

# **(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 4: Reflection**

<b>Session 4 reflection</b> 16.00 – 17.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ What contribution can this symposium make to theory and practice concerning (in)significance and values?</li><li>▪ In what ways might this be achieved?</li><li>▪ What theoretical roadblocks, research and creative directions for practice might we recognise?</li></ul>	
16.00 – 16.10	Reflection 1	Ross Gibson
16.10 – 16.20	Reflection 2	Sharon Sullivan
16.20 – 16.50	Key issues, defining actions	Facilitated discussion:
16.50 – 17.00	Wrap up. Communicating 'messages' from the Symposium.	Tracy Ireland and Steve Brown

### **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 flavour of the Session-4 discussion.

---

## Session 4 - reflection

---

**Co-Chairs.** Steve Brown (University of Sydney) and Tracy Ireland (University of Canberra).

The fourth session of the symposium was divided into two parts:

1. Reflections on the previous sessions provided by two rapporteurs; and
2. Discussion and concluding comments.

### RAPPORTEUR'S REFLECTION

**Reflection 1.** Ross Gibson

Ross Gibson is Centenary Professor in Creative & Cultural Research at the University of Canberra. Recent books include *The Summer Exercises* and *26 Views of the Starburst World*, both published by UWAP.

- I provide my perspective on today's proceedings as someone – 'a friendly stranger' – who lives nearby your world, but has not lived in your world for long.
  - I will touch on a few things that have fascinated me, and I think are important to you. I will talk about these under four headings.
1. **Smart and eloquent.** A general observation is that all of the presenters exhibited these qualities. This was an artifact of two factors. First the lightning presentation mode is excellent: it gets to the big idea quickly and, as with all good film editing, you leave immediately the point is made. The presentations have been concise. In a day with a profusion of ideas, the crisp delivery of big ideas is important. A second contributing factor to the smartness and eloquence is that professionally the work we do has to be deft with several dialects: one needs to talk to government, to policy-makers, to the participant general public, to scholars. It is not surprising therefore that people are eloquent and able to get on-point quickly.
  2. **Law as infrastructure rather than as interdictions or impedances.** This point goes to the idea of charters, rules, and regulations. This idea of the use, or not, of a charter has come up again and again today – whether it should be a series of prohibitions and interdictions or whether it might be something differently phrased and used so as to be generative. The idea chimed with me because a few years ago I undertook work in legal studies – for a job ... and not something one does for fun. What came out of the work that was especially fascinating was the whole area of legal studies that insists that law should be treated as infrastructure – the means whereby you get something done. Rather than the law being treated as a raft of prohibitions or negations. How can one bring positive momentum into law and treat it as generative. Similarly the idea of the good charter is one that does not say 'you must not ..., you must not ..., you must not...'. It is a charter that says here is an 'algorithm for activity' from which something will bloom, something generative.
  3. **Accounts.** This point has several subsets. First, let me suggest that the significance of an object or a place or a practice (the three issues that perhaps comprise heritage) might be a factor of how much and how well these 'heritage things' prompt a rich array of ACCOUNTS about them; and the people that encounter them, take care of them, who participate. What do I mean by that? Accounts are

modes of measurement, and hence we have accountants in the world. But also accounts are NARRATIVES. Narratives as accounts of experience. Perhaps the account of the experience of encountering a heritage thing. Thus 'account' is an important and crucial word. In accountancy there is an occasional practice of applying 'notes to the account' – in a sense these are narratives of accounts whereby figures and measured things can have stories relating to them. But also stories are measurable: e.g., one can measure how much value is in a story, how much patterned information is in a story. Those of us who practice in Museum Studies employ techniques before and after narrative extraction to determine if anything has been learned from the encounter. This work draws on notions that stories are loads of information that are semantic but also emotional and emphatic. That is, there IS measurability in narrative. So to restate, the significance of an object or a place or a practice might be a factor of how much and how well these 'heritage things' prompt a rich array of NARRATIVES about them.

