It's all in the telling: interpreting archaeological remains

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Increasingly, research funding and grant opportunities require archaeologists to justify archaeological research in terms of its benefit and projected outcomes for the 'community'. In addition, many government development approvals will often require documents such as 'Interpretation Strategies' and 'Public Archaeology Programs' to be submitted during and after the completion of archaeological works programs. As a result, archaeologists, site owners and heritage managers often find themselves searching for guidance or examples of how to successfully prepare and complete public programs and interpretation strategies. Using both local and international examples, this paper explores examples of how to improve the way in which we conduct archaeological research to ensure that archaeological remains are interpreted and presented in a way that makes the research meaningful to a broad range of people, from local residents through to developers and heritage planners. In the end, archaeological resources can not speak for themselves. Their ability to educate and inspire people is in the telling of the tale.

Introduction

Archaeologists are trained to interpret a wide range of data, including the scientific results extracted from archaeological excavations in order to tell stories about past events, life ways and activities. How well archaeologists actually communicate those stories to the public is often reflected by how successful they are in convincing non-archaeologists to care about preserving, conserving and researching rare archaeological resources. But they often fail to connect with the general public's interest in archaeological research. In the way that a jigsaw piece in isolation can not form a complete picture, the ad hoc interpretation of tantalising pieces of archaeological research can result in the public misunderstanding the intrinsic cultural values and significance of an item or site.

There are at least six basic principles that can help to shape the data discovered prior to and during the archaeological process into something that provides a more complete picture of archaeological research and may inspire the non-archaeologist to become an advocate for the protection of our precious cultural heritage resources. I have identified these as 1. Assessment of significance; 2. Identification of target audience; 3. Identification of interpretation opportunities; 4. Understanding of budget constraints and opportunities; 5. Reassessment of interpretation options and 6. Use of the right storytellers.

1. Assessment of Significance

Prior to the redevelopment, restoration, investigation or conservation of any type of archaeological resource, the project archaeologist needs to identify the potential significance of that particular place, item, object, relic or fabric subject to the review. This assessment needs to occur well ahead of any development or activity that may impact on an archaeological resource and many guidelines have been published to assist people in adequately identifying an item's significance. These include the Burra Charter of Australia ICOMOS (1999) and the New South Wales Heritage Office's Assessing Significance Guidelines (2001).

Identifying an item or a site's social significance is often overlooked in the initial assessment of significance because it can be both difficult and time-consuming. However, if adequate time has not been allocated to identifying a site or an item's social significance, then the overall interpretation strategy risks being inaccurate, incomplete and at worst, offensive to some communities. For example, the Cyprus-Hellene Club at 150-152 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, is listed as a State significant heritage item on the New South Wales State Heritage Register (www.heritage.nsw.gov.au) because it has strong social and historical significance to the Aboriginal community and is identified as the 'Aboriginal Day of Mourning Site'. The architectural values of the building itself are not considered to be significant. If an assessment of the site's significance had concentrated on the aesthetic appeal or historic value of the building alone, rather than the site's intangible heritage values, its 'social significance' would never have been recognised and ultimately protected by its statutory listing on the NSW State Heritage Register.

Where a site or item has been identified as having a strong association with a particular community group (through collective memories, oral histories, ethnography, photographs), then the interpretation needs to be developed in conjunction with those members of the community for whom the site or item has strong social significance. Depending on how sensitive that community's needs are, it may not be appropriate to provide any type of interpretation for a site or item at all. The community identified as having a social or historic connection with the site may wish to keep the site's significance private for spiritual or cultural reasons and any interpretation, however well-intended, may be viewed as highly offensive.

Every site has a unique significance. The manner in which this significance is explored and assessed will ultimately impact on the quality of the final interpretation strategy to be formulated.

Figure 1 A US National Park Guide gives one of the daily tours at Mesa Verde National Park. (Natalie Vinton)
2. Identification of target audience

The target audience for every site or item will vary and is dependent on those values that have been identified as significant to a specific site or item. Identification of the target audience needs to be considered well before any activity that may threaten or destruct the archaeological resource has commenced. For example, archaeological resources that have been identified as having international or national significance are likely to appeal to a broad global audience because they are generally rare, relate to major historic events and have substantially intact aesthetically impressive archaeological remains, such as Port Arthur in Tasmania, or Mesa Verde in the United States of America. At sites with this level of international significance, there is an opportunity to target a large number of community types within the interpretation strategy – varying from local school groups and historical societies, to domestic and international tourists, right through to multiple levels of the professional community, including developers, heritage practitioners and politicians. This is discussed by Richard Mackay elsewhere in this volume.

