Seeing through others’ eyes: understanding the aesthetics and meanings of place

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Abstract

‘Some people say that there is nowhere else in Australia like Broken Hill. Do you agree?’ This was one of a series of questions that explored how Broken Hill people see themselves and their city. Can a stark mining landscape be beautiful? What is it that shapes a town like Broken Hill, and how can we understand the nuances of meaning that make this place special in the eyes of those who know it most intimately? Essential to the assessment of the National Heritage aesthetic and social values of the Broken Hill City was understanding the city’s aesthetic qualities, and who values them. Using the inspirational landscapes approach, combined with an online survey, careful analysis of art and literary sources and other social research, a picture emerged of a community with a strongly articulated sense of identity and a passionate connection to this place.

This paper examines the foundations for and methods used to gain an understanding of the social and aesthetic values of the Broken Hill City. It offers a case study on the use of some new and emerging methods available to heritage professionals involved in community-based assessments. The paper will also discuss the challenges in trying to ‘see through the eyes of others’ and the potential for applying these methods to other complex, populated places.

Setting the scene

Broken Hill, it seems, is a place like no other. The verdict is in from the Broken Hill community. This article explores ways of understanding the complex expressions of community aesthetic and social value for a place like the City of Broken Hill (NSW, Australia).

Broken Hill City was nominated to the National Heritage List by the Broken Hill City Council in 2005. A statutory consultation process on nomination was followed by a project to assess the National Heritage social and aesthetic values of Broken Hill City. Whilst this paper focuses on the latter, it also draws on the other consultative processes.

The paper starts by examining the applied research methodology that underpinned the assessment, explores the approach adopted, reflecting on the influence of current practice, community factors, ethics, the constraints of National Heritage List criterion and other practicalities. The analysis revealed distinctive local community perspectives and contrasts these with those of visitors, and Australians generally. The paper concludes with reflections on the benefits of this approach in understanding and managing the heritage values of other complex urban places.

The project was commissioned by the Commonwealth government (then the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts), in close consultation with Broken Hill City.
Council, and undertaken over a period of five weeks. During the project new National Heritage List guidelines were released (Australian Heritage Council (AHC) 2009). The brief required that the consultants engaged directly with the community to understand their values. This was regarded as a challenge as Broken Hill people are often reluctant to participate in formal consultation processes (P. Oldsen [Group Manager Sustainability, Broken Hill City Council] 2009, pers. comm., 1 May).

**Underpinnings**

The terrain of place connections and meanings is complex and highly nuanced. It is shaped by who we are individually and collectively. Methods for understanding both aesthetic and social significance are founded on the idea that connection to place is a fundamental part of individual and collective identity. Hugh Mackay (2008) writes that ‘place is fundamental to the human sense of self, sense of community, sense of morality and sense of destiny’ and that our failure to ‘protect and nurture the places that have formed us’ comes from our failure to acknowledge our deep yearning for a sense of place.

Methods that tap into the deep and emotional well-springs of identity need to be ethically applied, and researchers require sensitivity in reading the responses that arise. Ethnographic research and public participation approaches are two of the most common sources of such methodologies.

Traditional ethnographic methods take more time than is commonly available in heritage assessments and in response, rapid ethnographic assessment procedures (REAP) have been developed and applied. For example, Taplin et al. (2002) describe a methodological framework used to understand the cultural ties between communities and their parks, noting that local places form part of ‘home territory’, both symbolically and functionally, and potentially are a significant element in a shared sense of identity.

Whilst Australian practice in social and aesthetic values assessment has not specifically identified itself as ‘ethnographic’, current methodologies use applied research to ‘illuminate cultural values and draw out special meanings’ (Taplin et al. 2002: 80) through a combination of direct engagement and background research. A wide range of ethnographic and participatory techniques can be used and many of these have been applied in Australia:

- **understanding the history of a place and its cultural and community setting**: this could involve research (potentially with community members); interviews with community ‘leaders’

- **visiting the place with community members**: this could involve going to the place for example ‘transect walks’ (Taplin et al. 2002), ‘look around country’ (Walsh et al. 2002), and photographing place qualities (Walker 1998)

- **mapping the place and connections**: this could include drawing, mapping and speaking about the place for example cultural mapping (UNESCO 2009), mapping attachment (Byrne & Nugent 2004), and imagining being there

