This paper is a meditation upon an alternative approach to interpreting houses at places with difficult histories. I want to canvas the current state of play in house museums, and suggest that we have lost our way and become complicit in toxic myth-making. I will argue that we need to replace the vain dream of authenticity with the authentic drama of integrity. That to create places where real understanding of difficult histories can be developed we need new communication strategies. That it should be an urgent project to retrieve the convict history of Australia from the culture of amnesia and self-delusion. That Port Arthur, as the most intact convict site in Australia, has a particular responsibility to take a leading role in that project. And that our houses are key sites in this process of retrieval.

Here at Port Arthur, we have a number of houses; three are furnished in traditional National Trust style, one has been the subject of a more experimental approach and the rest are still closed to the public. Even if we wanted to, furnishing them with nineteenth-century furniture is now out of the question, with a single 1840s chair realising $34,000 at a recent auction. What are we going to do with these houses, with all these empty rooms?

My meditation took off on a new tangent when Alec Campbell, our last Gallipoli veteran, died. His death unleashed a torrent of mawkish, romantic nonsense, like this from RSL National President Maj-Gen Peter Phillips: 'Australia might have been founded in 1901 but the spirit of this country dates from 1915.' One of the few voices pleading that we might move beyond the myth that Gallipoli has become, that we might turn a more critical gaze upon the idea of Australia, came from Dr David Day in a sober article in *The Australian.* Among other things, he recommended a rediscovery and revaluation of other foundation stories, which he named as ‘1788, the Eureka Stockade, the Federation story and the Great Depression’.

Not a mention of convictism, of the greatest Australian story never told; surely, with the invasion, one of our two actual foundation stories as opposed to myths. And I found myself wondering what kind of nation Australia would be now if there had been a state funeral for the last convict, who is said to have died eleven years after Gallipoli?

And what has all of this to do with house museums, and with places with difficult histories? It is my contention that this type of museum, especially at places with difficult histories, are enormously powerful myth factories. That, far from telling us the important, albeit painful stories of our past, they promote a myth that is, in its own way, as powerful, seductive and delusional as Major-General Phillips’ Gallipoli.

In 1993 Linda Young counted about 230 house museums in Australia. They fall into a number of different types but I only want to deal with one today. It is the most common type — the shrine to some person, event or period. There are two subtypes:

1. Intact with owners’ furnishings. These are rare. Three outstanding examples are Carrick Hill (Adelaide), Woolmers (northern Tasmania) and Rouse Hill (outer Sydney).

2. Recreated. These are the majority; they have little or no original furniture, there is generally no knowledge of the original furnishing scheme, and as a result they are completely ‘fake’ in both the historical and the visitors’ sense of the word. Examples include Entally House (northern Tasmania) and, at Port Arthur, the Commandant’s House and the Junior Medical Officer’s House.

The driving force in the recreated house museum is the curatorial fetish of ‘getting it right’, the pursuit of the highest possible degree of material accuracy. Once we have ‘got it right’, by some kind of magical osmotic process these kilos of mahogany and metres of chintz will speak to the visitor about the life and times of the house’s inhabitants. A fatal paradox lies at the heart of this enterprise of course — every recreation is inauthentic by definition, and ‘the righter we get it’ the more deceptive it is, but we are having too much fun shopping and decorating to face this unwelcome fact.

And the irony is that, despite all of our persistence, I suspect that our meticulous efforts towards authenticity are lost on most visitors; the vast majority cannot tell an 1830s chintz from a 1960s chintz. But they are so persuaded by the authenticity of the framing of this artifact, i.e. the house, and the sheer tonnage of apparent material reality and its high aesthetic values, that they almost invariably respond when asked why they have enjoyed their visit: ‘I love to look at how they lived then’ or ‘It’s like stepping back into the past’. This successful deception is seen as a curatorial triumph.

