(in)significance: a discussion about values and valuing in heritage

Friday 15 May 2015, Ann Harding Conference Centre, University of Canberra

Conveners: Tracy Ireland and Steve Brown

Symposium abstract

The notion of 'significance' is a central concept for heritage conservation in many parts of the world—it describes what the institutions of heritage choose to remember and what they choose to forget. Used in American historic preservation legislation from the late 19th century, and in the 1964 Venice Charter, in Australia the Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS 1979) introduced the phrase 'places of cultural significance', a concept that emphasised meanings over monuments. Determining significance is a process of ascribing values–culturally constructed meanings or qualities attributed by individuals and groups to a heritage object, place or landscape. Valuing heritage has led to practices that typically list, rank and then privilege particular values–at world, national and local levels. At the symposium we hope to explore the history, theory and practical application of the concept of significance and broach the idea of insignificance.

NOTES ON SESSION 2: theory and critique

Session 2 *theory and critique* 11.30 – 13.00	- Are values past, present or future oriented? - How do recent critiques of nature/culture dichotomies impact on significance assessment? - How does recent research into the affective and emotional dimensions of heritage impact significance assessment? - Are there clear and well understood distinctions between materials, materiality and values?	
11:30 – 11.40	Critique 1. Car yards to cafes	Ursula Frederick
11.40 – 11.50	Critique 2. Significance for whom? Objectivity and community in heritage practice	Adam Dickerson
11.50 – 12.00	Critique 3. Nature and Culture	Kristal Buckley
12.00 – 12.10	Critique 4. The tautology of 'intangible values'	Laurajane Smith
12.10 – 12.20	Critique 5. Reduced to insignificance? Valuing emotion and empathy	Steve Brown
12.20 – 12.30	Critique 6. Significance and the supernatural	Denis Byrne
12.30 – 13.00	Panel discussion. Why have these critiques arisen – what's driving them? Do they have traction across fields of practice?	Panel of 6 presenters Facilitator: Tim Winter

Note on notes

The following summary is not a verbatim transcript. Rather, the notes are a series of statements that seek to capture what was expressed and discussed. The notes are not intended for direct quotation in a scholarly sense, but rather they provide a flavor of the Session-3 discussion.

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Session 2 – *theory and critique*
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Chair and Facilitator

Professor Tim Winter (Research Chair of Cultural Heritage, Deakin University Melbourne)

Speakers

Dr Ursula Frederick (Research Associate, University of Sydney); Dr Adam Dickerson (University of Canberra); Kristal Buckley (Lecturer in Cultural Heritage, Deakin University Melbourne); Professor Laurajane Smith (Head of Centre for Museum and Heritage Studies, Australian National University) and Gary Campbell (Independent Scholar); Steve Brown (PhD Candidate, University of Sydney); Denis Byrne (Senior Research Fellow, University of Western Sydney)

DISCUSSION

Each of the six speakers ascended the podium to form the session panel.

Tim Winter. Asked panel members to offer a question or comment that connected their presentation to the others. What is the take away message from your presentation and to which the audience can respond?

- Gary Campbell. There is a rift in the language people are using about so-called intangible heritage. That discomfort displays a dissonance in political work that explores tangible and intangible; perhaps reflecting disciplinary perspectives. The discomfort is reflected in the language operating to legitimise one way or other ways of how material culture is valued.
- Denis Byrne. Most people in the room today are committed to conservation and that heritage work is the work of conservation. It has always struck me as peculiar that people like ourselves who are committed to conservation – and many people here are conservation activists – assume that we can assess the significance of places and objects in a neutral way. We already have a clear interest in the spaces we assess. I would appreciate your thoughts on this matter. It seems that in our practice we cannot be value neutral – we bring to the process our own value systems to places we investigate.
- Steve Brown. I pick up a point made by Adam: who are 'us' in the significance assessment process? In my view a missing aspect in the process is the personal, but also feeling or emotional dimensions in respect to cultural groups. Perhaps universal values are better covered in heritage practice than are personal connections. Picking up on Denis' paper, 'us' may well be some of the materials we are investigating. Because the material can 'radiate' a sense of power, perhaps this aspect can be incorporated into an evaluative process.
- Kristal Buckley. My question is how do we take some of the insightful understandings of where practice and thinking is lacking or has gaps, and start to think about things differently? While we are here in this room things are happening 'out there' by all sorts of actors for all sorts of reasons. How do we contribute? How do we act

differently? My presentation was about nature and culture, but I was very inspired by the other panellists.

