Introduction: Experiencing Place — the People’s Ground

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Introduction

Just after 5pm on a cool October day, the full-time siren of the 2016 AFL Grand Final sounded at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). The Western Bulldogs had broken a 62-year AFL Premiership drought. The ‘People’s Ground’ was bursting at the seams; 99,981 people, all wearing combinations of red white and blue. The roar was deafening, and fans reported feeling the stands vibrate. Many of them had waited a lifetime for this moment.

Less than a week later, heritage professionals from around Australia, and as far afield as the United States, India, and Indonesia, gathered at the People’s Ground, the 2016 conference of Australia ICOMOS and the National Trusts of Australia. By then, the MCG was already being transformed. Over the course of three days, more than 60 speakers examined heritage practice, while we watched below as groundskeepers painstakingly laid the pitches and curated the ground for the upcoming cricket season.

Ever changing, the MCG is included on the National Heritage List as a place loved by the nation not particularly for its fabric, but for its function (Figure 1). Little of the existing fabric at the

Figure 1: Curating the People’s Ground. (Photo courtesy of Digital Heritage Australia).
ground predates 1992, yet its role as a sporting stadium dates to the mid-nineteenth century along with its connections to international cricket and Australian Rules football. This venue set the scene for discussions about place and conservation, and how the practices of architects, urban planners and heritage professionals are evolving along with our understanding of the significance of place.

The People’s Ground conference provided an opportunity for many speakers to share their experiences of place, with experts and non-experts responding to the themes of the conference including intangible cultural heritage, cultural landscapes, managing heritage places, and community. In reviewing the papers from the conference, an overarching theme of experiencing place suggested itself as a theme for this issue. Some of the papers and the round table sessions invited participation from people presenting multiple and different viewpoints. In selecting papers for this edition of *Historic Environment* papers have been chosen that represent some of the multiple ways of understanding and experiencing place. Several of the many papers presented at the conference that illuminated the experience of place are included in this volume. Other papers or round table discussions also had much to offer in this regard, and several are mentioned below.

**Experiencing place through cultural relationships**

Cultural relationships with places are inevitably wrapped in expressions of both tangible and intangible heritage. The case study of Nairm (Port Phillip Bay) by Boon Wurrung elder Aunty Carolyn Briggs and David Jones brought together the stories of its creation and the geophysical mapping of the bay in a way that enriches our understanding through both recent and deep time, one way of seeing supporting another. In Tangurang culture, relationships with place are not expressed in the notions of tangible and intangible heritage, as we were reminded in Mick Harding’s contribution to the round table discussion. Moving further into this sphere, Denis Gojak brought us a practitioner’s view of protecting cultural relationships and intangible heritage when there are major impacts planned. There are challenges aplenty but the notion of taking time to understand and to reflect and to work together to enable solutions to emerge is one that has much to recommend it.

Susan McIntyre-Tamwoy and Katie O’Rourke’s paper (in this volume) pointed towards Southeast Asia where there is considerable progress in the research, documentation and enactment of legislation to protect intangible heritage under the umbrella of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals agenda of 2015. Their paper also described the conundrum of protecting cultural relationships between people and their intangible cultural heritage in a top down manner, when such heritage is often very much a group participatory activity.

Catherine Forbes, in her paper on the experience of natural disaster (in this volume), discusses the two sides of loss of cultural heritage; that of grief for what is damaged, and conversely, the strength of attachment that drives renewal. She argues that the customary practices that are part of the web of intangible heritage inherent in place and material culture, are vital and sustaining following extreme loss.

**Experiencing places—crossing boundaries**

Two events that engaged in presenting different viewpoints were thought-provoking as they examined different ways of experiencing place. A chance to reflect on how landscapes are made and remade focussed on the well-known Melbourne landscape of the Fitzroy Gardens. Seeing the gardens through different eyes added to the place’s many meanings and interpretations, enabling participants to engage in a wide range of viewpoints. Caring for and planning the gardens’ future, co-existed with big ideas of Aboriginal Country, a shared history and sustainability were interwoven throughout the day’s presentations.

