INTERPRETATION: HERITAGE REVEALED

Linda Young

In the past, when 'heritage' meant 'inheritance', the only uncertainty about the meaning of the term was whether Grandfather would strike out the family 'black-sheep' from his will, or whether Aunt Esther was going to leave her all to the Dogs' Home. In today's application of the word, heritage refers to a whole range of natural, built and social environments, as well as to the objects they contain or used to contain, which are so valued by the community that our society provides both legislation and financial support to preserve them. The definitions may be contested but, put simply, in a phrase from the 1974 Hope Commission of Inquiry into the National Estate, heritage is 'the things we want to keep'. Heritage interpretation explains why we want (or ought) to keep these things.

In other words, heritage interpretation is the communication of the ideas about nature and history which make certain material places and 'things' culturally significant. This is a challenging prospect, for many of the objects and sites that are identified as 'heritage' are incomprehensible to the non-expert. For instance, unless the viewer is highly knowledgeable about, say, architectural styles or ironworking techniques or alpine ecology, he or she is unlikely to simply intuit that a building is important on account of its style, or that an engine is worth preserving because it represents a new technology, or that a bog is a crucial element of a mountain ecosystem. Most people require extra information to understand heritage significance, and interpretation is a means of providing it.

When people understand the reasons why a place or a thing is said to be part of our heritage, they are able to share this understanding with others. Interpretation is a process by which such knowledge is circulated. Interpretation can take the form of a walk around a site with an expert; a self-guided tour with a brochure; an audio-visual show in a visitor centre; an exhibition in a museum; a historic building or room re-creation; a book, leaflet or catalogue. Any medium of communication is potentially a vehicle for interpreting a heritage item, limited only by imagination (...and usually budget!). Sharing the knowledge which explains the significance of a heritage object or place is not an act of grace or favour, but of moral responsibility and political strategy. Professional standards in heritage conservation recommend public participation in the processes of defining and planning heritage management. In administrative terms, particularly when public funding is involved in a heritage project, it is a political obligation that the reasons for outlaying tax-generated money be justified.

But at root, interpretation contains an ideological imperative to present an image of the cultural and natural environment which is in accord with society's dominant values. To some degree these values are likely to exclude subaltern groups, which may challenge the mantle of 'heritage' with revisionist or affirmative ideas - ideas which may ultimately achieve public acceptance either as expressions of changing value or of deliberate equity programs. In the broadest sense, however, the reason for interpreting heritage things or places is to contribute to the communal sense that, as a society, we share a material heritage which is part of our cultural identity, and that such shared heritage is valuable. Heritage objects and places reflect different aspects of experience: some people may feel more kinship with certain kinds of objects or sites than others, but effective interpretation can open up the material world as 'having meaning for all'.

Goals of interpretation

The first goal of heritage interpretation is to express the significance of a site or of an object in clear, explicit ways that are also compelling enough to attract the interest of visitors. 'Why is this place or thing so important that we want (or ought) to keep it?' should be the question, and it should be answered convincingly. Too often the answer is commonplace or a cliche, such as that a place was the birthplace of a famous person, or that it was the home of early settlers in the district. It is critical that the site or object in question is of authentic heritage significance, or else the currency of heritage will be devalued by triviality - an issue beyond the responsibility of the interpreter but impacting gravely on interpretation work.

A second goal of interpretation is to place the site or object in a broader social and historical and environmental context than might be suggested by its immediate presence. Many historic buildings survive in isolation from their original arrangements, and many Aboriginal art sites have lost the context of their traditional culture. Even features of the natural environment may have been significantly changed over time, for instance, by mining or reforestation. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the spirit of indomitable survival or the intrinsic fascination of something ancient and rare - but both perspectives tend to blinker the viewer from understanding the original whole. Similarly, the impact of the rest of the world, in the form of economic movements, political influences, social relations and environmental conditions, is not readily apparent in many heritage items. It is important to supply
these extra elements of information so that visitors become aware of the complex of forces that form a heritage place or object.

