Sustainability, big pictures and other reflections on Australian heritage interpretation

The inclusion of interpretation in the 1999 revised Burra Charter was a welcome step that recognised the role of interpretation in communicating significance, and therefore enraging community appreciation of heritage places. The Burra Charter definition of interpretation is a broad one: interpretation means all the ways of presenting the cultural significance of a place (article 1.17). The explanatory notes remind us that interpretation may be a combination of the treatment of the fabric, the use of, and activities at the place, and the use of introduced explanatory materials. No one would disagree with this. However there is a need for more discussion about the practice and wider purpose of interpretation, and where it fits within the current structures of heritage and cultural planning.

Interpretation is a process of communication. It helps people explore and discover, respond to and find meaning in the place. Think of interpretation as a way of telling stories about people and places. The human element in the story telling about places is vital. Interpretation is not the delivery of facts and information about the design and fabric of the place. It must engage the community and visitors, and be responsive to their needs and interests. Surprisingly perhaps, visitors might not respond to what is summarised in the statement of significance. They may not be interested in an old shop as a representative example of the Federation Free Style. And they may not need to know this in order to enjoy the experience of walking through the spaces.

There is potential tension between the ICOMOS position that the purpose of interpretation is to present the significance of the place, and the need to plan interpretation around the interests of the visitor or audience. A visitor-centred approach to planning interpretation makes good sense. Interpretation can be expensive in money and resources over many years. It has to find its audience, just as the place itself has to find a sustainable use. For the interpreter, considering what will engage and entertain visitors requires as much thought and analysis as the statement of significance. It is possible that the significance of the place will not, on its own, cater to the visitors’ needs, or sustain the interpretation. It is true that the interpretation planner’s job is to make the significance of the place understandable and enjoyable. However sometimes the means to do this lie outside the immediate significance of the site in question, in a wider set of relationships, places and associations. And the tools to make these connections may not be those of conservation practice and planning, but of community cultural development.

The past is indeed a foreign country. Younger visitors are coming to heritage places without the memories and cultural context to make sense of what they see. Heritage visitors today and in the future may lack even an elementary understanding of Australian history, and of rural, working and domestic life. The interpreter’s job is to build a bridge between the past and present, creating a set of reference points that enables visitors to find meaning in their experience. In the future, connecting with younger visitors will require more resources to create imaginative interpretation and activities.

Many conservation plans now include interpretation strategies. Good practice sees interpretation specialists included in the conservation process from the start, as part of a multidisciplinary team that might include a conservation architect, an archaeologist or landscape specialist, an historian and of course the client and community representatives. This is having a positive effect on the range and scope of the historical research, the way the works in progress are photographed, and some of the conservation decisions, which increasingly consider interpretive potential. There is no doubt that this kind of collaboration produces better interpretation proposals for the site. However, implementation is still fraught with difficulty and disappointment.

Most interpretation plans are commissioned when a place is undergoing change, development or conservation. Despite our best efforts, this often means that interpretation is construed as something that happens after the works have finished, after the architects and builders have done their job. Often there is little money left for more than a few signs, a small display of remnant and disjointed movable heritage, and a brochure. Interpretation developed in this context tends to produce a set of proposals that focus more on fabric and the conservation process. This might highlight good conservation practice, but whether it works for visitors, whether it caters to their needs and the way in which they engage with the site, and whether it ultimately builds understanding and support for conservation is another matter. A further problem arising from this site-specific approach to interpretation is the proliferation of disjointed, small-scale heritage displays that lack the resources to reach a wider audience or to mount ongoing programs and activities.

