Cultural landscapes as an analytical tool: analysing squatting landscapes

Introduction

Although the concept of ‘cultural landscapes’ is quite old, even in Australia it is only in the last 10 or so years that the term has begun to be used by a variety of specialists, mostly working in the general field of ‘cultural heritage’. In most of these studies the landscape is assessed as a static object. That is, the landscape is viewed and its objects examined, classified and analysed as they are at the time of analysis. This approach ultimately derives from a number of important works on rural landscape classification and registration by Keller and Keller, Melnick and McClelland et al. designed to describe the morphology of the landscape and assess its cultural significance in order to manage it. As a consequence, these works are very useful for those who work in the business of cultural heritage management.

In researching squatting landscapes, however, the static approach has limitations if the research aims to understand the past cultural landscapes and processes that created them. It is, perhaps, more interesting to attempt to understand a landscape in terms of the dynamic processes of historical change, rather than the static morphological classification of each element.

It is also relevant for those assessing cultural significance and ultimately managing cultural landscapes, to understand the potential of a landscape to contain information that can be used to help understand the past (which can be termed the research potential of a landscape). This aspect is often overlooked in landscape assessment, primarily because there is more analysis of the documentation than the landscape.

This paper discusses the methodological approach adopted in my doctoral study of squatting landscapes. Its presentation is mainly for discussion in the context of work in progress rather than as a claim that this is the way all studies should go.

From squatter to squattocracy

The squatting expansion and settlement of south-eastern Australia is a well known and well documented part of Australian history. The squatting expansion outside the defined ‘limits of location’ in south-east Australia was technically illegal and unplanned by the colonial government. The squatters had no effective title to the land, and indeed some such as the Henty’s and the Port Phillip Association, occupying what was to become Victoria, received official notice from the NSW Government that they were trespassers. As Brian Fletcher has shown, the squatters were originally viewed by the established gentry as little better than scum, and legislation was moved against them. However the ‘better’ squatters were able to separate themselves from the ‘others’ and the Government allowed licences to occupy land to men of ‘good’ character.

The squatters were able to transform themselves into an ‘upper class — the ‘squattocracy’ — and acquire the land they squatted on. It seems they used...
their position as an 'upper class' to argue for favourable treatment (especially virtually free land), due to the good they brought to the community at large. The squatters managed to maintain their position throughout the 19th century despite economic downturns, gold rushes and the selection movement of the 1860s. The mechanism used was the concept of respectability. This concept emerged with the rise of evangelism, but later became a more secular concept. It came to Australia through the life experience that the squatters had as members of society at home, and the use of the numerous advice books and pamphlets that transmitted respectable ideals. Davidoff and Hall have noted the influence of Loudon's writings on houses and gardens, in translating respectable mores into physical spaces.9 Loudon's was one of the many architectural books that were brought to Australia.

My research focuses on how the squatters gained and maintained their status in south-eastern Australian society during the 19th century. It concentrates on their use of the landscape to create, express and defend their position. Theories about the relationship between social position and landscapes suggest that the squatters would have used the landscape to define their class (the squattocracy) and to mediate between themselves and others — notably the colonial government in the 1840s, and later the NSW and Victorian governments who were bent on opening the land to selection (by the lower classes) in the 1860s. The squatter landscapes are effectively the runs taken up and developed by the squatters. These runs include both homesteads and gardens as well as fences, plantings, outbuildings, sheep and so on.

On taking an analytical approach

The approach to landscapes taken by Keller and Keller, McClellan and Melnick is a morphological analysis.10 This is also the approach taken by the geographer Carl Sauer and his students (who are characterised as the Berkeley School) who worked extensively on aspects of cultural landscapes. Sauer is an extremely important and influential writer on landscapes mainly through his paper, The Morphology of Landscapes,11 cited by almost everyone writing on cultural landscapes. Recently Sauer and the Berkeley school have been re-evaluated by the so-called 'new cultural geographers' primarily Cosgrove Duncan, and Jackson.12

This critique focuses on the definition of the term 'culture'. Sauer and the Berkeley School (notably in Wagner and Mikesell's introduction to Reading Cultural Geography) saw culture as being super organic, separate from the people and social forces than might create it and acting in its own mysterious way, rather like a black box.13 This approach has limited explanatory power on its own and also limits the ability to understand how the actions of individuals and social forces might create a cultural landscape.14

The super organic approach led cultural geographers to study physical and material effects of culture — so-called culture traits as an end in themselves.
This produced voluminous studies on items such as log cabins, barns, fences, houses and so on, which typify much of cultural geography as practiced in America. As Jackson notes,

... in contrast much less consideration has been given to the non-material or symbolic qualities of culture or other dimensions of the concept that cannot be read off directly from the landscape."  

