Telling tales: changing light globes

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I have been reminded during the last two days of the old joke about how many women’s liberationists does it take to change a light globe. You know, something about one to hold the ladder, one to change the bulb and four to make a video of it — but I won’t retell it here for fear of political incorrectness and bodily harm. Well, how many fomaries does it take to conserve a building? (I am using conservation in the elastic ICOMOS way). I think about ten: four to perform the ritual of archaeology, two to preserve the building and four to interpret it — leaving no one and no money to maintain it.

Let me regress. At this point I think regression may be the better part of valor.

I am no tire to the practice of interpretation. For thirty years I have been engaged in conservation and interpretation, striving to distinguish the two yet correlate them.

You may therefore dismiss my remarks not as impertinent, but as out-dated.

The spark that ignited my curiosity came from a seemingly odd source: the debate, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, on conceptual art. Was the work of art the physical thing and the craftsmanship it displayed or was it the intellectual concept that lay behind the manufacture? The arguments were not new. Was Marcel Duchamp’s urinal of 1917 the work of art or was it his creative act in declaring it a work of art? However, it was being debated with renewed vigour around 1970.

The transposition to conservation is obvious, but for me it needed the revelation of reading Ruskin’s Lamp of Memory to focus it. You must remember it was a time when conservation meant restoring buildings of perceived architectural distinction. What I saw being conserved around me was — mostly — the architect’s notion of what the concept of the original designer was, and not the preservation of the historic artefact that Ruskin pleaded for. Here were the arguments, transposed, for and against conceptual art. What was real and what was the fake? And did it matter? The moralist in me — evolving through five generations of Methodists — told me that it did, but I also soon began my own career in faking, and began justifying it. My career in interpretation had begun.

The real and the fake. Overall, I believed, and still believe, Ruskin was right. The physical evidence — whether of an architectural, social or artistic concept or of materials or craftsmanship, or simply of time — is what counts. But how to explain the relevance and appeal of this fake? What justification for all those heritage colour schemes, shingled roofs, pretty shutters, period furnishings and Federation carports? Italian sky blue and yellow conserves the woodwork of Haberfield houses as well as cream and green, and an IKEA couch is probably more comfortable than William IV — not that I’ve ever sat on one — and would draw the line at coffee tables. (I wish someone would ask me to lecture on coffee tables — the most useless, ergonomically hopeless piece of furniture in the history of furniture design must be the coffee table — so beloved of modern architects. Besides, as Quentin Crisp observed, you can tell the newness of the money by the lowness of the furniture). Anyhow, back to the point.

Are all the new green shutters and turned and fretted wooden carports, done in the name of conservation, and with conservation money, just romantic self-indulgence, fashion or good taste? I would never accuse conservation architects of any of those — so what are they? If this fakery is justified at all it is the justification of interpretation; of explaining former architectural concepts, tastes and fashions through reproduction or emulation. It has surprised me over the last two days that so little has been said about this most basic and prevalent means of interpretation; for over the last thirty years I estimate that as much of the building conservation budget has been spent — I will stop short of saying squandered — on such interpretation as has been squandered — I will go beyond saying spent — on archaeology.

Reconstruction — and the recreated house museum, now so much out of fashion, is an extraordinarily effective medium of interpretation: ‘writing’ history — whether social or of the decorative arts — in three dimensions. Using objects, not words. At its best this kind of interpretation is most immediate, engaging and understandable. At its worst such physical interpretation is destructive of the artefact, the evidence being compromised, obscured or even destroyed. Restoration or reconstruction is no more prone to romantic or middle headed self-indulgence, or fashion than other media of interpretation — and probably less prone to political correctness, dogma and cant.

Whether it is more costly than other forms of interpretation is doubtful. To paint out a 1960s all white colour scheme with stone-drob and oak-graining rather than Tuscan pink and faux marbre is a lot less expensive than commissioning a sculptor, film-maker or choreographer — and oak-graining does conserve the woodwork better than a projected dance-film interpreting oak-graining. As to its permanency, that also may be a curate’s egg. For all its physical presence it is less lasting that the written word. Just look at the middle that the once rigorously disciplined interiors of Elizabeth Farm have become.

Also, little has been said about changing interpretations. Interpretation is, and I think should be, continually changing, not because it keeps you in a job. If you define history as I do, not as simple chronology or a registering of facts, but as a relationship of the present to the past, then interpretation should and must change. I have often used the analogies of the old university lecturer or the biographer: we have probably all experienced the lazy lecturer who gave the same, increasingly irrelevant, lecture year after year (a bit like my talk today for many of you). Or the biographer. A biography of Churchill written during the war is very different to one written in 1950, to one at his death, or one now — and should be.

I have seen, and largely been responsible for, changing substantially, within twenty years of their assembly the furnishings — that is the interpretation — of Elizabeth Bay House and Government House, Parramatta. I defend, in principle, these changes. History — Interpretation — is a changing perspective. I am less sure about the costs involved if that money comes from the conservation purse. Choosing the wisest, as well as the most effective, medium for interpretation may be more complex than the interpretation itself.
My attitude is patronizing: if one fights for, and uses public money to keep (ie. conserve) what one believes is important to the community, then I also believe there is a duty to explain (ie. interpret) to the community why you think it is important. Conversely however, private owners, struggling to conserve something should not be bullied by heritage planners to add yet another burden -- interpretation -- to their obligations. (It seems to have been totally ignored in the last two days that most historic places are privately owned).