Finding a sustainable heritage management framework can be difficult with project based, site-specific interpretation work. Who is to implement the plan, do they have the skills and is there someone to manage the maintenance and renewal of the interpretation? Effective interpretation is never simply a set of works and interpretive infrastructure that are installed and then left to run themselves. Even signs and brochures need some kind of maintenance and renewal. Museums and historic houses have long recognised that it is not enough get the exhibition open, or to dress the rooms with the appropriate period wallpaper and furniture. Public programs and community activities are now an essential part of the repertoire of interpretation. Heritage properties are working harder to create occasions and events to attract return visitors. If the client is not a heritage organisation, then implementation, activities and maintenance of the interpretation needs careful consideration.

Kylie Winkworth
There must be a good fit between the interpretive strategies and media, and the client’s capacity to implement the plan and manage the interpretation. It is obvious that there is no point in recommending a museum or visitor centre if the core business of the client is not heritage management. But it may be possible to develop a partnership with local government, a library or community museum to present and maintain the interpretation on behalf of the client.

Too often, interpretation is constrained by the boundaries of land ownership and management. Yet, some of the most engaging and successful interpretive programs are those that transcend particular sites and take the visitor on a journey. Limiting interpretation to land ownership boundaries, risks ignoring important linkages and heritage management issues. Looking around our major heritage sites and parks there are many anomalies that fragment places with important historic links into different management and interpretation regimes.

Think of Old Government House in Parramatta Park, managed by the NSW National Trust, while interpretation of the landscape setting is the responsibility of the Parramatta Park Trust. Also in Parramatta, Elizabeth Farm is managed and interpreted by the NSW Historic Houses Trust, while close by, Hambledon Cottage, which was part of the original Macarthur estate, has a different standard of interpretation by the Parramatta and District Historical Society and Parramatta City Council. There was once a well-trodden path between the two houses as Penelope Lucas, the Macarthur’s governess, made her way to Elizabeth Farm to dine with Mrs Macarthur in the houses as Penelope Lucas, the Macarthur’s governess, made her way to Elizabeth Farm to dine with Mrs Macarthur in the late afternoons. Despite the best intentions of staff and volunteers working on the ground, such fragmentation of the heritage estate diminishes interpretive opportunities and the visitors’ experience. The artificial fences around heritage sites obscure the linkages, the social relationships and connections to people and places elsewhere in the region. These are often the stories that most engage visitors and enrich their experience of the landscape.

Across western Sydney, there is a patchwork of remnant historic houses, historic landscapes and history museums. Together these places are part of an important landscape of colonisation and contact history. This is an untold story of national significance. A disparate group of councils, trusts, national parks and heritage agencies are managing this fragmented estate. Individually most places are struggling to find the resources, skills and critical mass to survive, and all are competing for the same visitors. The chances of developing quality interpretation in such a fragmented pattern of heritage management are very small. No one place or agency is large enough to have the resources and skills for their professional care and interpretation. The long term sustainability of many of these places is in doubt. Visiting the places, museums and heritage sites in Western Sydney you find them telling much the same story with minor changes. What isn’t interpreted is the same story with minor changes. What isn’t interpreted is the wider set of historic, spatial and social relationships. Nor can we explore or journey through the landscape to discover what should be an unfolding story of contact history and colonisation.

There is a need for better-coordinated heritage management frameworks that link to broader regional structures, to organise heritage interpretation into a more sustainable framework. Interpretation has to move beyond the bounds of individual sites and conservation management plans. The inclusion of interpretive programs in heritage studies and regional thematic surveys is one opportunity. This would then open the way for interpretation of the bigger picture, dealing with themes and stories of state and national significance.

In some recent work, I prepared an interpretation plan for the Wentworth Main Shaft Mine at Lucknow, owned by Orange City Council. Lucknow is a mining village on the Mitchell Highway on the eastern side of Orange. Two distinctive poppet heads anchor a landscape of mullock heaps, tin sheds, and miners’ cottages. One poppet head, with associated sheds, is the Wentworth site in Council ownership, and the other structures are spread throughout the village. Lucknow’s mining history is one of interlocking sites, shafts and companies, and family and community structures. The story of the Wentworth site is not one that can be confined to the boundaries of the land currently owned by Council. Moreover, the biggest threat to Lucknow’s heritage is not from the deterioration of the structures on the Wentworth site, but from inappropriate development, design, signs and landscaping in the village.

