What is heritage?

Both as a word and as a concept ‘heritage’ is in current use but it is commonly agreed that it is nearly impossible to define. And so we settle for the quotidian definition of ‘the things we want to keep’. It is a workable definition which provides a basis for the selection and interpretation of our heritage. The definition also reflects the materialistic values at the heart of our consumer-oriented society and omits placing lasting value on those legacies of society which are intangible such as traditions, ideals or associations. The social conceptualisation of heritage is influenced by three main groups: heritage professionals or gate-keepers, the public and the marketeers. It is further problematised by a three-way tug-of-war between these groups over its meaning and by the non-stable nature of the groups themselves, with public interest sometimes coinciding with the commercial and sometimes with the professional. The complexities behind the conceptualisation of heritage clearly have an impact upon the way heritage is used and interpreted by the public, and must be taken into account by heritage professionals in their approach to heritage selection, assessment and presentation.

The meaning of heritage has shifted significantly over recent decades. Unlike today, the idea once held currency in the private sphere and focussed on the idea of inheritance, of the passing down of both things and values from one generation to another. One inherited obligations and family or class values along with material goods. Today the meaning of heritage rests predominantly in the public sphere, with the private heir having been replaced by a group, community or nation. Rather than being private, heritage is now a public property. Of particular note, however, is the severance of heritage from its base concept of inheritance. In becoming public and in being disconnected from inheritance, the meanings and values of heritage have become constantly contested.

That heritage has little to do with inheritance may at first seem a dubious proposition. Nonetheless, I want to argue that it is a matter of modern cultural choice, which though often linked to the past, is not necessarily determined by it. Heritage is not that which has been kept for us, but what we choose as being significant in the modern instance. ‘Our heritage’ is not so much what has been kept for us, but what has survived and which we now choose to preserve and designate as significant. In one way, this signals the public’s growing control in determining what is representative of its own heritage. It is the democratisation of one of the means by which a society seeks to define itself; it also, however, signals a shift away from the use of history (in the sense of inheritance) as a source of reference in modern life.

Heritage and history

The constitution of our heritage is the end result of a process of selection of culture and cultural artefacts, carried out within the modern public arena. Though inextricably intertwined and often confused, history and heritage are not one and the same. Heritage, unlike history, is not open to scrutiny or analysis but is more an article of faith. It might contain elements which are unhistorical or ahistorical but which when combined, add up to a cultural truth. History does not and should not stand as a totalising framework deciding what is ‘true’ or what is of value for our community on empirical grounds. Myth is also an important aspect of our cultural make-up and identity. History can, though, provide a set of parameters within which heritage gains definition, and also act as an important interpretive resource.

When combined, history and heritage can act as a powerful and well-balanced duo. We deem certain objects or things as being our heritage, as reflecting and explaining who we are. The physical object is held as heritage, but it is the object’s history or provenance (intangible as it is), which allows the past to operate through that object today and enrich us as a community. It is the history of cultural artefacts which endow them with heritage values. Heritage objects can represent the dynamism of history, emphasising the continuum of time which links the past with the present.

In skilled professional interpretations of heritage sites and objects, disciplined and agreed procedures are employed. Effectively, heritage maintains its links with history, with the idea of inheritance. Sites and objects are interpreted through their history, their associations, and their cultural value to our community today. As noted by Linda Young (this volume), such interpretation often requires highly specialised knowledge and skill, and is the result of hard and deliberate work. The central tenet of professional
interpretation stems from a respect for the close relationship between history and heritage.

Heritage and the public

Professionals are not, however, the only interpreters of heritage. The public are increasingly becoming a powerful force in the interpretation and use of their heritage. This is a development which is partly supported and encouraged by the market place: heritage has become a major commercial industry. The evidence for this is all around us: new 'genuine' period-style homes - complete with antique flushing toilets, polystyrene ceiling roses, aluminium roof gargoyles and double carports - are mushrooming along the streets of our suburbs; we can buy home-style heritage bread at our supermarkets, and we can holiday in heritage motor inns.

The heritage industry commodifies heritage. It manufactures 'new heritage' - things which have the look of 'pastness' but which have no provenance. The industry trades on the public's desire for the value of the old. It capitalises on the nostalgic and antiquarian appeal of heritage rather than on the intangible potential of historical knowledge or meaning to enrich the individual. It transforms heritage from 'the things we want to keep' to the 'things we want to buy and keep privately for ourselves' and provides the commodities through which this can be made possible. Heritage becomes an aesthetic and history becomes irrelevant. Moreover, the aesthetic is for sale.

In essence, the harnessing of heritage to this end is a logical extension of the materialism which underpins our understanding of heritage. It is also an extension of the principle that heritage is something which is public, something which is owned by all and to which all have a right. In a way, the public have embraced this attitude as a result of the tendency by heritage professionals to construct interpretation around objects, and to concentrate on objects as being the foci of significance.

