storytelling in conservation practice (especially for marginalised groups), and the discursive limitations of industry documents like Conservation Management Plans (CMPs). Like many analyses in critical heritage studies, it ends by arguing for a new discourse that can more fully centre community values and aspirations and boost the use-value of storytelling.

Introduction

A values-based heritage management approach is said to represent ‘best practice’ at both the national (Australia, Canada, USA and the UK) and international level (UNESCO) because it has the capacity to integrate community attachments to place. Such an approach is contained within the Australian ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance (The Burra Charter). Adherents in the industry argue that such an approach can centre community aspirations in the conservation and management of a place. However, the degree to which authorised management regimes facilitate the long-term conservation and presentation of a place’s many heritage ‘values’ in a dynamic and integrated way—as layered memories of place that can and do change over time, according to the vested interests of communities in the place—has been a subject of scrutiny in critical heritage studies (Harvey and Riley 2005; Smith and Waterton 2010; Smith, Morgan and Meer 2003; Johnston and Clark 2003). For his part, Poulis (2010) has criticised a values-based approach on the basis that it is unable to deal with ‘living heritage sites’ that have continuous and evolving connections with community groups.

The cultural significance of heritage places continues to be defined through a set of values—aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual. Arguably, a ‘successful’ values-based approach requires dynamic (and continuous) interaction with the community or communities most attached to the place in order for the management approach to be kept relevant and cognizant of changing values. Best practice recognises this, and over the last couple of decades various ICOMOS Charters have responded to more academic critiques by trying to privilege community values and promote the recognition of ‘intangible’ heritage—most obviously in response to UNESCO’s Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005). The heritage studies literature has been critical of this artificial division between tangible and intangible heritage (Smith and Akagawa 2008; Munjeri 2004). But nonetheless, new industry
charters and policy papers seeking to elevate the ‘intangible’ demonstrate a willingness to take into account community views, and recognise the values of living communities with lived experiences connected to a place (Australia ICOMOS 2017). But to what degree have these discourses challenged approaches to conservation management? Have they trickled down to local practices bound by local or state heritage legislation, or to industry documents that determine conservation practice? How are community values reflected in these documents?

In some ways, these questions also extend on the work of Waterton, Smith and Campbell (2006), in their discourse analysis of the Burra Charter. They determined that the discursive construction of the Charter undermined otherwise laudable and sincere attempts to incorporate greater social inclusion and community participation in the practice and process of heritage conservation. This discourse continues to ground knowledge and power with heritage ‘experts’ and can sometimes reinforce a misrecognition of the heritage of some marginalised groups, which can also have social and material effects for that group. This article relies less on critical discourse analysis—a critical linguistic approach used to analyse power structures within texts and language—but it does seek to contextualise texts (especially Conservation Management Plans) and the material and social conditions that shape them.

This paper is interested in tracing the interplay between strong community expectations and the authorised and legislative documents that circulate in the heritage industry in Australia—namely, the Conservation Management Plan (CMP). As scholars, we also need to continue to interrogate these legislative and highly regulated spaces, and the role that community engagement, and the strength of community attachments to a place, can play.

Hutchison and Grist (2019) have argued for a conservation approach that privileges ‘lived experience’. Along with similar arguments from Clark and Johnston (2003) and other heritage practitioners and scholars (Mydland and Grahn 2012; Byrne, Brayshaw and Ireland 2003; Pocock, Collet and Baulch 2015; Prinsen 2013), their critique contributes to a strand in critical heritage studies that has dissected ‘heritage practice for over a decade’ and ‘repeatedly exposed the lack of mechanisms for activating, recognising or incorporating “lived experience”’—specifically through facilitating and recognising ‘storytelling’ and the role it may play in heritage identification, management and interpretation. This aligns well with Poulilos’ (2010) three key principles that determine a ‘living heritage approach’: 1) empowering communities in the conservation and management process, 2) benefiting from their traditional knowledge, management systems and maintenance practices, and 3) linking conservation to sustainable development of the communities, by developing a process to manage change and by making heritage relevant to the needs of the contemporary communities.

I am especially interested in the influence of the strength of community expectations and whether they can be met by a CMP. What other avenues exist in tandem to facilitate a successful values-based management approach, and to ensure relevant community groups are not only ‘included’, but are participating in heritage conservation in a way that is not only for them, but with them (Waterton 2015: 57)? The case at hand is the former Benalla Migrant Camp in rural Victoria, and its newly released CMP. The place—a collection of 1940s RAAF timber huts, which housed up to 60,000 European post-war refugees and assisted migrants from 1949 to 1967—was listed on the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR H2358) in May 2016, after a groundswell of support and an outpouring of personal and familial stories from former child residents. The first CMP for Benalla was adopted at a Benalla Rural City Council Meeting in December 2018; forty-one members of the Benalla ‘camp kids’ and the associated group ‘Benalla Migrant Camp Exhibition Inc.’ made submissions to the Council in support of this CMP. The council retains the ability to apply for heritage funding for the place, and to ensure its CMP is implemented. Some individuals from the Benalla Migrant Camp group argue that Benalla Rural City Council’s response to the huts as ‘migrant heritage’ has been apathetic since the idea was first publicised in 2013.