Visitors to Lucknow will experience the Wentworth Mine not just as a discrete heritage experience, but in combination with shopping for skins, garden pots or antiques. So, the interpretation needs to be structured to physically and conceptually to unfold the story of the place in a way that acknowledges these visiting patterns.

In discussing the scope of the brief, it was evident that Council needed not just an interpretation plan for the Wentworth site, but a strategy for the village that would generate community support for the holistic care of the landscape in both a heritage conservation and a business environment. Community cultural development principles are an important tool to build consensus and support for heritage conservation in this kind of situation. Interpretation specialists may need to look critically at the brief and negotiate with the client to define the work in terms of meaningful geographic, historic, social and economic relationships – past and present.

Like western Sydney’s heritage, the interpretation of mining in central NSW is subdivided by the patchwork of different heritage sites and management regimes. No single site gives the visitor the bigger picture, or looks at the interlocking relationships between different mines, companies and cultural groups who worked around the region. The big untold story is about the economic and cultural impact of mining on the region and the state. There is a case for consolidating fragmented interpretive resources into regional or local heritage centres, run by local government, with the resources to interpret the wider regional story, as well as orienting visitors to particular heritage and mining sites in the locality.

Local government has a critically important role to play in heritage interpretation, not just in terms of planning and development consent, but through its museums, libraries and community cultural development programs. In NSW, local government is now required to develop cultural plans. Heritage interpretation is part of contemporary cultural life and it should be a strand in every cultural plan. Community esteem and identity is often based on the heritage of the town. It is a rich foundation for contemporary cultural activities, reflecting on the history and character of the place. The inclusion of heritage interpretation programs in local government cultural planning offers the best chance of a recurrent budget, the people to do the work, and the necessary commitment to community engagement.
We need some new methodologies for interpretation planning that position interpretation within community cultural development. Cultural mapping methodologies can be used in conjunction with other heritage planning skills to survey all the community’s heritage assets, to understand their needs, to map important storylines and pathways, and develop integrated plans to conserve and interpret heritage. John Neish and Dinah Fisher did something like this in the early 1990s in their heritage development strategy for Parramatta. Presented as an exhibition, the strategy was used to good effect. Every time there was a politician in town, they were wheeled in front of the plan and shown the project in question that was waiting for funding. At a glance you could see how the project fitted into an overall vision, and what the result and benefits would be. There was a photo opportunity and more often than not there was a cheque in the mail. More holistic and strategic heritage planning produces better outcomes for places and the community.

Many small rural communities and villages are eager to turn their heritage into new economic and cultural developments. These towns typically have a shopping strip that has had the main street treatment, vacant shops and hotels, redundant railway stations and a failing historical society that has wonderful objects with the potential to interpret the history, places and people who have built the town. They also have a core of hard-pressed volunteers who might be volunteers in half a dozen community organisations, and new and emerging arts boards and cultural groups. These small towns cannot resource separately-managed museums, heritage sites, cultural programs and arts centres. The opportunity is to develop new hybrid museum, heritage interpretation and cultural facilities that build a sense of place, in tandem with contemporary cultural activities and economic development. To do this though we need to restructure the framework in which heritage interpretation operates, so it is not just about the interpretation of individual sites, heritage fabric and conservation processes.

Heritage interpretation needs to find that wider story about themes and activities that link to contemporary cultural life. This will require better-targeted policies, new partnerships, and grant programs that integrate heritage interpretation into programs for community cultural and economic development. Ultimately it is not the clever things we can do with heritage fabric that will ensure the long term sustainability of heritage places but the extent to which we can weave contemporary society into a meaningful relationship with the past. Interpretation is the means to do this.