Abstract
This paper looks at cultural tourism experiences in two historic landscapes. The two landscapes represent ‘extreme’ histories in divergent places: the Port Arthur Historic Site in Tasmania as a landscape of punishment and penal rehabilitation, the World Heritage listed ancient city of Ayutthaya in Thailand as a landscape destroyed by Burmese invasion in the 18th century. In both places, contemporary voices and traditional practices have been reintroduced through devices that act to enhance the cultural tourism experience. The two approaches are themselves at extremes – one relies extensively on modern art and technology, the other on a continued and enduring traditional practice. Juxtaposed, they provide an inspirational insight into the way ‘living’ stories can enhance our engagement with heritage places.

Introduction
This paper is more about the juxtaposition of ideas and places that are themselves at extremes, rather than ‘extreme heritage’ as such. At the same time it creates linkages of these extremes, through an exploration of commonalities. I intend to use two extraordinary heritage places that are geographically and culturally diverse: the Port Arthur Historic Site in Tasmania, Australia and the Ayutthaya Historical Park in Thailand. Ayutthaya has been on the World Heritage list since 1991 for the monuments that remain from its period as one of the ancient ruling capitals of that region. It was destroyed by a Burmese invasion in 1767 and effectively burnt to the ground. It is in fact the scene of one of the greatest defeats in Thai history but is today revered and esteemed as a national icon, representative of the glorious past of prathet Thai.

Port Arthur is part of the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage Area. It is on Australia’s National Heritage List and, as is Ayutthaya, despite a history that is associated with extreme pain and suffering, is considered to be an iconic place in the construction of the country’s national identity. It shares the fiery fate of Ayutthaya, losing many of its structures to bushfires during the 1890s. Interestingly, both places have risen from the ashes, undergone a new settlement process, become major tourism attractions, seen their communities removed through government intervention, been gazetted as historical parks, and are today internationally significant heritage places and cultural tourism destinations (Figure1).

One of the other features that both places share is a history of water use, boats and boat building, and the focus of this paper is the way in which this heritage is retained, presented and interpreted as a significant element of the modern day cultural landscape. Ship building has been described as one of Tasmania’s first major industrial enterprises and was a significant contributor to the colonial economy during the early 19th century. The first intake of prisoners to Port Arthur in 1830 included a boat-builder, and by 1834 a formal dockyard had been established. In that same year a Master Shipwright was appointed. As well as constructing numerous craft for government and commercial use, Port Arthur served as a

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Figure 1 – Iconic representations: Wat Phra Si Samphet, Ayutthaya and the Penitentiary, Port Arthur Historic Site
repair and maintenance depot for the colonial government’s fleet and also serviced visiting British warships. The Port Arthur dockyard operated officially from 1834–1848, with small scale boat building and repair work continuing for a number of years after its closure. During the operation of the Dockyard 15 major vessels and 140 small craft were constructed (Nash 2004: 40–41, 50). Its closure was embroiled in debates about its cost effectiveness, but capital values aside, during the time of its operation it made a major contribution to colonial development in terms of the training of numerous convicts who were absorbed into the colonial labour force as highly skilled workers. The Port Arthur ship building activities can also be seen as a small component in a much broader network that linked this small settlement within a much larger economic, political and commercial endeavour.

The dockyard area at Port Arthur today contains an extraordinary range of evidence of this past, and contributes to the enigmatic and visually impressive landscape of the Port Arthur Historic Site. It is a powerful reminder of the role of water transport in the everyday life of the penal community and the colonial enterprise. It has recently been the subject of a major interpretative project that has sought to re-impose a sense of the history of ship building at the site, and to re-populate the landscape with the presence and narratives of the hundreds of individuals who contributed to the processes and creations of the precinct. This included not only the convicts who worked in various roles at the Dockyard, but the free employees who contributed to the enterprise. Skills encompassed those of shipwrights, blacksmiths, timber carriers, sawyers, carpenters, sail-makers, charcoal burners, overseers and clerks. And of course some of the free workers were accompanied by their families, meaning that women and children were also a part of the Dockyard life. The Master Shipwright’s residence was constructed at the Dockyard in 1834 and stands today as the only aboveground structure relating to the Dockyard period of use. A second house remains, built after the closure of the Dockyard over the site of the former blacksmith’s shop. The challenge for interpretation was to reintroduce this significance industrial and domestic narrative within a relatively small landscape precinct that was visually dominated by two unassuming houses in a sloping and grassy area that was broken by an indented channel (no longer discernable as the main slipway) and a limekiln unrelated to this phase of use. The solution was based around four main elements:

1. The introduction of a structural feature within the slipway that relied on an artistic interpretation of a vessel, imposing a relativity of size and shape yet clearly allowing it to be read as a modern intervention (Figure 2).

