Grounding Identity – Exploring Perceptions of Urban Archaeological Sites in Australia and New Zealand

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Abstract
In the last decade the number of colonial period archaeological sites conserved and displayed in situ in Australia and New Zealand has grown significantly. However, there has been little critical review or evaluation of this form of conservation, or of how these sites are perceived or valued by communities. This paper discusses the results of an online survey, distributed to a range of heritage related interest groups, organisations and institutions that explored people’s opinions about these sites and their perceptions of what they learned, felt and experienced when visiting them. Analyses of the results of the survey suggest that the materiality of these archaeological remains, combined with perceptions of their authenticity, provide an embodied experience of place-based memory: an experience that grounds narratives of the past and cultural identity in a specific locality. This experience is perhaps made more distinctive by encountering these remains or displays in contemporary urban environments, often in non-museum contexts, where visitors feel free to experience the remains on their own terms.

Introduction
In the last decade the number of colonial archaeological sites conserved and displayed in situ in Australia and New Zealand has grown significantly. While the in situ conservation of archaeological remains – particularly for sites of high research potential, historic or symbolic significance – has been an aim of archaeological heritage management since the 1970s (Temple 1986, 1988), this outcome was rarely achieved before the late-1990s. As Karskens (2002: 44) has discussed, the focus of archaeological heritage management in the 1970–90s tended to be on the excavation, recording and collection of the archaeological ‘resource’ for future research. Heritage conservation activity in this period was also likely to be contested and involved in contemporary cultural politics, including emerging discourses of cultural nationalism, multiculturalism, decolonisation and Aboriginal rights (Ireland 2002: 22–23). In seeking to explain the recent proliferation of colonial archaeological sites conserved in situ several factors could be significant:

- the raised profile of historical archaeology in Australia and New Zealand following several decades of significant archaeological research (see Lawrence & Davies 2011; Smith 2004)

While all of the above factors are likely to be important and deserve further examination, my experience of working on archaeological conservation projects since the late-1980s suggests that significant changes in public perceptions of the value and meaning of these archaeological sites, and of the experience they provide when conserved in situ, have occurred over this period. It is my interest in understanding more about these changing understandings of colonial archaeological remains that has shaped this research project (Ireland 2012, 2012a).

The focus of this paper is an analysis of the results of an online survey distributed to a range of heritage related interest groups, organisations and institutions, which asked individuals who had visited conserved archaeological sites (see Table 1) questions about how they perceived and valued these places, and what experiences they derived from them. While the conclusions drawn from this particular group of respondents, who already have a developed interest in heritage conservation, are limited in scope and cannot be construed as representative of the ‘general public’, the findings provide new data about visitor perceptions of colonial archaeological sites in the Australasian region.

While there is extensive international literature on techniques and best practice for archaeological conservation in situ, there is far more limited discussion of the meanings of the places created, how they are experienced, what version of heritage is being conserved and the community benefits that accrue from this process. Critical analyses of in situ archaeological conservation have been rare (see Fousiki & Sandes 2009: 38; Mason & Akrani 2000: 15), with the overwhelming majority of the literature focusing on technical and practical matters. This focus on the ‘how’ rather than on the ‘why’ of archaeological conservation tends to reinforce the notion of conservation as a neutral, scientific process which is always used to achieve the ‘highest and best’ outcome for an archaeological site. Such a situation tends to obfuscate the conservation choices that are inevitably made, and the sets of values or interests that are implicitly privileged. This is of particular concern in the context of the archaeology and heritage of the recent colonial past which is so closely entangled with postcolonial cultural politics where heritage, as a means of demonstrating the attachment of people to place and the significance of the past to the present, is a critical location for debates about identity, sovereignty and ownership (Ireland & Lydon 2005: 20). I therefore seek to explore these questions from the perspective of what socio-cultural ‘work’ these places might do within the context of the settler societies of Australia and New Zealand.
As Smith (2006: 65) has convincingly argued, heritage conservation’s function as producing both the material ‘things to have’, as well as its role as a cultural tool, ‘something that is done’, highlights the role of both forms of heritage in creating the material evidence that bolsters the authority of particular shared narratives. The field of memory studies also interprets heritage conservation as ‘memory work’, actively constructing the social and material conditions for shared performances of remembering or commemoration (Hamilakis & Labanyi 2008).

