Does the practice of heritage as we know it have a future?

Sharon Sullivan
Abstract
This paper is based on a panel discussion at the Australia ICOMOS Conference 2013 for the Centenary of Canberra, Imagined Pasts, imagined Futures. The session was chaired by Sharon Sullivan, with contributions from panel members Jackie Huggins, Helen Lardner, Sharon Veale, Denis Byrne and Andrea Witcomb. The panel was asked to address the questions of where heritage practice is going, is it going in the right direction, and what are the current challenges? Panel members were also asked to outline their vision for heritage and the areas of heritage practice they would like to see develop (or disappear); and also, to identify the most important thing in their vision for the future of heritage practice. The session offered the opportunity to reflect on the next generation of heritage practice, what issues and opportunities face young practitioners, and how and where will innovation and creativity emerge in the future? This summary forms a fitting conclusion to the discussion in the volume on the future of heritage practice.

Introduction
There is much debate about the influence, or even hegemony, of Western views in global thinking and directions. Yet many of our current challenges arise from heritage practice in Asia and the Pacific, and respecting and understanding local and regional values and cultural practices. Australia’s contribution to heritage practice, values-based management as embedded in the Burra Charter, is gaining international support, but the question remains, whose values count in decision-making about heritage conservation? What directions should we be taking with our practice? And what do we need to guide practice into the future?

While the methodology Australia ICOMOS has pioneered and developed has stood Australian heritage practice in good stead internationally, and made Australia a leader in some fields, this is because of a past alliance between our national and state governments and NGOs such as Australia ICOMOS and the National Trust which used to agree on the importance of our heritage and on improving heritage conservation. As commonwealth and state leadership in this field declines before our eyes, and as the heritage conservation movement manifestly loses ground (See State of the Environment 2011 Committee, 2011) we must question the nexus between our national practice and the growth of sophisticated global heritage leadership in the region, and where we fit in the future.

A range of heritage practitioners responded to the challenge of commenting on the future of heritage, based on their own experience and inspired by the stimulation of the conference themes, papers, and discussion.
Jackie Huggins, an Indigenous representative on the Australian Heritage Council, spoke first. She gave us the insight of a wise, well-practised activist and facilitator, a representative of Indigenous culture but also someone with a wide experience of how traditional culture interacts with globalisation and how it might in the future. She pointed out that no culture is any longer isolated from the rest of the world, but that while this is the case, the concerns and implications of the globalised world are not necessarily front and centre for some First Nations. Indigenous people have a sense of place and of belonging in that place, and a profound recognition of the uniqueness of that place and of responsibility for it. This sometimes means that the forces of globalisation and some of the ideas it generates can threaten and appear to subvert some traditional Indigenous ways of understanding and being in the world and of caring for and protecting Indigenous heritage. Jackie outlined what she hoped for Indigenous heritage in Australia in the next 25 years. What follows is a summary of what Jackie said prepared by Sharon Sullivan.

Jackie Huggins

Jackie indicated that she was frustrated by the fact that the wider population has not fully embraced the enriching heritage concepts that First Nations can contribute and expressed the hope that this recognition will grow and enrich the whole community. She hoped that the importance and all-encompassing nature of the concept of songlines will be recognised and celebrated in Australia. Songlines describe, celebrate, and place on the contemporary landscape, the journeys of the ancestors as they created that landscape, and who remain active in the landscape and travel the songline routes through the commemoration and re-enactment of their journeys and stories by their descendants. Songlines seamlessly link the intangible and the tangible, and the past and the present in a way which European concepts of heritage still struggle to attain. They represent a concept which perfectly incorporates an Aboriginal sense of place and gives Australians and the world an integrated and timeless way of celebrating country. She felt that we should ensure that Indigenous languages and their rich heritage flourish, and are appreciated, and that we will continue to reinstate Aboriginal place names, and use them to enrich the meaning of the Australian landscape.

