Interpreting our heritage: the quest to be accessible, relevant and provocative

You enter the fort, aware that this is obviously a historic place. Suddenly you realise that you are not alone. Men's voices and marching footsteps echo through the empty tunnels. The hairs on the back of your neck start to prickle. The marching becomes louder, and closer, until - their owners unseen - they pass you by. A ghostly encounter with the past? Or an effective interpretive encounter with the present?

This paper describes two recent heritage interpretation projects, what they set out to achieve, and the contribution interpretation can make to cultural heritage management.

Fort Nepean

Fort Nepean is an impressive complex of gun emplacements and underground tunnels buried into a sandstone headland, surrounded on three sides by the sea - Bass Strait on one side, Melbourne’s Port Phillip Bay on the other, and between them the treacherous stretch of water called ‘The Rip’.

As you enter the fort you may notice that the old structure is still in good condition, despite the feeling that the place is largely overgrown. A sign describes how the gun emplacement was used, and a simple display introduces “The Foe” and the early Colonial fears. But you soon become aware that you are not alone – there is someone whistling an old tune from the depths of the underground tunnel. Upon entering this darkened tunnel you hear the voices of men echoing up from the ammunition magazines below. They mention something about the drudgery of army life and how someone was on report for disobeying orders!

Further down the tunnel you hear marching footsteps coming towards you. You stand aside, and they pass you by.

Deeper underground, another tunnel branches off towards ‘Gun Emplacement No.’. And in the distance you can hear the sounds of a gun being loaded. As you walk towards it through the gloom, you hear the call ‘Ready Number One... FIRE!’, followed by the boom of a large gun being fired. Some people can get a bit of a fright from this, and need to surface for air, but most are intrigued by the way in which the old fort has come to life, as if those walls really can talk.

The whole experience is interpretive, where soundscapes, subdued lighting, simple signage and well-designed displays present the story of Fort Nepean, from its beginnings through to its abandonment after World War 2.

Historical significance

The fortifications were first established in the late 1870s, when Gold Rush Melbourne was one of the richest cities in the world, and fear was rife that ‘The Foe’ would attempt a raid on the bulging gold treasury. Since those times, the fort has been added to and changed to cater for new military threats and technologies.

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Fort Nepean has the dubious honour of firing the first allied shot of World War 1, and the first Australian shot of World War 2; both as warning shots to ships that ignored instructions. Tragic shipwrecks occurred along the neighbouring coast, and the nearby Cheviot Beach was the location of Prime Minister Harold Holt's disappearance in 1967.

Added to all this historical significance, public access to the area was heavily restricted until it was opened as part of the Point Nepean National Park in 1988. As a result, the area is shrouded in mystery and potential danger, heightened by frequent warning signs about the possibility of unexploded ordinance.

**Interpretation design – more than old guns**

The rationale of the interpretation design was to deal with something that was more than old guns. Although guns were the most obvious subject matter, they were also the most likely topic to be ignored. From initial survey research, the interpretive
team found that the most popular reasons for people visiting the park were to see the coastal scenery and to participate in a family activity. Viewing the fortifications and satisfying other historical interests were further down the list. What this indicated to us in terms of the design of any interpretive displays, was that if we interpreted the site in a fairly conventional way – dealing primarily with historical facts and figures – we would lose the attention of the greater part of our audience.

The approach we took was to structure the interpretive stories on three broad levels: Fort Architecture, Life and Times of the Fort, and Political & Social Events. This aimed to provide people with a range of interpretive experiences that best suited their interests and attitudes. The media used include simple signage, atmospheric soundscapes, reconstructed sound scenes, oral history accounts, and evocative displays using newspaper headlines, cartoons, advertisements and historical photos.

But underlying the whole display is the principle of making maximum use of the fort itself -- its mystique and inherent ambience.

By presenting very sparse, ambient soundscapes and engaging with the essential ambience of the fort, we are able to produce an emotional response from visitors: voices calling, men whistling, boots marching, wind howling, and whispered conversations. Hairs on the back of the neck prickle, the heart rate may rise fractionally, and people feel a little uneasy. Not uneasy enough to want to leave, but uneasy enough to become a little anxious, slightly uncomfortable, and definitely provoked. Through this emotional response they are not simply learning about some old and irrelevant place; they are interacting with the fort, obtaining a strong experience of the fort, and gaining an understanding about the people who once served there. And they will remember their responses.

They will remember the phone conversation they had with the telephonist from the Australian Women's Army Service. They will remember what it was like to hear about being a soldier stationed at Fort Nepean, achieved through personal accounts, popular songs of the era, tales of the drudgery and boredom, and images of soldiers dressed up like pirates making some poor sod walk the plank!