Following a short contextual discussion on Benalla Migrant Camp’s function in Australia’s post-war immigration scheme, the paper outlines the strength of community attachment to and familial memories of Benalla—especially leading up to and in the wake of its listing on
the Victorian Heritage Register in 2016. Part Two then explores the degree to which these attachments shaped the creation of Benalla’s first conservation management plan, and questions whether a CMP is the best medium to fulfil these community expectations and capture community storytelling—those that are linked to highly affective memories around family, economic hardship and migrant integration. The paper then discusses alternative forms of public history that go some way toward fulfilling these community expectations, when official, legislative documents do not or cannot.

PART ONE

Historical Background: Benalla and community attachments

The migrant camp that was established at the former Benalla RAAF training centre in 1949 served a unique function in Australia’s wider post-war immigration scheme. While it was part of a larger network of Department of Immigration centres (or ‘camps’, as they were colloquially known) that received, processed and temporarily housed post-war refugees from Eastern Europe and then government-assisted migrants from all over Europe, Benalla was unique. Benalla acted as a ‘holding centre’ (rather than a ‘processing centre’ like Bonegilla) that primarily housed ‘unsupported’ mothers or so-called ‘broken’ families. It is the children of these women, many of whom were displaced during and after WWII, that are now at the forefront of efforts to preserve this ‘difficult heritage’ (Pennay 2015), which includes more than just the built fabric of the camp.

As I have described elsewhere, the camps and their staff were responsible for migrants’ physical dispersal across Australia through the allocation of employment and camp accommodation. Upon migration, new assisted migrant arrivals signed a two-year work contract with the government—this secured them subsidised (but still financially onerous) accommodation in camps, many of which were former military training bases near rural centres. Individual signatories over the age of 16 were allocated and moved to employment anywhere across the country, mainly in heavy industry and agriculture. The conditions were often spartan, and the health and safety needs of children were not always considered (Dellios 2017: 91-124). Only pregnant women and married women with young children were exempt from this indentured contract, although departmental memos indicate that these women were encouraged to work, and found it necessary to cover the costs of camp accommodation.

Accommodation at a Department of Immigration centre could cost up to £3 a week, at a time when unemployment benefits were £2.50 a week (Agutter 2013). Benalla camp had child-minding facilities, enabling the women to work, but this also came at a cost. Life was therefore very difficult for single working mothers, and many found it impossible to move out of the migrant camp and into the wider community. A high proportion of so-called ‘problem cases’ (Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council 1951), meaning ‘unsupported’ mothers, were shunted to Benalla. They were expected to work at either of the two nearby factories—Latof and Calill clothing, or Renolds Chains. Although Benalla did not exclusively house single mothers, social workers made note of the departmental tendency to ‘send all unsupported women and other problem cases to Benalla Holding Centre from camps all over Australia’ (Harris 1957). The option of temporarily placing their children into ‘care’, in state or church institutions, was frequently pushed on these women by social workers and Department of Immigration officials, as a means to get the women into full-time work and out of the camps.1

While most post-war refugees and assisted migrants passed through the camp system within weeks or months, a substantial proportion of the initial 170,000 displaced persons stayed for much longer, living within departmental camps for the duration of their two-year work contracts, and sometimes well beyond that (Dellios 2017: 2-21). Approximately 60,000 people passed through Benalla from 1949 to 1967. Throughout most of the 1950s, the resident population was 400, with an average of 200 moving in and out each year (Kemp 2018: 93). Approximately 400 lived in the camp for up to and beyond ten years. The children spent their childhood or teenage years living in the camp. The relatively small number of residents helped the families, most of whom were women and young children, form close ties and build a
strong sense of community, despite being hampered by economic difficulties. When Benalla was finally closed in 1967, the last 135 residents were moved to commission homes in Benalla (Pennay 2017: 577).

**Heritage Recognition**

Over the next few decades, most of the remaining huts were demolished, without protestations from the wider Benalla community. The last of the huts were moved, sold to Benalla Rural City Council, and leased to local businesses from 1992. Many of the camp’s former residents do not live in Benalla town—they are spread across the country. A majority chose to ‘get away to Melbourne’ after secondary school (Pennay 2015: 41). Those who made return trips—to visit elderly mothers who never left Benalla—noted their dismay upon seeing the structures moved or demolished (Fellowes, pers. comm. 21 July 2016).

Some recognition of the huts’ heritage value was noted in the 1990s, when former resident Ziggy Kulbars, who was born in Latvia and lived and worked at the camp from 1949 to 1955, agitated the local paper to raise awareness of the huts’ deterioration (Pennay 2015: 43). An assessment was eventually made by the National Trust in 1997, and they classified the huts as holding social, cultural and historical significance; primarily in relation to the place’s military and RAAF history. Despite this recognition, a few years later, most of the huts were demolished to make way for Benalla’s Cooninda Retirement Village. The last nine huts were relocated nearby.