This is not to say that the morphological study of the landscape is dead, but that there is a greater depth of understanding of the past that is available by going beyond morphology.

It is this depth that seems necessary in attempting to understand the squatter to squattocracy transformation. Although we know from established history that the transformation occurred, our understanding of it is currently very 'thin', and limited to general overviews and a few specific histories of squatting families. By taking a dynamic approach to the landscape, one that reads the landscape in depth, a thicker understanding of the way squatters created their social status, at both the broad level of south-eastern Australian and at the local level (eg. the Murrumbidgee Valley near Lanyon) can be obtained. The remainder of this paper discusses ways to realise this approach.

The importance of being interdisciplinary

It is difficult to believe that any one academic discipline has all the tools to analyse landscapes, although there are some individuals who have a wide variety of skills and interests so that they can analyse a landscape almost by feel. Donald Menig's article 'The Beholding Eye: Ten versions of the same scene' is a good place to start to understand the varying ways a landscape can be seen, and by implication the skills required to understand a landscape. An interdisciplinary approach to cultural landscapes is needed. Disciplinary boundaries merely indicate the ignorance of those who wish to confine research within them.

Interdisciplinary team research is not often practiced or taught in academic areas, but in practical terms, a team approach is preferable to obtain the breadth of skills needed to understand landscapes. This lack of collaboration is often demonstrated in heritage research where a project such as a heritage study is broken into a series of studies which are really unconnected and the professionals involved seem to have never interacted. Team research must be based on the team members being interested in what is happening outside their discipline in order to actively discuss matters within the team. This process of interaction and mutual understanding across disciplinary boundaries immediately adds depth to landscape research.

Methodology

My approach has been to adopt the Melnick methodology to the demands of the research project. The first stage of investigating a landscape involves establishing the landscape to be studied and its boundaries. Landscapes are
defined by a multitude of boundaries: political, economic, social, natural, and these need to be clearly set out. The relative permeability of the boundary also needs to be evaluated. One response to the selecting movement of the 1860s, for example, was for squatters to enforce their boundaries by changing permeable boundaries that allowed a flow of people through, to impermeable boundaries forcing people to either go round or seek authorisation to enter their land.

The main set of boundaries in research on squatting are the edges of the runs and their relationship with the landscape. These vary considerably over time as land holdings change. Here the historical research undertaken early in the project should establish a chronology of the run size and boundaries and map these on a base map or more usefully on a Geographic Information System (GIS) in the form of a multitude of layers. The boundary size will determine the main area on which to focus the field survey work.

The landscape has to be located both in space and in a variety of historical and contemporary contexts. Historical contexts can be both standard historical contexts based on documentary research such as the history of land legislation in NSW, or historical contexts based on non-documentary research, such as pollen analysis which produces a regional sequence of vegetation change or a geomorphological study.

A little understood, but relevant point, is that the different types of evidence used to derive our understanding of the landscape have varying types of precision and time scales. This presents problems for the integration of differing types of evidence into a chronological history. In attempting to deal with these issues in his monumental study of the Mediterranean, Braudel (a major figure in the Annales school of history) developed the concept of differing scales of history. Braudel outlined three concepts of time and related historical action; the events which are almost instantaneous, 'conjonctures' which relate to the broader concepts such as economic cycles and the longue durée which is concerned with slowly changing items, typically climate or geology. While the application of these concepts in practice has not been particularly rigorous they do offer an approach to integrating data of differing time scales.

My modest approach to this problem has been to try to construct a 'spreadsheet' of history, trying to fix events as well as show trends using chronology as an integrating factor. It has not proved particularly successful except in assisting to provide a context for readings of historical documents. This often helps in interpretation. A flock of sheep is found to be on the Monara, for example. Is this a new station being established? I thought so until I realised that it was a drought year and the sheep may have been on the road looking for grass.

