Our Island Home: difference, marginality, community construction and implications for heritage

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Abstract
This paper considers the understandings of attachment, identity and place found within the communities of a small off-shore Queensland Island: Magnetic Island, which is located in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and World Heritage Area. Individuals, as members of the island community (which is characterised by various unbounded community groups), in living their day to day lives on the island, engage in a quest for identity and authenticity that is involved in a relationship between identity-making as a process and the way in which worlds and ways of living are meaningfully constituted. One of the outcomes is that the past is selectively constructed and organised in a relationship of continuity with the lived experience of the island environment and the nostalgic recreation and reinforcement of both place and community. In so doing the various physical features and intangible aspects of the island, and indeed the community itself, is imbued with cultural meanings that also act to reinforce the islander sense of marginality, difference and separation.

Introduction
The following discussion shows how heritage as a social phenomenon is implicated in the complex social processes in which people – individuals or communities – identify those things that are of value to be kept for future generations. Importantly, these include practices and traditions and the web of meanings that reinforce belonging and communality and act to ‘make place’. Many communities today are facing new cultural, social and economic challenges. One of these is an increased plurality of memories and the necessity for understandings of the past that allow for multiple representations, including the way in which nostalgia acts to introduce and reinforce pasts that might be representations of memories other than our own. Another is the way in which the formation of attachments and values – and understandings of heritage – does not rely on a measure of time depth and of ‘rootedness’. If we recognise that the processes that people use to engage with and define their own pasts are as revealing as those pasts themselves, within the heritage context this allows an equal emphasis to be placed on culture as tradition, and culture as communication, with obvious implications for the way in which we identify and protect heritage values.

Magnetic Island
In contrast with many of the inhabited Reef islands, the Magnetic Island community is not critically composed of tourists or of those supporting tourism and its related activities. It is a place where people choose to live, while engaging with the pursuits associated with Queensland coastal life. Magnetic Island lies 8 kilometres north of Townsville, Queensland’s second largest settlement, across the waters of Cleveland Bay. The island is a suburb of Townsville, and many of the people who live on the island regularly commute to the mainland for work, school and other activities. A ferry service links the island and the mainland between around 6 am and midnight: there is no bridge between the mainland and the island, and this is a feature of the island that many residents are determined to retain. However, bridge or no bridge, the island and its community is constituted in terms of a complex and inseparable relationship with the mainland, often posited as one of opposition.

Magnetic Island has a land area of approximately 5200 hectares, bounded by some 40 kilometres of mostly rocky coastline, and a resident population of around 2500 people. The island community is concentrated in four settlement areas: Picnic Bay, Nelly Bay, Arcadia (Alma and Geoffrey bays) and Horseshoe Bay. A number of other uninhabited bays are small, secluded, attractive places visited regularly by both locals and tourists. More than half the island area is included in the Magnetic Island National Park, which has a considerable influence on land use and development.

The settlement that was to become known as Townsville was founded as a port in 1864, and it was not long after this that the new residents set themselves to exploring the attractions of the nearby island. The island at the time had a long history of Aboriginal use and occupation. Non-indigenous use of the island was initially recreational, epitomised in the naming of the first settled island area as ‘Picnic Bay’. Within a year of being settled, Townsville inhabitants began to cross the bay to the island for picnic excursions, and to clamber around the rocky outcrops on the shoreline, collecting plants, shell and coral. The abundant natural resources of the island soon led to the establishment of more permanent occupation by non-indigenous people. The appropriation for use, whether recreational or resource driven, also led to the dispossession of the original inhabitants (Harrington 2004).

Although hire boats had been ferrying people to and from the island since the mid-1880s, what is today the Magnetic Island Ferry Service was established at the end of the century by Robert Hayles, whose family still plays a prominent role with island projects (Barnes 1997: 12; Hayles Magnetic Island Service n.d.). A permanent ferry service was important as it created an essential physical link between the island and the mainland. It also fostered the ongoing relationship between the island and members of the mainland community who could regularly and easily participate in Magnetic Island life without permanently residing on the island.