We might then ask is there anything special about our part of the world? What can we bring to the culture of global heritage management and heritage use? What is smart, special, and local about our version of narrative practice? As has arisen a few times today, we have that great Aboriginal English word: COUNTRY. The word is not to be blithely taken, but in heritage we recognize being drawn to the idea of using the word. There is a necessity to earn and re-earn the right to be engaged in a discourse of Country. Those who have worked with this discourse of Country have experienced an extraordinary generosity around the keenness of custodians of Country to let other people start to understand and start to take some carriage of some of the narrative and performative aspects of Country-making and Country-people. So there is an inherent generosity, a generosity that we never never forget still has to countervail colonialism and post-colonialism; this is an area where inter-cultural cooperation and collaboration is almost always generously afforded by primary or Indigenous cultures. It is something local, something that is special that has come to the world – an understanding of Country as a mode of living heritage in place and in memory.

Case study example. The University of Sydney has a three-year-old project titled *Space Place County*. The project has looked at each of these notions, and has asked 'at what stage in each of these notions we need to shift our mode of understanding, our mode of remembering, and our mode of communication in order to develop a renewed or innovative mode of knowing country in the city, in the aftermath of colonialism?' Sydney University is on the edge of Redfern and there has always been a fraught relationship for the university with the Redfern Koori community. Its been an astonishing three-years or so working locally in the Redfern community with the *Space Place County* project – to see the generosity and the amount of engagement that is starting to happen around that idea of Country in Redfern – Redfern as Country. How do we understand that? It is an example of something that's gone well as a collaborative process.

4. Which leads us back to ... **PRACTICES!** How do we conserve significant practices? How do make them healthy? How do we hold them well? And how do we hand them on? Are we content that practices are conserved by memory systems, especially *personalised* and deeply felt or *embodied* memory systems? Everyone has

to carry these practices somehow. How do they get carried and transferred? I would say there are lots of different means for getting the techniques for carrying, transferring, through embodied memory practices. Who are the specialists in these activities? I would remind us that creative artists are story-tellers, real-time performers, improvisers who play music, do dance; people who do ceremonial activities in real time. These people are very good at doing that kind of practice, containment, and communication. It is worth doing an audit to determine how many art folks work are amongst heritage practitioners. Are they authorized to be with us?

These are my responses to the day.

### **Reflection 2.** Sharon Sullivan

Sharon Sullivan AO is the retired Executive Director of the Australian Heritage Commission and the former Australian government representative on the World Heritage Committee. She has worked and published extensively on cultural heritage management issues for thirty years, in Australia and overseas, including the USA, China, Africa and Cambodia.

- There is no doubt that the first point made by Ross Gibson – smart and eloquent – also sums up his style. My style is ‘messy and hand-wavy’. You will have to bear with me.
- It has been a very rich day, or in postmodern discourse parlance, a very ‘thick’ day. It has been filled with ideas and layers of information.
- I want to take you back to 1969 BCC (Before the Burra Charter), which is when I started work with the NSW NPWS. Aboriginal sites legislation was first passed in NSW in 1969 – well before legislation was enacted for historic sites (1977). The reason was specifically because of the scientific paradigm, which held sway after World War II and taught us: ‘Every flake is sacred’. This was what I was taught when young – i.e., we have to save ‘it’ all for science and ‘it’ will tell us something that is universally important. That is the whole basis of the 1969 Aboriginal sites legislation. The first NSW legislation did not mention Aboriginal people, which is hard to believe in today’s world. Neither did the legislation mention social value. At the time there was no advent of the discipline of heritage, nothing. At this time also, there was no recognition or valuing of non-Indigenous heritage. The dominant view was Australia’s European historic heritage did not compare to that in Europe. Historians of place, who tended to be local practitioners rather than in the academy, were not considered to be relevant to Australian heritage practice. That was the situation.
- There has been a BIG CHANGE. It was a change that began about five-years after 1969, and began with the Hope Inquiry, as Bronwyn Hanna described. The change that happened was an alliance of government, practitioners, and academics working together. Though they represented different disciplines, it was an absolute alliance. The Burra Charter was paid for, and developed with the active support of the Australian Government. So heritage practice had this effective alliance which developed, proselytized, and applied the Burra Charter methodology, and worked on it year after year. That brought us today’s much revised Charter, which supports an extraordinarily sophisticated, interesting, rich experience of practice in Australia. The situation of government involvement in this endeavour is UNTHINKABLE in the present day. For example, before I left my Australian Government position, I was told