The recollection of both the experience and the engagement with the past, highlights the valuable contribution that interpretation can make to sites of cultural heritage significance. It comes from developing interpretive facilities that are based on solid research and that take a lateral view of what is possible, combined with a sensitive use of display material. The interpretation material should engage and provoke, using stories that will be relevant to a wide range of people, rather than presenting the immediately obvious stories in dry and fact-laden ways. At the same time, there is a fine line to walk -- between making an interpretive display that engages and provokes, compared to a display that overtakes the site, and is intrusive and dominating.
Anzac Lingo

Australian slang has many origins ... especially the language of the ANZACS.

"Ankle banger" ... an overcoat
"Consumption stick" ... a cigarette
"Rissole king" ... an army cook
"Throw a seven" ... to die
"Ziff" ... a beard
"Bumbrusher" ... an officer's servant
"Concrete macaroon" ... an army biscuit
"Branding paddock" ... the parade ground
"Sin shifter" ... the army chaplain
"Up the camel's arse looking for an oasis" ... a person's unknown whereabouts
"Wipe your boots! (or they'll dirty the back of my shirt)" ... a response to an excessive demand
"Rosebowl" ... an open air latrine

Figure 2 Fort Nepean display: ANZAC Lingo

Impacts?

In designing and installing the display, it was imperative to follow strict guidelines to avoid damage to the fabric of the fort. Also, we wanted to hide the technical equipment and speakers as much as possible, to assist in the creation of the interpretive illusion. As a result, all sound equipment was linked into the existing infrastructure, where existing conduited cables and wiring for the fort's lighting system were supplemented with speaker cables and sensor wires. By taking this approach, the installation of the display resulted in minimal impact on the buildings.

This is a crucial factor to consider in any interpretation that is undertaken in a heritage area. However, it is necessary to recognise that some impact will occur by installing an interpretive display, whether it be by securing a display element to the floor, or conduiting speaker wires and cables. The important consideration is to minimise this impact and to strictly meet the specific management requirements for the site. A good principle to follow is that the display should be designed and
installed in such a way so that when it is eventually removed or replaced, it should leave virtually no evidence of its presence.

**Cultural heritage tourism - an opportunity or a curse?**

"If we didn't have to deal with those damned visitors, we would have a better chance of preserving our valuable heritage sites. All the tourists do is wreck the place!"

A familiar cry? Are tourists just a hindrance to the ‘real’ work of preservation and conservation? I believe that this is really only the case when visitor management at a site is not appropriately structured. Some sites can only take a very small number of visitors, and under quite strict supervision. Others, however, can cope with large numbers and allow visitors freedom to explore. But in whichever situation, well-designed heritage interpretation can play a significant role in visitor management.

But what kind of interpretation can contribute to visitor management most effectively? Many people would be familiar with glass cases of objects clearly displayed and labelled. Is this effective interpretation? I am sure that many others have been to historic sites with neat metal signs pointing out the many pertinent details. Is this effective interpretation? And what about display scenes with figures, soundscapes and sophisticated lighting. Is this effective interpretation?

I believe that effective interpretation is the art of making the unfamiliar familiar, the process of provocation and enticement, and a method of ensuring an increased visitor appreciation of our heritage.

**Built on Gold Exhibition - Old Treasury Museum**

Old Treasury is located on Spring Street in the centre of Melbourne, and was built in 1862 as the offices for the Colony of Victoria’s leaders: the Governor, the Premier, the Treasurer and the Auditor General. It was also built as a repository for the huge amounts of gold flowing into Melbourne during Victoria’s gold rush. Old Treasury and nearby Parliament House were the two major public buildings of the era, and Old Treasury is recognised as one of the finest examples of early Australian public building architecture.

In the basement gold vaults, the ‘Built on Gold’ exhibition presents the story of Victoria’s gold — its journey from the goldfields to Melbourne and beyond, and the legacy it left. The exhibition starts in a gold dealer’s tent, with various gold miners arriving to sell their gold. Some of the miners are pretty sharp and manage to secure a good price. Others, however, are either desperate or naive and get badly ripped-off. Two large back-projected video screens show the faces of the buyer
and miners, and the story is told by placing the visitors in the middle of these negotiations (Figure 3). Using this medium, a host of stories can be told, such as what it was like for people to try to earn a living by gold mining, the way in which society was rapidly changing, different people's perspectives towards the same historical events, and racial prejudice, especially directed at the large Chinese community.