- **hearing from community members**: this could include interviews with individuals, structured surveys, workshops and focus groups, affinity groups (i.e. people who have shared experience and inter-personal connections), story-telling, purpose designed games and role plays

- **talking to key informants**: this could include talking with individuals who have special knowledge of the connections between a community and a place (for example researchers, community leaders, commentators and observers)

- **observation**: participant observation, behavioural mapping (who uses a place and how), analysis of community ‘expressions’ (for example local and public art, logos, imagery, events).
Two important features of the REAP approach are the triangulation of techniques and iteration. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods and data sets to increase the reliability of the data (although obviously not offering a statistically validated sample). Iteration refers to a process of ‘constant re-evaluation of findings…with the implication that new research questions’ are thereby generated (Taplin et al. 2002). Walsh (2002: 38) describes this as an ‘act, review, plan’ spiral, suggesting that the process of understanding is ongoing. By using multiple data sources, information can be compared and contrasted, enabling a richer understanding to emerge. Preliminary testing of the validity of the initial conclusions is also highly desirable in the REAP approach, for example by returning a draft analysis of significance to a community for review.

The benefits of understanding the cultural relationships between communities and place are multiple. Hayden (1995: 43) in The Power of Place advocates tapping into the power of the historic urban landscape through people’s memory and experience as a powerful tool for engaging and enfranchising communities, as well as enabling their perspectives, identities and interests to enrich urban planning. Taplin et al. point out that by informing the planning process, ‘values explicit’ approaches enable management decisions that ‘resonate with user constituencies’ (2000: 80) and are less likely to trigger conflict, and ultimately can work to ‘achieve self-determination and to foster the accumulation of power in local communities’ (Ibid: 81). Further, Young (2008), writing from an Australian context, suggests that the recognition of the increasing multiplicity of values and identities that make up contemporary urban communities and of finding new ways to engage with values and identities, is a new paradigm.

Building on the ideas of Hayden, Sandercock and others, Young proposes a ‘culturisation’ of planning, adding Sandercock’s ‘six ways of knowing’ to the usual technical and scientific planning methods: knowing through dialogue, from experience, from local knowledge; and learning to read symbolic and non-verbal evidence, through contemplative or appreciative knowledge, and by doing, or action planning (Sandercock 2003: 76-81, in Young 2008: 59-60). This parallels emerging practice in understanding social and aesthetic values (as will become apparent in the Broken Hill example discussed below).

### Shaping our approach

Major advances in analysing aesthetic values emerged in Australia in the 1990s as a consequence of the large-scale regional assessments required to support the national Regional Forest Agreement policy (Ramsay 1993; Lennon & Townsley 1998), the development of the Inspirational Landscapes concept, methodology and its associated indicators (Context 2003a, 2003b; Crocker & Davies 2005), and the subsequent integration of these multiple data sets in aesthetic values analysis of natural landscapes (Context 2006). Social significance analysis has also advanced over the same period. With the introduction of the National Heritage List in 2004 came a new threshold, that of ‘outstanding heritage value to the nation’.

Aesthetic significance refers to a place’s ‘importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by community or cultural group’ and social significance to a place’s ‘strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural spiritual reasons’. Both are community-held values, requiring direct community engagement. Each criterion also embodies particular definitions and concepts that require careful examination.

### Defining concepts

For example, the term ‘community’ is commonly used to mean the people of a geographic locality. The National Heritage List guidelines (AHC 2009) define community or cultural group (hereafter simply ‘a community’) as ‘a group or body of people that share characteristics such as social organisation and locality, culture (e.g. practices, beliefs, traditions), spiritual values’. The sharing of deeply felt experiences may also create a community: for example, those who trained for and experienced war service together. Shared experience may transcend the usual boundaries of time too: for example, prisoners detained in a particular prison may have had
similar experiences because of the culture and structure of prison life there, even though they were imprisoned at different times.

The NHL guidelines (AHC 2009) further clarify that communities can exist at ‘various levels’ and there is no statutory requirement that a community be substantial in size. On the other hand, the guidelines note that ‘community’ can also be large, for example the Australian community. The definition and framing of the idea of a ‘community’ is complex and requires careful analysis in every instance. For example, the first ‘community’ that might be recognised in the assessment of a factory would probably be the employees. But are they the only ‘community’? What about the managers, the owners, a board of company directors, the union officials who visited the site and those who may have picketed at times of industrial strife, the suppliers who repeatedly visited, and of course the local community who live around the factory?

