Interpretation

1 Purpose

This Practice Note provides guidance on interpretation for places of cultural significance. It examines the concept of interpretation and how it relates to the *Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, 2013* (hereafter *Burra Charter*) process, and the connections between interpretation and conserving significance.

The focus of this Practice Note is how interpretation contributes to recognising and retaining the cultural significance of a place through building understanding, awareness and engagement. It also outlines the process of interpretation planning and offers guidance on how to develop a cohesive interpretation plan for such places. Key terms are defined. It does not detail the many different ways that interpretation may be delivered; this is a significant topic in itself.

The *Illustrated Burra Charter* (2004) and some other helpful resources are offered in Section 5.

The Practice Note is for all practitioners who are seeking to fulfill Article 25 of the *Burra Charter* and to build interpretation into the planning and management of places of cultural significance.

Scope

This Practice Note covers:

1. Purpose
2. Definitions, concepts and principles
3. Key steps in interpretation planning
4. Common issues
5. Resources

2 Definitions, concepts and principles

What is interpretation?

Interpretation is defined as ‘all the ways of presenting the cultural significance of a place’ (Article 1.17, *Burra Charter*). The aim of interpretation is to **reveal** and help retain the significance—natural, cultural or both—of that place. It is often thought of as an action or an activity and the international *ICOMOS Ename Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites* (ICOMOS: 2008) defines interpretation as the ‘full range of potential activities intended to heighten public awareness and enhance understanding of cultural heritage sites’. Others have described interpretation as:

- A means of communicating ideas and feelings which help people understand more about themselves and their environment. (Interpretation Australia, [http://www.interpretationaustralia.asn.au](http://www.interpretationaustralia.asn.au))
- *Interpretation can strengthen and sustain the relationships between the community and its heritage.* (NSW Heritage Office: 2005)
The scope of interpretation can vary greatly from fully developed visitor experiences incorporating a range of techniques through to the modest, simple and inexpensive. It is applicable equally to places that are of every day use such as offices, residences, and institutions, as well as dedicated tourism places. Defining the scope and objectives is a key task in interpretation planning.

Why interpret?

Interpretation, added to the Burra Charter in 1999, is recognised as being integral to the conservation of a place and its values. Article 25 states:

The cultural significance of many places is not readily apparent, and should be explained by interpretation. Interpretation should enhance understanding and engagement, and be culturally appropriate.

Interpretation enhances understanding. Interpretation communicates what is important about a place, recognising that a place may have a range of values and meanings for different people. Conservation actions, like restoration, preservation and reconstruction can be seen as a means of interpretation. These actions have the potential to reveal significance and aid in its understanding.

Interpretation may be achieved through many different means, for example: through use; in the way the fabric of a place is investigated or conserved; through interpretive media (e.g. signs, displays, activities, publications, events); community engagement and more. Essentially, all the actions taken on a significant place may contribute to people’s appreciation of its significance and their engagement with the place and its meanings.

Interpretation can be an important way of safeguarding a place. Public awareness and understanding of the cultural significance of a place may reduce the risks of vandalism or unintended damage, and increase the level of community vigilance.

Key principles

The international ICOMOS Ename Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites adopted in 2008 sets out seven key principles to guide approaches to the interpretation of places:

1. **Facilitate understanding and appreciation** of cultural heritage sites and foster public awareness and engagement in the need for their protection and conservation

2. **Communicate** the meaning of cultural heritage sites to a range of audiences through careful, documented recognition of significance, through accepted scientific and scholarly methods as well as from living cultural traditions

3. **Safeguard the tangible and intangible values** of cultural heritage sites in their natural and cultural settings and social contexts

4. **Respect the authenticity** of cultural heritage sites, by communicating the significance of their historic fabric and cultural values and protecting them from the adverse impact of intrusive interpretive infrastructure, visitor pressure, inaccurate or inappropriate interpretation

5. **Contribute to the sustainable conservation** of cultural heritage sites, through promoting public understanding of, and participation in, ongoing conservation efforts, ensuring long-
term maintenance of the interpretive infrastructure and regular review of its interpretive contents

6. **Encourage inclusiveness** in the interpretation of cultural heritage sites, by facilitating the involvement of stakeholders and associated communities in the development and implementation of interpretive programs

7. **Develop technical and professional guidelines** for heritage interpretation and presentation, including technologies, research, and training. Such guidelines must be appropriate and sustainable in their social contexts.

