The role of history in interpretation

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When I was asked to speak on this topic, I went to the ICOMOS web site to refresh myself concerning the Burra Charter. The review notes outlining the changes to the charter that precede the actual document include the following: "Prominent among the changes are the recognition of less tangible aspects of cultural significance including those embodied in the use of heritage places, associations with a place and the meanings that places have for people. Why conserve?" the review asks. And the answer is that "places of cultural significance enrich peoples' lives...they are historical records that are important as tangible expressions of Australian identity and experience."

Places are historical records? They are places. They have a history? They contain historical meaning. But is the history self-evident from the place? Are they historical records in the sense that the meaning is inscribed in their actual being, and that they just need a heritage-savvy practitioner to interpret them? Take a building. Any building. Does the fabric, the place, tell its own story? I believe that we accept that proposition at our peril.

Let's look at a high profile example. Sydney Town Hall. As you probably all know, it was built in stages, and the final stage, the main hall, was completed in 1889. It was supposed to be completed in 1888, not for any particular reason. The City Fathers were perplexed at how long it took to complete. They wanted it to be finished by early 1888 at the latest and they therefore decided to call it the 'Centennial Hall' because 1888 was the year to 'celebrate' the centenary of European settlement/invasion. And when it was not completed until 1889 they kept the name Centennial Hall anyway. By then this name was inscribed into some beautiful mosaic flooring in the northern and southern crush rooms, facing Druitt Street and the St Andrews Cathedral. And so the 'Centennial Hall' was finally opened in 1889, when the celebrations were all over.

But then a few years later, in 1892, the city fathers decided to celebrate their own beginnings - fifty years since the City of Sydney had been established in 1842. And questions were asked about the reasons for the naming of the Centennial Hall. 1898 was not a 'civic' date. It did not apply as it was about a colonial event, not a city one. It was not part of the culture of the place. Accordingly, the Council voted to rescind a resolution naming it the Sydney Centennial Hall. Further it voted that "the words 'Centennial Hall' in pavements in the northern and southern entrances to the large hall be removed and the pavements be left plain and wherever 'Centennial Hall' is now used in connection with the use of the large hall, the name 'Town Hall' substituted. The alterations are easily adjusted to by reason of the total unfitness of the larger term to express the civic possession." (Resolution of Council 25th October 1892.) The 'civic possession' referred to the establishment of the City in 1842. This had little to do with the arrival of Europeans in 1788 and hence nothing to do with 1888. The thinking and the documentation could not be clearer.

At this point in the story there appears to have been some stalling on the part of George McCrae, who had by then become the City Architect. He was more concerned about appearances than about civic understandings of the meaning of space. He said the mosaics looked the part, and that removal of the words would be very difficult, and in the end he seems to have got away with not removing them. At a later stage the flooring at the southern entrance was removed and replaced with much plainer work, minus the Centennial Hall inscription, but the original work remains today in the northern crush room. But although the fabric remained intact, the rhetoric was altered. From 1892 the term 'Centennial Hall' was no longer used. The written record from then on for almost a hundred years refers to the 'Great Hall', or more usually the 'Main Hall' or just the 'Town Hall', but never to the 'Centennial Hall'.

That is until 1989 when a special meeting of the City Council was held to commemorate the centenary of the building. And there, without any reference to the written record, and presumably on the basis of believing what they saw in the mosaic, or perhaps read in the newspaper of the opening day a hundred years before, the Lord Mayor moved that 'out of respect for the intentions of our forefathers the title of this Hall in which we are now assembled, which has been referred to in recent years as the Main Hall, be reaffirmed by its original title, 'The Centennial Hall.' This did not show respect. It was not based on an historical understanding of the role of the building, though it was an interpretation that the physical fabric could support. The fabric did not yield up sufficient of the historical meaning. And of course, in the end, the more complex story is the more interesting one.

So who gets to propose historical meaning, the nub of the statement of significance?
The background notes on the ICOMOS web site also say this of the new Burra Charter: "The Charter recognises the need to involve people in the decision-making process, particularly those with a strong association with the place. These might be as patrons of the corner store, as workers in a factory or as community guardians of places of special value, whether of indigenous or European origin. There's a bit of an issue there with that 'indigenous or European' option: what about the many non-European Australians? That aside, and assuming that 'all' are to be included, let's run by this again. It's about including 'community guardians'. It does not say these might include the historian.