I should resign from ICOMOS because membership of it constituted a conflict of interest.

- To my mind, the three most important things the Burra Charter brought to and thereby enriched Australian heritage practice were:
  - Social value, and everything that effloresces from it. An incredibly important contribution.
  - Landscape, and the Aboriginal English notion of Country, which, as Rose discussed, is so rich.<sup>1</sup>
  - Finally, the Burra Charter takes into account that there will be potential for conflict in values. It tells practitioners that it is their job to document all the values of a place, AND to reconcile potential conflicts between them. This is an aspect sometimes forgotten. This does not mean that we have to 'sacrifice' one value for another. There is a real mindfulness in this practice, which is important. The Burra Charter process promotes the idea of mindfulness.
- Today the government-practitioners-academic alliance has gone belly-up.
- However, I find myself today in a thriving academic discipline in Heritage Studies, in which PhDs can be undertaken! Heritage is now a theoritised discipline. When I was working in heritage in NSW, we had not heard of the Authorised Heritage Discourse. Can you believe that? How could we have worked in the heritage environment without this stuff? I feel exhilarated to have witnessed this change in my lifetime.
- I can now submit a paper somewhere and I might receive feedback saying 'This paper is significantly under-theoretised'. One could have a stamp – the SUTP rubber stamp – for we older scholars. Actually, it gives me great joy to have lived through this whole efflorescence of heritage from nothing to a room full practitioners and academics who are speaking with great eloquence and complexity.
- While all this change has been happening, we have used up the capital that we had in those early days with that fabulous alliance. As practice has advanced and developed, so government, especially the Federal Government, has drawn back, drawn back, drawn back. There are no senior heritage people in the Australian Department of Environment and Heritage and there is a very small staff. I honour greatly those staff working in government today. However, at Australian Government level there is no alliance, no care, no interest in heritage – either in theory or practice. This is a problem that has to be addressed and one that needs to be spoken of.
- There are a couple of conundrums which have risen out of our discussions today.
  - There is no such thing as an objective assessment of significance. It is one of the conclusions evident from the presentations. Cultural significance is a cultural artefact. While the Burra Charter goes to great length to emphasise that practitioners should be objective, it is clear that objectivity is not available or appropriate. We need to think about a sense of place – elements of memory, of myth (in its real sense) and of emotional and aesthetic response to places. These are things that are hard to quantify and which I will speak of further.
  - Another legacy we have been left because of our need to protect places, is the legislative hierarchy – the 'hierarchy of heritage'. That is World, national, State, local, or whatever. It makes no sense in a technical context, but we need to do

---

<sup>1</sup> Rose, D.B. 1996. *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness*. Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra.

it. And why do we need to do it? We need to do it to protect things. And we need to get up in court and argue about why we need to protect things. Therefore we need definitions and processes. And that is very difficult to balance in our practice and something we need to think about more. It is an antipathy to much that was said today. However, currently we have a society that lists. We are a Western society, which has a polarity, hierarchy, and materiality. That's all reflected in the legislation and in the way we have to practice heritage officially at all levels of significance. So we can think of the concept of hierarchical significance as 'nuts', but then that's what we have to work with. This is a conundrum to reflect on.