Audience questions and comments

- Edwina Jans. I work at the Museum of Australian Democracy, Old Parliament House, Canberra. As a heritage professional, one of the things I do every day is talk to my work colleagues about using significance in decision-making. One of the tricky things is that significance is a word that means different things to different people. We have success with the idea of 'spirit of place'. Part of that picks up on some of the things discussed in this and the previous session. I am hoping to tap into the thousands of years of experience in this room and ask for, and tease out, ideas of communicating significance and language – within our practice to our colleagues who are tasked with doing slightly different things in places. I am talking about someone who is on the front line of communicating heritage and doing it every day. What are people's thoughts on the idea of spirit of place? Or as Dennis Denuto says '*the vibe of thing*'. These concepts concern emotional understandings of place.

- Ursula Frederick. We have talked today about words and the importance of words. In my experiences of Braddon, and car culture generally, there is a complete language or vernacular, unknown to the outsider that expresses values. Thus 'show and shine' carries meaning that can be seen in objects – such as shiny hubcaps and waxed car bodies. Values get embedded in language. And there are ways language connects to sensory experiences, images, voices – literally voices – reflecting a multisensory experience of value that incorporates words but also goes beyond words to include images, sound, and so on.

- Greg Roberts – ACT Historic Places. This session has been really powerful for me because it has taken me back to a previous life that I had living in the Snowy Mountains for almost 20 years. The point I am picking up on is language and how it interacts with human beings; the word 'us'. I was a participant in the Kosciuszko National Park Plan of Management community forum. What Steve said brought the issue of language home to me. On the community forum were 22 people who ranged from Indigenous community representatives, farmers, bush walkers, high country people, and so on. We would attend these meetings every month, and those people would spend an hour arguing about a particular item – e.g., a white rock in the high country. A problem was that, to distil-down all opinions and views, the result, to use an analogy, you picked all the fresh fruit, boiled it in a saucepan to get jam, and what you got was pips. In my own work today, language can work against us. The sort of English used in the Plan of Management may not make sense to a practitioner that has to repair a broken water pipe.

- Steve Brown. Thank you for the comment. I want to preface my response by saying the 2006 Kosciuszko management plan was revolutionary for NSW national parks. It really changed the management plan paradigm, the process was widely consultative, and a great depth of expert knowledge informed the plan. When in my presentation I critiqued the plan, I was focusing on a specific aspect. But I still stick to my position that there is more capacity to integrate affective and emotional aspects into the way in which we talk publically and amongst ourselves about heritage. So it seems to me that a community discussion about a 'white rock' is an incredibly important conversation to have for the purpose of understanding values and managing place. While you were talking Greg I was, for some unknown reason, thinking about the ABC

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News weather map. During the weather report a map is presented showing complex linear configurations of highs and lows moving across Australia. I was thinking of Kosciuszko in terms of that weather pattern of lines traversing the landscape. The analogy is that 'highs' represent moments in time when things are 'significant' and the 'lows' represent insignificant stuff. The moving weather pattern image conveys for me a sense of dynamism in the temporal valuing of landscape. Just throwing that thought out there.