Further, Mason has suggested that the extent to which the practices of heritage conservation implicitly shape memory through their material interventions, and the extent to which heritage conservation practices actually set out to shape memory, are questions that are currently insufficiently explored in heritage conservation literature (Mason 2004: 64).

**Colonial Archaeological Sites**

The first stage of my research on this project was to identify and compile an inventory of conserved colonial archaeological sites and artefact displays found in urban settings. The study group of 19 sites (three from New Zealand and 16 from south eastern Australia, see Table 1) included in the online survey is therefore not a comprehensive list of conserved archaeological remains in the region – there are further examples conserved within historic precincts, national parks and rural areas that would expand this number significantly. While a rigid definition of site ‘types’ is difficult, the focus on remains conserved and displayed in an urban context relates to my interest in how the conservation process and the urban or architectural design process have interacted, how visions for juxtaposition of the old and new have been developed and how visitors react to archaeological remains encountered not within an historic site or national park but when juxtaposed with the ‘modernity’ of urban environments. I have previously suggested (see Ireland 2012a) that the places created through this conservation and design process tend to fall into a number of categories: archaeological landscapes – where conserved remains are presented as layers in the urban environment; archaeology used as an aesthetic focus – where the archaeological remains inspire a design approach to a place; and symbolic or ‘sacred’ sites – where the fabric of the site is linked to powerful cultural memories, narratives or events, essential for commemoration and national identity building. While these categories may overlap, they each focus on an aspect of the ‘agency’ of the material remains – a sense of place that incorporates the past, an aesthetic experience that is inspired by the past, and an experience of spatial and temporal aura that provides a sense of connectedness between individuals, collective memory, and places and objects from the past.

Of the 19 sites in the survey group, only four of these in situ displays were constructed between 1984 and 1999 and 15 were constructed between 1999 and 2010. This indicates that over the last decade the conservation of urban archaeological remains has been more strongly enforced through legislation and policy, has become more technically achievable, and has come to be seen as a more acceptable and feasible option to communities. I also suggest that the growing use of conserved archaeological remains in urban locations has emerged as a distinctive form of urban design or place making, linking locality and memory through what has been termed the ‘urban palimpsest’ (Huysse 2003). Huysse (2003: 4) has argued that historical memory is increasingly being given material form in urban locations – reflecting a global culture of memory that has transformed ways of ‘thinking and living temporality’ that may represent a true epistemic shift in the way time and geography are experienced in the context of cultural globalisation. While concepts of the urban environment as chronicle and palimpsest are familiar in European cultural history, colonial locations in the “new world” were generally perceived by European colonists as without memory or history (Ireland 2003). The phenomenon of urban archaeological remains conserved in situ in the Australasian region has therefore been clearly influenced, in both heritage management and design terms, by the growing number of global examples (e.g., Kelly 2008; Matero 2000: 74; Nixon 2004). In the Australasian region, I suggest that this recent urban design approach mimics the historic depth of old world cities, referencing an antiquarian appreciation of ruins that attempts to make the urban environment more like Europe by creating evidence of similar historical layering (Woodward 2002).