- I am much reminded of this conundrum when I think of Historian Peter Read's book 'Returning to Nothing' (1996) in which he vividly conveys the ways in which local communities galvanise to get places on heritage lists. The communities want to take what they value, where they live, their place, and prove its heritage value through formal recognition. It is a very artificial thing that people have to go through. But they do it in order to try to save their places.
- This comes to a head in an as yet insoluble way in the political and land-use sphere in regard to intangible value. Intangible value is difficult for politicians, bureaucrats, and decision-makers to deal with. It is possible to objectively assess intangible value, but it is difficult. It is a difficult concept to put to decision-makers and is feared by them. This is because it is not something that you can point too – like a building facade that can be recreated or moved. It is not possible to implement such practices in relation to intangible heritage.
- Many places are genuinely 'sacred' with intangible values, especially when we talk of Aboriginal heritage. This is an area where landscape and Country are important concepts. We have been talking about this today, and the difficulties in balancing the 'hard' government legislation and policies with intangible values. When the 'sacred sites' concept was applied in heritage legislation in the 1970s, governments thought it would be possible to identify a series of contained sites across Australia, and all the rest would be non-heritage. This simply does not align with the concept of Country. This is difficult for decision-makers to deal with.
- So I suggest that we have failed in selling this conundrum and in persuading governments to recognize and work toward addressing it.
- I conclude, not by making a call to arms, but by saying that these discussions, these issues, are never over. There is a real world 'out there' in which developers want to make a lot of money, and governments need to make money – particularly out of the extractive industries. So, by way of example of the way issues are never 'won' or dealt with, I could not believe my ears when I saw Peter Veth on TV saying that the Western Australian Government has changed the legislation so that a sacred site now means a site at which religious ceremonies are held. It does not mean a totemic place, a place of story. This will effect what is listed and de-listed as a sacred site in that State. I am not saying we should all rise up and rush to the Western Australian embassy, but that though we have come along way and we have some fabulous ideas – the message is that government is not where it used to be. Therefore the alliance between government, practitioners, and scholars is now more important than it ever was. And there is a challenge in thinking smartly and working out how to pull things together. How do we adapt fixed, hierarchical, Western 'rules of heritage' in ways

that incorporate the kinds of scholarly, flowing, instinctive, and emotional ideas that we have talked about today?

Thank you.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Ross, Sharon, Tracy, and Steve made up the final panel of the day.

Steve Brown.

- We have about 20 minutes before we are scheduled to finish the day.
- I propose to select audience members to respond to the day's discussions and to respond to a specific question. That is, based on the issues discussed today, how might you change your approach to heritage thinking and/or practice? How can you as an individual make incremental change? While I welcome suggestions of radical change, it is in the personal and effective realms of practice that I seek your contributions.
- For example, one of my learning experiences from today relates to my paper on better including emotion and affect in the way heritage practitioners write statements of values or significance. Here I acknowledge a lunch-time conversation with Kristal Buckley. There is nothing, no legal issues, saying that one cannot incorporate personal stories and emotional narratives, initially in low-key ways, into statements of significance. While some attempts might be unacceptable in a legal frame, we can push boundaries. This is something I propose to do in my work.
- Question to Robyn Sloggett. How do you resolve or address the issue you identified of spending \$5,000 on a professionally commissioned significance assessment versus a new computer for a community centre?
- Robyn. It is important to be vocal by standing up – identifying issues is a necessary thing to do. Coming from a university environment, I have the opportunity to raise complex ethical issues in my teaching of future career heritage scholars and practitioners. So I can seed important issues in my teaching practice, minor-thesis research topics, in the way doctoral studies are guided, targeting influential journals, and engaging with other disciplines. For example, I am particularly interested in accounting and working with accountants at the moment. Thus an integrated approach and being clear about and articulating what it is that is unsettling in the heritage space. And then building a resource base around issues is what I would like to do.
- Question to Tanya Koeneman. From what you have heard today, is there anything that might effect or change your practice as an Aboriginal person working in government?
- Tanya. My position in the Heritage Division, NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, is to oversee NSW State Heritage listings specifically in relation to Aboriginal places and stories under the NSW *Heritage Act 1977*; as well as to oversee Aboriginal Place listings under the NSW *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*. For me it is about putting Aboriginal people back into the official heritage and history of NSW and demonstrating their contribution. It is also about building capacity. Events such as today's, which focused on significance and heritage values, is important in the Heritage Division's day-to-day work. Whose voice is being used and whose documents researched when we construct significance? Whose voice dominates?