The community or cultural group needs to be clearly identifiable, meaning that it is recognised as a ‘community’ by both those within and those outside that community, but there is no requirement that it be formally structured. Further, the guidelines state that a value needs to be shared by ‘people within a particular community or cultural group’, but it is not necessary for the value to be universally held.

Who can not be a community? The NHL guidelines (AHC 2009: 43) suggest that a shared interest group may be a community but that ‘common expertise’ such as in a professional association is not sufficient in itself to define a community.

Establishing that there is a real connection—that is ‘a strong or special association’ with the place—is the key. The association needs to be enduring and deeply felt, and include a sense of ownership or connectedness. The NHL guidelines (AHC 2009: 43) suggest that ‘in some cases’ significant former associations by past communities may meet the threshold, my view is that understanding connectedness requires engaging with a living community.

Aesthetic, according to the Macquarie Dictionary (2013) means ‘having a sense of the beautiful, characterised by the love of beauty’ or ‘related to the science of aesthetics’ and beauty means ‘the quality or characteristics which excited an admiring pleasure or delights the eye or the aesthetic sense’. Is Broken Hill such a place? Where is its beauty? And to whom? The criterion requires that the ‘particular aesthetic characteristics’ of the place are valued—that is ‘appreciated, respected, esteemed, treasured’ - by a group of people that form an identifiable community.

The terms ‘strong’, ‘special’ and ‘associations’ in the social significance criterion of the NHL guidelines each have important meanings: ‘strong’ is defined as meaning ‘of great force, effectiveness, potency or cogency…[and] firm or unflattering under trial’ (AHC 2009: 42); ‘special’ means ‘of a distinct or particular character…distinguished or different from what is ordinary or usual…extraordinary, exceptional, especial’(ibid.). ‘Association’ is the easiest of the three to understand; it means associated or connected with.

Interpreting ‘outstanding heritage value to the nation’ in relation to values that are held by and within a community is particularly difficult. The NHL guidelines (AHC 2009) are unclear on this question. They suggest that the community recognised as holding the value will usually be beyond a region or state, that is, not a local community. Second, the guidelines suggest that there should be evidence that the Australian community cares about or identifies with the place and its community associations, although on the other hand noting that places that are little known may also be able to achieve the threshold.

Understanding each criterion and applying the threshold tests are significant challenges that need to be addressed squarely in assessment methodologies; if not, we will fail the very communities on whose behalf such assessments are done.

Selecting our methods

Low et al. (2005: 179) note three defining factors to guide the selection of methods to collect and conceptualise social data associated with design of urban parks: the scale of the research (individual, group or societal), the possibility of direct involvement with the research ‘subjects’ and the nature of the problem being investigated.
Shaping the method to suit the nature of each particular community is both wise and ethical. Many community factors need to be considered including for example: norms and values; preferred ways of meeting and working together; resources available; competing issues, and literacy. Broken Hill today has a diverse community, with a strong and distinctive world-view built on the foundations of the cultural and social influences of mining, strong artistic traditions, the experience of isolation, a spirit of independence and of looking after each other, and the qualities of the place itself. The Broken Hill community sits within a vast region of interconnected and fragmented communities. Many people from ‘away’ have strong connections here too: past residents; artists; return visitors; mining industry; unions; and many others.

People in Broken Hill are said to be reluctant to engage in public policy discussions (Oldsen 2009, pers. comm., 1 May). Would this community be interested in engaging with heritage values? As well, Broken Hill, like many remote communities, was considered to have a relatively low level of internet access compared to other NSW communities, potentially limiting the use of some techniques that had been successful in other places.

Considering Low’s three factors, especially the nature of the community, and practicalities such as time and resources, a decision was made to focus on the Broken Hill community as a whole—rather than segment into more specific interests—and the Australian community. Methods were then developed for each. Direct involvement with Broken Hill was considered achievable within the project scope and budget; for the Australian community surrogate data would be used.

The multi-facetted community consultation on National Heritage Listing for the City provided a good starting point: it used ‘facts sheets’, short pieces in the weekly newspaper, local radio and TV items, formal and informal meetings with stakeholders, a workshop and street stalls. This project added an on-line survey, creating an opportunity for the Broken Hill community to express directly the importance of Broken Hill through their own eyes, enabling a more community-centred appreciation of place and meanings. And because the Broken Hill community is remarkably expressive about itself—through art, writing, community event—we were able to identify a wide range of possible research materials.