Contemporary contexts are also very important. It is quite important, for example, to understand how the history of the area is constructed, what themes and personalities are emphasised, where are the silences? What is your role and how does your research fit in?
Having established the landscape to be studied and its contexts it is then possible to use the methodology outlined by Melnick and McClelland et al for systematically reading and understanding a rural landscape. Their approach, although orientated towards the requirements of the US National Parks Service, is a useful methodology for gathering and organising information about a landscape. It is based on the concept of landscape characteristics which are ‘tangible evidence of the activities and habits of the people who occupied, developed, used, and shaped the land to serve human needs’. They identify 11 landscape characteristics, but I have modified these by removing the category of archaeological sites and small-scale elements. The former were removed because they really belonged under the category of buildings structures and objects that they were prior to entering the archaeological records. The latter category was dropped because it was ambiguous at best, as it was not clear how the boundary between small-scale elements and anything else was to be drawn.

Gardens have been added as they seemed separate from the broader category of vegetation relating to land use; they used not only vegetation but items such as paving, borders and statuary to create an effect which made an intentional statement about their owners.

The characteristics to be ‘read’ during the field work are therefore:

- Land uses and activities
- Patterns of spatial organisation
- Responses to the natural environment
- Cultural traditions
- Circulation networks
- Boundary demarcations
- Vegetation related to land use
- Buildings structures and objects (including portable relics)
- Clusters
- Gardens

There is no substitute for field walking as a way of recording information about a landscape and to get a ‘feel’ for how the landscape is organised. My own preference is for a walk over the landscape at the earliest possible stage so that during documentary research some of the inevitable ambiguities of the documentary record can be identified and resolved. A more systematic survey can then be undertaken with the aim of identifying and recording the characteristics.

Much of the field data concerning the location and extent of characteristics can be recorded on a Global Positioning System (GPS). The survey and the historical data can be added to a GIS such as Mapinfo or Grasslands as a precursor to analysis. The advent of accessible GISs means that much of the analysis of the landscape characteristics can be undertaken quickly and with a high degree of precision.

The next stage is to combine the contextual history of the landscape with the

endnotes

1 I would like to thank Eric Claus, Roland Fletcher and Tony Mitchell for reading earlier drafts of this paper, and Jane Lennon for organising the conference at which it was presented.
2 The origins of the term cultural landscapes are to be found in the German geographers use of the term ‘Landschaft’. See R. Hartshorne, The Nature of Geography: A critical survey of current thought in the light of the past, Washington, 1961, and related literature for an extensive discussion. The first use of the term seems to have been by O. Spate, ‘Bush and City: Some reflections on the Australian Cultural Landscape’, Australian Journal of Science, 18, 1956, pp. 177-184.
10 Melnick is particularly important for his obvious influence on Australian practitioners, the work of Ken Taylor and the Heritage Commission’s discussion on landscapes.


D. Menig, 'The Beholding Eye: Ten versions of the same scene', in Menig’s edited volume The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays, New York, 1979. This text is commonly cited by those writing on cultural landscapes and is an obviously important collection. It should be noted, however, that many of the articles were written in the context of trying to move from a humanless, morphological approach to landscape.

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Jackson, op cit., p19.

This raises the obvious problem for research on landscapes within the framework of a higher degree where lone scholarship is required.


Ibid, p. 3

Duncan op cit.


field observations of the characteristics and attempt a deeper meaning.

Landscape theory argues that social conditions and issues are expressed in the landscape through various means and typically uses the methods of textual analysis of landscapes to obtain a deeper reading of the landscape. Duncan, for example, points to various ways in which a landscape can be seen to act as a signifying system, identifying ways in which the landscape acts rhetorically.

The deeper reading requires another field experience. The methodology for undertaking this field work is based on the concept of ‘serial vision’ used by urban designers to evaluate the effects of building and urban morphology on society. The serial vision methodology involves moving through the environment along various circulation networks and looking at what is revealed or closed off by the combination of natural and cultural features. The difficulty of dealing with landscapes that have changed can be worked round by using GIS and various animation programs to create a past landscape (based on historical research) then taking an animated walk through it. Careful utilisation of serial vision allows the re-reading of the landscape to achieve a deeper level of meaning.

Conclusion

Trying to look at cultural landscapes as something dynamic and not static represents an attempt to move the issue of cultural landscapes beyond the morphological analysis generally undertaken by most practitioners into an area where a deeper understanding of the dynamic processes of landscape creation and maintenance can be reached. This helps us see landscapes not only as a static feature able to be classified, but also as containing information about the past that is not immediately apparent.