Archaeological sites dating to the colonial period in Australia and New Zealand are often termed ‘historical archaeological’ sites. These are archaeological remains dating to the period since the colonisation or invasion of Australia in 1788 and following the commencement of missionary activity in the early-nineteenth century and the later colonisation of New Zealand following the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. The term ‘historical archaeology’ is generally used to refer to the archaeological study of the modern world, which is particularly concerned with colonialism, large scale urbanisation, the spread of global capitalism and the interactions between Europeans and indigenous peoples (Orser & Fagan 1995: 11). While nineteenth and early-twentieth century interest in the archaeology and anthropology of indigenous peoples in Australia and New Zealand was authorised through discourses of colonial science and collecting, the material history of colonisation by Europeans was valued through a different process that linked local cultural nationalism with broader transnational discourses of heritage, in a process that burgeoned from the 1960s (Ireland & Lydon 2005). The practice of historical archaeology is also linked to this cultural movement which attributed new forms of heritage value to colonial histories and places as part of foundational national narratives significant for a shared national identity. This process both legitimised and encouraged the expansion of archaeological research dealing with the material remains of colonisation under the auspices of the cultural heritage management system (Ireland 2002). While historical archaeology has often been characterised as a decolonising practice (e.g., Bickford 1981) many of the products of its practice (historic sites, conserved objects or remains) have ironically been implicated in attributing material veracity and authenticity to (neo)colonialist and nationalist narratives (Ireland 2003, 2005). Adding to this tension is the relative material invisibility of the indigenous cultural past, when compared with the monumentality of the ‘ruins of colonialism’ (Byrne 2003; Colley & Bickford 1996; Healy 1997). In Australia the term “historic heritage” is used commonly and in legislation to mean non-indigenous heritage, thus continuing to reinforce the notion that indigenous people have no history and contributing to their historical and archaeological erasure from the colonial period. Further, the term ‘colonial’ tends to be euphemistically avoided in much heritage discourse where the more neutral terms ‘natural’, ‘historic’ and ‘indigenous’ are preferred as components of a consensual national heritage.
Numerous examples now exist of decolonising practices and methodologies for correcting the ‘absence’ of indigenous people in the archaeology of the colonial period (e.g., Bedford 1996; Harrison 2004; Lydon 2005, 2009; Paterson 2010; Phillips 2000) and also in the interpretation of some colonial sites. The Museum of Sydney on the site of the archaeological remains of first Government House (a site in the study group shown in Table 1) is a key example of the latter practice (Carter 1999). However, the extent to which such practices and concepts have impacted upon the structures of cultural heritage management and broader public understandings of history and cultural landscapes continues to be debated (e.g., Irish & Goward 2012). In New Zealand this notion of material invisibility has not been such a significant factor because of a tradition of archaeological interest in Maori settlements and fortifications, however this archaeological interest also traditionally focused on the reconstruction of ‘pre-contact’ Maori life (Bedford 1996; Lydon 2006). While postcolonial critiques are revising histories and archaeologies of Maori experiences of colonialism, policies of biculturalism developed since the 1980s have engendered archaeological, museum and heritage practices that are distinctive from their counterparts in Australia. Archaeology in postcolonial places is therefore particularly distinctive: it can be seen in this context as a memory archive – a material repository from which a history that was not previously remembered or valued, can be recovered, re-valued and made manifest in contemporary life for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (e.g., Lydon 2009; 251). Thus archaeology is significant for the material dimension it provides for these forgotten or even suppressed pasts, a dimension which can be personally experienced and felt by locals, visitors and tourists and incorporated into their own particular narratives of the past and identity.

Urban Conservation and Changing Values

The group of sites shown at Table 1 are examples of archaeological remains that have been conserved and displayed in situ through a process of integrating the archaeological remains, or in some cases displays of the artefacts yielded by excavation, into new construction, either inside new buildings or outside, where they have been incorporated into plazas, precincts, streetscapes or open areas. As touched on above, I have drawn a distinction between archaeological remains conserved within these urban contexts and examples found within historic sites or places specifically reserved for heritage conservation, such as the well-known example of Port Arthur in Tasmania. I am interested in understanding how people respond to archaeological remains encountered in everyday urban contexts – shopping centres, streetscapes, universities, hotels, car parks, etc. – juxtaposed with contemporary architecture and integrated into new developments that have a variety of everyday uses. The retention of these archaeological remains in situ has also impacted on the proposed new developments to some extent: adding to the costs associated with the development, necessitating changes to the approved design, or impacting upon what might be considered the full development potential of the land. The act of conservation therefore indicates not only considerable public or private investment, but also some degree of consensus on the value of these archaeological remains. This notion of a shared concept of the value of these colonial archaeological sites is important here. As discussed by Colley (2002: 126–29) and du Cros (2002: 8–11) public perceptions of archaeology in Australia in the early 1990s reflected notions that archaeology was something done overseas (in places like Egypt), that archaeologists (like Lara Croft and Indiana Jones) sought treasure, and that there was unlikely to be anything old enough in Australia for archaeologists to find. However, later research published by Colley (2007: 33) showed that university students studying archaeology thought that Australian archaeology provided public benefits because of its significance to understandings of national and personal identity and because of its ability to counter Eurocentric and colonialist ideas about history and progress. While only limited data about public perceptions of archaeology in the Australasian region has been published, this study also suggests that perceptions of the value of the heritage of the colonial period continue to expand to incorporate even the most ordinary evidence of everyday life, as represented by the sites in the study group, reflecting the perception of their value through concepts of personal and collective identity.