**Figure 1.** Indicates the data sets used and their application to either or both of the ‘communities’ under consideration. The following section details each data set and what it revealed.

New research undertaken for the project included an artistic and literary sources survey (Young 2009) and an on-line survey of community-based aesthetic and social values (Context 2009). The on-line survey was promoted widely in the Broken Hill community. A key focus in the on-line survey was to understand the nature of the aesthetic values appreciated by the Broken Hill community, particularly the concept of beauty within their specific and distinctive cultural and environmental frame of reference.
The views from the Hill

Previous heritage studies and assessments

The social and aesthetic significance of Broken Hill has been considered in previous heritage assessments: in the Register of the National Estate listing (2000), the NSW National Trust’s listing (1995), the two heritage studies of Broken Hill City (Latona Masterman 1987; High Ground Consulting 2008) and in several studies of the mining areas (Austral Archaeology 1994, 1998).

The Latona Masterman study (1987) addresses aesthetic values directly noting that ‘the Line of Lode is the reason for the existence of the city, and is one of the most dominant elements of the city’s townscape’:

Throughout its history, Broken Hill has been unique, and remains so today. Its uniqueness comes primarily from its people, and from the way they have organised their lives in response to the forces acting on them. The uniqueness has expressed itself in the strength and cohesion of the community, in the self-reliance of the people, in their architecture and building, and their efforts to humanise their environment, and in the technology and innovation they have employed to overcome the difficulties of mining and of life in the context of the place (Latona Masterman 1987: 35, 38).

The NSW National Trust listing notes the imposing nature and grand scale of the Line of Lode as attesting ‘to its important place in local and national mining history’ and that even though the original Hill is gone, in its place there are the ‘huge residue and mullock dumps which dominate the skyline above the city. The imposing headframes have acquired individual landmark status’ (National Trust of Australia [NSW] 1995).

Artistic and literary expressions

Broken Hill is a city of the arts. It has a lively and engaged arts community with at least two hundred painters living locally and more than thirty-five galleries. As well there are writers and poets, photographers, film makers and more. Broken Hill has gained a reputation as a centre of artistic endeavour and the work of past and present visual artists has helped build this reputation. The regional gallery itself may well be part of what has seeded such a rich artistic community. Established in 1904 to meet the needs of a ‘city in isolation’ it is the oldest regional gallery in NSW and is in itself a demonstration of the self-reliance of the Broken Hill community, offering a remarkable selection of local artists’ work. Art teachers such as Florence May Harding, born in Silverton and a teacher at the Broken Hill Technical College did much to stimulate artistic activity in Broken Hill, with her students including Pro Hart and Eric Minchin, two of the well-known group of Broken Hill painters tagged as the ‘Brushmen of the Bush’. She also helped found the Willyama Art Society in 1961 and it continues to be an important influence today.

Young (2009) noted that many local artists and many from ‘away’ seek their inspiration in the local landscape—looking in towards the city and the mines or out to the desert. Artists in Broken Hill are intensely interested in the mining landscape of the town. The light, colour and vastness of the desert surrounding the town and the contrast between city and bush are powerful visual attractions. Through his detailed analysis Young (2009) recognised that artworks depicting the physical environment of Broken Hill have been made from the town’s foundations in the late nineteenth century to the present. They include a significant number of paintings, photographs and films, as well as a small number of novels and poems. Artists have been attracted by the physical nature of the place—especially the intimate physical relationship between the town and the mines, the qualities of a human community surrounded by a vast desert expanse stretching away to the horizon, the mines themselves and the associated structures, the Line of Lode as a dramatic geological phenomenon and its centrality to the town, and by the heat, dust and vivid colours.

Broken Hill has been visited and depicted by a number of major artists of national standing including the painters Fred Williams, Sali Herman, Kenneth Jack, George Gittoes and Idris Murphy as well as the local naïve painter, Sam Byrne; the photographers, Frank Hurley,
Wolfgang Sievers and Rex Dupain; the novelists, Arthur Upfield and Ken Cook; the poets, C J Dennis and Les Wicks; the film makers, Ted Kotchef, George Miller, Nadia Tass, Gillian Armstrong and Stephan Elliott; and the contemporary video artist, Shane Gladwell (whose work Maddestmaximus, filmed around Broken Hill, went to an international audience at the 2009 Venice Biennale). As well, the works of popular artists such as the ‘Brushmen of the Bush’ and in particular ‘Pro’ Hart are widely known and appreciated.