- Caroline Reid I am from Adelaide. I have been grappling with issues of materiality and significance and disconnects between private and public heritage. I think it is increasingly a problem that we have statements of significance and a heritage authority that strictly adheres to those statements, particularly the material aspects. To illustrate, a third generation owner may think of their home as a space for the living; an authority may think it an object in the landscape. There can be conflict between what the owner wants to do with the property and what the authority thinks should be done. We need a re-think of heritage values. There needs to be a different way. For example, writing statements of significance so as to have a latitude enabling buildings to go on being used and adapted and not frozen in time. The latter is often the general public's view of what heritage does.
- Tim Winter. The comment goes to the idea of cultural rights.
- Adam Dickerson. I am conscious of being too abstract. Many of you as professionals are concerned about a particular object, such as this apple, while I do not care about the particular in my role as a philosopher. I think it would be foolish to think that we could get a right answer to questions like that; though I am not suggesting that is what you are doing. At times I see in some of today's debates and my readings that there can be a right answer or a right way of doing significance that can make problems go away. Part of what I want to say is that it is inherently political. So what heritage people are doing is always going to be a political act – e.g., in constructing a community or constructing a certain image of a community. Not everyone will agree with the result. There is no way of avoiding disagreement. There is a political dimension, whether we like it or not. I would be worried about turning it into a technical issue since there is no technical wording able to get us out of what are essentially political issues. This is not a solution but I think it is the problem.
- Duncan Marshall. It seems to me that the conversations, the presentations, have gone in a couple of different directions. One set of conversations is about the toolkit we use, if I can be as Capricornian and practical as that. The other set is about how well that toolkit is used. Being a card-carrying heritage depressive, I wonder whether we have robust evidence of how well or poorly the toolkit is working, and what things we need. I take heart from Linda Young's earlier presentation. It is easy to find poorly performing cases or examples of heritage practice.

    It seems to me that heritage 'activity' is a bell curve. There is a tail, a centre of the activity, and a leading edge. The best practice in my experience is very good and addresses lots of the issues raised this morning. The worst practice is dreadful. I am not sure where the centre of the bell curve lies. My question is to what extent do we have robust evidence of the performance of the toolkit – whether the philosophy, techniques, tools within that toolkit – and whether the tools are working or failing? How they being used and what are are the strengths or weaknesses?

- Adam Dickerson. I can't speak for everyone at this table because there are different views. I would reject your analogy of a toolbox. It implies neutral criteria to determine if a technical apparatus has been working well or not. The problem is that any criteria are implicitly or explicitly political at some level. You may think that this heritage is working wonderfully but another community may reject that whole picture – that community you are building is not one I recognise; you don't speak for me; etc. It seems you are trying to eliminate that politics and replace it with a technical question. Again, I would reject that because it is not possible. Other people may violently disagree.
- Ursula Frederick. I obviously like the analogy of the toolbox! [Applause]
- Denis Byrne. In relation to popular religion, one of the things that has really struck me is that there is a huge literature, just for Asia, in the fields of anthropology and modern history in particular. This literature is on popular religion and the way it works and engages with old places and materiality. It is striking that that it is never referenced in the heritage world. Thinking bodies of evidence, we have to be much better at looking outside our own field, to what other experts are saying about the places we are looking at and about the people who live within them.
- Juliet Ramsay. I want to make a few comments about the Alps and Kosciuszko. I helped do an assessment of the Australian Alps for the Australian National Heritage List many years ago. It was an extremely difficult exercise in getting the cultural landscape recognition of north Kosciuszko in which Old Currango sits. My statement is that we have places listed on the National Heritage List and other lists, but being listed they may be devoid of emotional information. However they provide a platform that gives people something to work on in the future. They can work on those stories. Significance should not be static in time. There should be scope to build on significance year after year. There are thousands of stories associated with the Alps. If listings had not gone through, Old Currango would not be there, new Currango would not be there, and half the other huts, and places that were listed under technical or political processes – or whatever you want to call them.
- Jane Harrington. I want to end up on a positive note. I am Piscean. One of the problems about being Piscean is that you are well known for being emotional and very Pollyanna-optimistic about things. Pisceans do not intellectualise as a first response to something. Rather we look at something and think it is beautiful and espouse that beauty. I think we are being overly critical about what we are doing.

  Returning to Duncan's point about where we are succeeding and not succeeding. If I look around this room it is full of heritage practitioners. It is full of people who have moved from one discipline to another. It is full of people who have at various times gone into academia. Several of my role models are sitting in this room. I thing we have done some wonderful things and we should be celebrating them. I am concerned we are creating a dichotomy between all the evil things that are happening now, the power games, and politics that are playing, without actually recognizing that we are having this insightful discussion. We are the people 'out there' influencing practice.