It was not until after World War II that it became possible to travel between the various bay settlements by road. Previously this could only be achieved by foot or by boat. One of the
impetuses would have been the continuously growing island population. Cable electricity from the mainland was finally connected in 1960, a lack of infrastructure and facilities having been a characteristic of the island for the first half of the 20th century. For many, happy to be removed from the demands of the modernising world, this was one of the island's appeals (Harrington 2004).

**Our island home**

‘Our Island Home’ has become a colloquialism for the island, its genesis in the name of an early guest house in Nelly Bay. The house is listed on the Commonwealth Register of the National Estate, with the statement ‘Our Island Home is a rare local survivor from the early period of Magnetic Island’s history’ (http://www.ahc.gov.au/cgi-bin/register). The irony is that the building no longer exists, having been destroyed in development activities at Nelly Bay, which one section of the community sees as being antithetical to the continued ‘sense of place’, heritage and identity of the island and islanders.

An oral history held by the Magnetic Island History & Craft Centre records that there is evidence to suggest an element of escapism was part of the motivation of early (and current) residents’, and that even today there is a protective mechanism in which the islanders jealously guard their past with a ‘look but don’t touch’ defence, and an assertion that the island and the islanders have done and will continue to do things ‘their own way’. Paraphrased in Australian vernacular, the message is one of: hands off ... we’re all right mate ... we do things differently here.

Part of the escapism of island life was reflected in the delayed establishment of facilities and infrastructure, enhancing the ideological distance between the islanders and the ‘real/modern world’ and the identification with a pioneering and alternative mode of existence. The more pragmatic members of the island community insist that being a suburb of Townsville should accrue infrastructure benefits equivalent to (and no more expensive than) those on the mainland. This contradiction – the desire to be both removed and different from mainland Townsville, and the demand for equal residents’ rights and all the benefits of a ‘Townsvillian’ – has been interpreted as one of the impetuses for the community’s sometimes bipolar character, or “the way "Maggie" is the way she is” (MI History & Craft Centre n.d.: 23). The attraction of island living is compelling, but even more so when it can be combined with the advantages of proximity and easy access to mainstream life. As a Townsville resident noted: ‘The island is only 5 miles from the city ... but it seems so much further away once you are there’.

The history of the island is characterised by a divergence of views between those desirous of a modern, forward-thinking and developed island, and those who wish to retain a more reclusive, pristine and development-free environment. Jessie Macqueen (1952: 16) encapsulates this dichotomy when she muses about a theoretical reaction from the island’s long-deceased first European settler, Harry Butler:

> It is well, Neil [Butler’s daughter] and I think, that he is not here to witness the present bulldozer epidemic now laying bare the grand old forest land and uprooting gigantic trees, merely to build roads from bay to bay, so people may walk in city fashion, instead of hiking like those of old through perfectly delightful scenic tracks.

And

It must be borne in mind that the early visitors to, and residents of, the island did not want development. (There are many island residents who still do not want it). What they came here to do was to fish, relax get away from it all and soak up the island ambience. Let the people on the mainland immerse themselves in the mania of development, but leave the island alone. And there are those who will tell you that the island ‘eventually claims you’. (MI History & Craft Centre n.d.: 11)