Young (2009) observes that in the twenty-first century a symbiotic relationship has developed between the arts community of Broken Hill and a number of artists from outside. These ‘outside’ artists take up residences in the city, give workshops, encourage and teach local artists and hold exhibitions of their work. The visiting artists, it seems, both respond to the enthusiasm of the locals and share with them the inspiration they take from the Broken Hill environment.

Young (2009) concludes that this artistic output has significantly shaped the Australian community’s perceptions of Broken Hill, and that at a local level, engagement with artistic endeavour is strong and flourishing, across all forms, with Broken Hill being widely known for its active arts community.

**The Hill as symbol**

Symbolically Broken Hill is The Hill—in name and in form. The Hill is the local name for the town, even though the original ‘broken hill’ has been reshaped through more than 125 years of mining it is still the heart of the town. Celebrating its 125th anniversary in 2008 Broken Hill used the phrase ‘the hill that changed a nation’ and a logo based on the hill and the headframes.

Three years later when the Miners’ Memorial was opened there was a renewed focus on the Line of Lode and its powerful meanings, illustrated by the following extracts from the local paper, the Barrier Daily Truth.

“The whole idea behind the Line of Lode has been there’s nothing like it in the world—we’ve got to keep it… It is the strength of this town that will lead us into the future—and it is that strength that brought us here today, to remember those who gave their lives for their family, their town, and indeed—the nation. (Ron Hellyer, Barrier Daily Truth, 23rd April 2011: 2).”  

“Memorial is a symbol of city’s ongoing resilience and strength” (Bill O’Neil, Barrier Daily Truth, 23rd April 2011:1).

“At the top of the highest point of Broken Hill, the jewel is the crown and the Miners’ Memorial and Visitors’ centre stand as a testimony to the city’s determination to grow into the future” (Gary Radford, President Line of Lode Association, Barrier Daily Truth, 23rd April 2011:2).

“At the opening, evocative symbols were used to demon-strate the importance of this event to the community: flags used to mark mine fatalities were flown, a piper played ‘The Lament’ and a scroll depicting the ‘future of the Lode’ was unfurled. Paired flags—red to symbolise the worker’s blood and black symbolising death—were always flown at Trades Hall every time there was a fatality at the mines” (Barrier Daily Truth 23 April 2011, pp1-2).
Around the town, murals capture images of the past and the present of the town. The ‘Community Oasis’ murals (Figure 2) on the front of the Broken Hill Community Centre offer powerful images of people and places painted by local artist Geoff De Main.

Like these public art works, other memorials throughout the city express some of the distinctive character of the community: the war memorial, the Titanic Memorial and the Miners’ Memorial, along with others. These reflect how the community sees and wants to portray itself and the town.

**Seeing through Broken Hill eyes**

Turning to the on-line survey, it sought to explore key aspects of aesthetic and social significance: the importance of Broken Hill, the qualities of the landscape of the city and its setting, and to test a series of draft values statements. Values statements were developed from initial research. In this project they were designed to test community response to a number of aesthetic qualities, including the definition of beauty in relation to the starkness of the town’s mining landscape.

The key ideas that emerged referenced the community and people of Broken Hill, its history and the qualities of the place: the most common descriptors used for the landscape included powerful, beautiful, dramatic, inspiring and iconic. The essential elements of the place included the Line of Lode and mining infrastructures, the surrounding desert landscape, the ‘tinnies’ (corrugated iron-clad houses) and the central city streetscapes and buildings.

To help understand the essential elements that made ‘Broken Hill’, the survey invited people to describe an image of Broken Hill that captured its essence, or to send in a photograph. Described images of Broken Hill were either from the Line of Lode looking down to the town and out to the desert, or included the Line of Lode as the subject or backdrop. One image of the Line of Lode (Figure 3) was photo-shopped by local photographer Boris Hlavica to resemble another Australian icon as a way of expressing its centrality to Broken Hill’s identity.

**Seen from the outside**

We also looked at how Broken Hill presents itself to the outside world through its tourism imagery such as websites, post cards, and publications, and how Australians see Broken Hill based on an analysis of tourism data and snapshots.

