Connecting up the dots: heritage, identity, interpretation and cultural planning at Wollongong and the Illawarra Escarpment

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This paper approaches issues of interpretation of the landscape and built environment of Wollongong. Along the way, it refers to three different projects I have undertaken in the Illawarra region between 1996 and 2003. My professional focus is on art, creativity and imagination and my interpretative work has an eclectic, interdisciplinary focus. While I love working with people who have fine technical knowledge in related fields, my own approach is essentially intuitive, drawing on disciplines ranging from history, art history and theory, and urban design. My academic background is in history, and I am currently researching and writing as part of a PhD in art history and theory. I curate exhibitions, installations and public art projects and work as a cultural consultant and broker. I also practice as an artist and designer in an interdisciplinary practice which, in keeping with all of my work, is concerned with place, meaning and identity.

I think all interpretation is about perceived meaning, significance and identity and that in turn is related to questions of whose identity? Whose meaning?

Wollongong and its surrounding landscape has been interpreted culturally in a number of predictable and conventional ways. Early European artists interpreting the landscape, mainly in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, drew on the romantic tradition which saw the Illawarra Escarpment in particular as a place of stirring beauty, the realm of imagination and feeling. Had they been in England or North America, they would probably have interpreted the Lake District or the Catskill Mountains in much the same way.

This romantic paradigm was later to be in tension with the other great philosophy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - utilitarianism. For more than a century ideas about Wollongong's identity, or the interpretation of the meaning of landscape and place, would be largely determined by ideas of progress and development, industrialism and functionalism. This is not to say that the romantic ideas about nature disappeared altogether - they were strongly present in early mountain tourism centred around Bulli and the later beach tourism encapsulated in the 1980s' Lord Mayor's term 'Leisure Coast'.

Interpretation of the meaning of place cannot be divorced from who owns and controls the place and in whose interest the place is being managed and controlled. As Wollongong is pretty much a twentieth-century industrial city without a mercantile or bourgeois tradition or infrastructure, the complex potential languages of identity and interpretation have only fairly recently been deemed of public interest and value. There has been in Wollongong district an exploitative utilitarian paradigm for nearly two centuries - which is not to say that artists and others have not sought other meanings in the landscape and built environment. In recent years a number of initiatives have been undertaken which have attempted to record places, stories, artefacts and values of the Illawarra - both the natural and the built environment. Community aspirations for preservation, interpretation, celebration and cultural development in various forms have gradually become expressed in collections, policies, documents and projects - many of which have been funded by local, state and commonwealth government.

For my part I first considered the question of the interpretation of Wollongong history, culture, artefact, place and story when I was engaged to undertake a regional strategic planning exercise for the 30 or so local museums of the Illawarra in 1996. At that stage, there was next to no interpretation of the continuous Indigenous occupation of the region or of the lives of the thousands of non-Anglo-Celtic immigrants who had settled and created wealth in the region throughout the twentieth century. One of my recommendations of the report for the museums' strategy project included the development of a 'regional distinctiveness plan which includes Indigenous cultural sites and sites relevant to non-Anglo-Celtic settler history of the region'. So from the beginning of my engagement with the region, I felt there was a need to be cognisant of the
fact that only some stories were being told and that, further, there were political, social and cultural barriers to the telling of other narratives of place.

When I began the next consultancy assignment in the Illawarra, which was the ‘Cultural Map of the Illawarra Escarpment’, I decided from the beginning that an attempt to arrive at any definitive idea of significance or an approach to interpretation was neither possible nor desirable. From the beginning the approach was inter-disciplinary and intuitive in that we would be drawing on many different kinds of assessments of what constitutes significance: indigenous, geological, literary, industrial, and others – all somewhat dissonant and yet in terms of the ‘implicate order of things’ as the quantum theorists would say – all intimately related. We decided early on to look only at the eastern side of the escarpment because of both, the empirical and the poetic, in the patterns of human occupation – Indigenous and post-settlement – on the coastal side of the landform.

We saw our cultural map as ‘a perceptual and intuitive impression of the human significance of Merrigong to the generations of people – of many backgrounds – who have lived and worked on, around, and under it, before and since European arrival’. The designated purpose of the mapping exercise was ‘to make recommendations about places of significance and themes for future potential works of public art to be commissioned for the respective recommended sites’. Our approach was to see art as ‘a translator or interpreter of place – not in a literal or didactic way but in creating a sense of appreciation and wonder about the place and its layered meanings’. It was recommended that future commissioned works of art should ‘touch the earth lightly’ (to quote Glenn Murcutt). The findings of the Cultural Mapping project do not claim to be objective but rather ‘a creative mix of the impressions of the many people and stories embodied in the historical record’, and this was added to by stories collected by ourselves.

I and the team I engaged to work with me (Kitty Eggerking, Maureen Davis, Lisa Jackson and Monir Rowshan) adopted an approach which allowed the meanings to evolve out of a range of ways of looking at things. We studied the written records, both published and unpublished, relating to the past and present history and stories of the escarpment. This included all of the phases of post-settlement human occupation and accounts of the geological, botanical and geological nature of the places along the escarpment’s length. In relation to the great number of Aboriginal sites of significance, we were indebted to the pioneering work of Michael Organ and his informants. We also collected contemporary stories from residents including artists who had lived and worked on the Escarpment for many years. We attempted to ensure that the voices responding to the land included those from Aboriginal and non-English-speaking backgrounds, so that the flavour and resonance of place did not end up belonging to one socially or ideologically dominant group – say miners, or dairy farmers.