2. The re-imposition onto the ground surface of the previous industrial landscape using metal footprints to delineate the structures and features related to places and activity nodes. These are planted with a variety of grasses to allow the footprints and spaces to become clearly delineated zones.

3. The creation of a soundscape, triggered by movement, which superimposes voices and the echoes of actions on the landscape.

4. The production of a small brochure that provides a historical context and greater information on the various activity points.

This was a $300,000 project that took almost a decade from inspiration to realisation. It was officially opened by the Tasmanian Minister of Tourism, Arts and Environment in May of 2007 and we are confident that we have introduced a cultural tourism experience that is of international merit and certainly one of best-practice. In terms of technology it uses state-of-the-art equipment, yet the overall effect is one of simplicity.

While Port Arthur is a place that has seen the demise of a traditional industry and its subsequent diminishment in the landscape, boat building at Ayutthaya continues as part of an unbroken practice that spans centuries. Ayutthaya at the time of its glory was a substantial river port, and the ancient part of the city was contained on a small island, surrounded by a series of rivers and canals. Water transport – and reliance on boats – was an integral component of this way of life, and has only in recent years undergone a period of decline. Boats however continue to play a significant traditional role in Thai life, from the annual long boat races at Ayutthaya, to the continued use of Royal Barges by the King on ceremonial occasions. Rather than facing the challenge at Port Arthur of reintroducing a history and experience of boat building into the landscape, the community at Ayutthaya is struggling to prevent the demise
of a centuries-old traditional craft and practice that is an integral part of a way of life associated with water.

Today life in Ayutthaya is influenced by a combination of the three arenas of industrial activity, tourism and historic preservation; the economic imperatives of the first two to some extent undermine the character and extent of the last. The advent of the railway and the 1930s construction of the Pradit Dhamrong Bridge across the Pasak River precipitated what was to be an ongoing decline in the use of the river as the primary means of transport at Ayutthaya. Two further developments dramatically affected water lifeways: the connection with the main road route to Bangkok, and the completion of the Chao Phraya and Phumiphon Dams in 1957.

More recently, investors have been taking advantage of the promotion of Ayutthaya as a major tourism destination, with the construction of multi-storied hotels, restaurants and department stores. There are certain advantages to local residents, in terms of opportunities to establish tourist-related businesses, or gain employment in such enterprises. Tourist growth has offered a new incentive to boat owners, notably the redundant water-taxi operators, as one of the major tourist activities is to undertake a river tour, circumnavigating the island while enjoying its splendid riverside views. However, these advantages must be considered in light of the more detrimental influences and potentially alarming impacts. Chutintaranond (1996) discusses the importance of the river to Ayutthaya’s people but cautions against the effects of the combination of industrialisation, rapid urban growth and tourist influx:

… [these are] compounding the outside influences affecting the local populace, their customs, traditions and spirituality that have descended from the earliest settlers. The people themselves work to fit in and take advantage of these changes while they also attempt to preserve their way of life on the river which nurtured them, provided their livelihoods, brought them fortune and fame, and guided their art and culture. (Chutintaranond 1996: 68)

However, the heritage of living and working on the water is not one that has been totally lost. A number of districts and villages in Ayutthaya are named with boat associations – Ban Sao Kradong (Mast Village), Ban Samphao Lom (Sunken Junk Village) – and Wat Rua Khaeng (Racing Boat Temple), the site of the annual boat races. Long boat racing has a long history which nurtured them, provided their livelihoods, brought them work to fit in and take advantage of these changes while they also attempt to preserve their way of life on the river which nurtured them, provided their livelihoods, brought them fortune and fame, and guided their art and culture. (Chutintaranond 1996: 68)