Jackie explained that her own passion has always been to work for the deeper appreciation of shared values, culture and history in our Australian community. The Australia Heritage Council is an example of weaving natural, Aboriginal and settler heritage values together, in its nomination processes and management recommendations, and she felt that one of the challenges of the next 25 years will be to ensure that this integration operates at all levels of government. In the same way strengthening the links between traditional knowledge and scientific and cultural research, and increasing collaboration between Indigenous people and professional heritage practitioners, will bring an added dimension to the conservation of cultural heritage, and should be another priority for the future.

Helen Lardner, also a member of the Australian Heritage Council, and well-known Melbourne conservation architect, takes up Jackie’s eloquent description of songlines and their ability to bring tangible and intangible together and stressed the challenge of recognising and conserving them. She discusses the still too prevalent emphasis on fabric in our practice, the need to integrate tangible and intangible values, and for us to recognise the heritage value of nothingness – the places and attributes between the loci of physical evidence which we have so far privileged in our practice.

Helen Lardner

Like popular story telling in blockbuster movies, heritage practice needs to produce the stellar sequel. It is time to challenge our collective ways to forge an inspiring future. However, far from being a clearer vision, heritage practice needs to uncover an entangled and more complex past. Einstein’s Theory of Relativity of Space and Time is accepted and Stephen Hawking entertains the notion of future time travel. If we journey back to our favourite heritage place in its prime, what will be discovered? Will multiple visits reveal disparate information? There is always more than one interpretation of the past for any place. One point in time is not part of a straight
narrative but a place where infinite threads can pass through. We need to embrace complexity to advance.

Current heritage practice is focussed too strongly on physical remnants. The Burra Charter 2013 is about the values-based management of extant cultural heritage places. We need to make sure that we address more than what remains. The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage is perhaps wrongly perceived as a counterpart to the World Heritage Convention. The future may integrate rather than separate the two. One aspect of international debate is the current popular trend for reconstruction works. However, it is not the lost fabric that we need to recover, it is the layers of ideas contributing to cultural significance.

Loss or lack of fabric may have intrinsic value. Flugelman’s Earthwork 1975, is an imaginative project of buried aluminium tetrahedra decaying to create a void beneath the ground of Canberra’s Commonwealth Park as Brown describes in this issue. If a future archaeologist happened upon the site, would documentation and even conservation of the decaying tetrahedra be likely at the expense of missing the value in the unseen void?

Our own experience is that absence matters and is a trigger for memory. We notice what is missing. As Brown pointed out, it is usual for heritage practice to describe the association of people’s feelings with a place by fixating on the material thing rather than the feelings it arouses. It is easier to conserve the object than understand the emotions. Attachment is not a static state even for each individual. The material object may be deteriorating slowly but the experience of it is infinitely more entangled and dynamic than the fabric. ‘Nothingness is not a state of absence of objects but rather affirms the existence of the unseen behind the empty space’ (Davis & Ikeno 2002: 255 quoted in Owen, this issue). It is only our conceptual limitations that stop us seeing that paradoxically, a ‘black hole’ contains both mass and light. How then do these more esoteric notions apply to the future of heritage practice?

Using outcomes from Aboriginal archaeological excavations in Western Sydney as an example, Owen demonstrates the value of locations with ‘nothing’ to heritage practice. His consideration of patterns of occupation and values of areas with and without archaeology is given context by Aboriginal traditional knowledge. The places without archaeology may be significant and related to ceremony or Dreaming. The physical fabric that remains is essentially incomplete and in a state of decay. However, it can provide the medium for greater understanding or interpretation of the whole, including the contribution of emptiness. This is the challenging future for heritage practice – to embrace the spaces between, the complexities and the entanglement around the fabric.