Some visitors with nasty suspicious minds, however, spoil it for everyone. They may then ask: ‘Is all this stuff real?’, by which they mean, did the furniture, silver, glass etc belong to citizen X? When told that ‘no, they are not real but is the kind of thing citizen X would have had’ they glover and sulk. Now they know that they have been conned. And they are not happy. As Donald Horne has said ‘the question of authenticity is one of the inner agonies of sightseeing’. Our meticulously ‘authentic’ reconstruction is not only not ‘real’, which sounds relatively harmless, it is actually a toxic lie. In its calm, well-ordered rooms there are no rebellious teenagers, fearful wives or angry husbands. There is rarely a glimpse of the underpaid or unpaid labour that kept all the mahogany polished, the sternly patriarchal system that constrained and controlled women and the working class, the high child and infant mortality that made these tranquil bedrooms and nurseries the sites of pain, grief and anxiety. These houses are the purveyors of the powerful myth of a lost Golden Age, a time when all was gracious and stylish, when prosperity and order reigned, when everyone knew their place and was happy in it. As Roger Hewison has argued in *The Heritage Industry*, the past thus presented makes us even more unhappy with the disordered and anxious present, and less able to deal with it. This is not history but heritage, the
b astard offspring of interior decorators and marketing managers.

**What are curators of social history doing in such dubious company?**

We have wandered into the seductive maze of gleaming mahogany and rustling chintz and become lost. And the alternative? The immortal Freeman Tilden exhorts us to 'expose the soul of things', to search for meaning and relationships over the facts of table and chintz.6

We must replace the futile pursuit of authenticity with the pursuit of integrity. By integrity I mean a close fit between what the Conservation Plan establishes as the values and meaning of the place and what we do in our houses.

Unfortunately it is not quite as simple as reconstructing service areas or furnishing kitchens, to add 'the other half' — usually the convicts, the women, the children, servants and Aboriginal people — to the existing place. As an example of the limitations of this approach, at Colonial Williamsburg, a site once characterised as presenting a self-congratulatory and all-white interpretation of American history, I am told that they have now reconstructed the slave quarters, and slaves now participate in re-enactments but these words still exist in parallel with the dominant, white, male world; during a Christmas presentation, slaves are talking in one room, masters in another. They do not interact, and a threateningly disruptive reality is safely contained. But it is surely in these interactions, these relationships, that meaning is revealed. In order to reveal those meanings we must obviously be prepared to face and to present difficult histories.

I would now like to turn to the houses here at Port Arthur to illustrate these ideas. The Port Arthur Statement of Significance, much condensed from our Conservation Plan, reads:

> Port Arthur Historic Site is an important foundation for Australia's sense of identity; it exemplifies a world-wide process of colonial settlement using labour provided by forced migration; it symbolizes an expansionist period of European history and British strategic objectives; it displays key aspects of penal philosophy and the social structure that produced it; it is a focal point for understanding the convict history and convict-period operation of the Tasman Peninsula; it also represents changing community attitudes to the notion of convict heritage.7

There is more but I think you take the point. Nowhere is it said that Port Arthur is important for what it can tell us about early to mid-nineteenth-century furnishing styles, domestic life or individual Commandants. This then should not be the focus for our interpretation of the Commandant's House or at any other house here. Rather we should seek to establish the meaning of this house within the overarching framework of the meaning of this place.

This will involve translating a Statement of Significance which essentially deals with the public, the institutional, the masculine, the global, into a set of messages that develop these ideas within a context that is domestic, private, local and feminised. We must also examine the points at which the public and the private, the domestic and the institutional, the male and the female, intersect and clash, This will obviously be difficult, emotional and dangerous.

It was in the Commandant's House that men debated ideas and formulated strategies that sought to administer this penal system. In this house there lived and socialised men who feared the united power of those imprisoned, who loathed the convicts' tainted moral and physical condition, who feared and despised their alleged homosexuality, who were capable of the most callous cruelty. Here, over port and cigars in the dining room, they tried to reconcile the twin aims of punishment and reformation, within a framework of bureaucratic and budgetary demands and personal beliefs. Women, even if they did not participate in these debates, must have been aware of them. These women's days were filled with drudgery and loneliness; they watched their children born and sometimes die without the solace of family and intimate friends. Some were too afraid to go outside alone. Convicts, members of a class they feared and despised, cleaned, washed and ironed, waited at their table, cared for their children, haunted every room of their home.