**What is interpretation planning?**

Interpretation forms a key part of conservation planning. Interpretation should help achieve the fundamental conservation principles espoused by the *Burra Charter*: that is, places of cultural significance are best conserved through good management based on an appropriate understanding of significance.

Interpretation practice is an area of professional specialisation and uses some specific terms and concepts. These include:

**Interpretation policy**: is a broad philosophical statement designed to guide the overall approach to interpretation. An interpretation policy would generally form part of the overall conservation policy for a place and consider, for example:

- The approach to all aspects of significance—fabric, meanings and associations, and setting
- Interpretation of works or changes—before, during and after
- The involvement of associated people, and
- Access to the place.

**Interpretation plan**: guides how the cultural significance of a place will be communicated through specific projects, programs and activities. It is essential that it is based on a sound understanding of the significance to the place. It will generally:

- Research and identify significant themes and stories about the place
- Analyse the place to identify interpretive opportunities and issues
- Profile the likely audiences for the interpretive activities
- Describe how these themes and stories will be presented
- Provide a framework for managing visitors, and
- Set priorities, timing and define the resources needed.

An interpretation plan should be regularly reviewed.

**Interpretation projects and programs**: specific projects and programs will be identified in the interpretation plan. Each will need planning, concept development and design, followed by its implementation and finally its evaluation.

**Interpretive media**: this means all of the different ways that the interpretation is conveyed. It can include fixed infrastructure (e.g. signs, sound systems, displays), materials and guides (e.g. audio guides, phone apps, brochures, booklets), people (e.g. story-telling, artists-in residence, role plays) and events and activities.
3 Key steps in interpretation planning

Interpretation planning should be undertaken with rigour and using a methodical approach. This section provides an overview of key steps in interpretation planning. Careful research and documentation is important throughout the whole process, and the materials used and sources quoted should be accurate and relevant to the place.

Inventory

Following the establishment of the aims and objectives of the interpretive program, it is necessary to understand what assets or resources are available to underpin interpretation. These will include the place itself, other related sites, movable objects associated with the place, documentary materials (both primary and secondary sources), oral histories, visual media and people with knowledge about or associations with the place.

Understanding the significance of the place is an essential part of the inventory. Cultural significance may have already been documented in a heritage assessment or study, heritage register listing or a conservation management plan. If it hasn’t already been done, an analysis of the place should be undertaken to understand the ways in which the attributes of the place—fabric, associations, meanings, setting—relate to its cultural significance and to identify what can be conveyed, as well as any constraints.

The available records and other sources of information about a place should be identified to ensure that important sources are not overlooked. Local communities, previous and current occupiers and owners of the place and local researchers may also be important sources of knowledge in developing interpretation.

Many places have special associations with particular people and communities, and it is vital that they are involved in interpretation (Article 12 of the Burra Charter). Such people may hold knowledge about the place that can contribute to the development of interpretive themes and stories. They may have social, spiritual or other cultural responsibilities for the place, and these may form part of the significance of the place.

Indigenous people are the primary source of information on the value of their cultural heritage. Ask First: a guide to respecting Indigenous heritage places and values (Australian Heritage Commission: 2002) offers sound principles and processes on involving Indigenous people. The Australia ICOMOS Practice Note on the Burra Charter and Indigenous cultural heritage management is also a valuable guide.

Define the audience

Interpretation is the fundamental interface with the public. People encounter heritage in various situations, including everyday use of heritage places: these all need interpretation. Every place has an ‘audience’. As well as tourists and holiday makers, these may be people who work in a place, or who live there. It might be those who attend activities or events there, or those who appreciate the place as part of their local landscape.

It is critical to recognise that the audience is not all the same. Visitors are motivated by different interests and have distinct needs in visiting the site. Effective and efficient interpretation requires knowledge of visitor demographics and psychographics. Demographics indicate distinctions such as
age and visitor group composition. Psychographics indicate perceived needs and desires. This type of segmentation of visitor characteristics may be available from local tourism authorities or larger museums. Even general knowledge of visitor characteristics can assist in the effective focusing of interpretive (and marketing) resources.

A different or expanded audience may also be desired, requiring different interpretive approaches designed to attract or suit the needs of these new audiences. School or other education-focused groups for example, may require larger gathering spaces or styles of interpretation different to those already in place.

Interpretation needs to respond to, and engage with, both known and potential audiences. This means identifying who they are, how they engage with the place now and why they are interested.

Develop interpretation policy

Developing an interpretation policy will guide the overall approach, including the way in which stories are told within and around a place. Prefacing the policy with a ‘vision’ for the interpretation of the place may be appropriate and useful at some places.