Where to from here and what can be done? Whether I am dealing with an Aboriginal community or individual, developer, or Minister, it is important never to underestimate the 'whats in it for me' principle. We need to continually couch heritage in holistic terms in order to articulate how heritage benefits us in so many ways and is an intrinsic part of who we are and how we see ourselves. Too often heritage is seen as that other thing off to the side. Communicating heritage is about language and about relevance.

I did a policy-writing course a few weeks ago. When you reach a certain stage in government you are sent off to such courses. The object of the course is to create technically good policy able to be politically endorsed. The message I took from the course, from the long-term political advisor who ran it, was that networks make decisions. Networks affect the most change. People often consider it is the rich and powerful that drive change, but networks are collaborations of people that get things changed. While I am not in need of a new network, we should utilize the networks that we do have; especially those involved in heritage matters. It is also useful to put out tentacles.

A third thing for me as an Aboriginal person working in government is that you sometimes have to be courageous in your decision-making and take appropriate action. It is preferable to get on with it, do something. There is a lot of chatter in the information age and there is constant talk, and unhappiness, about the directions things are taking. We need to rise above this. And today's conversations assist me in achieving this in my work.

- Question to Jo Thompsom. Jo is undertaking a PhD in Heritage, University of Western Australia. What from today might influence the direction of your research?
- Jo. I have done a Masters in which I critiqued archaeological significance assessment in reference to WA. That work highlighted ways of moving from theory to method and implementing concepts of constructed values. In wanting to change particular practice, I realized there was a bigger picture or context to be understood. One of my concerns with current changes being made to the *WA Aboriginal Heritage Act* is the broader impacts and consequences of the changes. Today has been important in understanding big issues and consolidating my thinking about ways in which heritage processes might be changed and reformulated.

***Panel members response.***

- Tracy. Thank you Jo, Tanya, and Robyn for your responses and reflections. I want take the opportunity to raise a few issues I have been thinking about. What was the purpose for today? That is, beside sitting in a room filled with expertise and knowledge. For Steve and I, we never thought we were going to generate answers or a set of outcomes and actions. Today was all about the questions. We had a feeling, which Sharon alluded to, that, in Kuhnian terms, there was a revolution in the late 1960s and through the 1970s that formed a new paradigm. It was very creative and, in Ross's terms, generative. It gave heritage a lot of momentum and we are still riding on that momentum. But I think some big things have changed, perhaps a paradigm shift, but on this I am unsure. There are some overarching issues: we have talked about the digital and reformulations of community. Is the individual, communities, or the crowd having experiences? How do we deal with them? How do we recognize when we are part of one?



And there is a changing relationship between society and government. Having worked in heritage for almost 30 years, I think we have seen a revolutionary change in the concepts we grew up with and what we expect government to do and lead. We need to look for that leadership in other forms of social contracts. How will heritage practice generate new forms of cultural and social capital that give us the momentum to work those things out?

So today was about enriching the questions and enriching our ideas about the methods. I am interested in the idea of undisciplined heritage, a term Steve uses, or post-disciplinary heritage. Veronica posed the question as to whether Heritage Studies should be a discipline. I am attracted to the idea of heritage NOT being a discipline, but rather it being a field of post-disciplinary theory, methods, and practice that interpolates into many social and cultural areas. I got a lot of material today to assist me in thinking about those things.

The relationship between heritage and artistic and creative practice. How does that feed into this new suite of methods? Rather than a toolbox of methods, perhaps we need to image a palette with daubs of paint that represent methods that can be mixed in infinite different combinations— a rich suite of methods. There is such a lot of interesting work being done in different ways through new methods. I went to a workshop recently on ‘speculative design ethnography’ – world building. I immediately could see new uses to which we could apply the method in heritage work. Thank you.