Exploring a regional perspective, a round-table discussion focused on the Victorian Goldfields, which has increasingly defined itself as a region in which to experience immigration history and gold rush heritage through its cultural landscapes. Increasingly, cross disciplinary studies
of people, community, shared history and story are uncovering different aspects of that heritage. This has implications for how we understand and interpret the region. The history of goldmining, often seen as ‘nation-building’, has an alternative face, that of the extensive environmental degradation that is a hallmark of mining activity. In Dja Dja Wurrung Country in central Victoria, mining has left a legacy of “upside down Country” with soil erosion, salinity and toxicity from contaminants. Experiencing place has many different aspects, depending on who you are.

**Experiencing place through new heritage frameworks**

Heritage frameworks developed in the 1980s and 1990s have been successful in the protection of thousands of heritage places, and created a whole industry of heritage experts and non-experts alike. Heritage frameworks are becoming increasingly ill-equipped to deal with the both the rate and extent of change, and new frameworks are needed to deliver different approaches.

It is against this backdrop that the Historic Urban Landscape is being rolled out in Ballarat. The UNESCO Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) is redefining how the city of Ballarat sees itself, and is providing a new framework for responding to change in the city. A paper by Susan Fayad and Kristal Buckley (in this volume) looked further into the future for HUL and the changes for heritage practice that it could entail.

The City of Melbourne’s Reconciliation Action Plan and Aboriginal Heritage Action Plan are also providing new ways of thinking about heritage through integrating Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage studies. Recognition of tangible and intangible heritage is largely still happening on a site by site basis. Challenges exist in the management of Aboriginal heritage across the city, however managing this in less spatially defined ways was the subject of a round-table discussion with a team from the City of Melbourne.

**Experiencing place through re-purposing**

Creating new understandings of place through new uses is a highly effective tool for being part of the heritage experience. The adding of new and meaningful layers to a place may invite curiosity and reward investigation. The paper by Fiona Gray, Cristina Garduño Freeman and Matt Novacevski (in this volume) explores ways of reconnecting with abandoned industrial history in ways that are inclusive, responsive and informal. The authors argue that the act of re-making becomes part of the re-engagement with place. The case study of Fyansford’s Barwon Paper Mill provides some lessons for other forgotten and abandoned places.

*Figure 2: Keynote speaker Franklin Vagnone at The People’s Ground conference, October 2016.*
*(Photo courtesy of Digital Heritage Australia).*
Experiencing place through creative place-making

Public history and the museum is the playground into which the irreverent keynote speaker Franklin Vagnone played elaborate games, turning house museums and cultural sites literally on their head (Figure 2). Genre-busting public art, performance and the inhabiting of spaces as an immersive experience is the stuff of Vagnone’s work in the United States. In creating new experiences in heritage places, Vagnone uses collaboration and different perspectives to re-imagine revered places.

Using place as a starting point for works of art or performance can inspire a new thinking about places we know well. East Perth Cemeteries provided a site for a quartet of classical guitarists to interpret the themes and stories from the memorials within. Memorials are themselves a rich source of historical information as anyone who has spent any time in cemeteries could attest. Cemeteries have also changed from places for the deceased to places that cater for the needs of the living. The idea of creative placemaking within cemeteries is inspired, as even in this sombre setting, the promise of art transforming the space is possible.

The role of community

Threaded throughout the conference proceedings was the importance of community. Writer and heritage advocate Janet Bolitho explored the rich history of the Montague community in Fishermans Bend, which over many decades has been displaced due to encroaching industry and gentrification. Montague has found its contemporary expression on a Facebook group where locals and former locals can share stories and historical information.

The paper by Ursula de Jong, Robert Fuller and David Beynon (in this volume) reflects on the role of seaside communities participating in decisions that affect their places. The authors argue that management of physical change through place sensitive planning should be through partnerships with the community, rather than a series of metaphorical battlefields.

Providing an international perspective, Aishwarya Tipnis’ paper on heritage conservation work (in this volume) examined the communities that inhabit places and their associations and the methodologies for achieving a paradigm shift from expert driven to community led. Through examples of urban architecture, community engagement and digital technologies Tipnis asserts that heritage conservation demands to be re-written and re-interpreted to make heritage and the conservation of it more relevant to the local community.

Conclusion

Just as the MCG continues to change and evolve, yet continues to retain its significance, heritage practice is evolving along with our understanding of place, and the values attached to places by the community. Through this issue of Historic Environment, we have endeavoured to present a cross-section of the ideas discussed at conference, which we hope will provoke further discussion and reflection.

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