  One final note on language, including intangible values. I cringe every time I hear that phrase. I don't know about being a tautology – I'm sure it is – but it is oxymoronic, like the 'wet water' thing. But, the fact the term is being used acknowledges that we are dealing with grammatical nincompoops and not

necessarily with people who are out there trying to play a political power game. Certainly there is evidence of people doing that. Having been the editor of *Historic Environment* for a long time, and we have another editor here, there is nothing within heritage that suggests that people don't use English well and I suspect most of the people I know who use terms such as intangible values clearly are committing a grammatical error more than they are espousing a political philosophy. I want to end on that note and give ourselves a pat on the back in recognition of some of our work. Well done everyone in the room. [Applause]

▪ Tim Winter. We are going to wrap up for lunch, but before doing so I am going to give a summary of where I think we have gone in this session. For me there were three meaty things we opened up.

The first was our entanglement with materiality. It was nice to start with the first presentation by Ursula on the particular technology of the car, and the way that technology is connected to landscapes and to our sense of space and time; and to think about urban forms. But then I think it got a bit messier. We were asked to get more connected to the material world and we were asked to be less connected, to disentangle ourselves. So in response to Kristal's presentation, my view is that the Anthropocene changes everything. We need to see culture in relationship to nature: nature as a non-human actor in this world that is bearing upon everything we do in terms of conservation and it's the setting within which we need to think about the culture and nature relationship. There were other presentations, particularly Gary's, that spoke to and asked us to step back from that material; to see socio-cultural forms as less-material, less-fabric centred. That led onto another dimension, which was a cultural reading of entangled significance. Denis took us into cross-cultural context, Ursula into a sub-cultural context. What was redolent about both was how do we think beyond the material and how do we look at particular sub-cultural forms that are in play? How we think about that?

The second theme concerned knowledge domains that frame heritage and questioning around that idea, and the knowledge domains that frame objects and places. Both Adam and Steve pointed out how knowledge domains set up, and how heritage creates, assumptions of value. That needs challenging because it bears upon ways in which history gets written and history gets made, and so forth. The knowledge domains that sit within these bifurcations of nature and culture, tangible and intangible, seem surprisingly stubborn and we need to move beyond that. That's an ongoing challenge. We are going to be back here in ten years time and there will probably be the terminology we are all using. So how do we address that? Gary's presentation spoke to that theme.

The other interesting topic was the problem of ethno-centrism. Talk of 'us' and the 'we'. How do we step outside that? How do we attribute values that are both reflective of us and question us - the idea of empathy that Steve raised? And the tendency to secularise, which Denis raised, and which I will come back to. In that knowledge domain area there was also the critical issue of questions of language – how we use language, how it gets circulated outside policies and documents, and how we might communicate our ideas better. There was also the importance of listening and using and understanding particular vernacular languages that we don't necessarily speak or hear on an every day basis. So language was a key thing.

A third and final theme that came out was the ethos of the contemporary moment, which is a really important point. We touched on that but we could go a lot further. So the scale of the 'us' that Adam raised. It is commonly talked about at the community level. I know Adam was reluctant to open out beyond that. A question that came up strongly in talking about the Anthropocene, climate change and culture-natures – what is the 'us', the 'we'? Who are 'we' representing? Is it a species? These are big questions. And the urgency of the history of the modern era, which Denis touched on. How we step outside of assumptions, those knowledge areas that we privilege, that we use, and are embedded in our institutions today, to respond to those big challenges of the contemporary moment. Denis tried to challenge us to think about these things.

So for me these were key themes. Please join me in thanking the panel, the six presenters. [applause] Please be back at two o'clock for the next session.

General rumbling noises and stomachs as people ruminated and reflected, all the while gravitating toward edibles … and lavatories.

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Session 2 - *theory and critique*

Facilitator: Tim Winter

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Ursula Frederick - *Car yards to cafes*

In the lead up to its centenary, Canberra's civic centre has undergone substantial transformation. Once the motoring heart of the nation's capitol, the suburb of Braddon is now a hub for hipsters enjoying life in the inner-city. This paper explores the role of place-making as a practice of performance, erasure and re-purposing, whereby the values and memories associated with place are selectively remembered and forgotten through heritage. From burning rubber to roasting beans, the transformation of Braddon is discussed specifically through the lens of visual anthropology and creative practice, to consider how cultures of the (in)significant may be imagined.