Yet another goal of interpretation is to fill in gaps in the record of evidence constituted by the site or object. The survival of places and objects is affected by physical conditions, such as the deterioration of materials or destruction by natural catastrophe; these can lead to the loss or alteration of parts of a surviving whole. Survival may also be affected by cultural practices, such as the preference to keep important, valuable objects and to throw away what is regarded as trivial ephemera. Spectacular scenery is valued for similar reasons, while the back-country - the deserts and stony plains - is perceived as wasteland. Consequently, some kinds of historical and environmental evidence tend to be lost, while others may be absent from the immediate site. Typical cases are the survival of stone or brick mansions but the disappearance of simple timber buildings due to fire, termites or re-use; and the preservation of wedding dresses but the disappearance of everyday work clothing, due to wearing out, handing down and re-making. Making the missing items evident indicates the larger reality by expanding the world of the surviving heritage item.

Interpretation can also be a tool for the conservation management of a heritage site or object.4 When visitors understand why a place or thing is significant, they begin to appreciate it, and then to treasure it. The principle that "what people like they generally take care of" is the basis of substantial interpretive programs in national parks, particularly on extensive sites, or where direct supervision of visitors is not feasible. A satisfied response to information means that most visitors are willing to stay on a walkway over a rock engraving or a fragile plant community, and not to touch polished furniture or antique curtains. Such informed and willing guardians of heritage places and objects make the surest guarantee of their continued preservation.

What to interpret?

The goal of interpretation is to communicate the importance of a heritage item. This introduces the problem of identifying heritage items in the first place: as often exemplified in family situations, agreement about what we want to keep is rarely unanimous. In the making of such decisions, one person responds to sentimental associations, another acts on the advice of an expert, while a third person dispassionately analyses current needs.

In the heritage industry, items are assessed against criteria which establish importance in a rational and defensible way, though it must be said that not everyone agrees with them. For cultural (human-made) heritage, the standard measures are judgements of historic, aesthetic, social and scientific significance, or more specific variations on these themes.5 Such judgements are summed up in a Statement of Cultural Significance, perhaps the most useful concept in Australia ICOMOS's 'Burra Charter'.4 The Statement of Cultural Significance is a synthesis of the physical and documentary evidence concerning a place, developed through a methodical investigation. The same technique could be extended to natural environment sites and to objects of heritage value, for at present no such unified standard exists. Natural environment heritage assessments tend to be implied in legislative concepts rather than stated explicitly, and are certainly made more difficult by the large scale on which many nature conservation projects are undertaken.7 The heritage significance of objects is even less explicitly stated, but can usually be found in museum acquisition and cataloguing records.8 In any case, for all aspects of our heritage - the natural environment, cultural sites and cultural objects - the total of thoroughly researched documents and conclusions about particular significance provides the basis for interpretation.

A Statement of Significance lists why an object or place is important. For instance, Calthorpes' House, Canberra, is of historic significance because of its unchanged physical character - furnishings, fittings and decorations, which were bought when the house was new in 1927 and are still there (Fig.1). In the collection of the Western Australian Museum, a brooch made in 1895 of a nugget of Kalgoorlie gold is of social and historic significance because it represents the tribulations and rewards of goldfields life (Fig.2). The smooth, scratched rocks exposed at Hallett...
Cove near Adelaide are of scientific significance as evidence of ancient glacial activity on the Australian continent (Fig. 3).

Interpreting Calthorpes’ House, the nugget brooch and Hallett Cove is a matter of communicating their importance to the public audience. In the case of Calthorpes’ House, continuing to maintain the existing household arrangements is a means of interpreting its significance as evidence of a way of life now gone. Visitors are often unnerved by the apparent ordinariness of the slightly worn upholstery and the somewhat battered kitchen implements. ‘We had one like that’, they say with a mixture of recognition and surprise. In this case, the significance of the place and its contents is that - familiar as these things were to some people - they rarely survive today and are beyond the experience of several new generations. Calthorpes’ House is further interpreted by an introductory exhibit located in the backyard shed, by guides who conduct small groups around the house, and by an authoritatively researched booklet.9

The significance of the nugget brooch is enriched by its having a provenance recorded in a diary, which tells us that it was commissioned from Kalgoorlie jeweller and goldsmith, Stanley Caris, for £5 though it is not known to whom it was given. The piece was made for a digger, but not from a nugget he found himself, suggesting that the symbolic character of the lump of gold was more important than a personal connection with it. This story has been interpreted by the Western Australian Museum through exhibition and publication - the one, in its branch museum in Kalgoorlie; the other, a specialist study of gold-digger jewellery which explores both the social and technological environment of its production.10