Migrant heritage recognition of the place grew from newly public expressions of personal or family histories at Benalla, which were made public through the establishment of the Benalla Migrant Camp Inc. (BMC) and their photographic exhibition in 2013. This initiative came not from former residents themselves, but from ‘insider-outsider’ Sabine Smyth, herself a migrant to Australia. Smyth migrated from Germany to Australia in the 1980s to join her partner, who grew up in Benalla town. I interviewed Smyth in the course of researching Benalla’s heritage. Her connection to the stories of Benalla migrant residents goes back further than her own migration journey: her family history was also marked by displacement in the wake of WWII, and the shifting borders of Germany, Poland and the USSR. She was able to see her family’s history in the traumatic stories of the women displaced by the USSR who passed through Benalla in the 1950s and 1960s.

Ms Fellowes, a former child resident, mentioned to me in 2016 that she was ‘a bit embarrassed that we didn’t start it. An outsider [Smyth] started it’, with the formation of the Benalla Migrant Camp Inc. Fellowes went on to argue that her generation of ‘camp kids’ and their family’s experiences had always felt marginalised. She cites her regret at witnessing the camp’s partial demolition over the years:

I guess we felt that it wasn’t that important, we didn’t matter… We all sort thought we weren’t good enough anyway, only camp kids, so why bother. It took an outsider to say you are important, your story is important… Sixteen years ago [2000], Irene and I we watched when they bulldozed the theatre and we stood there crying. We had so many memories… That’s where we raced to when there was floods in the camp, where I spied watching the people dance, where we had our inoculations. It was a temple… We watched it, and it all seemed so surreal. We grew up there… As the first generation, we don’t have a place to call home. Camp was home. Mum couldn’t go back to Latvia, it was no longer home. So the migrant camp was very significant in that way. To have somewhere to go back to. To say, this where I started from, this where Mum started from, from my roots. It was significant. Watching it all demolished before your eyes. Not saying that we mind (Fellowes, pers. comm. 21 July 2016).

The link between this generation’s sense of belonging and place is made explicit in this testimony—Benalla ‘locates’ not only their childhoods but their contested relationship to their mothers’ migration experiences. Its marginalisation in heritage industry practices reflects the historic marginalisation of their parents’ welfare by the nation-state in post-war Australia, and the devaluing of their mothers’ ‘contribution’ to that state. Historians Catherine Kevin and Karen Agutter (2017) describe how government officials and social workers approached these
women as ‘failures to assimilate’; their primary function as assisted migrants (to work) was hampered by their unwed status. This was not only a moral hindrance, it also cast them as ‘non-compliants’.

In Fellowes’ and other testimonies, former residents internalise the shame heaped on their single working mothers (from social workers and other government officials, the media, and mainstream Benalla community). I think this process reflects the process of misrecognition elaborated by Laurajane Smith drawing on Nancy Fraser—the invalidation of claims for recognition of diversity, the indifference to their working class pasts, and thus the political marginalisation of their historic experiences:

Heritage can be understood as one of a range of specific resources of power that is drawn on to validate or invalidate claims for recognition of diversity or to maintain misrecognition and indifference to diversity and thus help maintain political marginalization and injustice… In this context, heritage as an embodied performance of meaning and identity making can be understood as a process that actively works to assert or negotiate the nature of individual and collective identity that interacts with societal acts of offering of withholding of respect and legitimacy. In short, heritage can be understood to have very material overt and covert impact on social debates and justice issues (Smith 2017: 71)

This too goes some way to explaining how and why Smyth came to be the instigator of these heritage efforts, rather than ‘camp kids’ themselves. Many threw themselves into the campaign thereafter. As Smyth noted ‘since our efforts for heritage protection began, former residents have stepped out of their comfort zone and have mobilized’ (2016).

The need to interpret the place and its stories, or otherwise risk ‘losing it all’ was a pressing one to Smyth—so she formed the Benalla Migrant Camp Inc. (BMC) and began asking after photographs. In this scenario, when residents are dispersed across the country and the remaining physical fabric is inaccessible or undervalued, collecting photographs, and thus building the public visibility of the place through intimate glimpses of family life in sparse surroundings, became an obtainable first step. Almost all the photographs come from private family albums. They were eventually able to display the photographs in a temporary exhibition in Hut 11, which the council leases to BMC. The other half of the hut is leased to Benalla Broken River Painters. The current exhibition is run by 13 volunteers—most of them former ‘camp kids’. As public historian and heritage advocate Bruce Pennay argues: ‘it is principally via photographs that they retain memories of growing up and coming of age, which are at the base of their connection with the place’ (2015: 41). Another former resident captured the powerful absence and presence of these photographs when she stated: ‘[they] remind us of everything else that has already been lost, forgotten or left behind’ (Topor cited in: Price 2015, np). These affective
photographs contain many dialectical possibilities, especially when connected, as they implicitly are, with other migrant camp collections—the growing Bonegilla collection, the Greta Migrant Camp collection at the Newcastle Region Library, and the National Archives of Australia’s ‘Immigration Photographic Archive’ containing ‘hostel and reception centre’ photos.