Australia’s National Heritage List records natural, historic and Indigenous places that are of outstanding heritage value to the Australian nation. Our heritage contributes to Australia’s national identity, an identity that should be diverse and inclusive. Currently, recognition of Australia’s national heritage is place-based, mapped and listed in accordance with provisions of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (the EPBC Act). It presents a challenge for the recognition of ancient Indigenous songlines, woven across the land but still held in oral traditions and intangible heritage. It is difficult to see how our current heritage practice can expand from its simplistic approach to encompass national recognition of Indigenous songlines. However, the bigger question is, how can it not?1

Sharon Veale, a Partner in GML Heritage Pty Ltd, a large Sydney heritage consulting firm, returns us to the current reality with her discussion of the future of the past in New South Wales. For her the idealism of former governments and practitioners about conservation of the past has vanished. The tide of an integrated, all-encompassing and sophisticated concept of the National Estate has receded and left the flotsam and jetsam of miscellaneous, lifeless statutory provisions, frequently revised with the express aim of achieving faster service delivery and obstacle-free development processes. She calls for the heritage industry to examine its role in this debacle, and to consciously develop a reflexive practice which restores integrity and a sophisticated understanding of values:
Sharon Veale

In NSW, the future of the past is presently turbulent and uncertain. Major reforms are proposed to the State’s land use planning and Aboriginal heritage legislation. Given this, in theory you would expect that the enduring tensions between, development, economic growth and progress and the ‘things we want to keep’ would be centre stage. But are they? The radicalism and rights-based democracy that characterised the ‘time of hope’ during the late 1960s and early 1970s has all but vanished. The membership-based preservation stalwart and advocate, the National Trust, appears moribund both as a model of social and political action and financially. The Office of Environment and Heritage, the NSW government agency with responsibility for administering the State’s heritage through the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Heritage Division, has been subject to deep and prolonged realignment. The realignment process has seen considerable expertise, knowledge, experience and capacity in the administration of Aboriginal and historic heritage under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* and the *Heritage Act 1977* significantly reduced. For what? Streamlined processes, faster approvals, and improved service delivery. Alongside this, the ever-diminishing level of government resources has ushered in mantras for historic buildings such as ‘highest and best use’, and a focus on increased visitation, experiences and customer focus. These are not bad aims in themselves, but when coupled with the persistent refrain that heritage is costing government, developers and private owners too much to conserve and maintain, one cannot help but feel the future of heritage is tenuous.

Forty years on, the geographical breadth, combined with the community and place-based intimacy and sophistication that defined the National Estate in the 1970s, has literally disappeared. In its place we have a somewhat meaningless litany of statutory applications, permits and consents that in some instances do little to achieve the conservation of significant values.

As heritage practitioners, we are ensnared in the system of heritage, rather than in understanding and unravelling the social processes of its making. Heritage practice by its nature and technical processes seeks to identify, assess, manage and conserve places and their attendant values. In NSW, millions of ‘things’ – movable objects and relics, have been excavated over now more than four decades under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act* and the *Heritage Act*. Yet despite the overwhelming quantity, it appears we are no closer to a more inclusive or richer understanding or account of our collective pasts. As we all well know these ‘things’ have no inherent value in themselves, only those we ascribe to them. In most instances, we have become practiced at the argument for heritage but it is largely self-referential. We have become a mature industry, past the emergent and growth phases, but it is only in recent times that one is able to point to a body of largely academic research and writing that studies heritage critically.

The challenge for heritage practice in the future is to transform what we do. As practitioners we need to actively engage in the life of the community so that we are bringing into being the places and values that genuinely reflect their values not ours and our well-crafted systems and processes. I envisage heritage as an ongoing dialogical practice of collaborative history and meaning making – a creative cultural mapping enterprise that is layered, inclusive, storied, oral, visual, spatial and textural. This heritage enterprise would represent a perpetual co-production with communities to reflect their deeper attachments to place and the past.

We need to shift from official, politicised imaginings of our nation’s past driven by reductive processes within a complex framework of statutes that appear to simultaneously facilitate heritage for heritage’s sake and destruction. We need a critically reflexive practice, one that is less focused on the singularity of practice that we laud under the *Burra Charter*, to a practice centred on deeper cultural engagement that reflects meanings and values as dialogical and mutable.