![Figure 3. “The Icon”, a photo-shopped view of the Line of Lode. (Source: Boris Hlavica).](image-url)
Broken Hill primarily attracts Australians rather than international tourists: 94% and 6% respectively, with most Australians coming from states other than NSW. A visitor survey in 2006 reported that Broken Hill is a destination in its own right and that people come to ‘experience our nations/Australia’s history’, suggesting that the pull to visit Broken Hill is because of its important place in Australia’s history and in the Australian psyche (Tourism Research Australia 2006).

Snapshots taken by visitors are an interesting source, and our work included an analysis using three ‘snapshot’ web sites. A vast number of images were found. The two most common were industrial and mining infrastructure often silhouetted against the sky, and the Line of Lode itself with panoramas from the Line of Lode looking down on the town, views across the Line of Lode (including The Big Seat) and from town with the Line of Lode in the background. Also strongly featured were the Miners’ Memorial (located on the top of the Line of Lode), the town centre and the desert.

**Expressed community values**

**The Broken Hill community**

The Broken Hill community is remarkably articulate about its own identity. The qualities of strength, resilience, self-reliance are valued and acknowledged. This community is strongly unified by common goals, common challenges and shared tragedies.

The Broken Hill community sees itself as having been shaped by the land, history and culture. At the heart is the location. Remoteness is a key factor in the community’s identity and social structures have been designed to support and protect the community in the face of remoteness. The setting of the city and its separation from ‘other places’ is distinctive, and is an important reference point in the community’s sense of identity. Likewise the mine and mining. As the major workplace for over more than a century, involvement in mining is central to people’s identity. The Line of Lode is so important to Broken Hill that without it Broken Hill would not be Broken Hill. The mining landscape—above ground and below—helps connect people to their past and the present.

The strength, depth and enduring nature of the Broken Hill community’s connection to the city and its landscape are made tangible in many ways including in the design and landscaping of the town and the regeneration areas, in the appreciation of the distinctive ‘tin’ architecture and in murals, public art and memorials throughout the city each of which offers a strong statement about identity and connection. And the ‘intangible’ aspects of culture also offer important evidence of the strength and quality of community associations: local culture and language; shared experiences and stories; open and supportive relationships, and so on. For example, the use of specific terms such as ‘away’ to indicate the world outside Broken Hill, and the naming of the place as ‘The Hill’ articulate what is central and dominant.
The Broken Hill community strongly recognises and responds to the aesthetic qualities of the landscape of the Broken Hill City seeing it as a powerful, dramatic, beautiful, iconic and inspiring landscape. The beauty of this place is embodied as much in the starkly splendid mining landscape—the Line of Lode, mining headframes and other features—as it is in the graceful streets, the grand buildings, and the glowing sunsets. These qualities are widely and highly valued.

**Australian community**

The essential challenge in assessing social and aesthetic values for the Australian community is that whilst it is easy to assert the idea of ‘a sense of a national identity’ clearly not everyone will or should agree on what it comprises. The NHL guidelines (AHC 2009) do not require that values are universally held, only that people within a particular community collectively have a strong or special association.

Based on the evidence analysed on the Australian community perceptions, we concluded that the association with the Broken Hill City is symbolic and historical, as well as (for those who have visited) experiential. There is extensive evidence that the Broken Hill City is an iconic place in the minds of Australians. The symbolic meanings attributed to Broken Hill within the Australian community are based on many factors, and on a considerable time-depth. The city and the company that adopted its name—BHP (Broken Hill Proprietary)—are household names. A key factor may be the importance of mining in Australia, and in particular the importance of the Broken Hill mines to the wealth of the nation. The phrase ‘the hill that changed a nation’ is particularly evocative. The outback and mining together represent themes of great resonance nationally: for their connections to the challenge of remoteness, the harshness of the Outback, the idea of hidden wealth awaiting discovery. What has happened in Broken Hill and how it has happened has had the potential to impact upon the whole of Australia. It has also been highly dramatic. The industrial history of Broken Hill has been one of the most confrontational in Australia’s history, filled with many dramatic incidents (Young 2009: 40).