The 'local' is only one focus of community of understanding about the significance of place. The community which advocates for forest conservation is clearly drawn from a wider 'community' and often sharply at odds with the 'local' community who may want wood chipping. The same complexity applies to many urban places. You need a wide focus, not a local one, for issues like harbour foreshore development and for that most challenging issue of industrial heritage. Here the community who were involved may well be alienated from the place where work was for them hard and reasonably unrewarding, and mostly they won't live there anyway. Regard for the heritage of the place is not likely to be high on their agenda.

And often it will be the historian who says 'this' or 'this' is important in allowing communities to interpret their past, particularly those with a strong association with the place. These might be as patrons of the corner store, as workers in a factory or as community guardians of places of special value, whether of indigenous or European origin. There's a bit of an issue there with that 'indigenous or European' option: what about the many non-European Australians? That aside, and assuming that 'all' are to be included, let's run by this again. It's about including 'community guardians'. It does not say these might include the historian.

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problem was, as it so often is, that there was really no understanding that there was actually any skill involved in understanding the history of the site. There was no understanding that their words were not OK and no understanding of what an historian does.

In part this is because we historians have failed to get our message across. We need to learn better how to interpret ourselves to the wider heritage profession. I know there are plenty of people in this audience who just don't believe the proposition that anything more than a good level of familiarity with a site is necessary to know its history. And I see many so called 'histories' that provide the interpreters with very little that is exciting or challenging to work with.

According to the senior heritage planner at the City of Sydney, the majority of CMPs that come across his desk do not have a contextual history written by an historian. No one would think of running an archaeological dig without an archaeologist. And architects are very ready to decry buildings that are not designed by architects. But too often anyone with a bit of a knowledge of research methods is considered OK to do 'the history bit' of heritage documents, which form the basis of the final interpretation. As a result, we get far too much work that regurgitates the obvious, lists the business directory entries for a place, amasses a pile of the maps that indicate past use, and generally serve it up as a kind of pseudo-historical sludge. The good historical contextual report is not the one that has covered every piece of documentation, but the one that has weighed all this material up, along with the knowledge that comes from the broader study of history and historical forces to arrive at a nuanced understanding. The dross will have been jettisoned, referred to in an appendix maybe, to indicate that it has been sighted if not cited, and the tale that is told will be engaging. The report will ideally be fairly slim in many cases.

But let us allow for the moment that an historian has been employed - not the junior member of the architectural team, or the cleaning lady, but a real live historian. The contextual history has been done. What then? How is the context meshed to the following processes of recommending action? And bear in mind that some of these cases involve millions of dollars of heritage floor space transfers. When the final document is delivered to the consent authority, how is the value of the historical interpretation and contextual history assessed? By an overstretched heritage officer who is almost certainly an architect or a planner. If you are lucky. Or by a town planner/engineer in a small council. Or by a body that is its own consent authority for its own property as in the case of an organisation like SHFA. And on occasions locals councils too are their own consent authority.

Who assesses the historian? Can we imagine a second rung of historians doing the work? Not likely. Even at the City of Sydney, where we have two full-time historians employed, this is not work that our schedules allow. At best, if the heritage planners are really doubtful about the quality of a piece of interpretive work they may consult us, but this is not routinely done. Could we expect that the State Heritage Office provide random spot checks on organisations that commission this kind of work? More realistically, the problem of inadequate historical input into interpretive work needs to be headed off at the pass in the beginning by insisting that it be an historian who does the history. Not an architect or a planner or an architectural historian, but a plain broad-brush, wide-ranging generalist historian.

After years of attending forums where this has been said, and being met with resistance from those who really don't believe or understand the historian's craft, it is probably time to say that it will not happen unless it becomes a statutory requirement. This would cut across the way I know many people in the heritage business work. This wouldn't solve everything. There are good historians and not so good ones, just as there are good and not so good architects, pastry cooks, and everyone else. But it would be a start.

Then there are the issues of insisting that recommendations become real by tying execution into the conditions of the DA. And then, in the later stages and for final interpretation, might it not be possible to also involve the historian. There remains a kind of fear that if you let historians anywhere near interpretive signage, they will want to be too didactic, that historians cannot conceive of playing with poetry, with art, with whimsy. That the historian would make it dull. These assumptions raise many questions about our own cultural engagement with our history. But there are two things that I know. Firstly, that people are hungry for information. They want to know. And secondly, that they deserve to be told with the simplicity and clarity that come from the widest and deepest understanding that we can all collectively muster.