

Heritage & Culture

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I'm here because Robyn Till, of Swan Hill, saw me give a paper nine months ago. She liked it. Yesterday evening, I re-read that paper in the hope that, with apologies to Robyn, I could just read it out loud today to our mutual satisfaction. But, at around ten thirty last night, I decided that, given that you're paying me money, and that this is a quite focussed interest group, there might be things we could argue about other than the issues I raised in the speech that Robyn witnessed.

Why should you be interested in what I've got to say? Apart from 'Robyn said', it might help if you had some sense of my background.

I arrived on these shores at age 10 by ship from Trinidad; from an early age, I've been a performer: through university revues, musicals, experimental, political and group-developed theatre, I ended up as the strongman in Circus Oz.

When writing one's own history, it's tempting, almost mandatory to create a dynamic and integrated narrative out of fractured experience - to make sense of our lives (exactly what you do in your daily business, I imagine). Insignificant events become momentous in hindsight - here is an example.

Twenty years ago, touring Europe with Circus Oz, we arrived in a Dutch town where the presenters of our show had already designed and distributed their own poster. Across an image of a human pyramid was imposed a very long Dutch word that I couldn't understand. Upon asking, I was told that the English translation was 'highstanders' and it referred to the brave ones who climbed to the top of the human walls of flesh. And what was the word to describe the poor buggers on the bottom? I asked. 'Understanders', I was told. It was an epiphany. Suddenly I knew my vocation. As a direct result, here I am now.

Via, that is, five years of directing the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council through the middle of the eighties, and since then, heading up a bunch of arts service organisations. But all the time, this 'understanding' thing becoming an obsession with the language of public planning and policy; an obsession with trying to untangle and rebuild the ways we express our dreams, our identities, our fears, our visions; with how we describe the

way we wish to pass through life; and with expressing these nebulous ideas in ways that were accessible to both bureaucrats and regular folk.

This madness bore fruit in 2001 with the small volume I've written for the Cultural Development Network of Victoria entitled, *'The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning'*.

In this little booklet I mount a devastating critique of the triple-bottom line, exposing its inherent limitations, which can only be cured with the introduction of a 'fourth pillar' named 'culture'. That's the standard twenty five word review although often the adjectives slant the other way.

'The Fourth Pillar' begins:

'A society's values are the basis upon which all else is built. These values and the ways they are expressed are a society's culture. The way a society governs itself cannot be fully democratic without there being clear avenues for the expression of community values, and unless these expressions directly affect the directions society takes. These processes are culture at work.

'Cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability. In order for public planning to be more effective, its methodology should include an integrated framework of cultural evaluation along similar lines to those being developed for social, environmental and economic impact assessment.'

Practically, and at its most simple, the implementation of this approach would mean, for example, that a government's heritage policy would be questioned from these four perspectives:

- Environmental: does the policy take full account of what's out there and its sustenance?
- Cultural: is everyone getting to actively participate?
- Social: is everyone getting a say, and being heard?
- Economic: does everyone have access to the results?

I know that 'everyone' may be viewed as at least unmanagable, if not hopelessly utopian, but I'm trying to emphasise that public planning must constantly remind itself of its fundamental goal: the maintenance and development of democracy.

In rounding out what each of these four perspectives cover, I argue that the concept 'environment' should embrace not only natural resources and ecosystems, not only the physical world we have built, but also the intangible heritage that informs our sense of ourselves - our stories, our narratives, our songs, our music.

When I get to outline the cultural perspective in a minute, the profound connections between heritage and culture will become clearer, but we can't even begin teasing out these connections without first acknowledging the obvious: this was, is and always will be blackfella country.

We are extremely fortunate to live in a country with custodians who have the longest uninterrupted track record on the planet of maintaining and developing culture. Which means, apart from anything else, that there is much we can learn.

Particularly about the connections between the physical and the spiritual, between memory and action, between conservation and change, between heritage and culture.

So what am I talking about when I say 'culture'?

I use 'culture' in what is known as its 'anthropological' sense (it is also the sense in which it is used in the 1996 UNESCO Declaration of Cultural Rights).

In this context, the concept 'culture' describes:

- our values and aspirations;
- the ways we develop, receive and transmit these values, and
- the ways of life these processes produce.

While this outline is fine as a dictionary definition, it misses the heart and the guts of culture.