From 2013 to 2016, the group focussed on building their photographic collection. The ultimate aim was to have a permanent exhibition on the site ‘using the photos and the stories behind them (captured in oral histories and on film) as the center piece’ (Smyth 2016). When I visited Benalla in 2016, the collection contained 500 photographs. By 2019, the collection had doubled. The CMP itself contains only a few of these 1000 photographs, and does not flag the importance of this collection to the collective memory of not only this group of former residents but arguably all who passed through post-war migrant centres in Australia. They feature more prominently in Pennay’s 2015 history of Benalla, Difficult Heritage, commissioned by Benalla Migrant Camp Inc.

In this commissioned history, Pennay hypothesised why it had taken so long for this kind of remembering to emerge at Benalla, in contrast to the collective efforts at other camps like Bonegilla, West Sale, Cowra and Greta. These other camps, especially Bonegilla (the largest and longest running centre) have hosted reunions, unveiled commemorative plaques, and have been the subject of temporary and touring exhibitions since the 1980s. Nonetheless, such structures remain invisible within a Western heritage practice that prizes fabric—including national practices that devalue not only migrant or military structures, but also industrial heritage. But this prevailing heritage practice does not entirely explain the unique silence around Benalla. Pennay turns to the three main interest groups to explain this: the nation, the town, and former residents (Penay 2015). For the nation, Benalla was ‘difficult heritage’—a bleak and unattractive place containing the sad and tragic stories of displaced women, most of whom fled their homelands and left family behind only to find themselves socially and economically isolated in rural Australia; such narratives do not conform to nation-building narratives and the migrant success stories that are associated with the post-war immigration scheme. The camp was also on the edge of town, with only a small proportion of residents eventually settling in Benalla town proper. As for the final group, the former residents ‘have rarely spoken publicly about their time there’ (Penay 2015: 3). I would argue also that, like many heritage listings in Australia, the effort to recognise Benalla came in response to a perceived threat to the remaining physical fabric (Pocock, Collet and Baulch 2015)—the threat came from vague plans to demolish the remaining huts to make more space for the 2016 World Gliding Championships at Benalla Airport (Topor 2015).
Concurrent to Benalla Migrant Camp Inc.’s work, in early 2015 former resident Helen Topor began petitioning the Mayor and the Benalla Rural City Council to ‘Save the historic Migrant Centre Huts at Benalla Airport’ (Topor 2015). Like Smyth, Topor saw heritage listing on the Victorian Heritage Register as a way to ‘protect’ the place from further destruction. She was also willing to sit down with me and conduct an oral history interview.

Topor was born in a refugee camp in Germany in 1947; she migrated as a displaced person with her Latvian parents and younger brother in late 1949. After passing through a few migrant centres in their first year of ‘settlement’, Topor, her mother and her younger brother eventually settled at Benalla; and like most residents her age, she moved out at 16 to find work in Melbourne. In her petition, she stated:

On a recent visit to Benalla I was alarmed to see how little remains of the Migrant Accommodation Centre. More than half has disappeared under development. While the school still stands, the original blackboard, interior wall linings, light fittings and schoolbag hooks in the school buildings have been removed as part of an unsympathetic renovation. Worse may still be to come… The remnants of the migrant centre are at their most vulnerable without heritage protection (Topor 2016).

The council responded to Topor’s 2015 petition by promising to halt demolition. Even before the petition had closed, in March 2015, Sabine Smyth for Benalla Migrant Camp Inc. had submitted the huts for nomination on the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). In July 2015, however, Heritage Victoria Executive Director Tim Smith recommended that the place not be included in the VHR (Heritage Council of Victoria 2016). In his rejection, Smith cited ‘other more intact sites’ like Bonegilla that ‘more clearly demonstrate the associations with post-war migration’ (Smith cited in Heritage Council of Victoria 2016: 5-6). No member of Heritage Victoria contacted Benalla Migrant Camp Inc. about the exhibition and its relevance to assessing the place’s ‘social significance’ during this process. In this case, state heritage processes failed to account for community attachments, or to assess the place’s social value and the specific and marginalised histories the place contained. Smith also argued that there was ‘no regular, organised or enduring ceremonial use of the place’ (cited in Heritage Council of Victoria 2016: 14)—but this statement did not consider the temporary and voluntary-run photographic exhibition, special events run throughout the year (on Australia Day and as part of the annual Benalla Festival), or the fact that visitor numbers are not logged. Heritage Victoria and the ‘thresholds of significance’ used to assess places failed to understand the nature of this community and the family histories that unite them, despite their geographical dispersal across the country. In response to the rejection, Benalla Migrant Camp Inc. took their campaign to the local media and again sought the support of local council. They used the 60 days after the rejection to dispute the ruling and lobby for a hearing. The hearing was scheduled for two days in February 2016.

In the months leading up to the February hearing, emotions ran high. It was during this time that I was contacted, as a historian of postwar migration, by members of the Benalla camp kids’ community who were compiling their submissions to the hearing. Many of the stories I heard referred to their mother’s experiences—not only within Benalla, but during WWII and in refugee camps after the war. They contained repeated references to their mothers’ resilience and strength and the economic hardships they faced. I have written elsewhere about their desire to ‘honour their mother’s memories’ (Dellios 2018a). The appeal hearing thus became a platform to piece together their mothers’ history—before, during and after WWII, and as single working mothers attempting to settle in the migrant camp—and to insist that the camp was worthy of heritage listing and public acknowledgement (Dellios 2018b). In other words, they worked against the collective feelings of shame and silence that had been heaped on their familial and migrant pasts.