Discussion of Survey Results

In March 2011 a 21-question visitor survey, designed using the Survey Monkey online survey tool, was distributed in Australia and New Zealand via various networks, including heritage related associations and interest groups, workplaces and universities. The survey sought opinions about the conservation and display of colonial period archaeological sites and artefacts in cities and towns in Australia and New Zealand. As many of the sites in the study group are not staffed, an online survey distributed to known communities of interests was considered a pragmatic way to gather some initial data on visitor responses. One hundred and ninety eight anonymous responses to the survey were received over a two month period from March 2011. The majority of respondents (34.6 %) were people living in NSW (where many of the conserved sites in the study group are located), however responses were received in smaller numbers from all states and territories in Australia and from both the North and South islands in New Zealand.

A wide spread of age groups was represented in the respondent group. The largest group was in the 46–55 years of age bracket (30.3 %), however age was quite evenly spread in that 49.4 % of respondents were under 40 years of age and 50.6 % of respondents were aged over 40. Due to the manner of distribution of the survey (through interest groups and universities) respondents mostly had a scholarly or professional interest in heritage, with 62.8 % working in a heritage related area and 39.5 % studying in a heritage related area. The respondents were also highly educated (35% had bachelor degrees and 34% held a Masters or PhD). 54.8 % visited heritage places frequently and 47.5% visited museums frequently. The group was also well travelled: 82% had visited archaeological sites when travelling overseas. This survey therefore reflects the opinions of visitors with a highly developed interest in cultural heritage and with considerable experience of visiting cultural heritage sites and/or museums.

Site Visitation

The survey presented respondents with an illustrated list of 19 places where urban archaeological excavations had taken place and where remains and/or artefacts have subsequently been conserved and displayed in situ (Table 1). It then posed a series of questions designed to elicit information on visitor’s
opinions about the remains and displays and about their experience of visiting the sites. It first asked respondents to identify all sites on the list that they had visited. The most highly visited sites were in Sydney, with the most visited being the Museum of Sydney on the site of First Government House (68.1% of responses), followed by the Sydney Harbour Youth Hostel (the Cumberland and Gloucester Street archaeological site in the Rocks, visited by 58.4%).

Respondents were then asked to answer further questions on one particular site from the list, or an alternative site of their choice. All of the sites on the list were discussed by a number of respondents, except the convict-built barrel drain in George Street, Parramatta. This is also the earliest and perhaps most simple in situ display from the study group, which has been open to the public since 1984 (Higginbotham 1983: 38). When offered the opportunity to discuss a place of their own choice, 33 respondents chose this option, of these 15 referred to ruined places which had not been excavated, three discussed museum exhibitions about archaeological sites and seven discussed archaeological sites that respondents had visited during excavation, but had subsequently been either re-buried or built over.

While these questions were designed to provide information about the range of places visited and known to people, they also revealed interesting information about the respondents’ understanding of the category of archaeological remains conserved in situ. More than half of the group choosing their own place to discuss did not distinguish between some of the key categories that are commonly used in heritage management, for example between ruined buildings and excavated archaeological sites, indigenous pre-contact sites and colonial period archaeological sites, in situ remains and ex situ museum displays of artefacts.

Experience, Interpretation and Authenticity

The survey included a number of questions themed around issues of interpretation, authenticity, enjoyment and experience. As many of the sites included in the survey have minimal on site interpretation, the results here were surprising in that respondents were overwhelmingly positive about the interpretation of the sites. As shown in Table 2, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that interpretation was:

- informative and educational;
- explained what the things they were looking at were;
- told them most of what they wanted to know about the place; and
- was creative and interesting.

Respondents also overwhelmingly agreed that all the sites they visited were ‘original and authentic’ and not a reconstruction (see Table 3). When these results were filtered to show answers specific to sites that included some reconstruction, these results did not vary. This suggests that because all these sites included at least a proportion of ‘original’ archaeological remains, this was sufficient for the perception of the sites as original and authentic. Alternatively, the level of reconstruction and intervention involved in the conservation in situ process may not be clear or may not be important to these observers. Most respondents also agreed that the all sites visited were in good physical condition, with only 17% of respondents disagreeing with this statement (see Table 3).