Fishing is still a commercial past-time in the waterways of Ayutthaya, although with restrictions on catch size one can more commonly see single fishermen in small wooden boats. Living in harmony with the rivers and canals, and the ability to take fish and shrimp, are enduring aspects of Ayutthaya life described by a fisherman in his early 20s. He fishes from the boat that was once his father’s, and is proud that his father has the skill to make water craft. He notes that there are fewer boats on the Ayutthaya canals and rivers today, with boats such as those belonging to the water traders – rua kam pan – being almost gone as goods are carried by road. An elderly woman who has been selling tao hu thoad (a type of Chinese dessert) on the river for 30 years has also seen the river traffic decrease rapidly over the years – no longer can one travel down the river to Bangkok on the passenger ferries that commuted between the capital and the river settlements. Today, she is one of only four boats selling on the river, and is proud that her product is still sought by the locals. Both she and the younger fisherman, however, share a concern that the river is being “dirtied” by people who do not respect it or understand the strong spiritual nature of the river. Both acknowledge the importance of making offerings to Mae Ya Nang, the boat goddess, and to the water and river spirits, particularly Mae Kong Kha, the goddess of water, who is an important figure in the Loy Krathong Festival. The Loy Krathong festival is held in late-October or early November and honours the spirits of the water.

The lives of the villagers still revolve around the river in terms of sustenance and employment. The boat goddess and shrines on-board watercraft take the place of the spirit houses customarily associated with land based properties. The decrease in barge transport has obvious impacts in an environment where new sailors learn their skills from the older people. Similarly, there has been a decline in boatyards, and skills associated with building and repairing boats, although there are three yards still operating at Ban Kacha, in the area around Wat Phanan Choeng (Harrington 2004: 265).

Khun Paltoon Khaomala, a now-retired teacher, reminisces that as a child he was given his own small boat as it was the only way he could travel to school. For many years he taught boat building at the Ayutthaya Industrial and Ship Building Training Centre College, which when it was established in 1839 was the first school in Thailand. Studying there as a pupil, he recalls: ‘we used to take the floating logs from the river and make them into planks to build our boats’. He has spent his life studying Thai boat design, but has also been involved in numerous projects that have seen adaptations of new designs, technology and materials. The series of books he has written are today used as texts by various boat building schools.

The inspiration for my endeavours has been to provide knowledge and understanding to develop a pride in later Thai generations in the expertise and accomplishments of their ancestors, particularly in the Thai Royal Barges that have become famous worldwide (Quoted in Chutintaranond 1996: 173).

There is no country in the world with as many different boats and watercraft as Thailand. I am a native of Ayutthaya and my life has evolved around the water since I was a boy. Today it is important that we protect our waterways and vessels (ibid: 176).

Khun Paltoon is concerned that the skill of building traditional Thai boats will be lost, because so many young people find that careers in boat building depend on understanding and practising modern techniques, materials and designs. He recalls that before the bridge that now spans the river and before the good roads, the only transportation was by boat and that most households would be able to make their own form of floating transport, even if it was just hollowing out a log. Today such simple practices are forgotten and even fishermen will buy a boat rather than make one themselves. Not only are the skills being diminished, but he laments that even those who buy boats have little understanding of wood or design that would help them purchase the right craft. With this in mind he set up
the Thai Boat Museum as a place to not only show visitors the important aspects of traditional crafts, but also to teach the skills of building scale models to the community, both young and old: ‘I can do something important to preserve Thai culture, because boats are an important part of Thailand – even before Ayutthaya the river was here, same as now … even the King travels by boat’. (see Figure 3).

The traditions of boat building also involve knowledge of decoration and of the rituals and ceremonies that accompany the process – from the time a tree is cut to the launch of the boat. The latter requires a ceremony to Mae Ya Nang. The paintings found on the rear of a boat are representations of Ra Hoo, the water spirit, and the skill to paint these designs is an important part of traditional boat building. Khun Paitoon is still invited to perform the ceremony to launch new boats, and he is concerned that there are few artisans left who have the knowledge of these ceremonies. He also thinks that boat building is one small part of other related water and boating activities and traditions that are important to the heritage of Ayutthaya, including long boat races and boat songs, and the festivals of Loy Krathong and Songkran. Both these festivals are associated with water and its symbolic association with purity.