Over 100 people attended the hearing held on 10 and 11 February 2016, a uniquely large audience for any heritage hearing (Kemp 2018: 88). Across the two days, fifteen former residents and invested individuals gave oral presentations to the three-person Heritage Council Registrations Committee. Eighteen others submitted written testimony (Heritage Council of
They focussed on criterion A and especially criterion G of the Heritage Council’s criteria for assessment of places of cultural heritage significance: ‘importance to the course or pattern of Victoria’s cultural history’, and ‘strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons’ (Heritage Council of Victoria 2018). Smyth’s description captures a feel for the day, and underlines its importance in the minds of this community:

I’ll never forget that... it was a turning point because ... more and more people coming, we’re in the fight together...There was this real hum and positive tension in the room, and everyone was just glued to everyone else giving witness, and there was clapping and cheering. It was a sense of a community group invested in the camp coming together and backing each other up. There were tears, there was laughing (Smyth, pers. comm., 1 April 2019).

Recognising the undeniable strength of community attachments displayed at the hearing, Heritage Victoria ruled in favour of listing the remaining huts on the Victorian Heritage Register on 12 May 2016—nine structures in total were listed. This was described as a victory for camp kids, as the BMC posted on their Facebook page:

Over a thousand people engaged in our fight to gain State Heritage Listing in 2015/2016 and we won! A group of volunteers did for free, what Councils pay consultants tens of thousands of dollars for without blinking! (23 March 2019)

I have argued elsewhere, however, that the Heritage Victoria report and Statement of Significance that recommended listing did not fully capture the community’s values and associations with the place. It appeared as Point 26, under Criterion A for listing:

The majority of the objecting submitters argued that the Place is significant due to its use as a centre for unsupported women and their children, and that it is a very early example of a place where childcare was provided for working mothers. It was argued that these specific values are not currently represented in the VHR (Heritage Council of Victoria 2016: 7).

It was Benalla’s ability to fulfil criterion A, rather than G, that secured its listing, namely its association to a phase ‘of great significance to the course and pattern of Victoria’s history’, which is ‘evident in the physical fabric of the Place and through the oral histories and documentary resources’ (Heritage Council of Victoria 2016: 8, my emphasis). The Statement of Significance also underplays the prominence of women and children’s stories to this history. Benalla appears as significant because of its function within the immigration system, ‘an example of one of only a small number of surviving centres which had been part of a network of camps that were established and used to accommodate migrants throughout Victoria and Australia’ (Heritage Council of Victoria 2016: 9).

Where and when is the space for centering these stories of ‘unsupported women and their children’? For moving beyond the fabric to consider the lived experience of former child residents? State heritage criteria, in this regard, worked to homogenise the post-war migrant experience in favour of officially-endorsed tropes of progress and development, a nationalist discourse that undeniably runs through the criteria for heritage listing at the state and national levels. Topor also argued this point at the hearing: ‘All migrants are NOT the same. Benalla, Bonegilla, and Maribyrnong each tells a significantly different migration story’ (emphasis in the original, 2016). The listing process might not have been the best avenue to explore these complexities or underscore Benalla’s distinction. Nonetheless, expectations after the listing ran high. It was assumed that the physical fabric was now protected—the promotion and recognition of the community values of the place was an attendant project. Therefore, community expectations for the next step, the formation of a CMP, were great.

PART TWO

In what follows, I explore instances in which the CMP privileges (more fully than Heritage Victoria and its Statement of Significance) the experience and heritage values of those
who were children at this place—that is, the invested group of ‘camp kids’ involved in the place’s recognition. Nonetheless, such a document cannot fully reflect and fulfil community expectations for the place, given the logistical and material constraints on conservation at Benalla. Nor can it, as a medium, fully integrate community attachments and familial memories in its recommendations, bound as it is by discourses that privilege ‘expert’ knowledge—a sense of self-referential authority that Waterton, Smith and Campbell (2006: 346) recognised in the Burra Charter—about conservation practice and what it should constitute. Therefore, the document as such is unable to draw on and integrate community knowledge and values through oral histories, other lifestory writing, and photographs. In this context, I argue that the audiovisual storytelling project, instigated in 2017, heralds the future of Benalla’s migrant heritage.

Fulfilling community expectations

The CMP needed to recognise, where the VHR process did not, that ‘many of those who came to this camp had different experiences to those who passed through places such as Bonegilla Migrant Centre’ (Kemp 2018: 105). The CMP was important in this context. Due to the strength of community expectations and emotions, it needed to provide a pathway to not only the physical conservation of the built fabric, but the recognition and promotion of the place’s history—the stories of difficult settlement and migrant childhoods. Informed by the initial aims of the BMC, the author of the CMP, Deborah Kemp (heritage consultant for Heritage Concepts), insisted:

The identified social significance can also be identified within the fabric. However, this social significance is often found in the less tangible fabric. This can be far more difficult to identify and protect. For this place the social and intangible values are very high and the fabric is supportive of these values but they also rely heavily on elusive characteristics. That is a characteristic that cannot be readily “captured” in the built or landscape form (Kemp 2018: 109).

