Conservation practice in Australia has been tutored by a passion for the power of place and almost clinical respect for the integrity of fabric. ICOMOS Australia has been instrumental in striving to achieve an honesty of process and a shared understanding of heritage significance and values. We have drafted charters and guidelines, written books, managed heritage sites and told their stories in so many media.

The power of the imagination, the authority of place, the poetics of language the confidence of the visual ... where does the art of conserving and revealing heritage significance emerge from technical authenticity to meaningful interpretation?

The 2003 Australia ICOMOS annual conference Telling Tales sought to explore some of the relationships between conservation process and creative practice – in writing, film, architecture, theatre and sculpture – by inviting leading Australian artists to reflect on the role of their work in interpretation; in return, conservation practitioners thought again about the audiences for their own work, and the media with which the meaning of significant places can be communicated, through a series of case studies.

The conference took place within the context of the 1999 amendments to the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, which incorporated the concept of interpretation as a component of conservation. Interpretation is emphasised as an essential part of securing the future of heritage places by informing and exciting their constituencies and reflecting diverse community identities and values. Internationally, ICOMOS is also becoming involved in the development of the ICOMOS Ename Charter – 'international guidelines for authenticity, intellectual integrity and sustainable development in the public presentation of archaeological and historical sites and landscapes'. ICOMOS Australia is actively contributing to the evolution of the Charter, proposed for adoption by the ICOMOS General Assembly in Quebec in 2008.

In Sydney, local Councils increasingly require Interpretation Plans as part of development consents relating to heritage properties. But what is meant by an Interpretation Strategy or Interpretation Plan? At present there are no generally accepted guidelines or standards to develop or assess projects. Hence, a national ICOMOS conference was planned, with a following invited experts workshop to assist in the development of NSW Interpretation Guidelines and to facilitate input to the ICOMOS Ename Charter.

The conference organisers determined that it would be a memorable event – and the now vacant School of Artillery at North Head, near Manly, provided a spectacular setting for the weekend. On arrival, all delegates were formally inducted, actors and ICOMOS volunteers interpreted experiences of military life and protocol, from pre-conference parade ground drills to canteen etiquette, ably led by conference co-ordinator Stephen Couling of Design 5. Facilitated by the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, a truly magical mystery twilight tour of Sydney Harbour heritage sites, many rarely accessible, was led by Godden Mackay Logan. Telling Tales was unusual amongst Australia ICOMOS conferences in that our speakers were all invited. The programme was designed to provide unexpected food for thought. Author and broadcaster Sarah Macdonald opened with her experiences of the limitations of media in telling tales – acknowledging that ‘the media, like it or loathe it, writes the first draft of history’. Film maker John Welly showed the opportunity of hyper-realistic audio visual presentations in alleviating pressures on fragile heritage sites. Sculptor Janet Laurence demonstrated her search to create a fluid space of remembrance and transformation, at sites such as the Sydney Olympic Park site and the Australian War Memorial in London. John Pastorelli, Rachael Faggetter and Linda Young reflected on the roles of community, audience and participant in the interpretation experience.

Other speakers were invited to use specific case studies – Camilla McRae spoke of the interpretation of place through events, the highly successful Tom Roberts Festival at Inverell; Rod Simpson mourned the lost opportunities for interpretation in planning and urban design at the Newington Arms Depot in Sydney; and Vladimir Sitta reflected upon his landscapes of meaning, particularly at the National Museum in Canberra. New Zealander Kevin Jones (in a paper prepared with Mary O’Keefe) put forward the bold proposition that ‘New Zealand interpretation of sites is poor, almost to the point where they are a kind of national personality defect – it is persistent, it debilitates the development of historical consciousness’.

Natalie Vinton and Richard Mackay reviewed the role of interpretation in archaeological practice, reflecting on local and international examples for inspiration. Sally Gray took our imaginations to the Illawarra escarpment, with a review of the community outcomes of the recent Cultural Mapping project. Veronica Macno provided a tour of the recent interpretation installation in the Blacksmith’s Workshop at the former Launceston Railway workshops at Inveresk.

Evelyn Crawford, Adele Hyslop, Chantarle Pitulej and Uncle Bill Robinson together discussed the impact of other people’s perceptions of Aboriginal heritage, firmly stating that effective interpretation cannot be achieved without the involvement of Aboriginal people.

Alan Croker faced the challenges of interpretation at White Bay Power Station in Sydney, using architectural volumes and details to propose the interpretation of lost elements within the construct of a totally new future use scenario. City Historian

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**Introduction**

**Telling Tales: papers from the Australia ICOMOS Annual Conference 2003**

*Sheridan Burke and Alan Croker*

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Shirley Fitzgerald forcefully argued the essential role of the written record in a world fixated on visual substance. The conference concluded with a suite of provocative practitioners looking forward: Meredith Walker, Kylie Winkworth, Sheridan Burke and Michael Trudgeon.

But the 'last post' was left to Polonius, Dr James Broadbent, who asked us all to contemplate: 'How many ICOMOTES does it take to conserve a building? ... I think about ten, four to perform the ritual of archaeology, two to preserve the building and four to interpret it- leaving no one and no money to maintain it'. The conference programme which had started with the frankly open role of new media closed thus with a cautionary word to focus on results, not process; action, not more reports in triplicate!

Dr Broadbent closed with a benediction: 'In the name of the holy trinity - archaeology, conservation and interpretation – may ICOMOS be with you'.

And so it came to pass.

endnotes
1 This project was begun by an international group of archaeologists and virtual-reality experts based in Belgium, initially concerned with scholarly authenticity in new media simulations, which has expanded to include all types of presentation infrastructure and techniques as well as community collaboration, documentation and tourism aspects.
2 Organised by the NSW Heritage Council.