Displays in the other gold vaults tell the stories of the Gold Escorts and the problem of bushrangers; the associated growth of the shipping industry and trade; conditions in gold rush Melbourne as told by those who were there; Melbourne's building boom and architectural legacy; the growth of Melbourne's cultural life as expressed in theatre, sport and politics; and how the international markets were affected by this massive influx of gold. Each of the displays uses a completely different form to tell its particular story. For example, the display on shipping uses a simple television and standing lamp to create the sense of a lounge room scene (Figure 4). The television is screening a Channel 10 news bulletin, with the newsreader and field
reporters presenting the news of the day — the only difference is that the news of the
day is temporally located in the 1850s and 60s, with historic images used as field
scenes, and events presented as if they happened in the present. The rationale for
using this fairly novel display idea is that, throughout history, people have received
news information in many different ways, each relevant to the technology of the
time. If historical events are presented in their original form, many people will tend
to switch-off as they find the stories lack relevance to their present-day experience.
By presenting historical stories through a contemporary medium, it is intended that
people will find the stories far more relevant and meaningful to their present-day
experiences. This more radical type of interpretation necessitates taking a fair
degree of licence in the presentation of historical events; therefore, it should only be
attempted with due care and not over-used.

Important principles

The ‘Built on Gold’ exhibition is slick and highly finished, and it uses beautifully
designed graphics, sound and display lighting to assist in the storytelling. Access to, and conditions within the exhibition are well controlled. On the other hand, the Fort Nepean display is largely unsupervised and is located in a harsh, wind-blown environment with sand, salt and moisture being a major issue in the display's robust design. Historical images are used, as are real, oral-history recordings. Even the sound equipment has to be tough, as it is powered by an old diesel generator.

But despite the significant differences, these displays or exhibitions are based on the same principles first identified by Tilden, which I believe often go unheeded in interpreting heritage sites:

- The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
- Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based on information. However, all interpretation includes information.
- Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.

Provocation, revelation and relating to the experience of the visitor: these are the core elements of successful interpretation, whether they be in the form of simple signs, guided tours, visitor centre displays, or sound and light displays. The medium, in many ways is secondary to these core elements. If the core principles are not satisfied, then no amount of expensive equipment will remedy the situation. And if an on-site sign is based on straight information – dry facts and figures – it may become nothing more than a boring sign that most visitors will ignore.

Aldridge reinforces this by stating: 'Interpretation is about encouraging people to think for themselves, not about telling them what to think, or setting society's objectives'.

This, I believe, is the issue for interpreting heritage sites. If the interpretive objectives and concepts are flawed and ignore the important core principles, then the product will be flawed, and the value of the heritage site compromised. There are numerous examples of signage and displays laden with volumes of text, all about some character or event that means nothing to most people, and which will be soon forgotten after being read (if it was ever absorbed in the first place). There is an unfortunate tendency in interpreting heritage sites to try to tell the complete and detailed story, and often from a single ‘authoritative’ perspective. No doubt there is lots to tell, but there is no discernment of what is pertinent or relevant to the visitors, and the idea of provoking and revealing is simply ignored. 'Interpretation' of this sort plays no role in the management of the heritage resource, and some may argue it is more a form of visual pollution.

When developing interpretation at a heritage site, it is important to be aware and stick to the core principles of interpretation. Good interpretation breeds good visitor attitudes, and conversely poor interpretation breeds poor attitudes.
Interpretation is not something that can be simply thrown together. As stated in another of Tilden's principles of interpretation: 'Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable'. Interpretation is an art that needs to be – and can be – learned. It takes time, effort and understanding. Just because a person has a pencil does not mean they can draw. A person with the latest fancy camera is not necessarily a good photographer. And likewise, a person who understands the history of a historical site and can write about it, is not necessarily an interpreter.

Well-designed interpretation can play a role in the management of cultural heritage sites, and provide people with a new-found understanding and respect for the site. It can also play an important and broader social role of igniting a spark of interest in our heritage and providing people with an understanding of who we are. When we start to understand our history – warts and all – then we will start to mature as a people and as a nation. Uzzell refers to the concept of 'hot interpretation', where the story of a site is told from different perspectives, and not always in the most flattering way. This may make some people uncomfortable, with the presentation of history consisting of both the good and the bad, of the great and the infamous, and from people both well known and 'ordinary'.

Our museums and interpretive sites should be centres of excellence for telling the story of our cultural heritage in all its dimensions. Of course, we want them to be a celebration of the finest achievements of man, but if they are to be of educational value they must also honestly re-present the most shameful events of our past.

To provoke an emotional response is not soft or weak, it is what it is to be human. We are deceiving ourselves if we think that when we stand in front of a case of medals, or guns or photographs of mutilated bodies we are looking at the past. We are also looking at the present and the future. If interpretation is to be a source of social good then it must recognise the continuity of history and alert us to the future through the past.

This is the important role that our heritage sites and their interpretation can play. By addressing visitor interests and needs, presenting heritage stories in imaginative and accessible ways, recognising that history needs to be told from a variety of perspectives that are provoking and revealing rather than instructing, and by being prepared to cause emotional responses – then, and only then, is interpretation effective and able to make an important contribution.
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references


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