Since European occupation of the area in the 1860s, there has been a close and ongoing relationship between the people of Townsville and Magnetic Island. It is incomplete to talk about community attachments to the island without considering the nature of these attachments as experienced by regular island visitors who are otherwise residents of Townsville. The 1990 Townsville City Council Magnetic Island Management Plan records that the largest proportion of visitors to the island came from Townsville City, and that many of them have equally strong opinions about protecting the island from further development, and preserving the relaxed and peaceful atmosphere and lifestyle (Gutteridge et al. 1990: 78–80, Appendix 9). Before the implementation of a regular ferry service many of the island ‘residents’ were mainlanders who maintained houses on the island. They had the ‘best of both worlds’ with a modern weekday existence and the ability to escape on weekends and holidays to the simpler, more relaxed island lifestyle. Consequently, in addition to people who currently live on the island, many ‘Townsvillians’ have strong attachments to the island: some have either previously lived on the island and/or regularly visit the island, whether for day excursions, because they maintain a residence there, or because they engage in an island associated activity – for example, fishing, swimming or surf life saving. Aboriginal communities living in Townsville have an ongoing connection through their relationships with the Traditional Owners of the island, the Wulgurukaba people, and an ancient and continuing association with the island and the surrounding waters.

**The way we were and always will be**

Historically, the lifestyle of the islanders was immersed in a social environment more open, free and uncluttered than the mainlanders’ mode of existence, particularly when considered in the context of the conservatism of the post-Victorian era. Although larrkinism had been established as one element of the ‘Australian character’ during the first half of the 19th century, the more structured and conservative aspects of society were often difficult to escape – unless of course you moved elsewhere ... to an island for example. Kapferer (1996: 51, 82) lists qualities that are considered to be quintessentially Australian as youth, audacity, loyalty, a care for the underdog, ingenuity, suspicion of authority, fatalism and a well-honed conception of social justice that is based on equality before the law. The symbolic ‘type’ of the larrkin represents an enduring Australian myth, particularly represented in characteristics associated with flouting authority and convention. ‘It is no wonder then, that Magnetic Island, so beckoningly close, would attract the freedom lovers of the nation, to begin yet another iteration of the development of the Australian ethic, as an escape from the trammels of conservative society’(MI History & Craft Centre: n.d.). Kapferer (1996: 77, quoting Morris) suggests that Australians have lost the ‘space of splendid isolation’ which was available
to them in the 1930s – 'a space which allowed the freedom to discover, interpret, create, rework and above all put to personal, everyday use a chaotic variety of meanings, understandings and knowledges of ways of being, traditions, heritage and cultures'. Many of those who contributed to the research project on the island identified that the island enshrines this sense of isolation and freedom to explore a way of life that has been lost in the modern urban experience – to simply live uncluttered by buildings, noise and people and to engage with the environment in a way that allows the experience of being part of it, not merely an observer.

Members of the island community and regular visitors appear to seek and highly value a life that is simpler, safer and more community conscious than is represented by perceptions of living in other places in today's Australia. For example (quoted in Harrington 2004):

"We came over to the island in the early fifties... we lived in Townsville and came here on holidays... there was no mains power, no mains water; you lived with hurricane lamps and wood stoves... sort of stepping back in time.

My family first came here for holidays as it was seen as an unspoiled area and the way Australia may have been some years ago... the big attraction is it is not suburbia... no glitz... it's a family place and it just doesn't have the same sort of social problems as other places... it's stuck in a time warp... there's no need to comply with social norms and there is a wonderful community atmosphere.

For some on the island there is a sense of trying to regain a way of life that has been lost; for others there is a desire to allow their children to experience the same joys of childhood they themselves remember. Either way, there is a nostalgic imperative that seeks to link the present with past times and places, and that emphasises a relationship with and close proximity to the natural environment.

One Townsville resident described his life-long association with the island. His grandfather settled in Townsville in the 1930s and took his family to Magnetic Island most weekends, finally retiring there. His father continued the pattern, allowing his children to spend most of their holidays on their island. Today, by taking his own children to the island (where he owns a holiday house), he is introducing a fourth generation of children to the island. His wife also used to visit the island as a child and they want their children to have the same experiences and advantages. By choice they would live on the island, but schools and work and the children's activities make this difficult. But he stresses that he wants his children to be able to do the same sorts of things he did as a child, including bushwalking, snorkelling, spear-fishing, swimming and surfing.