The landscape, town and people of Broken Hill are known to Australians through depictions in film and art. The research into artistic sources revealed an extraordinary wealth of material, much of which would be well-known in the Australian arts community and to some across the wider Australian community. The strength of the attraction of Broken Hill for a remarkable range of artists over more than a century is in itself evidence of the important place of Broken Hill in the minds of Australians. Some of the best known depictions of Broken Hill are probably not how the community of Broken Hill wants to be seen: in *Wake in Fright* or in *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* for example. And some may dispute Pro Hart’s depictions of a lively, character-filled outback town. Nevertheless the popularity of these images adds further dimensions to the place in the minds of Australians.

For many Australians, Broken Hill is more than ‘symbolic’: it is a place to be experienced (Tourism Research Australia 2006). The tourism data demonstrates that Australians who travel to Broken Hill see the city as the destination, and that it is seen primarily as a place to connect to Australia’s history. There is evidence too that many people return after their first visit, and although there is no separate data on the returning versus first-time tourists, collectively a strong majority identify this desire to experience ‘our nation’s history’ as a significant purpose of their
journey. Other attractors include the recognition of artists who have captured Broken Hill. Appreciation of the aesthetic attributes of the city by visitors is strongly based on the experience of place—the powerful qualities of the landscape as evident in snapshots for example—and the extent of recognition and celebration of the aesthetic qualities of the place nationally in a variety of art works and media.

**Striking out into the desert**

The landscape of social and aesthetic values assessment is still relatively untracked. The benefits of each and every exploration are that some new terrain may be understood, some nuances of our processes revealed and some other ways of understanding discovered. The Broken Hill project sought to further refine previous approaches developed for similar projects and to respond to the richness of the expressions about people and place ‘discovered’ on our reconnaissance visits to Broken Hill. The definitions provided by the newly released NHL guidelines (AHC 2009) required clarity in our approach especially in relation to aesthetic values, and the reported reluctance of the Broken Hill community to engage in public consultation presented an apparent obstacle. The framework for the project was thus shaped by practice, by the nature of the place and its community, and by reflective examination of ethnographic methodologies.

Whenever we work with other people—communities and cultural groups—ethical questions need to be at the forefront of our thinking. Are our approaches ethical? What principles create the foundation stones of our practice? For example: acknowledging those who hold and maintain cultural traditions; respecting the intrinsic cultural diversity within all communities; enabling multiple meanings to be articulated and heard; recognising intellectual property and moral rights; etc. As yet there is no overarching framework of ethical principles guiding Australian heritage practice when working with communities. The Broken Hill project and others like it could be used to define such principles.

Rapid ethnographic assessment procedures (REAP), as an approach, is well suited to the resource constraints common in heritage assessments. One attractive feature of REAP is the clarity around data collection methods, strengthened through the concepts of triangulation and iteration. Establishing a suite of social and aesthetic data collection methods is highly desirable, along with practitioner-based evaluation of their effectiveness. New approaches could also encompass all of Sandercock’s six ways of knowing. This still remains to be achieved.

Three elements of the Broken Hill project were critical to its success:

- **The reconnaissance**: the visits to Broken Hill to better understand the place, to talk informally with a range of people, to read and to listen, and to observe. The importance of having ‘community insiders’ as cultural interpreters cannot be overstated.
- **The on-line survey**: the survey proved to be a very effective tool, and in combination, the structured and open-ended questions enabled people to express their perceptions in some detail.
- **Research and field data**: the evidence of community expressions of aesthetic and social value revealed across the landscape of the city—the murals, memorials, events, the way certain aspects of the town landscape is managed—provided valuable data about community connectedness, and the art and literary sources work illuminated both local and wider perceptions about place.

Urban settlements large and small are complex places. What are the ‘literacies’—the professional and life skills—that heritage planners need to appreciate and manage the heritage and other values of complex urban settlements? The foundations of place-based heritage must first lie in the place itself—the literacies of reading the landscape and caring for the fabric. Young (2008: 79-86) suggests urban planners need three other literacies: cultural literacy, ethical literacy and strategic literacy. These all seem applicable to our work. Cultural literacy implies an ability to recognise and engage ‘culture’ in all of its tangible and intangible forms and contemporary and historical manifestations in our work. Ethical literacy acknowledges
importance of having ethical foundations for our work. And strategic literacy asks that we seek to understand connectedness between communities, environments and histories and across the planning domains of local, regional and national (Young 2008: 84-88).

And after journeying out into the desert, may our return to ‘town’ be to a place where all the ways of knowing and all those who know are valued: as Young so clearly states all of us have an ‘aspiration to belong to a culture and a place, and so be at home in the world’ (Young 2008: 72).

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