On the issue of integrating an understanding of these values and ‘elusive characteristics’ into the built or landscape form, the CMP has less to say. Hutchison and Grist (2019) have more recently explored ways in which the lived experiences of invested individuals, especially through oral history and first-person documents, could be a powerful means of developing heritage management and conservation. They use examples from the Canberra Fire Museum Oral History Project and Tocumwal Housing Precinct. Rather than a means ‘to learn about the building’, they drew on oral histories to reveal new social histories, histories that interweave the national and the local, and the ‘physical, emotional and personal impact of national events as they were felt’ (emphasis in the original, 2019, n.p.). Smyth was explicitly thanked in the CMP for facilitating access to the BMC’s photographic collection and arranging access to the personal accounts of former residents. Rather than consistently integrating first-person accounts in the interpretation of histories at Benalla, however, the document itself remains bound by the ‘orthodox role of storytelling enshrined in Australian heritage interpretation policy’ (Hutchison and Grist 2019), to intermittently build up the lesser understood official category of ‘social value’ attached to the physical fabric. This narrow use of storytelling in heritage management and interpretation has been subject to critique internationally (Staiff 2014). Others have argued that oral history may be used to identify alternative routes or places, and the values associated with them, and then in turn be used to interpret and present the place to visitors (Pocock, Collet and Baulch 2015).

While many recommendations in the CMP reflect the weighty expectations of camp kids, it did not fully draw on and integrate the existing oral history record, written testimony from the hearing, or the 1000 photographs as part of the collection, in its recommendations. CMPs are bound by standard formats in the industry, which largely focus on fabric preservation and do not typically detail or reference available social archives and community memories, even if they may help steer relevant conservation efforts. In Benalla’s CMP, expert preservation is discussed in detail—as the genre warrants—but plans for boosting community interest and supporting migrant community involvement remain vague. They are largely contained in one part of the
final section of recommendations: the one page dedicated to ‘Intangible Values [sic] and how they can be better represented at this place’ (emphasis in the original, Kemp 2018: 119), which reflects the document’s conceptual separation between what it calls tangible and intangible heritage values. This also reflects artificial distinctions made in heritage legislation nationally and internationally. When separated from the aims for the physical preservation, it has obvious limits. I am not suggesting the author or heritage consulting body wilfully excluded oral testimony or community archives in the course of compiling the CMP, but rather that the genre and the heritage practices expounded in it, limited the potential of the document to fulfil community values and expectations.

Nonetheless, the strength of community expectations, propelled by camp kids’ testimony, is implicitly evident in some recommendations, even if storytelling is not cited. Namely, in the suggestion for ‘targeted exhibition spaces’ that recreate the life in the camp from a child’s perspective: ‘This is important and the development of one of the school rooms would assist in the interpretation of those values’ (Kemp 2018: 120). The reconstruction of some aspects of the landscape, especially the entrance gate, fencing, tree planting and footpath design, is recommended with an eye to ‘understanding the place’ and ‘provid[ing] a place for reflection’, presumably on the migrant and familial histories contained at the place (Kemp 2018: 122). The integration of such stories, or recommendations to gather them, is not made.

As with many heritage conservation efforts, the urgency to protect a place from further physical deterioration leaves little room for new oral history projects to serve as the basis for a CMP or other interpretative documents. Oral history projects take time, patience, funding, and dedicated people that have a degree of experience working with communities. The CMP exists to recommend measures to conserve the physical, the fabric. It mentioned also its hope to ‘provide a mechanism that will ensure that the more intangible values are not lost’ (Kemp 2018: 109), but these ‘intangible values’ are presumed to follow on from a preservation of the fabric (they reside in the fabric), rather than necessitating a project that encourages or builds on storytelling and collecting the intangible. Exceptions arise in the recommendations I cited above, where community camp kids’ needs and expectations directly shaped recommendations as to the type of reconstruction and conservation Benalla demanded.

The CMP’s recommended changes to the Victorian Heritage Register’s citation and Statement of Significance demonstrate most clearly the influence of community expectations. Note the addition and capitalisation of ‘AND THEIR CHILDREN’ that the CMP’s author made to the existing statement:

The Former Benalla Migrant Camp is of historical significance for its association with post-World War II non-British migration AND THEIR CHILDREN … The Former Benalla Migrant Camp is of social significance for its connection with former residents and their families and for its ability to interpret the experiences of post-World War II non-British migrants AND THEIR CHILDREN to the broader Victorian community (Kemp 2018: 91).

The physical fabric matters for a reason not consistently captured in the CMP: the family histories and community experiences of marginalisation and co-dependency that occurred there (Dellios 2019). Benalla remains a place ‘of gathering, of coming back and remembering—of making sense of a parent’s or grandparent’s journey’ (Smyth, pers. comm., 12 September 2016). Before the release of the CMP, Smyth mused on the difficulties of integrating ‘active interpretive processes’ and how best to ‘record the emotion the Benalla migrant camp site evokes’ (Smyth 2016). This issue is still on the minds of the BMC, as they take stock of their expanding collection, and consider ‘how to also allow for spaces to leave a mark, and reflect and honour’ (Smyth, pers. comm. 1 April 2019).