At other sites, the potential target audience for an interpretation strategy may have a less tangible connection to the site’s significance. At Elden Pueblo, a Native American Indian site in Arizona, USA, for example, one of the key interpretative goals is to provide a rewarding cultural experience for physically disabled people. As a result, the pathways are being constructed in a manner that can facilitate wheelchairs, scented gardens are being planted in particular areas of the site so that smell can trigger particular reactions in sight-impaired visitors and signage is being prepared in English and Braille. Schemes to incorporate mentally-disabled volunteers within the conservation activities at the site have also been implemented and have proven to be successful.

3. Identification of interpretation options

Interpretative strategies that require in-situ retention of the archaeological resource and on-site interpretative facilities generally become too difficult to incorporate into the planning process once the actual development or research project is underway. Therefore, such options need to be canvassed early and considered prior to the commencement of the development, conservation or research phase of the project. Several interesting and innovative interpretative strategies are temporary and only need to be implemented for the lifetime of the archaeological research project, such as guided tours of archaeological excavations, viewing platforms and links to a weekly archaeology update on a website. Given their temporary nature they need to be planned and ready to implement as soon as the project begins. Other interpretative strategies will result in long-term educational facilities and museums, such as the Alexandria Archaeology Museum, in Virginia, USA.

By identifying potential interpretative options early, it is possible to consider redesigning particular aspects of the project to accommodate specific interpretative needs, such as in-situ retention of archaeological remains, should it seem probable that a substantially intact and significant archaeological resource will be found. For example, at a recent project in central Sydney, at the major redevelopment site identified as the KENS site, the New South Wales Heritage Office, the statutory authority responsible for issuing an historical archaeological permit for destruction of relics, participated in early negotiations with the archaeologist, Wendy Thorp and developers, Leighton Properties, to identify a range of interpretative options for the site. These discussions led to an agreement that certain areas within the development would be
designated for interpretative displays and spaces; a room would be designed and custom-built within the development to securely house the artefact collection likely to be excavated; and most significantly, it was agreed that, if any remains of a late eighteenth-century government gun magazine and fortification were found during the archaeological investigation, the building design would be modified to ensure the in-situ retention, conservation and interpretation of the remains.

In addition, the developer and archaeologist agreed to facilitate a temporary interpretative program throughout the archaeological excavation, which include the construction of viewing platforms to allow free public viewing of the archaeologists at work; the placement of interpretative signage on the site hoarding; and at times of interest the site was opened to the media and the general public for tours. By identifying all of these interpretative options early, the developer was well-informed and prepared for a mixed, high-end level of interpretation at the site. Unfortunately, the gun magazine was not found but at least a contingency plan that would have allowed for it to be retained in-situ and interpreted had been identified prior to the commencement of works on site.

Innovative interpretive tools are described in numerous international publications. Completed interpretative facilities, such as the Franklin Court, Philadelphia; Dawes Point Interpretative Park, Sydney; New York Unearthed, New York; The Conservatorium of Music, Sydney, now exist in some international city centres for people to visit and gain inspiration from.

4. Identify financial constraints and opportunities

Planning for interpretation at the earliest stages of a research, conservation or development project increases the likelihood of adequate funds and expertise being allocated to an interpretation project. In addition, adequate information about the site's significance, the diversity of the target audience and potential interpretative options for the site can build up a more accurate understanding of whether or not substantial resources need to be allocated for interpretation.

In some states of Australia, the proponent of the research, development or conservation project is required to fund the archaeological works, including excavations, research and interpretation as part of the trade-off for being allowed to destroy or disturb the archaeological resource. In rare instances, they may be required to pay for the in-situ retention and conservation of archaeological remains as well. Unfortunately though, the proponent themselves, are often unaware that there are state, national and international funding opportunities that can assist them with certain aspects of their projects, particularly as they relate to in-situ conservation, public education and interpretation.

The NSW Heritage Office Heritage Incentives Program, for example, runs on a two-yearly basis and provides funding to projects where the grant applicant can demonstrate that an item has significance at a State, National or International level and will contribute to the public understanding of interpretation.

It is far easier to pursue grant and sponsorship opportunities when one can identify appropriate people or organisations within the community and target audience to help facilitate the project. For example, at Elden Pueblo in Flagstaff, Arizona, the Museum of Northern Arizona and the Arizona Archaeological Society have teamed up with the National Forest Service to provide facilities, publicity, expertise and funds to run a voluntary community archaeological investigation and conservation program. The Museum and Archaeological Society contribute because they share a mutual commitment to educating the general public to appreciate and become involved in the management of cultural heritage assets.