- Ross. Picking up on Tanya’s idea of network and applying it to my rudimentary understanding of Country. Part of the genius of Country is that it has nodes – nodes of intensity – the way people have carriage of particular batches of knowledge; then often responsibility is moved to other batches. Nodes of intensity and the full knowledge of Country is distributed amongst an entire community and amongst the Country itself. No one person knows it all and therefore, in the right situation, the community has all the knowledge. That sense applied to heritage, applied to the force of that which is remembered, moving the present into the future is one way of thinking, a networked thinking. It is a particularly Australian way of thinking. It might be a useful way to think about some of what we do.

***Are there any more final points from the floor before we segue into drinks?***

- Sheridan Burke. It was particularly interesting listening to Sharon’s take on the history and turns in heritage protection in NSW. In the 1970s and 1980s there was a real reliance and need for focused expertise. That expertise was shared across organisations, for example, ICOMOS, the NSW Heritage Branch, which were focuses of excellence with a willingness to freely share knowledge. The papers we have heard today speak to a completely different age where information is shared and accessible, much of it unverified, but nonetheless accessible. The symposium, while titled (in)significance, was about enrichment, enlightenment, and engagement. It showed that we occupy a different mindset to that of previous decades. All of the trends, ideas, and threads that came to us through the papers suggest we can no longer be focused on what was then, but rather our concern needs to be on where we should be going now. I look to this group – presenters and colleagues – to lead us to the next step. Thank you.
- Nicholas Hall. I want to comment on the idea of new practice and creative development and focus on (in)significance. Much of my work, organized around four

limbs, is very much about facilitation – something Sharon talked about. It is work ‘in significance’. Rather than the structures we once used to make us effective heritage bods, we now work more commonly via a reflective practice, which we see through the multi-variant approaches we bring to work in significance. Perhaps we need to be in it and explore it from the inside out, which has been said this afternoon. We need to generate the social contract, touching on Tracy’s point. In heritage practice what can be lost when there is an over-emphasis on articulating values required by bureaucratic processes, is to look at the social contact around curation and caring. The curation element, which is going to get more important, requires a focus away from heritage lists and overly structured practice, to build a social contract around the care we want to have for things – in newer senses of creative practice and creative competencies.

***Tracy Ireland: concluding comments and thanks.***

- As Sharon said: ‘The discussion is never over; it keeps on happening.’ There is good evidence of that today. Steve and I are more than thrilled with how today has panned out.
- Thanks to each of the speakers for their willingness to present. As Ross Gibson said, the presentations were both smart and eloquent. Each presenter provided in their contributions a wide variety of perspectives, experiences, and personal insights.
- Thank you more broadly to the audience for attending and participating in the symposium. We recognize that many attendees travelled from far away places – including from Western Australia. It has been thrilling to have everyone here to share in the discussion. We hope the symposium contributes to all of your ongoing intellectual conversations concerning the theory and practice of heritage.
- We anticipate two main outcomes from the symposium.
  - A ‘resources page’, which will comprise PowerPoint summaries of the presentations as well notes on each of the four session discussions. The information will be linked to the University of Canberra webpage for the (in)significance symposium.
  - A book proposal on the symposium topic, which might be either Australian practice focused or extended to incorporate a global scholarship on thinking and practice.
- Tracy invited audience members who might wish to follow up on anything about the symposium and proposed outcomes to contact the conveners.

Sharon Sullivan thanked Tracy and Steve for organizing the symposium. A considerable amount of work, intellectual power, and institutional support went into making the symposium a success. Sharon observed that in looking at all the audience faces, there was enthusiasm to continue the conversations – to ‘talk our heads off’ – fuelled by the day’s conversations ... and a drink.

An intellectual vigor and camaraderie accompanied the dash for drinks.

**THE END**