The policy and vision should inform the development of the interpretation themes, and specific projects or programs. It will also guide the appropriate selection of interpretive methodologies and media.

Define key interpretive themes and stories

The choice of themes for interpretation requires understanding of the place, its significance, its history, people and context. Developing interpretive themes is a skilled undertaking, requiring creativity, reflection and consultation.

An interpretive theme is not the same as a historical theme. An interpretive theme is a succinct distillation of one or more key ideas about a place into a concept that can be communicated and explored. The interpretive themes should reflect the significance of the place and establish a framework for specific stories and activities. They should embody the core concepts for interpretation and provide clarity of purpose and experience. They should be developed with different audience segments in mind.

Interpretive themes may enable a place to be linked to other places, objects and collections, and to wider themes that extend across a locality, region or beyond. For example, a number of key Australian convict sites including Port Arthur, Fremantle Prison and Norfolk Island are formally connected through their World Heritage Listing.

A place may have several interpretive themes, and each may be delivered through a range of programs, activities and media. As many sites have multi-layered or potentially conflicting histories, understanding these stories and the significance of the place to different groups is important to an authentic and sensitive interpretation of the place.

Establish interpretation methods and techniques

Interpretation may be achieved through a combination of many different methods and techniques. While discussion of specific methods is beyond the scope of this Practice Note, some key concepts underpinning the development of successful interpretation are outlined below.
First, interpretation can be **embedded into the overall planning of the place**, forming part of the brief for conservation actions, new development or the design of new elements, as well as making sure that off-site and movable interpretation is integrated and consistent with the overall project. A second conceptual level might be considered to be ‘**incidental’ interpretation**, aimed at providing clues and ‘provocative’ elements that encourage further inspection or contemplation. A third is **detailed interpretation**, designed to provide information about the place. Rather than being wholly factual however, this can remain open ended, but should provide the base information in an accurate framework.

Good interpretation requires creative responses to the place and will often embody all of these concepts and utilise a range of techniques in concert to provide an integrated experience. These techniques and experiences should be tailored to the specific visitor interests and be compatible with use of the place.

While common and traditional techniques include signage, text and images, other approaches can include permanent and ephemeral artworks/sculpture, guided tours, architecture, landscape, soundscapes and lighting. Digital media, internet and personal devices such as smart phones can provide access to greater levels of information and more experience-based interpretation with less impact on the significance of the place. They can also provide remote access and potentially engage a larger audience.

Event-based programs such as talks, festivals, theatre productions, education programs, and less thematic activities can also form part of the interpretive strategies. Off-site interpretation should also form part of the interpretive suite as it has broad reaching opportunities for conveying important messages. For example, books, websites, films and other programs related to the place can also contribute to the experience and understanding of its significance.

**Implementation**

The final step—implementation—involves turning the planned interpretation into reality: into projects, activities and the variety of interpretive opportunities and media.

Key implementation questions include: How will the interpretation be funded and maintained? Who is responsible for which aspect? Who will evaluate the effectiveness of the interpretation in delivering the interpretive themes or storylines? Who will maintain and repair the interpretation, and plan for and implement changes?

Regular review of the interpretation policy and plan is vital to ensure it is achieving its objectives and enabling the significance of the place to be understood. Usually such a review would occur in parallel with a review of the conservation management plan.

### 4 Common issues

**Issue: Respect for the special connections between people and a place**

*Significant associations between people and a place should be respected, retained and not obscured. Opportunities for the interpretation, commemoration and celebration of these associations should be investigated and implemented (Burra Charter Article 24.1).*
Guidance: At the core of many interpretation projects is the practitioner’s ability to connect with those people and communities who are custodians and owners of the stories of the place. Interpretation planning needs to enable former users, occupiers, owners and others to contribute to the story-telling and interpretation program. An inclusive approach is essential.

It is equally important to recognise the ownership of stories. Each project is different but often the stories that underpin the significance of the place are derived from the understanding of those who have associations with the place.

This is of paramount importance working with Indigenous people and communities. The Australia ICOMOS Statement on Indigenous Cultural Heritage recognises that:

- The Indigenous significance of places can only be determined by the Indigenous communities themselves
- Indigenous people should be effectively involved in decisions affecting their heritage, and in managing places significant to them. Land managers should respect the rights of Indigenous people to make decisions about their own heritage
- Indigenous communities should always have control over information about their heritage. There may be instances where Indigenous communities do not want information about their cultural heritage to be generally available.