Casey (1993: 37) tells us: 'Nostalgia... is not merely a matter of regret for lost times; it is also a pining for lost places...' (emphasis in original). Chase and Shaw (1989: 1) more closely relate nostalgia to an imagined and conceptualised sense of the past, suggesting that the distinctly modern and metaphorical use of the word 'nostalgia' means that the home we may miss is no longer a geographically defined space but is a state of mind. It variously serves to connect the past to the present, often through generations of people. Lowenthal (1989: 21) allows us to recognise that nostalgia is not alone in its distortions, as no non-nostalgic reading of the past exists that is by contrast 'honest' or authentically 'true': many other historical perspectives have the same 'presentist' bias as nostalgia. Kapferer (1996: 80) also discusses this 'glossing over' of the past as the selectivity of collective memory, which allows a celebration of an existence that often can only 'be rendered "romantic" or charming through the safe distance of a later time, a welfare "state, modern sanitation and technological progress"'.

The past that many islanders seek to recreate on the island is no doubt one that is 'glossed-over' and eclectic in the values it recalls. For some, this nostalgic re-presentation also harkens to a past that has not been personally experienced, but one that has been passed on through the memories of earlier generations, or enshrined in other representations.

However, the island as experienced today – for all its modern sanitation and trappings – is far from an attempt at a commercial recreation of an unspoilt past, or a media perversion presented as 'heritage'. Unfortunately, such concerns may well become the case, not because of the attempt by the islanders to reclaim a desired 'sense' of the past, but rather in the face of a development-driven marketing program that emphasises and seeks to sell the island's nostalgic, 'village-like', laid-back lifestyle values and community – the very attributes that are most threatened by commercial development and the inevitable change to the island's community structure.

The overwhelming nostalgic desire for things past 'is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery' (Hall 1990: 236). Many of the islanders lack a historical longevity of place experience and memory that characterises communities with longer histories – most have moved to Magnetic Island as adults because it is only in the last few decades that ferry services have been regular enough to allow commuter-living on the island. A similar period has seen the island become more attractive with the installation of 'livable' levels of infrastructure and services. The linkage between the past and the future does closely suggest a 'state of mind', and it certainly encompasses an 'alternative' lifestyle. For many this represents a now-gone, simpler and safer past – one that is predicated on a guardianship relationship with the environment that imbues 'Maggie' with meaning and gives rise to its many narratives and its sense of place. Many of the residents have consciously chosen a present, and a future, that have emerged from a remembered, remixed, reworked and re-imagined past with roots not only in other places, but in other people and ways of life.

There is a danger in assuming that identity – and identification within a landscape – requires a time-depth and rootedness to be valid. Discussions of the relationship between landscapes, diasporas and movement reinforce this, as does the way in which modern communities create places and attachments in new environments. Landscapes can themselves be semi-imagined or informed by memories of other places. In any instance there is a nexus, a negotiation, between personal experience and memory and environmental spaces, that lead to the creation of a sense of place. There is an easing of old experiences into the new environment, and the creation of new histories. Identity, whether personal or group, is created through engagement with particular places in a landscape, and through recognising and understanding the semiotics that may constitute the meanings associated with these places. On various scales social identity and attachments to place can be formed by appropriating a landscape and its elements.

Amit (2002: 16) assures that it is a mistake to conclude that
modes of community that are ‘newly formed’ or episodic and partial necessarily constitute ‘shallow and less deeply felt attachments’ than those that are longer established. For example, non-indigenous communities in settler countries are often erroneously perceived to lack a sense of belonging or strong sense of locality. The Magnetic Island community is characterised by relatively recent arrivals and a form of ‘extended’ membership involving Townsville residents who regularly weekend on the island. For many, dislocation from both place and past has become a process of re-location and re-creation of social identity, which have acted to create new attachments, new places, new values, and hence to reformulate a prioritisation of those ‘things’ that should be protected as part of the heritage we retain and protect for future generations.