In the decades since key heritage legislation was initially enacted in NSW perhaps the community has become somewhat complacent with regard to heritage. Generally, items of local and State significance are afforded protection so communities only had to ‘take to the streets’ on occasion. Perhaps if the protective mechanisms that were hard won in the 1970s are wound back, as it appears they might be in NSW, we might start to see communities fighting for the things they want to keep again. I can only hope.
Dr Denis Byrne, long time researcher for NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, and now a Senior Fellow at the University of Western Sydney, gives us a view of the potential heritage future of Southeast Asia and China, including the growth of the middle class, which both threatens heritage and provides its potentially most influential and sophisticated audience increasingly visiting heritage places, and utilising modern technology to enhance their visit. Another outcome of this growing market is the growth of heritage theme parks, and a roaring trade in faux antiques, indicating both pluses and minuses for heritage conservation in the next 25 years.

Denis Byrne

In this brief exercise in ‘futuring’, I confine my scope to Southeast Asia and China, mindful of the serious limitations to my knowledge but at the same time aware that future-prediction is an art that is as inexact as it is indulgent. To begin on reasonably firm ground, however, we know that the middle class in Asia is expanding rapidly and we can readily witness the implications this has for heritage in the region. These include the spread of city-fringe middle class residential development out into the countryside, often wiping pre-existing built and in-ground heritage off the map. But the explosion of the middle class is also creating an unprecedented audience for heritage, or, to put it differently, is creating a population of heritage consumers to whom various heritage ‘producers’ are hurrying to cater.

There was a time when Westerners dominated the heritage tourism market in Asia but since the late twentieth century the balance has shifted in favour of the region’s own middle class. While the latter do not merely replicate Western visitor tastes and behaviours (e.g., Winter 2007) there are at least some trends in heritage consumption that appear common to both Asia and the West. One of these is the blossoming of various forms of replica heritage. In the Western context this has been related to the ‘experience economy’ of late capitalism in which people consume the experience of the old rather than necessarily the old itself (Holtorf 2009; Harrison 2013: 84-88). The trend in reproduction of heritage sites and experiences in the form of theme parks, themed traditional (and replica) villages, and faux-old urban shopping and entertainment precincts, is best documented in China (e.g., Campanella 2008; Oakes 2012). While this may be expressive of a ‘mimetic culture’ in China in which there is an on-going replication of key cultural symbols (Oakes 2006: 177), such as the native-place villages, temples, and lineage halls, it may also reflect a more mundane reality that genuinely old objects and places are not readily assessable in the landscape of most people’s everyday lives and also the reality that the genuinely old is often not as dramatic and ‘consumable’ as a reproduction can be made to be.

At the same time, of course, visitation rates at authentic heritage sites across Asia, including at World Heritage properties, can be predicted to soar from their already high levels. So, while our instinctive response to ‘fake’ heritage may scorn or ridicule, the time may quickly come when we appreciate its capacity to draw visitors away from heritage places in risk of degradation from over-visitation.

A similar point might be made in relation to fake portable antiquities. Past and current measures to control the illegal acquisition of Asian antiquities (otherwise known as ‘looting’) and the illicit trade in them have had notably little effect. Whatever gains may have been made in curtailting exports have been more than annulled by the increase in internal demand on the part of a burgeoning middle class eager to acquire the cultural capital to match its new financial capital (Byrne 2014). In a parallel trend, however, there has been a remarkable escalation in both the quantity and quality of fake antiquities in circulation. The level of knowledge now required to distinguish between genuine and ultra-high-quality fake Chinese bronzes and ceramics has reached the point where many would-be collectors are deterred. On the other hand, ceramics looted from archaeological sites in Southeast Asia and China must compete with medium-quality fakes for the attention of less discerning collectors.