A further question focused on displays of artefacts associated with the sites visited. Once again, respondents overwhelmingly agreed with the following statements:

- that the artefacts conveyed important information about the site;
- that the display was interesting/intriguing;
- that the artefacts were well explained; and
- that it was clear why the artefacts were displayed; and

Table 1 List of all sites in the study group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site location</th>
<th>Response count</th>
<th>Response %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Museum of Sydney on the site of first Government House, Sydney</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>68.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney Harbour Youth Hostel, Cumberland and Gloucester Street Archaeological Site, Sydney</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>58.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawes Point Battery, Hickson Road, The Rocks, Sydney</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cadman’s Cottage, 110 George Street North, Sydney</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatorium of Music, Macquarie Street, Sydney</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation Park, The Rocks, Sydney</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Little Lon' Display, 50 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windmill Street Cottages remains, Windmill Street Millers Point, Sydney</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tank Stream display, Martin Place, Sydney</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parramatta Justice Precinct, former Colonial Hospital site, Parramatta, Sydney</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towns Place, Walsh Bay, Sydney</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glebe Incinerator, Forsyth St, Glebe, Sydney</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convict built barrel drain, 126-128 George Street (at rear), Parramatta, Sydney</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Te Aro Pa, 39 Taranaki Street, Wellington, NZ</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitzroy Ironworks, Highlands Marketplace, 197 Old Hume Highway, Mittagong, NSW</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Tasmania, Menzies Research Institute, Liverpool and Campbell Streets, Hobart, Tasmania</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plimmers Ark, Old Bank Arcade at Lambton Quay and Plimmers Ark Gallery Queens Wharf, Wellington, NZ</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasshouse Arts, Conference and Entertainment Centre, Clarence and Hay Streets, Port Macquarie, NSW</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corduroy Track/Causeway remains, Wall Street Shopping Complex, Dunedin, NZ</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures show responses to the question ‘Which of the following sites have you visited (select all that apply)’. The table includes the response count and response percentage for each site.
However, this is an area where a distinction could be found in responses from different age groups. Respondents under 35 were more likely to be critical or less enthusiastic about the success of the artefact displays (see Table 5). Only 25% of under 35 year olds agreed with the statement that ‘it was clear why the objects were displayed’, compared to 40.6% of the total respondent group, while 50% of the under 35 year olds disagreed with this statement (see Table 5), opposed to 32% of the whole respondent group (see Table 4).

A free text section was provided for expansion on ‘why you did/did not enjoy the displays of artefacts’. Comments were made here by 57 respondents (roughly a quarter of the total number of respondents), 24 of these responses could be characterised as positive and appreciative of the artefact displays they viewed, while 27 were negative and discussed why the artefact displays were not enjoyable, successful or effective (a few comments could not be characterised as either positive or negative).

Examples of the positive comments include (quotations from the survey):
- ‘I think the artefacts provided a more personal attachment to the site’
- ‘made the architectural remains more relatable’
- ‘showed interesting windows into the past in a clear and understandable manner that didn’t require 1300 hours in a library to understand’
- ‘old objects give snap shot views of the past’
- ‘anchors for the imagination’

Examples of negative comments include (quotations from the survey):
- ‘artefacts are beautiful and intriguing but often lacking in context and interpretation’
- ‘they are just objects in a case that reveal nothing about the site’.
- ‘artefacts decontextualised and hard to understand’
- ‘a stunning example of the triumph of vacuous design over potentially interesting content’
- ‘displayed as if spoke for themselves rather than needing interpretation’.

These comments illuminate different perceptions of the artefact displays and how these perceptions contribute to different visitor experiences. The overwhelming majority of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the Lickert item statements about artefact displays (shown in Table 4) and only
a small proportion of these positive respondents chose to expand in the free text section. However, the comments give a clear indication that archaeological artefacts are perceived by some visitors as providing intimate or ‘personal’ links with the past, that are easy to relate to in terms of scale and meaning. Proportionally more of the respondents who were ‘negative’ about the artefact displays expanded on their views in the free text. The negative comments reflect different visitor expectations or experiences of artefact displays, from those who require more didactic interpretation and more information on context and meaning. These descriptions illuminate the contrast between visitors who seek a more experiential, aesthetic or emotional encounter with the distinctive materiality of archaeological remains, with those who seek a more empirical or informative experience.