In discussing why Magnetic Island is important, many ground their attachments in their ‘place’ within the broader community, and express a need to preserve the community and its cohesiveness as an important inheritance for their children. ‘Sense of community’ is inseparable from ‘sense of place’ (quoted in Harrington 2004):

We came here for the community... the current community is diverse, daggy and dysfunctional... we all know each other and of each other... it is a real community... there is a sense of a far away north Queensland community with space and place.

The community is great... it is safe, you can leave your houses unlocked, everyone gets on... they are forgiving and supportive, and you don’t have to mix if you don’t want to.

The things that people value are often familiar, special, and local. It is these things that form a basis for self and communal expression, and create a willingness for communities to tackle communal problems and sustain their communal wellbeing (Munjeri 2000: 43). ‘People care because they associate the idea of community with people they know, with whom they have shared experiences, activities, places and/or histories’ (Amit 2002: 16). The institutions and practices that are an integral part of such processes serve to develop and sustain community relationships, often accommodating both local and global conditions of life and providing stable and significant foci of cultural identity. The Magnetic Island community is diverse in terms of the range of impetuses that have acted on ‘migrants’ to the island. The island has been a haven to many who are idiosyncratically ‘alternative’ or eccentric, but it has also attracted those more commonly associated with mainstream lifestyles. Hence the population includes many professional people who commute to jobs in Townsville, and retirees. A Townsville resident notes that the Magnetic Island residents are ‘certainly interesting’, and that while not ‘quite like Nimbin’, the island has a similarly philosophically constituted population, which may explain the conflicting social imperatives that characterise the islanders’ approaches to development and change.

‘No man is an island’, but maybe a community is ...

A singularly important value expressed by both residents and visitors is that ‘Maggie’ is ‘an island’. Living on an island and being ‘an islander’, is a significant factor in how people identify themselves and differentiate the island community from the ‘everyday’ people on the mainland. There are elements of romance, adventure and of escapism, of being removed from a mundane existence, directed by abstract rather than contingent needs and desires. For many, it is a conscious determination to become ‘other’, where otherness is created by defying the perceived norm. The island community is created through a combination of non-orthodoxy and physical displacement.

One Townsville resident suggested that the attraction of Townsville is inseparable from its association with an island, citing the opportunity to just ‘hop into a yacht’ and go for a sail to the island and back. An island resident of some 20 years described the sense of ‘splendid isolation’ and of being in a place that was bounded and contained: ‘Part of the attraction of coming here was the physical place ... an island with boundaries – either you are in the place or not’.

The idea of separation and removal from the mainland is one of the more vigorously defended ideals of both island residents and mainland visitors. A bridge between the island and the mainland has been mooted over the years, the original impetus for the project being lost in the grey zone of urban mythology, although there are those who believe it remains an item on the local council agenda. Responses to the possibility of a future bridge were almost universally defensive of retaining the physical disconnection between the island and mainland Townsville, for example (quoted in Harrington 2004):

Bridge? – no, bad idea. Then it wouldn’t be an island, and wouldn’t have that attraction of being separate and away from the mainland.

The attraction of the island is that it is remote but is so close to Townsville... it is significant that you have to cross the water to get there... I would hate to see a bridge constructed... everyone on the island has to use the ferry and this creates a real sort of community closeness.

No bridge should ever be built – leave it the way it is as this is part of our heritage... Maggie needs to remain separate ... Australia is just ‘that other big island over there’.

Another common feeling was that the trip on the ferry is an important aspect of island living. It provides an opportunity to talk to people and feel a sense of community togetherness. Another island resident sums it up: ‘The ferry is a fabulous social event ... a great way to chat to people.’ Apart from the challenge to the conception of the island as a separate and contained place, a bridge would threaten one of the mechanisms that reinforces the ‘community’ and cohesiveness of the island community. It would also remove a part of the experience that many of the people interviewed mentioned as an emotionally charged moment in their relationship with the island, that of alighting from the ferry and walking along the Jetty.