Hallett Cove is interpreted through signage on site and various publications available to guide oneself on a walking track around the area. The information provided describes the geological history of the formation in text and graphics, and the walk takes the visitor up through the strata and over the glaciated pavement. Unfortunately, this is a case where the sign has become old and ragged: the brochure can only be obtained from the Department of Environment’s bookshop twenty kilometres away in the city (if it is in stock); and further detail requires library research in specialist publications. All of this says that Hallett Cove is not interpreted very well or adequately - a reminder that heritage interpretation is far from a perfectly managed business.11

How to interpret?

It can be seen that the decision as to what to interpret derives from the heritage object or place itself, and is an explanation of its heritage character. How to do it successfully is the art of presentation, comprising a mixture of research, design and communication technique.12

The ‘grandfather’ of heritage interpretation, Freeman Tilden, worked for the US National Parks Service and in 1957 published what is still an inspirational book on the topic, Interpreting Our Heritage.13 Tilden’s method stresses that interpretation should be more than the mere transfer of information - that interpretation should delight, astonish and touch the visitor personally. This is a tall order: advertising agencies spend millions of dollars on such attempts to reach the public, and entertainers charge high fees if they can do it. The average heritage manager, whether of a site or a museum, may not be endowed with such charismatic talent, and is almost certainly not funded at more than subsistence level. But would-be interpreters of heritage things and places have one tremendous advantage: the integrity of their product. Heritage items are the real thing, and have meanings - even if not fully understood - that can touch people deeply. (The popularity of heritage themes in advertising speaks to this power).14 (Also see P. Watt’s article, this volume, Ed.)

People choose to visit heritage sites because they enjoy contact with the past, or with beautiful things or places, or with natural phenomena - and they like to experience them in the company of friends and family.15 This is a positive environment for interpretation, making it fundamentally unlike compulsory or organised education. The appetite for information usually pre-exists among visitors, and they are usually eager to get the goods. Whether they are satisfied is the test of the interpreter. Good quality presentation is of the utmost importance in fulfilling the visitor’s appetite for heritage interpretation. It calls for authoritative knowledge to develop displays and films; smart graphic design in signs or publications;
excellent communication skills on the part of guides or rangers; and unobtrusive style in barriers, footpaths, parking area placements and garbage bin locations. Quality media and facilities in interpretation raise the level of respect of visitors towards the site or object - a vital factor in the survival of vulnerable places such as prehistoric Aboriginal camp sites and delicate objects such as historic furnishings.

Thorough knowledge of the site or object to be interpreted is a prime necessity. This usually requires both specialist research and a deep understanding of the place or thing in question, which may come best from traditional owners or long time occupants/users. The body of knowledge thus established may be based on oral remembrances, graphic images, maps, statistics, and personal and official historical records. At the same time, gathering such material may produce more detail than can be used in specific presentations; knowing what to pick out and where to stop is part of the art of the interpreter. Besides details that explain and illustrate significance, stories that will engage the attention of the visitor are good items to seek among a large body of research. They may be funny, or atmospheric, or gripping for quite serious reasons. Statistics in the form of diagrams can convey startling information, but can become repetitious. Pictures are often, as the saying goes, worth a thousand words.

The media of interpretation

Putting the data into material form - booklet, exhibition, sign or whatever - is usually best undertaken by a professional designer, though there may be occasions where an amateur presentation has more depth and feeling. The power of attractive design is another field worth millions in advertising, but available to heritage interpreters because many top quality designers choose to work on projects with character and integrity. Nonetheless, the need to work to a limited budget is often felt nowhere so acutely as in the commissioning and production of interpretive material.