Securing Hut 11 as a permanent museum has always been the aim of the BMC, but, and perhaps ironically, that would require changes to the physical fabric, changes that go against many of the recommendations contained in the CMP (Kemp 2018: 115), and its condemnations over current use and adjustments made to the interiors by the Art School and Theatre groups. This includes sanding and even replacing the original timber floors (Kemp 2018: 114). Following industry frameworks and Burra Charter principles (‘do as much as necessary, but as little as
possible’), the CMP is clear on alterations and repairs, advocating ‘like for like’, and expressing outrage over works in Huts 63 and 64, which saw interior walls knocked down and the walls painted (Kemp 2018: 141-43).

Making museums safe and accessible also requires compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Occupational Health and Safety Act 1991; in the case of Benalla, this will require certain alternations and repairs to flooring and entrances that go against many of the recommendations in the CMP. The same issues around accessibility and safety are familiar to all small museum and heritage sites. They also occurred at Bonegilla (which contained the same timber frame huts as Benalla), but the ‘authenticity’ of Bonegilla’s material heritage had been progressively replaced since the 1970s. All timber floors within the remaining huts at Bonegilla’s heritage park have been replaced at numerous points throughout the 2000s in order to make the site safe for public access. The BMC faces the task of balancing its desire to present this history and promote and conserve the emotional and familial pull of the site, with the desire to conserve the remaining fabric according to the industry-standard conservation principles contained in the CMP. But all of this is a moot point: the CMP has not been implemented, due to inaction on the part of Benalla Rural City Council. As Smyth argues: ‘we need to keep pushing, pushing just for Council to apply for this funding, and we just do not understand why this is’ (Benalla Migrant Camp Exhibition 2019). There have been no repercussions for those lessors (like Mark Blyss Yoga, Benalla Rose City Potters, and Benalla Theatre Company) who have made alternations without seeking permits from Heritage Victoria.

Benalla storytelling futures

Moving beyond the site and physical conservation, other projects have posed alternatives for the future of Benalla’s memory and familial history. A festive reunion was held at Benalla Aviation Museum, walking distance from the huts, on 10 November 2017. Over 200 people attended, including myself.

Earlier in 2017, BMC successfully received funding from the Public Records Office of Victoria’s Local History Grants to conduct a digital storytelling project. With this funding, 14 audio-visual oral histories have been conducted with former residents. Some of these interview recordings were conducted during the week of the reunion, when former residents from all over Australia returned to Benalla—eager to reconnect and recollect. The BMC are compiling the interviews into a documentary film, parts of which were publicly launched at Benalla Festival in November 2018. The BMC continues to tackle what they consider to be the town’s indifference to the
camp’s migrant heritage values. They hope to incorporate the final film into their existing museum display, in addition to making it accessible online. Smyth hopes it will be ‘picked up by a film maker whilst there are still eyewitnesses alive’ (pers. com. 1 April 2019) and expanded upon.

Purkis argues that ‘heritage’ can be situated within people’s life stories, rather than places or objects—that these stories create a heritage identity of a local place (2017). In this regard, she differs from existing discussions of digital heritage and public engagement, including my own: these academic studies discuss narratives in relation to how they connect to physical heritage sites, how the intangible is intertwined with material resources and spaces (Pocock, Collet and Baulch 2015: 962). They can work to attract visitors to sites and institutions. But Purkis suggests we may be missing something in focusing on this dynamic, that life stories alone give a sense of heritage and identity to a local region: ‘People’s stories can be discussed as holistic autobiographic accounts rather than as narratives that illuminate historical themes, physical artefacts and tangible heritage sites’ (Purkis 2017: 436). As indicated above, the latter is how oral history is commonly used in the heritage industry—slotted in or added to discussions of pre-identified ‘values’. People’s voices become ‘illustration rather than agent’, as Hutchison and Collins (2009: 96) also argue in relation to the conventional use of sound in museum spaces.

While disillusioned in the wake of the Listing, the release of the CMP and continuing council apathy, for the camp kids these storytelling efforts herald new possibilities for Benalla’s heritage interpretation and management. These possibilities extend beyond the limits of heritage legislation and physical conservation issues at the site—crucially, they also reconnect narrators with wider stories of their mothers’ refugee pasts and settlement experiences, and the historiographical possibility of expanding limited public narratives about post-war migration and progress. The future of the site as a place that tells previously sidelined stories of migration, displacement and settlement for single working mothers and their children rests with these ‘intangible’ heritage efforts, the storytelling of this generation.