It is not surprising that a threat to the future of the Picnic Bay Jetty engendered an emotional community response. With the construction of a new ferry terminal as part of the Nelly Bay development, questions were raised about the viability of structurally maintaining the jetty once it became ‘redundant’. These primarily relate to which statutory authority would take financial responsibility for its upkeep. The ‘worth’ of the jetty in this sense is strongly connected to its ongoing use as a marine facility. However, the value of the jetty to the community is inseparable from the jetty’s role as a mnemonic, as a symbol of journeying and arrival, of its affirmation of the island’s isolation from the mainland, and as a place of community reinforcement...
through shared departures and arrivals. It is a place of gathering, fishing and strolling. It is the place where most people meet the island for the first time, a symbolic portal or gate, where the present is strung with a series of narratives that link to the past and the future.

The island-based narratives interweave with those of journeying and arriving, of coming home, of a destination that is both tangible – in the sense of the island – and intangible, in the sense of belonging, community and being in place. Importantly, the jetty symbolises the conjunction of sea and land that reinforces the significance of being an island place. The jetty is thus both physically and experientially an extension of a more central story that embraces the island and the mainland, and links the community to the world at large.

Conclusion: a sense of place

Kapferer (1996: 4) notes in a summation of Australian attitudes that ‘the vision and experience of community (however subverted by the mythopoetic of nationalist passion and by the egocentricity of individualism itself) is a constant and cherished ideal’. The ideal of community is a valued component of the islanders’ expression of place, identity and belonging, and one that is inextricably linked with nostalgic notions of the past. The island is the place where many local people have lived (and continue to live) their lives – either in full or part, have passed on their knowledge of places (indigenous and non-indigenous), of fishing, boating, swimming, hunting, picnicking, collecting shells and food, and exploring the bush, beaches and reef flats. It is, therefore, a landscape that is inextricably bound into the lived experiences, identities and connections of both past and present individuals and communities.

The beauty of the island, promoted extensively in marketing campaigns to attract tourists, has influenced the decisions of many visitors to permanently settle. The attraction of the island features in many local histories and reminiscences. In its engagement with a range of sensual expressions and experiences it embraces far more than the visual aesthetics of the island’s physical features. These expressions emphasise community, security, spirituality, environment and the island as a ‘special place’, where attachment and attribution of value are reliant on what are often mundane activities. Yet the broader landscape is experienced and conceptualised at varying spatial and temporal levels, in a fluidity of place that allows personal and community spaces and places to merge and diverge. The island is a mosaic of multi-conceptualised places and meanings, some of which are ‘more’ personal and important. Being in place is also a reinforcement of not being somewhere else.

The ‘special’ places of the island are not simply points or locations – they have distinctive meanings and values for individuals and for communities and are bound up with personal, community and cultural identity. They are also implicated in broader, expressive landscapes, through which flow multiple discourses that merge local stories and meanings with more global narratives and attachments, or significantly, with notions of detachment and removal from some ‘other’ place that is not ‘the island’.

For all our efforts to identify the ‘sense of place’ through the cultural heritage endeavour, often these meanings continue to be somehow deflated and muted in efforts at engagement. One of the challenges is engaging with the conceptual, imagined dimension to the construction of all communities, and the capacity for empathy and affinity for people and place that are grounded in social relations and practices. A sense of place is intrinsically derived from how people feel and what they do and experience, as much as it is precipitated by the physical ‘thingness’ of place. These intangible dimensions of lifeworlds include people’s actions, often founded on traditional practices, where these give meaning to the daily lives of people. For Magnetic Islanders, the experience of swimming, fishing, picnicking and walking on the beach, boating and snorkelling are social practices that reinforce a stable, authentic and ahistorical platform for the reinforcement of identity. Together with a sense of community and belonging, these are the heritage values, places and practices that the islanders wish to retain and pass on to their children.

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