Beyond the Plaque: Engineering Heritage and the NSW Interpretation Guidelines

W H Nethery, M.Herit.Cons.(Syd.), Australia ICOMOS, Interpretation Australia Association, Museums Australia Inc, American Association of Museums, Heritage Officer, New South Wales Heritage Office

The best guarantee for the survival of all types of heritage items and places is popular and political support for their conservation. Heritage interpretation seeks to deliver this result.

The Heritage Council of NSW has recently published Heritage Interpretation Guidelines that aim to facilitate the planning and implementation of best practice interpretation in NSW. The Guidelines result from an intensive process of research and consultation and address all aspects of this challenging discipline in a way that applies to every type of heritage place and item.

This paper and the accompanying powerpoint presentation will outline briefly the principles underlying the Guidelines and explore their application to the planning and production of insight into the significance of Engineering heritage with reference to two Sydney engineering icons: Pyrmont Bridge and the Woolloomooloo Bay Finger Wharf. How does interpretation of these significant items measure up against the Guidelines’ “best practice” and what lessons do its successes and shortcomings hold for the interpretation (and thus, the survival) of Engineering heritage in the twenty-first century?

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provide an introduction to the Heritage Interpretation Guidelines recently endorsed by the Heritage Council of NSW. Their underlying principles are summarised in the accompanying powerpoint presentation. They can be found on the Heritage Office website: www.heritage.nsw.gov.au, under What’s New. There’s also an extensive reading list and bibliography.

The Interpretation Guidelines are the distillation of nearly 3 years’ exhaustive research and consultation conducted on behalf of the Heritage Council’s Interpretation Committee by two eminent practitioners, Elaine Lawson and Meredith Walker. I shall not attempt to paraphrase the Guidelines here.

What I would like to do here is take a look at the broader context that has given rise to the Heritage Council’s decision to prepare guidelines for Heritage Interpretation and to see what the applicability of those Guidelines to the conservation of some examples of engineering heritage might be.

All interpretation, whether of (or by) a language, a piece of music, a painting, a landscape, an artefact, or an experience, is an act of identifying or transmitting meaning.

Heritage interpretation is a process that plans and provides for visitors, potential visitors and the public at large, physical, intellectual and emotive access to the cultural and ecological significance of places, objects, natural systems and living things. Through appropriate technologies and the responsible stimulation of ideas and opinions, it encourages their protection, by and for present and future generations.

THE CASE FOR INTERPRETATION

Time was...

when the conservation of significant items was the exclusive preserve of one or more privileged classes. Their monuments or collections were amassed on the basis of their tastes, hobbies or convictions and at their own expense. These aristocrats were under no obligation either to justify their pursuits or to share beyond their circle whatever insights they may have arrived at in the course of their acquisitions and studies. These items were good and worthy because the “best” people said they were. End of story. Interpretation was no concern of theirs.

In time, the care of these buildings, landscapes, scientific or artistic collections outgrew the enthusiasm or the means (or both) of their creators and they were, for the most part, fostered upon governments or institutions of learning. With this change of management, came at least a rudimentary acknowledgement of accountability and a new regime of professionals whose “expertise” validated the demands of conservation on the public (or patron’s) purse. Their conception of interpretation, accordingly, focussed on the demonstration of expertise. These items were good and worthy because initiates into some specialist field of knowledge said they were. Interpretation took two forms: the label (indoors, item in a collection) and the plaque (outdoors, place or monument).
An example of the former, sublime in its opacity, could be seen as recently as 1990, at the National Gallery in Canberra. It proclaimed its associated artefact to be, “Reliquary, in the form of a chorten (stupa)”.

This is expertise rampant, deployed not to elucidate significance but to assert authority. The humble visitor, untutored in Buddhist iconography, Tibetan or Sanskrit, knows only that this intriguing thingamajig has been acquired, conserved and displayed at his/her expense and is an object of expert, professional veneration. End of story.

Predating that label by 101 years is one of several plaques to be found on Pyrmont Bridge, Sydney, “The foundation stone of this bridge was laid by the HON. E.W. O’SULLIVAN Minister for Public Works N.S.W. On December 6th, 1899”

... so far, this plaque, like many others, is but a grab for immortality on the part of someone perhaps doubtful that he will achieve it otherwise. But it is not without its assertion of expertise. It continues, albeit in fine print at the bottom, “Percy Allan, M. Inst. CE Engineer for the work”

End of story. Any attempt to reveal to the passer-by what is important or interesting about the bridge itself had to wait another 103 years.

Gradually, during that century, conservation of heritage objects and places came to be perceived as a public benefit, sustained by public expenditure rather than by élite patronage. Today, it takes more than aristocratic cachet or professional expertise to underwrite the public investment that heritage conservation demands. If that conservation is to receive the popular and political support - the votes and the money - that it needs to continue, significant resources had better signify not just to the experts, but to the people who are paying the bills.

So, there is a hardheaded, pragmatic reason for getting good at interpretation. If we want to conserve, we’d better interpret. As never before, heritage conservation has to sing for its supper. Interpretation is the way it sings.

Here and now ...
interpretation is clearly a valuable means to achieving conservation outcomes. But there’s more to it than that. We have blithely asserted above that conservation of significant objects and environments is a public benefit. Yet there it stands – the timber bridge, the grand estate, the very sword, the humble hut, the ancient vista – and just what public benefit is it delivering, and how? Here is a question that goes to the very root of the conservation agenda, Why do it?

The answer leads us back towards Interpretation. I mean to suggest that conservation that fails to culminate in some positive transaction with the public consciousness is not only a doomed but a futile exercise.