**Conclusion**

In this case, strong community attachments from a specific cohort did have a role to play in shaping some of the recommendations and inclusions of the CMP. However, the influence of their attachments, and their engagement, was limited by a wider industry discourse that grounds knowledge and power with heritage ‘experts’ employed to conserve physical fabric, regardless of, and sometimes in contradiction to, the social values of a place. These are not revelatory conclusions, and they have been made by countless others working in the field of heritage studies. The CMP has a specific function to fulfil—to develop a strategy for monitoring and maintaining historic places and prioritising physical conservation works, and sometimes these works aligned with the social values of ‘camp kids’. Only intermittently was the document itself able to speak to one of Poulios’ (2010) three principles for a living heritage approach: to empower communities in the conservation and management process. This particular CMP was developed in the context of a highly emotional plea for heritage ‘security’ from a group of camp kids that developed a keen sense of their (and their single working parents’) historical marginalisation, and the repercussions this had on their mothers’ quality of life. As stated, however, the local council retains the power to implement the CMP. They have shown little interest in drawing on the knowledge (Poulios’ principle two) of former residents, or of seeking to make the place ‘relevant’ (principle three) to the needs of the wider Benalla community through tourism and promotion, despite, as Smyth insists, the multiple opportunities to do so.

As an example of their indifference, in July 2019, the Benalla Rural City Council made the decision to ‘gift’ five out of the nine remaining huts to the groups and businesses that currently lease them, groups that have demonstrated a disregard for the place’s heritage values, much to the dismay of the BMC and other camp kids (Beck 2019). Some, like Smyth and Pennay, had hoped to eventually form a ‘precinct’ that would tell the stories of post-war migration from the perspectives of women and children: ‘it’s getting inside the huts, it’s getting inside the stories’ (Pennay cited in Beck 2019), and as Smyth says, ‘our hut [with the BMC exhibition] is the only one with its door open’ (cited in Beck 2019).
The pressing need to capture stories while this cohort of people are still alive was repeatedly mentioned in the BMC’s application for funding. This need to collect stories could be cited in relation to many post-war migrant cohorts in Australia, especially as we lose those from the earliest group that migrated under assisted passage: the displaced persons group, the parents of the Benalla camp kids. In a 2011 Heritage Victoria survey of post-war migrant heritage objects and holdings in Australian museums, libraries and historical societies, the authors ‘found very, very little material representing post-WW2 migration’ (Context and Way Back When 2011: 15). While small, the holdings are also overwhelmingly documents pertaining to nineteenth and early twentieth century migration. The authors suggested ‘proactive research’ (Context and Way Back When 2011: 16) based on interviewing community members may be the most effective means of identifying the ‘material history of postwar migration’ (Context and Way Back When 2011: 16)—the projects relating to the now defunded NSW Migration Heritage Centre are mentioned as a benchmark. Needless to say, the Benalla camp kids are not the only community grappling with how best to capture and preserve their migration and settlement histories (see Light 2015). Furthermore, they must also grapple with a degree of mainstream community apathy and disinterest or misunderstanding about the ‘social value’ they attach to their places of significance, as few as they are. This cohort is also defined by generation and common experience, rather than ethnicity or country of origin. They are therefore less easily categorised by institutions and publicly received according to prevailing (and often ethnocentric) mainstream narratives about multicultural Australia.

In the current context, in which little physical material or built structures remain—that is, most post-war camps have been demolished, and spaces within the urban landscape that housed the activities and settlement experiences of post-war migration groups are shared and layered places of everyday fabrication—Benalla’s listing on the VHR is significant. The camp kids successfully campaigned to secure listing, a degree of council recognition, and a detailed CMP that inevitably privileges the conservation of the physical fabric. The fact that a site exists, that there has been the understandable and necessary focus on the huts, and the group’s anxiety over council disinterest and current-use and alterations, should not blind us to the interpretative potential of storytelling—and what should be the reciprocal nature between fabric and storytelling. This has not been easily aided by industry frameworks and authorised documents. With places that maintain strong community attachments, there is the concurrent need to encourage and centre community knowledge, community expertise and community storytelling—as Poulios’ principles maintain. Some of this work is being done, outside of council and outside of authorised documents, through the tireless work of the BMC—small community groups occasionally able to appeal to State funding sources to spearhead their own public history projects. I have already hinted at the dialogical potential of the photographic collection and digital storytelling. The challenge is then to construct a new discourse, or ‘augment, destabilise and even challenge existing scientific knowledge’ in the heritage industry (Riley and Harvey 2005: 270), a discourse that is able to integrate and centre storytelling and oral history data in documents like a CMP, and in all stages of heritage management. Perhaps this is one way towards creating a practice that accords with the community-minded ambitions of a values-based heritage approach, advocated by so many in the field of heritage studies.

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Endnotes

1. This experience was the subject of Sophia Turkiewicz’s 2014 documentary Once My Mother.

2. Buildings 1 and 2 (Gliding Club of Victoria); Buildings 10 (Benalla Historical Society); Building 11 (Benalla Broken River Painters & Benalla Migrant Camp Exhibition); Ballooning Victoria building, Buildings 63 & 64 (the Benalla Theatre Company); Building 65 (Mark Blyss Yoga) and Building 66 (Benalla Rose City Potters) are of significance.

3. See, for example, the narratives of progress and nation-building associated with the National Heritage Listings of both Bonegilla Migrant Reception Centre and the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electricity Scheme.