When we were organising the official opening of the Port Arthur Dockyard we entertained (albeit briefly) the notion of incorporating some form of tradition with the formal launch. Other than the sacrifice of a champagne bottle across the nose of our new sculpture, none of us could readily nominate any particular practice or ceremony that would be appropriate. The point is not necessarily that such customs and traditions do not exist – further research on our part would have no doubt brought them to light – but that the considerable effort and research that had allowed us to reintroduce the story of boat building into our Dockyard precinct had ignored the arena of traditions and ceremonial practices, all of which would have been and no doubt remain as an integral part of the ‘life’ and practice of ship building.

One of Khun Paitoon’s more spectacular model boats, of a royal barge, is on display at the Ayutthaya Historical Centre, which is the major visitor and interpretative centre for the Ayutthaya Historical Park. He has created models that have been presented not only to the Queen of Thailand, but also to the Queen of England. He is, however, unable to obtain any support from the government for his museum, which is a small operation in the grounds of his own home. He has been visited by representatives of the Thai Fine Arts Department, who he believes commend his efforts, but have not provided any assistance otherwise. They do not seem to acknowledge that his efforts are heritage related, and rather he was advised that he should approach the Tourism Authority of Thailand for funding as a tourist project. This deeply concerns him, as he is confident that boat building is an important part of the heritage of Ayutthaya, and is in danger of being lost. It is not just a tourist attraction (Harrington 2004: 266–268).

However, the correlation between the two arenas is certainly being explored, particularly through training programs in model boat making that can provide community members with a way to participate in the preservation of part of their heritage, while at the same time being able to derive an economic benefit. Several Ayutthaya village communities have elected to concentrate on the production of model boats as a handicraft activity, the products of which will be primarily consumed in the tourist market. However, both the villagers and Khun Paitoon place value on the activity as being more than a tourist enterprise with economic benefits: they acknowledge that the skill itself is an important part of their heritage (see Figure 4). There is a need to preserve the relationship between objects and the living community, and values that the community might place on an object. It is important to recognise the complications that arise through tourism, which serves as a further catalyst for the secularisation and reinterpretation of culture as product, commodity, art, performance, spectacle and display. The alternative is to succumb to the ‘floor show’ imperative where practice is divorced from a system of beliefs and tradition and becomes manifest as a tangible collection of artefacts – both authentic and created for tourist consumption – in a process of trivialisation, miniaturisation and impact on quality.

It can be argued that tourism can promote the revival, preservation and protection of traditional practice. However, for value to be more than that accrued through commodification there is a reliance on a connection with the past that involves the object in a broader historical and experiential context. The object, a small model traditional boat for example, is otherwise little more than an illusory image of the original, depleted of the symbolic connection with past lifeways and lacking the narratives and meanings that support its role as a mnemonic.
device. It is through such symbolism and ability to inspire narratives and memories that Khun Paitoon’s models are given the power to link people, practice and place, and connect the present with the past in the immutable relationship between people and water. Such attributes are not available ‘off the shelf’, or retained through absorption in the tourist enterprise: ‘You cannot buy cultural values, or the dignity of the ancestors and their achievements’ (I Made Sutaba 1998).

I suggest that a common goal in both places is to work towards the retention, or perhaps reinvigoration, of the sense of identity that is crucial for the relationship between a product as a commodity and a product as a form of heritage, resulting from a sense of shared time, space and memories. At Port Arthur we have tried to do this through voices and sounds, and through a re-reading of the physical landscape: a ‘production’ that is based on technological innovation and considerable financial input. At Ayutthaya attempts are being made to retain the practices and skills and traditions that are an integral part of the history of boat building. The irony is that at Port Arthur we have used a contemporary artistic medium to reintroduce a life-sized rendering of a ship. At Ayutthaya, the perpetuation of traditional boat forms relies on the re-creation of ship images through miniaturisation. Certainly an excellent example of extreme approaches!

Culture as change recognises that people adapt, innovate, borrow and assimilate in response to multiple encounters, events and contacts, whether enforced or voluntary. Over time, new practices also become traditional. While our contemporary representations are grounded in the past, in traditional skills and their points of origin, they are at the same time modern products, in the sense of their contemporary status and the significance and meanings that are attached to them today, much of which is grounded in the relationship with their makers, whether they be technicians, artists, writers, artisans or heritage professionals.

From the extremes of convicts to kings, Port Arthur and Ayutthaya can be seen to make a contribution to both local and national heritage that is more properly a coordination of places and landscapes with the enduring traditions and stories that give life to both past and present communities.

References