The digital age offers a rich field for future-gazing. Some of those in the heritage field see trouble ahead in the form of a young generation more amenable to experiencing heritage the screens of their tablets and smart phones than on the ground at heritage sites. Similar worries exist about the willingness of the young to leave their bedrooms and digital devices to visit...
national parks. And yet digital technology has at least as much potential to take visitors to heritage sites as to keep them away, as illustrated by English Heritage’s ‘days out’ phone app. It also enhances the agency of visitors at heritage sites, allowing them to conduct their own on-site/on-line research. It seems safe to predict that the replicability of heritage objects and their digital consumption will form one dimension of heritage’s future but equally safe to say that we cannot know where this will take us.

Professor Andrea Witcomb, Director, Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific, Deakin University, pulls together many of the themes of this last session in her contribution including transnational spaces, the tangible/intangible, and the nature/culture divide, and the need for more openness towards non-Western understandings and uses of heritage. She espouses better methods of understanding the processes of attachment, to be achieved by a more sophisticated listening practice.

Andrea Witcomb

Building new heritage futures is no easy task. One of the strongest messages I heard during this conference was the need to break down received ideas and categories in order to reinvent heritage practice in the future. These calls seemed the strongest around three themes – the need to be more open to transnational spaces in the formation of heritage and not be limited by national geographies and heritage frameworks (Monica Luengo’s keynote, Kecia Fong’s analysis of Yangon’s heritage and Denis Byrne’s interpretation of the significance of parks for migrant groups within Australia being three such key moments); the need to overcome the distinction between tangible and intangible forms of heritage, made most explicit in the Songlines Project presentation and the need to break down the distinction between culture and nature, opening up a space for what might be called the trans-human – again a strong theme in both the Songlines Project and in Monica Luengo’s presentation as well as in Buckley and Wallace’s contribution in this issue.

All of these calls are motivated by a desire to be open to non-Western understandings of heritage, whether these be Asian, Indigenous or just simply those of diverse cultural groups that do not necessarily understand things in the same way that we do as western trained, heritage professionals. Such a desire springs from our increasing recognition of the complexity of lived experience. We are only just beginning to recognise that rather than being stable, social identities are far more open to fluidity, to movement and to connections between a wide variety of phenomena. At the same time, the significance of cultural and social memory to the practice of heritage as part of everyday life is also on the rise, pointing to the ways in which heritage is the result of complex processes over a long period of time. Essential to this recognition of complexity are three key relations – that between people and place, that between people and objects and that between people and landscapes.

The relevant questions then, are, how can we best understand and document these relationships? And how can we use these understandings to develop conservation, management and interpretation practices that support these relationships?

Part of the answer here, I would suggest, is that we need to do a much better job of understanding processes of attachment and their base in emotion and feelings. We also need to find new ways to work collaboratively with communities so that their understandings of these things shine through. Key to this is the need to develop a different kind of listening practice, by which I mean an awareness of other perspectives. This can be developed by looking outside of our own established frameworks, and look to what other disciplines and other cultural institutions are doing. How are museums for example, developing new kinds of collaborative practices? How are they incorporating issues around memory and emotions into their exhibitions and to what effect? What is the latest thinking in disciplines such as geography, archaeology, history, anthropology around the need to break down binary oppositions to allow a space for the intangible and the affective (emotional, sensorial) realm? How might we use their ideas in our practices? It can also be developed by looking more closely into non-Western forms of heritage practice, as called for by Tim Winter. It is only by doing these things, I would suggest that we
can build a better heritage practice for the 21st century, one that is much more alert to issues of cultural diversity and the need to develop cross-cultural forms of understanding.

References


Endnotes

1 This paper was inspired by discussions of the Australian Heritage Council of which I am a member and presentations given at the Australia ICOMOS Conference 2013 for the Centenary of Canberra, Imagined pasts, imagined futures, particularly the following: Steve Brown, ‘Earthworks as metaphor for belonging: implications for heritage practice’; Diana James, ‘Songlines to the City’; Anne Warr, ‘The City of the Future: Containing the Past’; and Tim Owen, ‘An Archaeology of Absence (or the archaeology of nothing)’.

2 Asia’s middle class currently stands at 500 million and will mushroom to 1.75 billion by 2020 – more than a threefold increase in just seven years (Mahbubani 2013)