The survey went on to ask for a yes/no response to the question ‘was visiting this site just like visiting a museum?’. 68% of respondents felt that visiting the in situ archaeological remains was not like visiting a museum. A free text section provided an opportunity for expansion on the yes/no answer and a large proportion (112 of the 145 respondents who answered this question) chose to make further comments. As one of the archaeological sites in the study group (the remains of Sydney’s first Government House) is located within the Museum of Sydney, some who answered ‘yes’ to this question had in fact visited that site. The vast majority of comments however described how the experience of visiting the archaeological remains differed from the experience of visiting a museum. Comments included the following (quotations from the survey):

- ‘open air, no glass cases’
- ‘the site provided a more realistic connection to the past than visiting a museum’
- ‘there were no glass walls between me and the place’
- ‘it’s a more personal experience and gives a better spatial sense of the past’
- ‘the experience was more visceral than a boring museum’
- ‘no post-modern crap, no museum nazis’
- ‘being at the actual site of the past activity gave it a level of immediacy’
- ‘provides direct link to the history of the area where it is located’
- ‘I felt connected to a past world’
- ‘being outdoors, there was a freedom to understand the place as I wished without being compelled to “respect” the objects in a semi-religious way, as is the case in a museum.’
- ‘because the site was very much a part of the living city... it appeared to have greater relevance for everyday life’.

These comments were particularly useful in terms of understanding common themes in the visitor’s experience of the archaeological sites. Key themes include:

- The significance of locality: clearly the experience of these archaeological places is deeply embedded in a sense of place and locality. The remains appear to act as an evocative form of ‘place memory’.

- The importance of proximity, access and openness: visitors to many (although not all) of the archaeological sites in the study group are not separated from the remains by a ‘glass case’. The resulting accessibility, openness and ‘closeness’ (one respondent used the term ‘intimate’) appears to be ‘affective’, in the sense that it provokes an emotional response in the visitor. Visitor descriptions of ‘affect’: terms such as ‘personal experience’, ‘direct link’, ‘visceral’ and ‘connection’ all describe the emotional response to the perception of tangibility, age and authenticity of the archaeological remains and artefacts, combined with the link they provide with the place or locality within which they are encountered and also with people from the past.

- Control/freedom of meaning: these responses also suggest that meaning at these archaeological sites tends to be experienced more through ‘affect’ than through didactic interpretation, such as some people expect to be subjected to in museums. This appears to have made some respondents feel that there was a freedom from ideologically driven interpretation (e.g., the comments about ‘post modern crap’ and religion).

When asked to choose phrases that best described the overall impression derived from their visit 82% chose the phrase ‘provides a connection with the past’ (see Table 6). The next most popular choices were 70% for ‘interesting’ and 67% for ‘provides insight into people and life in the past’. These overall impressions reinforce the findings discussed above, relating to
the importance of the experience the archaeological site provides of feeling ‘connected to’ and ‘in touch with’ the past. Finally, when respondents were asked to sum up what they had learnt from their site visit another strong contrast based on age is presented, as shown in Tables 7 and 8 which compare responses from the whole survey group to responses from respondents under 35. While the whole survey group overwhelmingly agreed or strongly agreed that they learned something new and something that changed their understanding of the past from their visit, visitors under 35 were far more likely to disagree with these statements.

Key Themes in the Survey Findings

The findings from this survey generally express an extremely high degree of support and approval for the sites visited and for the conservation in situ of archaeological remains. Relatively few respondents were critical of the places they discussed, even though one might have expected a greater level of critique from this expert group on aspects such as interpretation, the conservation methods used or the condition of archaeological remains and artefacts. The findings suggest that this group of visitors highly value these archaeological sites conserved in situ. Many respondents were far more likely to disagree with these statements.

The overall experience – respondents under 35 years of age

Table 8

The overall experience – respondents under 35 years of age to understand the technical and interpretative processes of archaeological excavation and conservation in situ in order to value and enjoy these kinds of sites.

Most respondents did not seem to expect or require elaborate interpretation of the conserved remains and they appreciated artefact displays more for the contrasting scale of the objects (compared to building remains) and the feeling of connection with people in the past that they provided, than for the information the artefacts might convey. However these results were not consistent across the age group, as represented in the survey. Respondents under 35 were more critical of the success and effectiveness of artefact displays and less likely to feel that they had learnt new information from their visit. However dissatisfaction with these aspects did not impact on the overall approval of this form of conservation by this age group. It would be interesting to test, through further research, if visitors under 35 generally place more importance on the information content presented alongside conserved archaeological remains than older visitors, who perhaps focus more on the aesthetic and authentic qualities of the places.