This argument is perhaps easier to sustain on behalf of historic heritage than of natural resources or cultural landscapes, which have clear ‘indirect use values’ that are independent of public access. ‘Green’ parks embody a tangible ‘ecological function value’ contributing positively, for example, to air and water quality and to the biodiversity of plant and animal species. Their ‘option value’, as recreational or research opportunities, contributes to the ambient quality of life in their regions. They do this just by being there, whether the public actually visits them or not. Just the same, the votes and the money that support their continued conservation will be forthcoming only from a public that is aware and appreciative of these benefits and derives satisfaction from the ‘existence value’ of these resources.

Some historic structures, of course, can deliver a range of direct use values. The old bridge will get you across the river; the old building can provide shelter, office space or accommodation. Heritage places can offer public amenity, in terms of recreation and leisure opportunities, or pleasant and prestigious venues for special events. They may also generate financial benefits and other positive economic impacts for owners, lessees and concessionaires, or for the neighbouring community that provides services and infrastructure to visitors. But these benefits of historic heritage conservation are incidental contributions to or by-products of the process of conservation: they are not its purpose.

The indirect use values of historic heritage incorporate no tangible components. Although its ‘option values’ – as opportunity, vicarious experience, bequest, or for future research – may be of the same kind as those of natural heritage, a conserved structure, place or object, however significant, confers no public benefit – call it ‘cultural function value’ – just by being there. Whether they are visitors or not, the public at large only values the place and its significance are perceptible. As objects in themselves their ‘existence value’ is nil.

The public benefit of conserved historic heritage thus derives entirely and directly from the public’s physical, intellectual and emotive access to it. The consummation of the conservation agenda - its end product - is not the conserved thing. It is that transaction with the public consciousness.
PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE
This growing realisation across the whole spectrum of heritage management, from museums to national parks; from historic sites to state agencies such as the NSW Heritage Office, has fuelled an increasing concern that interpretation not only should be done, but that it be done as well as possible.

Hence, this overarching declaration in the Heritage Council’s Interpretation Policy document,

“The Heritage Office is committed to encouraging imaginative, inclusive and accurate interpretation of the heritage of New South Wales and to establishing and sustaining best practices in content, methodology, implementation and evaluation of heritage interpretation.”

For the arsenal of Interpretation has expanded mightily beyond the label and the plaque. This is not to denigrate either of those two venerable media, but to acknowledge that they now share the field with other print, film and broadcast media, digital interactives, soundscapes, lightshows, etc. Any medium of communication in fact is potentially an interpretive tool. And each brings with it its own strengths and limitations, its own production values, and often its own audience. Add to this the infinite flexibility of a skilled human guide or presenter and the potential to convey heritage significance is immense. As is the potential to go astray.

The accompanying powerpoint presentation traces both possibilities as exemplified in the presentation of two Sydney engineering icons, Pyrmont Bridge and the Woolloomooloo Bay Finger Wharf. I’ve added brief notes to the images, beginning with number 15. Believing that a picture is indeed worth a thousand words, I’ll spare you many more of the latter, here.

I don’t pretend it’s a fair contest. Of course, my selection of these examples illustrates “best practice ingredient” number 4: “Explore, respect and respond to the identified audience”. However, both the plaques of Pyrmont Bridge and the interpretation media at the Finger Wharf were conceived without the benefit of the Interpretation Guidelines. Nor is there a winner or a loser. These places have simply served as instances of interpretive possibilities as exemplified in the presentation of two Sydney engineering icons, Pyrmont Bridge and the Woolloomooloo Bay Finger Wharf. I’ve added brief notes to the images, beginning with number 15. Believing that a picture is indeed worth a thousand words, I’ll spare you many more of the latter, here.

A most essential ingredient
Among the 11 “ingredients” for best practice interpretation identified by the Heritage Interpretation Guidelines is one that’s not particularly amenable to pictorial representation. It’s number 10 in the list and it says,

“Involve people with relevant skills, knowledge and experience.

People knowledgeable about the item, or with expertise and experience in interpretation, historic research and analysis, or skills in the preparation of conservation management plans, should be involved in planning for, or participating in interpretation. This includes people associated with the place. Historians and archaeologists who have been involved in documenting the item should be consulted where possible. As interpretation is now a requirement of heritage management, inclusion of experienced interpretation practitioners, from the beginning, will help ensure that the ingredients of best practice interpretation are embedded in the project and its ongoing management …” (italics mine).

Interpretation is many things, but it is not a one-man-show. The ingredient cited above might also have mentioned skilled specialists in guiding and personal programs, in graphic and three-dimensional design, sound, light and image design and production, digital media and their interfaces and any number of ever-evolving technical innovations in communications media.

The “experienced interpretation practitioner” is experienced in precisely the assembly and management of such multidisciplinary teams, tailored to the requirements of specific projects.

In Australia, experienced interpretation practitioners are to be found among the membership of the Interpretation Australia Association. You can find out more from their website: interpretationaustralia.asn.au .

CONCLUSION
At its best, heritage interpretation provides an example - a ‘model’- of interaction between significant resources and the informed imagination. From the experience of best practice heritage interpretation, people can take away not just greater knowledge about - and appreciation of - given places or things, but also new insight into ways of reading the world around them, ways of discovering both instruction and delight in ‘familiar’ environments. When this occurs, they may also discover themselves to be not just consumers of ‘heritage’, but truly ‘heirs’ to a wondrous legacy – with all the privileges and responsibilities that inheritance entails. And that is, in fact, the reality.

Interpretation is about the democratisation of heritage.

The Heritage Council’s Interpretation Guidelines represent an important step in the advancement of that agenda.

I commend them to your perusal.