The Commandant and his family walked in beautiful formal gardens that were both refuge and cage; they knew that the stunning scenic beauty that framed their lives also contained ravaged minds and bodies; as they pursued science, art and music, walked and talked, sang and laughed in this house, not 100 metres away men paced in tiny, cold, dark cells; some went mad and some were redeemed. There were men and women in this house too with their own private demons. Loneliness, constant bureaucratic bickering and factional squabbles lipped some of them over the edge into something akin to madness.

It is these social and emotional intersections that meaning lies. This is why this house is so important and why it is difficult to interpret with integrity. It is clear that traditional methods — signs and guides — are of limited value here. This is an area of emotions, not of facts. Now that we have struggled free from the maze of mahogany and chintz we need alternative models of communication that might serve the purpose.

I would like to present some possible models for consideration, drawn from a range of areas that are not traditionally seen as part of the interpreter's arsenal, although there are some notable exceptions.

**Theatre design**

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> Theatre design

> The more I visited furnished houses, the more they felt like stage sets where nothing ever happens. I began to wonder if the history of theatre design might be instructive. I realised how much we shared when I read designer Michael Ratcliffe's lament:

> The compulsion continues of West End audiences to clap any set which offers as perfect and jam-packed a replica as possible of what they would like their homes to be. The applause is particularly warm if escape is offered for 2-3 hours to an earlier, more sensitive time. – this is most likely to be represented by a large, middle-class sitting room.6

> Sound familiar? This should sound familiar too.

> Throughout the nineteenth century in theatre design there had been an ever more fervid quest for realism, culminating in the excesses of the novelist Zola, who arranged furniture in 'natural' ways that made no allowances for sight lines and hung real sides of beef on the walls. Zola's quest was abandoned because absolute realism is impossible to attain on stage. The framing is too apparent, and the use of real items focuses attention on the unreality of the performance.6

> In our houses the framing is provided by groups of twenty-first-
century tourists, camera flashes and unmistakably modern conversations. Attempting to achieve and maintain any illusion of reality is doomed.

Eminent British director Peter Hall said that:

stage design should support every mood, but not pre-empt it. It also must not do the work of the storyteller... it must create an environment which allows the meaning of the work to be expressed in all its contradictions... it is not necessary to be 'archaeologically correct' but there must be an acknowledgement of the period in which the piece was written... in my view, nothing should be there unless it has meaning.

The machine must not be the thing itself but a metaphor... the theatre puts one or two objects on a planked wooden floor, throws light on them, and asks the audience to believe they are seeing, for example, ancient Rome. If the choices of the designer are neither archaeologically oppressive, nor inappropriate, the audience will joyfully play this game of make believe, and a whole society will be created for the play. Great stage design is visionary, it is a world of suggestion rather than actually. The designer's most powerful collaborators are the actor and the text... together they express the play.10

In our quest for the literal in the historic house we have forgotten the suggestive; we have created the archaeologically oppressive set and we have forgotten the actors and the text. In the recent British television series, The 1940s House, the actors and the text have been reinserted into an 'archaeologically oppressive' set. For those who haven't seen it, it follows the lives of a 2001 family that elects to experience a simulacrum of the wartime Home Front. Every detail is described the meaning of the experience in emotional, intangible terms - exhaustion, hunger, frustration and anxiety, camaraderie, small joys, home-made amusements, a sense of community.

Art

Linda Young wrestles with the idea that in our houses we should confront the dark side of life. That we should stop self-censoring ourselves as curators and introduce, for example, a dummy representing a bashed wife or a terrified child into our afternoon tea setting.11 I think that the fact that we shrink from the idea of such a presentation demonstrates that this kind of literal, traditional recreation is too crude. New strategies are needed.

Contemporary art practice offers a less literal but very powerful tool, which has been used to good effect by the Historic Houses Trust in Sydney to question assumptions, formulate new directions and fashion present-day sensibilities. At Elizabeth Bay House in Sydney, Anne Graham's installation, 'The Macleay Women' featured six long plaits of differing shades of red hair, attached to the bars of a basement window and snaking, partially unravelled, across the stone floor. It spoke eloquently of the lives of limitation and control lived by the six plain, studious, red-headed Macleay daughters.12

The interventions of Fred Wilson

One of the problems inhibiting a major shift in interpretive strategy may be that we have already invested so heavily in tables and curtains, clocks and chairs. Does this mean that we have to throw everything out and start again? No — it is time to try an intervention.