Further themes of interest include the emphasis placed on the embodied experience of the past linked to a locality or place that these historic remains provided because of their location within the evolving urban environment, and how visitors tended to feel free to encounter and construct their own meanings for these places, not as dictated by an institution such as a museum. This suggests that the recent success and growth of this category of conservation in Australia and New Zealand is due at least in part to the alternative kind of experience of the past that these sites provide, an experience embedded in a sense of place and memory, in contrast to other types of heritage places or cultural institutions which tend to be removed from a sense of locality, and be perceived as more formal and controlled.

Conclusions: Grounding Identity

The materiality of these archaeological sites and artefacts, combined with perceptions of their authenticity, provides an embodied experience of place-based memory – an experience that grounds narratives of the past and cultural identity in a specific locality. This experience is made distinctive by encountering these remains or displays in contemporary urban environments, outside the authorising discourses of museums or heritage institutions, where some individuals feel free to construct meaning and relationships with the past on their own terms.

Jones (2009: 136) has recently argued that while heritage conservation tends to remain bound to a materialist conception of authenticity (the approach epitomised by the techniques and technologies of material conservation practices), constructive approaches to authenticity, which seek to reveal how authenticity is constructed and for whom, fail to ‘adequately address people’s emotive and meaningful engagements with the historic environment’. Jones’ (2010: 189) research has therefore sought to further understand the ‘numinous or magical qualities’ of authenticity by focusing on exactly how people establish and negotiate relationships between place, object and their sense of themselves. This work reinforces Handler’s (1986) earlier illumination of modern Western ideas of authenticity as closely tied to concepts of ‘possessive individualism’, whereby individuals seek to sustain not only their
sense of their individual essence, but also their belonging to a cultural collectivity through possession of authentic culture. Handler (1988: 4) argued that museums (‘the temple of authenticity’) provide important opportunities for individuals to appropriate authenticity into their personal experience, into their sense of identity which has been alienated from an authentic relationship with the past by the conditions of modernity. These visitors appear to value archaeological sites for the alternative, more personal experience of authenticity that they provide. Perhaps this is a reflection of a loss of authority of museums as the arbiters of authenticity? Or perhaps it relates to the growing importance of not only an authentic, but also an embodied experience of memory and identity linked to place and locality, as suggested by Huyssen (2003) and Appadurai (1996).

A further clue to this appeal may be found in the nature of historical archaeology itself, which deals in the ordinary and everyday things from the recent colonial past. Historical archaeology is often seen as an antidote to the propensity of history and heritage to focus on the grand and the great. Small things speak of the day to day lives of ordinary people: a factor which has been an important theme in historical archaeology in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere (Little 1994). Historical archaeological sites have also therefore been closely linked to ‘subaltern’ histories that have been influential in challenging dominant narratives, particularly in postcolonial societies.

However, the conservation of archaeological remains in urban contexts can also be seen as a practice of ‘spatial re-inscription’, juxtaposing the new and modern against the old and forgotten, in order to emphasise the overwriting of progress, the legitimacy of sovereignty and progress from colony to nation (Appadurai et al. 2001: 40). In this context, these conserved archaeological sites tend to reproduce a colonial history largely based on received narratives of settlement and indigenous displacement, even though the archaeological research associated with many of these sites has revealed a more complex and richer account of the urban past (e.g., Godden Mackay Heritage Consultants & Karskens 1996; Karskens 1999). As Karskens (2000: 15) warns, ‘places and the stories that cling to them can be delicious, or poignant, or inspire a sense of unease, but they can also be seductively misleading’. In settler cultures the tendency to be blind to indigenous memory and history continues to dominate PAIRIS’ presentation: the conservation for display of in situ fragmentary remains ‘in situ’ conservation, and more as a creative act that links people, place and objects in a web of authentic shared and personal relationships.

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References


Endotes

1 In situ conservation is the term used in archaeological heritage management to refer to conservation processes that aim to preserve and retain archaeological remains in the place where they were found. The ethical premise of in situ conservation is that this action preserves context in historical, environmental and archaeological research terms, as opposed to the loss of context that occurs if remains are removed and reconstructed in a more convenient location, as often occurred before the professionalisation of heritage conservation (e.g., Lyon 2007).

A further underpinning premise of in situ conservation is that it is only ethical to expose and display remains if their long term conservation can be assured. In situ conservation therefore implies a range of long term technical challenges – remains that were once buried in a stable environment are exposed to an unstable one where changes in light, heat, moisture and temperature may affect different materials in different ways, often causing their accelerated deterioration which in situ conservation aims to control and mitigate.