Some months ago, I was asked to comment on a draft of Cultural Planning Guidelines for Local Government in New South Wales. I suggested this preamble as a description of culture:

Our culture embodies the sense we make of our lives; it is built on the values we share and the ways we come to terms with our differences; it deals with what matters to people and

communities: relationships, memories, experiences, identities, backgrounds, hopes and dreams in all their diversity. And most of all, our culture expresses our visions of the future: what it is we want to pass on to future generations.

Our culture connects our present with our pasts and with the future we imagine. It is with culture that we make the connections, the networks of meanings and values, and of friendship and interest, that hold us together in time, in place and in society.

Our culture describes the ways we tell each other our stories, how we create our sense of ourselves, how we remember who we are, how we imagine who we want to become, how we relax, how we celebrate, how we argue, how we bring up our children, the spaces we make for ourselves.

Our culture is the expression of our desires to be happy, our desires to belong, our desires to survive and, above all, our desires to be creative.

This description demonstrates that culture describes those facets of our being that make us human; it embodies our essence.

This usage of 'culture' can be summarised as 'the social production of meaning', or simply 'making sense'.

And, of all the things we make, 'sense' is the most important; we need to recognise and facilitate this process in the ways we organise our society.

It seems to me that at the base of this process is the transformation of heritage – that we are in a constant dynamic of reshaping what we 'know' as we experience and learn new things.

What we make of our heritage is our culture.

And in a constant cycle, not only does heritage become culture but culture becomes heritage. That is, yesterday's stories are rewritten for today; and today's stories are remembered tomorrow.

The challenge for those with a responsibility for protecting our heritages, beyond resisting commodification, nostalgia and sentimentality, are to enhance diversity, engagement and, above all, vitality.

Which is to say that a cultural impact evaluation applied to the heritage sector would ask questions like:

Do the stories of our predecessors that we make visible exhibit the diversity of dreams, behaviours, attitudes, conditions and beliefs that actually existed?

In the case of Sovereign Hill, for example, how is the indigenous local culture shown? Is the diversity of the incoming cultures appropriately demonstrated? Is the variety of social relations effectively displayed?

In terms of engagement, the cultural impact questions would focus both on the quality of community engagement in the development of the stories and, equally, on the quality of the engagement open to current users of the facility.

I'm convinced that it is both possible and necessary to evaluate engagement qualitatively as well as quantitatively. But to do this we need to be able to give the idea of engagement a more useful meaning than the pretty fuzzy one it has now.

This is not as easy as might first appear. I will illustrate by examining another, related, fuzzy buzz-word – participation.:

A year ago, our state government launched its new arts policy, 'Creative Capacity+'.

The Age, reporting on the policy the following day, appended 37 column centimetres of editorial to a photo twice the size of the copy. Fair enough, a picture can often tell the story much more effectively than words. And in this case, The Age editors got it exactly right: the picture was of 11 schoolgirls looking, across a fence, at 3 very old skeletons.

This, to announce a policy that's first goal is 'Arts for all Victorians: A Culture of Participation'. Looking at bones from behind a fence is perceived as an appropriate image to illustrate participation. In a brochure entitled 'Arts Count' that accompanied the policy document, we were told that 68.3% of Victorians have been to the movies, 37.5% have been to a library and so on. It turns out that statistics like this are the measure of participation.

One wonders whether the number of people who attend AFL games would be seriously accepted as a measure of participation in sport. Yet this is exactly what's happening in the arts. What's more, even before the Premier launched the policy proper, he took time out to tell us that the admission price to the Melbourne Museum was to be reduced – and that this was an absolute indication of the government's commitment to participation.

Let's imagine for a moment Justin Madden proclaiming the cornerstone of Victoria's new sports policy as being a reduced admission price to the Museum of Sport. It wouldn't happen.

How is it that we know exactly what it means to participate in sport, but get totally confused when we use the same word to describe our relationship to the arts?

I am not using this example to denigrate the function of cultural institutions like heritage parks. We need keeping places. And, as far as I'm concerned, as public services, they should be able to offer free access to the citizenry. What I'm questioning is how the concept of participation is being applied.

Twenty years ago, 'participation and access' were key concepts in the development of public planning. After more than a decade in the cellar, they are now re-emerging as support terms for this year's key concepts, 'engagement' and 'capacity'.

There was a time when participation and access were ideas with widely agreed meanings. These meanings, for better or worse, have stayed in the cellar.

At least in the public rhetoric of 'The Arts', current usage displays both a counter-productively broad definition and a reduced appreciation of the need to distinguish more relevantly between types of engagement. For example, museum attendances are referred to as 'participation rates'. Reading a catalogue is participation. Buying a postcard in the gallery shop is participation. Being a volunteer attendant is participation. Experiencing an interactive exhibit is participation. Being part of a reference group is participation. Actively contributing to the content of an exhibition is participation.