I try to choose my words carefully, but like Eliot's -- and like much interpretation -- they 'slip, slide and decay with imprecision'.

History, I was frequently told by my former employers, was not 'sexy' and shouldn't be mentioned. Interpretation it seems to me after sitting here for two days, is a currently sexier euphemism for history -- history as I see it -- not just chronicking facts but attempting to explain the significances and relationships of the changing past to the changing present. I write history, but I also construct history (and that doesn't mean that I always make it up). For years in my house museum work, in my exhibition work, in my gardening, I have used the word 'interpreting' -- so much more discrete than 'faking' -- but have regarded it as writing history in three dimensions.

Many -- perhaps most -- historians would disagree with me. Real historians aren't interior decorators. But such 'real' historians run a mile from interpreting anything but the written word, and interpreting it through the written word. They do not believe -- or cannot read -- objects as historical evidence, nor can they 'write' with objects. Is this part-cause of the unsexiness of history and the fashionableness of 'interpretation'? Interpreters jump in where historians fear to tread? I think history/interpretation may be practiced by anyone -- even architects, artists and old age pensioners -- but not everyone is equipped to be an historian or interpreter.

Three things concern me: the discipline of practicing 'history' or 'interpretation', the limitations of the medium through which it is practiced, and competency. Competency is not the right word. Competency is what one expects. What I am getting at is potentially conflicting priorities when the dissemination of information -- be it facts or significances -- is harnessed to artistic expression. I'm not just talking about the plastic arts. Creative writing and good history are not synonymous, but the finest history is finely written. Similarly good artists are not necessarily good historical interpreters. In recent years there has been a fashionable trend to employ artists as historians or interpreters. In theory I commend history through any medium, in practice I have great reservations.

I think most of the 'interpretation' commissioned from artists by the Historic Houses Trust in the last decade or so has been as fashionable as it has been irrelevant, misinforming or silly. I am talking about the relevance, accuracy and sense of the history or interpretation. I am not judging works of art, nor do I believe it is the Historic Houses Trust's role to be a patron of the arts anymore than it is for the Art Gallery to conserve historic sites.

It is fine if good interpretation is also good art, but in nearly every case I think it has ended up as Art for Arts sake, not Art for History's sake. And I think there has been an extraordinary assumption -- both by trend-following curators and by artists -- that through some sort of divine or cosmic (Janet Laurence used the word 'alchemical') sixth sense artists have an insight into history that transgresses knowledge and research. What has been accepted as history or interpretation from artists, wrapped in beguiling artiness, would not be accepted as history from a secondary school student expressing in faltering prose. If artists, decorators or writers are to practise history or interpretation I believe they should be subject to the same disciplines of history or interpretation. Although I said I commend interpretation, in theory, through any medium, the reality is that there are inherent limitations in different media. Commemoration or paying tribute, through a work of art is not interpretation.

History or interpretation is the conveying of facts, figures, relationships and significances: understandings, analyses and responses. It is only partly a question of the skill of the artists: the degree to which painting, music sculpture, theatre, recreation or the written word is capable of expressing or conveying these, varies. The choice of medium, or media, is more important perhaps than the choice of executor. The suffering and anguish of a convict may be interpreted musically, but the most skilled composer cannot interpret the scientific associations that make the site of Governor Brisbane's observatory significant -- though he may pay homage to it. But why worry? This only makes for more places on the conservation bandwagon, more bites of the conservation cherry.

I do worry -- and become cynical -- when I sense that the process becomes more important than -- takes over from -- the results. This ever-increasing codification, bureaucratization of researching, analyzing, planning, reporting and commemorating that leaves no time, no energy, and no money left simply to nail back a few sheets of iron or board up a broken sash without reports, plans and approvals -- in triplicate.

I have just bought from Sotheby's a lovely pair of late eighteenth century Chinese ceramic flowerpot stands for either side of my front door. I like symmetry. I like pairs of vases, pairs of trees, pairs of cabinets. I like the 'yin' and 'yang' of things: the real and the fake, the keeping and the explaining, the conserving and the interpreting. I like the idea of the symmetry of archaeology and interpretation as decorative bookends to the act of conservation. Like my flowerpot stands frame my front door.

But the horror of the image of women's liberationists changing light globes comes back to me. Please -- please -- don't let interpretation become the new archaeology, the one a ritual -- Richard Mackay used the word 'celebration' -- to sanctify the site before conservation can begin (with its ever repeated mantra 'adding a human dimension to history' which in reality seems to mean drains, clay pipes and blue and white crockery); the other -- interpretation -- a benediction at the close of work. Then the liturgy is over. The left wafers are given to the cat, the holy water thrown on the pot plants and the Icomites -- high priests and acolytes -- go home to tea ...without a thought for who will clean the gutters, wipe the cowwebs from the interpretations! Art-installation -- or even change the light globes.

Although the zeal of ICOMOS has much in common with the old RSL, unfortunately the price of conservation, unlike peace, it seems to me, is not eternal vigilance, but a multiplicity of charters, guidelines, consultants. Anyhow, once again, as your elders have bid me, I have acted Polonius. (You know, an attendant lord, one that will do to swell a progress...start a scene or two -- no doubt an easy tool, full of high sentence but a bit obtuse -- almost at times the fool). All that is left is to give my benediction. So, in the name of the holy trinity -- archaeology, conservation and interpretation -- may ICOMOS be with you.

(Amen).