Fred Wilson, an artist and curator of African-American/Caribbean heritage, sought to find new ways to reinterpret collections so that "they could tell a greater range of stories about the human experience".13 As an artist of colour he was particularly concerned to address the absence of his people in museum exhibitions. The Maryland Historical Society and The Contemporary, an art gallery, engaged him to create a series of installations that they hoped would help them to reach a new audience and to use their collections in innovative ways. The Maryland Historical Society is a gentlemen's club that principally sought to honour the memory of Maryland's revolutionary statesmen. Its collections of fine furniture, silver and other domestic objects are displayed to enhance their preciousness and rarity and to vouch for their former owners' good taste and high status.14

Using unexpected, highly confronting and emotionally charged juxtapositions to elicit audience responses Wilson raised questions about the cultural amnesia of most American museums towards the experience of people of colour and their fraught shared history. His highly personalised 'interventions' in turn created more intimate and personal connections with the past. He transformed the Maryland Historical Society into a place for on-going cultural debate.

Into a case entitled 'Colonial Silverware' that held beautiful silver domestic objects - mugs, jugs, goblets, etc - he dropped a set of slave shackles and retitled it 'Colonial Metalwork 1793-1880'. A Ku Klux Klan hood replaced starched linen in a pram, while a nearby photograph showed black nannies pushing white babies in similar prams. In a painting of the Alexander Contee Hanson family — a charmed circle of mother, father, two children and dog, bathed in light — a little black girl stands alone in the shadows at far left, wistfully looking on. Wilson uses a covering sheet with an aperture that eliminates the family and foregrounds the little black girl; on the frame are the words; 'Who washes my back? Who combs my hair? Who calms me when I am afraid?'15

His work succeeded in galvanising responses to both the collection and to the pasts that it represented. Emotions ran high both in the galleries and behind the scenes as visitors and guides debated the issues raised. Lives were changed.

The Port Arthur Parsonage

When I was working as a consultant for Port Arthur some years ago, I was asked to interpret the Parsonage. This building had been burnt and rebuilt for use as a residence and Post Office in the late nineteenth century. In the collection were one or two pieces of Post Office period furniture, and oral histories had elucidated the layout and use of rooms in the 1930s. For the Parsonage period we had no information or objects. There was a small budget, not even enough to buy a colonial chair at today's prices.

An alternative presentation style was essential. It seemed to me that there were several important meanings to be drawn out of the convict history of this building, the first of which was drawn from the site's Statement of Significance, the second two extrapolated from what I knew of the site's history. Firstly, the Parsonage was the nerve centre of one of the two main strategies directed at prisoners, the use of religion as social
control and reformative coercion. Religion and its functionaries were thus intimately associated with the second strategy, punishment by both physical and psychological means. Secondly, prisoners were by no means simply passive in this process but found ways to express their resistance. Thirdly, daily life in this isolated settlement was characterised by bureaucratic squabbling and personal feuds, in which the Reverend Durham and Commandant Booth were frequently at loggerheads over prisoner treatment and discipline. Durham, always unstable, returned to Ireland, went mad and died in a place like Port Arthur.

Through photographs, sound, light and a Fred Wilson-style intervention I tried to explore those intersecting threads in a less literal, more impressionistic way. This less conventional approach is supported by conventional signs which explain the theatrical presentation and add the kind of factual detail that I was assured visitors would need to understand it. As yet, we have not done any evaluation on this installation, but anecdotal evidence indicates that lots of visitors ‘don’t get it’ but those that do, really like it. Even some of our guides, normally fairly conservative, are intrigued by it.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have suggested that we need to replace the dream of authenticity with the drama of integrity. That we need new communication strategies to deliver that message. That places with difficult histories have a key role to play in the retrieval of our convict history from the culture of amnesia and self-delusion, and that houses are key sites in that project.

I would like to remind you of the Fred Wilson intervention made on the painting of the Alexander Contee Hanson family. ‘Who washes my back? Who combs my hair? Who calms me when I am afraid?’

This is the secret and painful history of our difficult places. Ultimately we must ask ourselves

**Do we wish to delight, or to disturb, the idle dreams of our audience?**

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**Endnotes**