The most recent project I have been working on in the Illawarra might very loosely be seen as a project of interpretation of the city centre of Wollongong as a whole built entity – with its integral relationship to its topography. As Cultural Broker to the City of Wollongong, from 2001 to 2003, I have worked with strategic planners, architects, urban designers and landscape architects with the aim of placing cultural infrastructure development, cultural interpretation of landscape and built form, and local cultural identity at the heart of urban planning processes. I worked with what were titled the ‘City Centre Revitalisation’ and ‘Wollongong Futures strategies’ – 20 to 30 year urban visioning, consultative and planning processes for the city, my role being to ensure that cultural concerns became integral to these strategies. The first of these – the ‘City Centre Revitalisation’ strategy aimed to put in place a framework for preserving the city’s assets and its relationship to the Escarpment and the sea while creating and preserving the conditions for future growth and development.

The structure plan for the city undertaken by Russell Olsson Urban Projects, Hill Thalis, and Jane Irwin Landscape Architects, ensures that the nineteenth-century town plan is restored to its original transparency, and the dignified bones of the city are allowed to once again speak and determine the use plans for the city’s built structures. The spine of Crown Street is to be restored to its importance as the city’s urban spine – connecting the railway station and the sea and again marking out the graceful gradient and arc of the original plan. The principal civic streets – Burelli, Market and Church – are to be enhanced in a hierarchy of streets which recognises the civic good sense of the original plan. The building envelopes will be limited to eight stories so that nothing obscures the line of view of the Escarpment from the sea. The pavements and street furniture for these major civic streets are to be selected from a palette, which expresses this specificity of place. In other words the whole plan is a kind of interpretive mechanism which allows the landscape and topography, as well as the nineteenth- and twentieth-century use patterns to be transparently read and experienced. This is not an interpretation, which involves signage and memorials, but one which reveals the essence of the urban place.

As noted earlier, excellent cultural policy and research documents, including a five year cultural plan, had been commissioned and adopted, in principle, by Wollongong Council from the mid-1990s. However, there had been little political action around integrating that policy and research work into visions for the city’s future – particularly its economic future – and no significant cultural infrastructure investment since the Illawarra Performing Arts Centre was built in 1988. My Cultural Broker role came out of the recommendations of ‘The Wollongong Cultural Industries Audit’ (Guppy and Associates and National Economics 2000), which found that despite Wollongong’s considerable cultural assets, including its culturally vibrant communities, the city lacked the following:

- A vital cultural precinct
- An appropriate profile for the cultural industries with the business community
- Appropriate connections between culture, tourism and hospitality
- A regional cultural strength which could compete with Sydney
- Appropriate resource commitment from state and federal governments to provide infrastructure commensurate with population and importance as the centre of the region
- Definition as a regional urban centre
- Positive and expansive thinking to aid the creative planning process
- Appropriate networks and partnerships
- Ability to retain talented cultural workers
- Opportunities for training and retaining young people in Wollongong.
Retaining and valuing the urban assets of Wollongong – as part of developing a new and sustainable way of reading this place of 200,000 people as a city – includes the adaptive re-use of a council-owned asset which was slated for demolition and is now the subject of a feasibility study for creative re-use as a cultural incubator. This twenty-century electricity retail building (the former Integral Energy building) – architect-designed as a solid piece of Wollongong’s utilitarian modernity – is to be developed as a Creative Energy Centre as part of the reanimation of MacCabe Park, the city’s principal urban park, a park which had been for some time neglected, underused and a subject of fear of crime, if not crime itself. The feasibility study for this creative incubator facility is nearing completion with Hill PDA, Brecknock Cultural Consultants and Choi Ropiha Architects. The project forms part of the proposed Burelli street cultural precinct.

As part of a new reading of Wollongong’s urban infrastructure, a second urban design project (with a much longer time frame) involves the proposed redesign and refurbishment of Wollongong’s Civic Plaza including re-orienting current cultural facilities into a city-centre ‘cultural cluster’ including: Wollongong City Gallery; Illawarra Performing Arts Centre; Wollongong Library; Wollongong Town Hall performance venue and South Coast Writers Centre. These would be joined by cafes, an arts retail outlet and bookshop in redesigned public space.

Interpretation can be a vexed question and in my experience often is. As we see from the current Australian so-called ‘history wars’, there are many interpretations possible of the same historical information, artefact and place. What may be meaningless in terms of significance to one group will have such meaning for others that they prepared to die for its preservation – witness the struggles over sites in India which are both Hindu and Muslim holy places.

In this brief overview of three quite different interpretative projects, I have attempted to share with you eclectic, interdisciplinary ways of thinking about interpretation I have worked with. They may present varied possibilities for discussion of creative, open-ended, imaginative and community-focused interpretative approaches.

Endnotes

1 In 2003 84.9 percent of Wollongong residents said they believed that ‘a vibrant and diverse cultural life is important to a growing city’. However, only 57.8 percent of residents thought that ‘compared to other cities I’ve been to, Wollongong has vibrant cultural life’. WCC, 2003 Community Survey, IRIS Research Limited, May 2003.

2 In the late 1970s Wollongong City Council, along with Shellharbour and Kiama Councils, employed a Heritage Officer in response to the 1977 NSW Heritage Act. In the late 1980s there was a Wollongong Heritage Study by Anne Ali in 1991 a City of Greater Wollongong Heritage Study by McDonald McPhee and a local team; in 1993 the Development Control Plan listed the results of the Heritage Study into a statutory format and in 1995 there was an Aboriginal Heritage Study.