There is considerable debate about the effectiveness of text-based interpretation, specially in the field of traditional museum-type labels. Questions are raised and researched on issues such as how much visitors are prepared to read, what level of literacy to pitch for, and whether texts are intrinsically off-putting to most people. The findings are multifarious, but in our logocentric culture, text remains the dominant medium of permanent communication and brochures, catalogues and labels continue to be major media of interpretation. This is partly a function of their relatively low cost, especially by comparison with the most obvious alternative, audio-visual media. Not only are electronic media expensive to produce and operate, they also require protection from the elements, vandalism and theft, appearing often in the form of buildings such as theatrettes or booths which can be awkward to fit unobtrusively into heritage buildings or environments. They also need maintenance: there is little as depressing as an ‘Out of order’ sign on what ought to be a lively screen, and such events are unfortunately memorable in the visitor’s mind. At the same time, video and computer-based information media are demonstrably attractive to a large fraction of the visitor population, and hence cannot be dismissed as effective interpretive media. The autonomy response to moving images in favour of static displays or views makes the design of audio-visuals a special challenge in interpretation.

Interactive devices are increasingly popular both to engage attention and to enable visitor response to presentations of heritage things and places. Interaction may be experiential - as in touching or smelling a real specimen, or ideational - as in feeding back an opinion. The sense of touch is a specially powerful source of information about the material world, but one that is traditionally forbidden in the interests of the preservation of fragile heritage items. Yet it is usually not difficult to provide expendable examples of something connected with the subject of interpretation: live specimens, stuffed specimens, multiple items and damaged items can almost always be found for visitor handling. The eliciting and recording of visitor ideas can be realised in hi-tech and low-tech media. At the bottom end of the scale are cheap systems such as pull-down shades or pull-out drawers which present an alternative idea, or an answer to a question posed, as text, graphic or

Figure 3: The significance of Hallett Cove, near Adelaide, is interpreted through on-site signage and pamphlet-guided walks.
real object. More expensive variations may involve computer touch-screens, or other machines.

In some cases it is possible to present heritage interpretations 'live', through people who go by a number of job titles: guides, rangers, education officers, interpreters. There can be little doubt that an informed, responsive guide is the best medium of interpretation a site or object could have, but such a person is also the most expensive to operate in these times of sorely stretched resources for heritage management. Most guides present their sites or objects as third person intermediaries or experts: sources of detail and context that are unfolded in a logical sequence through a walk or lecture. The virtue of this sort of presentation is that it can be tailored immediately to the interests of each group of visitors, for a sensitive guide is always ready to pick up questions and run with them. Atmosphere is added at certain historic sites where interpreters dress in costume - though the standards of correct detail in historic clothing are less well known and practised than in architectural re-creations.

Some heritage sites offer interpretive programs where the guide takes the role of a historic person or a wildlife character such as a tree or animal. So called 'first person interpretation' demands total immersion in the history or biology of the place, requiring not only knowledge of minutiae but also the conviction to carry it off convincingly. Some audiences are reluctant to participate in the necessary suspension of belief, though others may respond enthusiastically. Given the unknowns that abound about most sites, some heritage managers have abandoned the technique as unnecessary make-believe, on the grounds that even limited knowledge is better than dramatic ad lib. Nonetheless, the colour and vigour of first person interpretation are undeniably attractive.

The common thread linking all these possibilities is the desire to communicate the fascination and delight of heritage things and places. Some people are lucky enough to be paid to do it; many more do it as volunteers in parks, buildings, museums and heritage organisations across the country. This tells us as clearly as any formal survey that interpreting heritage is not only worthy but a pleasure. The challenge is to make it worthwhile and fun for heritage visitors.

Linda Young teaches aspects of Cultural Heritage Management at the University of Canberra.

Endnotes


2 For a collection of other definitions, see Heritage Communicator 1/1, Feb 1987, p.19-20.

3 eg, Consultative Committee on Cultural Heritage in a Multicultural Australia, A Plan for Cultural Heritage Institutions to Reflect Australia's Cultural Diversity, Canberra, AGPS, 1991.

4 This is particularly the practice in natural environment sites; see Simon McArthur and C. Michael Hall, 'Visitor Management and Interpretation at Heritage Sites', in Michael Hall and Simon McArthur (eds), Heritage Management in New Zealand and Australia: Visitor Management, Interpretation and Marketing, Auckland, Oxford University Press, 1993, p.26-33.

5 'Guidelines to the Burra Charter: Cultural Significance' (see note 6 below); the Australian Heritage Commission uses eight criteria: Australian Heritage Commission, Annual Report 1990-91, p.18-20.


11 The Friends of Hallett Cove (an Adelaide community group) are presently upgrading the condition of interpretive material on site.