It is also possible to develop partnerships with organisations that may not have a mutual goal but with gain a mutual benefit from the conservation of the site. Tourist operators, for example, can be required to pay a percentage of their profit, or a set annual fee in return for gaining access to particular types of cultural heritage sites. In Arizona, for example, several white-water rafting companies are required to pay a set fee per annum towards the conservation of the national parks in which they run their tourism operations. They are also required to conform to particular conservation guidelines and protocols whilst using the site and if found to be non-compliant can have their licenses suspended or cancelled. The program is mutually beneficial because the parks service receives much-needed funds for particular types of conservation works, access to the sites is controlled and the tourist operators can expose the general public to cultural heritage sites and conservation principles.

If we look beyond the immediate funding constraints associated with projects (i.e. cost of the development project, consultant fees) then we can identify creative partnerships with a range of different profit and non-profit organizations. We can then begin to implement dynamic and innovative interpretation facilities and programs for the public.

5. Re-evaluate interpretation options

Once an actual project has commenced, potential interpretive strategies are likely to streamline or vary from the initial wish list of options. Sites expected to reveal vast amounts of archaeological material may turn out to be sterile or heavily disturbed, yielding little to no archaeological material. Therefore, it may no longer be appropriate to prepare a publication about the archaeology of the site or to retain a store of artefact collections.

Alternatively, sites expected to reveal one type of resource may yield a completely different layer of significant archaeological material not expected to be found. Therefore, communities and individuals who may have a potential stake in the site (i.e. historical societies, local residents, archaeologists, developers, site owners, descendants) need to be contacted immediately and a re-engagement of community consultation should be undertaken.

Even where a site reveals material that has been accurately predicted, some community members will engage more readily with heritage practitioners and managers once they actually see and understand the archaeological resource for themselves. At the Quadrant site, a large development site in Sydney, the archaeologist, Dana Milner and the developer, Australand hosted several free tours of the nineteenth-century archaeological remains once the archaeological investigation had reached a point where the remains could be viewed by the public. Advertisements were placed in Sydney newspapers and more than 1000 people visited the site. From the visitations to the site, there were numerous positive flow-on effects for the project, in terms of the interpretative options.
The tours resulted in a number of people returning to the site with historic photographs depicting their relatives working or living at the buildings being uncovered by the archaeologists. Many people were also able to contribute their own stories of their own, or their families' association with the site and several oral histories were recorded. As a result, the final interpretation being prepared for the site now includes a much larger oral history component than originally intended and several people have found a place to reconnect with their ancestors. 10

For all of these reasons, it is essential to review and refine the interpretation options for a site or item once the work has commenced so that the interpretation will be sure to reflect the significance of the material evidence being found and the community reaction.

6. Using the right storyteller

Unfortunately, it is at this crucial final stage in the project that many interpretative programs, displays and activities fail to deliver. When marketing a new product, companies will employ a whole range of professionals to help try to ensure that product is a success in the market place. The same thing should apply to preparing interpretation programs and facilities for archaeological resources. Education specialists should prepare the archaeology kits and programs for student, professional writers in conjunction with the archaeologist write ‘popular’ versus ‘scientific’ publication, qualified curators and designers put together foyer displays, web/graphic specialists create dynamic interactive webpages, such as the Multiplex webpage for an archaeological project in Sydney City. 11 Most importantly, if a site is spiritually or culturally significant, we have to ensure that the people telling the story are recognised by that particular community as an appropriate cultural group to be preparing the text, giving the tour or running the facility.

Once we utilise specialists in interpretation, marketing, design, education, publishing and a whole range of other interpretation–related professions, we can start to develop innovative programs, facilities and activities that will successfully connect with the public and start to inspire people to conserve and protect our heritage. In the end, our archaeological resources can not speak for themselves. Their ability to educate and inspire people is in the telling of the tale.

References

Australia ICOMOS. 1999. The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS charter for the conservation of places of cultural significance.


NSW Heritage Office 2001 Assessing Significance Guidelines.

Vinton, Natalie 2002 'Interpreting Archaeology: The Home of Archaeology lies in the Heart of Modern Communities' (http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/03_index.htm)

Endnotes

1 www.heritage.nsw.gov.au
2 http://www.realpropertiesawards.com
4 http://shs.ca.alexandria.va.us/
7 see http://www.nps.gov/frac/franklin-court.html;
8 http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/03_index.htm
9 Vinton 2002: 49.