Ursula K. Frederick is an artist and archaeologist based in Canberra, Australia. Her primary research interests include the production, reception and interpretation of visual and material cultures. Ursula has a background in Fine Arts (UWA), Archaeology (ANU) and Visual Arts (ANU). Her doctoral research examined the intersection of creativity and automobility through the lenses of visual anthropology, contemporary art and contemporary archaeology. She has published on a variety of topics including rock art, graffiti, photography, and the art of automobilies. Her predominant modes of art practice include photography, video, printmaking and installation.

Adam Dickerson - *Significance for whom? Objectivity and community in heritage practice*

This talk examines the question of the objectivity of judgments of significance. In particular, if a realist conception of the property of 'significance' is implausible, does that mean we must recoil into a relativist conception of it? However, if significance means 'significance for us' then everything hangs on who this we might be.

Adam Dickerson has taught Communication and International Studies at the University of Canberra for the last decade. Prior to that he studied at UNSW, and taught philosophy at the University of Durham in the UK. He's the author of *Kant on Representation and Objectivity* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), and various papers in the history of philosophy, philosophy of language, epistemology, philosophy of education, and the ethics of cultural heritage.

Kristal Buckley - *Nature and Culture*

If we know well that the duality of nature and culture is constructed and not universal – and we know that treating them separately within heritage systems of evaluation and decision making is problematic – then why is it so hard to make a shift?

Kristal Buckley AM is a Lecturer in Cultural Heritage, and member of Deakin University's Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific in Melbourne. Her work has a focus on evolving forms of heritage practice. She is a member of the Board of the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority, and has worked as a heritage consultant, and served for 9 years as a full member of the Victorian Heritage Council. She is a former international Vice-President of ICOMOS and an expert member of the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee for Intangible Cultural Heritage. In 2013, she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for *significant service to conservation and the environment, particularly in the area of cultural heritage, and to education*.

Laurajane Smith - *The tautology of 'intangible values'*

This presentation will argue that the tautological phrase 'intangible value' is more than a linguistic irritant, and that it does explicit and material political work in devaluing non-expert heritage values and associations. This phrase is a strategic response from within the AHD, and reasserts expert values in light of challenges offered by the increasing policy prevalence of both community inclusion and intangible heritage.

Laurajane Smith works in the area of heritage studies, and is editor of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* and series general editor with William Logan of *Key Issues in Cultural Heritage* (Routledge). Prior to arriving at the ANU in 2010, she held the position of Reader in Heritage Studies at the University of York, UK, where she directed the MA in Cultural Heritage Management for nine years. Originally from Sydney, she taught Indigenous Studies at the University of New South Wales (1995-2000), and heritage and archaeology at Charles Sturt University (1990-1995). She also worked as a heritage consultant in south-eastern Australia for a number of years.

Steve Brown - *reduced to insignificance? valuing emotion and empathy*

In Australian heritage practice statements of values typically present as empirical, expert and unemotional. I am critical of assessments that exclusively represent and value heritage objects, places and landscapes in this way. I argue for the inclusion of affective, emotional and personal dimensions in order to engage different audiences.

Steve Brown is an archaeologist by training and a heritage scholar/practitioner by happenstance. He worked for a long period as a cultural heritage researcher with the NSW government and recently completed a PhD in Heritage Studies at the University of Sydney. Steve is the author of *Cultural Landscapes: A Practical Guide for Park Management* (2010) and a co-editor of *Object Stories: Artifacts and Archaeologists* (Left Coast Press, 2015). Steve is President of the ICOMOS/IFLA International Scientific Committee on Cultural Landscapes.

Denis Byrne - *Significance and the supernatural*

A very large proportion of religious believers in the world today engage with temples, shrines, churches and sacred natural landscape features on the understanding that they possess supernatural, miraculous force. They assess the significance of such sites principally via their miraculous efficacy. Can such efficacy be accommodated within the secular-rational systems of significance assessment employed in heritage practice?

Denis Byrne is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Western Sydney. He is an archaeologist working in the fields of heritage conservation and heritage studies, focusing on Australia and Southeast Asia and currently researching the China-Australia heritage corridor, reclamation landforms, and the 20th century archaeological heritage of the Parramatta River. His books include *Surface Collection: Archaeological Travels in Southeast Asia* (2007) and *Counter Heritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage Conservation in Asia* (2014).