The commercialisation of heritage and its commodification cannot fail to have a major impact upon heritage as it operates within our society and as it is practised by trained professionals. Surprisingly, however, heritage professionals have been slow to respond to the development of the heritage industry, and the commercialisation of heritage is an issue which is little discussed or debated.

Thematic interpretation

Is it possible to interpret our heritage, our cultural inheritance, without objects? On a broad scale this is certainly possible, and is in fact increasingly practised at the local level. One example is the history/heritage walk devised by historian Philip Bentley, founded on an incident famous in Victorian history - the theft and disappearance of the Parliamentary mace in 1891. Unlike traditional heritage trails or walks, its course is not determined by the location of physical structures or objects - indeed the slums of Melbourne in which the course of events are believed to have been played out no longer exist. Instead the 'mace walk' is structured around a narrative which demands concentration, participation and imagination from its audience. It winds around city streets which now feature modern office blocks and buildings, along remnant back lanes clean and free of odour. The close proximity and concentration of habitations, brothels and cess pits which feature in the story of the theft (itself full of conjecture) no longer exist, but are nevertheless brought to life.

Bentley, in this walk, is interpreting an event which was played out over a century ago. The centrepiece object of the event, the mace, is missing. Who stole it? Can it be found? The walk traces the conjectured path over which the mace was taken following the theft - and the participants follow in search. Through the thrill of the mystery, participants are invited to become immersed in the social, political and cultural climate of late nineteenth century Melbourne and to learn about the rich depth of history that the city holds.

It is, therefore, possible to successfully provide a public interpretation of heritage without the aid of objects. Nevertheless, objects do form an immediate point of contact with the past - a tangible link between the past and the present - and are powerful and valuable interpretative tools. The local historical society of Fitzroy, a Melbourne group, have developed a series of heritage walks which, unlike Bentley's walk, are reliant on objects - in this case aspects of the built environment, but which do not make these objects the focus of significance and interpretation. These walks concentrate on developing a theme and thereby attempt to reveal the continuum of history reflected in the built and cultural environments of the suburb. The concentration on a theme broadens the scope of site-types visited in traditional walks and allows the participant to perceive and appreciate the dynamics and influences which have contributed to the environment in which they now live or are visiting.

The theme of one walk is animals - ranging from horses to dairy cows to rats - which no longer contribute significantly to the character of our urban environments. Horses, for instance - once primary providers of transport - are addressed in a heritage context by highlighting the infrastructure that allowed them to fulfil such an important role. The walk takes people past livery stables, farrier and veterinary complexes, food store houses, carriageways between houses, water troughs and hitching rings fastened in gutters. It examines the indentations of iron cart-wheels in bluestone curbing, and explains the use of wear-resistant red wood street paving - now the bane of motorists. It
indicates the places where cab ranks once stood and
discusses the odorous and messy pollution problem created
by the animals. The walk encourages participants to
imagine the dynamic and character of Fitzroy prior to the
introduction of mechanised transport, and also to see how
Fitzroy has changed and altered in response to its
introduction. It attempts to increase participants'
understanding and appreciation of the cultural environment
of Fitzroy and to equip them with the basic skills to
continue to do so.

Walks such as the mace walk of Melbourne and the animal
walk of Fitzroy seek to reinvigorate the history of the
places in which we live. Both are structured around an
idea, the focus of which is no longer present, and
elucidates that idea by means of a narrative or through
illustration. The use of a theme removes the primary focus
from objects to their meaning within the larger picture.
The object is secondary to the appreciation of contextual
meaning.

The potential of the thematic approach for more accurately
locating and assessing the cultural heritage of communities
and places has been recognised at both federal and state
levels. Increasingly thematic histories are being
commissioned as a central part of heritage surveys and are
subsequently used to guide the site selection process. This
allows interpretation to come into play at the earliest
stages and provides a structure in which the cultural values
and characteristics of a place can be more strongly
employed and reflected in the selection process. Thematic
histories employ methods which require much community
consultation but which can act to safeguard the integrity of
a community's heritage by ensuring that it is a true
reflection and not a select overlay that reflects the outlook
of a consultant. The Australian Heritage Commission, the
Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and
the Historic Buildings Council have all conducted studies
in Victoria along these lines.

Communities act as both the custodians and consumers of
heritage. Through education explaining how heritage can
actively reflect and enrich a community, and through
development of the ways and means to more accurately
assess, select and present that which is designated as
heritage, communities can become moderating influences
on the excesses of the heritage industry. Heritage
professionals must not ignore the activities of the
commercial realm but instead act to ensure that the
connections between heritage and inheritance are not in
fact severed, and that continuing emphasis is placed on
these legacies of society that are intangible.

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Endnotes

1 Robert Hewison. 'Heritage: An Interpretation', in David L.
Uzzell (ed), Heritage Interpretation. Volume One. The Natural