It is therefore critical in interpretation planning that there is an allocation of funding and programmed time for the engagement of Indigenous communities.

Issue: Some places have multiple and potentially conflicting values

All values of a place should be considered. Formulation of successful interpretation will require a creative and consultative approach.

Guidance: Some places are of cultural significance for a range of reasons and it may therefore be difficult to determine which heritage values should be emphasised in interpretation. This situation can arise where a place is significant to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people but for different reasons. In fact, sometimes it may even cause offence to the Indigenous parties to have non-Indigenous stories told at a place that is of particularly high cultural significance for them. The Burra Charter (Article 13) encourages the co-existence of cultural values and this demands respect for all cultures.

Interpretation for such places should be developed in consultation and specific outcomes derived from sensitive understanding of the issues and clear and appropriate policy statements that have been creatively developed.

Issue: Interpretation is considered an ‘add-on,’ started only after conservation planning has been completed

Interpretation planning should start early as part of the overall conservation planning for the place.

Guidance: Effective interpretation will be fully integrated into the life of the place. An early consideration of interpretation options is especially important where the place of cultural significance will be the subject of redevelopment, including adaptive re-use and refurbishment. For example, interpretation may be part of:

- The use of a place (Article 7)
The way that its significance is revealed through conservation actions
Investigation of its fabric, meanings or associations
The retention of the visual and functional setting of a place (Article 8)
Visitor management, and
Ongoing involvement of people with associations with the place.

Simply conserving and presenting the place is an act of interpretation. Interpretation is not confined to the ‘end product’ of conservation planning or works. Opportunities for interpreting the place and emerging understandings of its significance may be available while investigations are underway or during conservation works.

Interpretive solutions should be developed in collaboration with other professionals who are also working on the place, enabling interpretive opportunities to be fully integrated into proposals for the place. Embedding interpretation within the overall planning for the place is both critical and effective.

**Issue: The approach to interpretation is pre-determined**

*Interpretation practitioners should seek to bring a creative response to the cultural significance of each place.*

**Guidance:** Commissioning organisations as well as practitioners should be open to a range of creative approaches and techniques. What may be appropriate for one place will not be for another and ‘copy-cat’ approaches to interpretation may not be successful.

**Issue: Interpretation is limited to a didactic approach**

*Interpretation should seek to do more than instruct – it should engage and stimulate.*

**Guidance:** Good interpretation stimulates response and encourages understanding; it should provide more than instruction or signage explaining the history of a place. This can be achieved through skilled communication, active engagement with the place and its stories, and an open-ended approach that enables the visitor to bring their own questions and form their own understanding of the place.

**Issue: Interpretation adversely impacts on significance**

*Interpretation should maintain, convey and enhance the cultural significance of places, not detract from it.*

**Guidance:** Interpretation should aim to heighten the understanding and appreciation of the actual place, rather than adversely impacting cultural significance or potentially obscuring or being an intrusive layer itself. Interpretation that is poorly planned and executed or without due recognition of cultural significance, may damage the place and its significance.

Integrating interpretation into the entire planning process for the place will help ensure this does not occur.

**Issue: Interpretation is poorly planned and implemented**

*Interpretation should always draw on the principles contained in the Burra Charter to ensure appropriate planning.*
Guidance: Interpretation planning is a highly skilled and multi-disciplinary area of heritage practice. Successful outcomes will be dependent on the skills and experience that the interpretation specialist can bring to the project. These skills include planning, research, design, writing, selection of appropriate media and technologies, and implementation. Practitioners also need to be cognisant of the available resources (e.g. funding, personnel, skills) and the client’s overall aims and objectives. Investment in interpretation planning is essential.

Issue: Interpretation as justification for demolition

Interpretation is part of a holistic package of best practice conservation management measures.

Guidance: Archival recording of places of cultural significance or the placement of interpretive markers, as actions to mitigate the adverse impacts of that place’s demolition are often proposed. Although archival recording is an important tool, and a form of interpretation, it has considerable limitations. Similarly interpretive markers or other devices should not be seen as a comparable alternative, and be regarded as a last resort, where demolition is unavoidable.

It is not acceptable to use interpretation as an alternative to the physical conservation of a place.

5 Resources

The following documents are useful sources offering more detailed insight into interpretation practice and philosophy. This is not an exhaustive list and practice continues to develop.

Primary Resources


Other key guidelines


**Other useful information:**

Interpretation Australia Association [http://www.interpretationaustralia.asn.au/](http://www.interpretationaustralia.asn.au/)