Being able to analyse the cultural significance of types of engagement is severely restricted when they are lumped into categories so wide that critically different activities all appear as one. This is not a very useful way of looking at the world.

As an alternative, I have developed a framework that I believe makes sense of engagement; one that makes it easier to recognise key engagement factors and that can then usefully inform strategy development and program design.

I suggest that all the afore-mentioned 'participations' are types of engagement: some are about making culture, some about ingesting it; some are more creative than others.

Being able to distinguish between them is necessary because their differences are profound – both in essence and, as important from a policy-making perspective, in resource needs, social impact and application of sustainability strategies. All these various types of engagement require different approaches.

There are two streams of cultural engagement: participation and reception, producing and consuming, breathing out and breathing in; we make culture, culture makes us.

These streams run constantly in both directions: in our daily lives they are always in dialogue, eddying around in our consciousness: we talk, we listen; we make, we learn; we show, we watch. A large part of life is the rhythm of movement between one mode and the other, of often being in both at once.

Nevertheless, envisaging them as distinct functions is both reasonable and useful.

Across this spectrum from production to consumption, our imagination engages at shifting levels of intensity. To the most intense, we apply the term ‘creative’; to the least, the term ‘managed’. This is the second axis.

Both participation and reception can be creative; both can be managed.

This framework offers a simple way of visualising the varying, but related, modes of engagement with cultural action.

It shows a horizontal distinction between the two modes of engagement: we make culture (participation) and culture makes us (reception).

Then there is a vertical distinction that can be made on the basis of creative intensity. The apex is maximum empowered, active and direct creativity, in sharp focus. The base is a directed and mediated engagement with little control in the hands of the engaged (apart from passive choice – and sometimes even that is missing) and little imaginative stimulation.

These splits create quadrants that combine to provide a reasonably comprehensive, realistic and simple way of approaching cultural engagement; it’s built on an analysis of what actually happens in the world, it appears (at least to me) to meaningfully reflect real-world events, it offers interesting measurement possibilities; it identifies the mode in which maximum engagement is possible. All these, particularly the last, should make it a very useful planning and evaluation tool.

The grey areas separating, or joining, the quadrants symbolise the overlaps, simultaneities and constant transformations between the modes.

What relevance does this have to the managers of heritage parks?

The function of social memory is critical to cultural vitality. And memory, to remain healthy, requires exercise – not simply in the revisitation of memorabilia but in the active social application of our memories to the matter of our daily lives. This is a function squarely in the domain of heritage keepers.

But it will take more than increasing visitation, improving interactive exhibits and experiences and extending community consultation. These are all important, but they can't be claimed as manifestations of active community engagement. They are valuable but none of them land in the creative participation quadrant.

For the keeping places to achieve active community engagement, they must assiduously facilitate communities telling their own stories.

And not just stories of long ago, though these are important, but the stories of now, of the connections between the past and the present and the future.

And we need to constantly remind ourselves that there are an infinite number of ways in which stories can be told – in words, in images, in movement, in music, in objects.

I will conclude with something I wrote in *'The Fourth Pillar'*:

'Knowing where we have come from helps us to discover where we want to go. Our social memory and our repositories of insight and understanding are essential elements to our sense of belonging. Without a sense of our past, we are adrift in an endless present.'

We are born into complex surroundings. Our environment is more than paddocks and rivers, trees and climate, roads and buildings. We are also surrounded by memories, attitudes, songs and stories. These inheritances are as much a part of our environment as the earth beneath our feet and the air we breath.

They make us what we are. To know who we are, we need to know what made us.

What we become is deeply influenced by this heritage, both physical and spiritual. The meaning we make of our lives - what we call our culture, grows from this soil. The culture

we make, the life we lead, the hopes we nourish, will be the richer from our understanding of our roots.

Losing touch with the stories of our predecessors risks our humanity and threatens our environment and our culture. It is impossible to make new stories, new songs, if we have forgotten the language, misplaced the music.

I'm not entirely sure what an 'after-lunch' speaker is expected to provide. I suspect it's a sort of cut price 'after-dinner' speaker function – part entertainment, part stimulation. I hope I've managed to give you a bit of both.

Thank you for listening.

The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning is published by the Cultural Development Network of Victoria in association with Common Ground Publishing. Copies can be purchased from www.theHumanities.com

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