Challenging Places for Heritage Interpretation: Antarctica. Whaling Stations and Cricket Grounds

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Introduction

This paper addresses challenges for interpretation at three different heritage sites. Conclusions are drawn about the importance of place making whereby viewers of heritage places are encouraged to go beyond the 'received' historic themes and messages to form their own sense of place.

Mawson’s Huts Historic site, Cape Denison Commonwealth Bay Antarctic is physically inaccessible to all people some of the time and to some people all of the time. The site of the former Davidson Whaling Station south of Eden on the NSW south coast is now a beautiful and tranquil site, but this also makes it difficult to appreciate the character of the site 100 years ago when it was a shore based whaling station. The Sydney Cricket Ground is an iconic sports place, yet its intense use 'in the moment' already filled with messages can make it difficult to tell the story of an evolving cultural landscape.

The challenge with these three sites is to make more accessible the incredible heritage values and stories associated with these places. The sensitive physical landscapes of the Mawson’s and Davidson sites incline against traditional signage interpretation, while the SCG is already awash with signage and action.

The point I am hoping to make with these examples is that the most successful interpretation will be that which first grounds viewers in the site itself and then asks them to interact with the site, both its past and present, so that they form their own landscape sense of place. In this I am challenging interpretation that is presented as the receiving of history and associated thematic messages—these messages can be didactic, whereas encouraging viewers to form their own sense of place leads to a more personally meaningful appreciation of the values of a place.

I will briefly give an introduction to each site and current interpretation before discussing options for future place making.

Mawson’s Huts Historic Site, Antarctica

Mawson’s Huts Historic Site is located on the small rocky promontory of Cape Denison within the vast ice cliff expanse of Commonwealth Bay, Antarctica. The site is associated with the Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1911 to 1914 led by (Sir) Douglas Mawson. The Main Hut and the three scientific huts and other structures and objects there represent a cultural landscape of National significance that is protected by the Antarctic Treaty and managed under the care and control by the Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) on behalf of the Australian Government (AAD 2012 p7).
The site is one of only six remaining sites from the Heroic Period of Antarctic exploration in the late nineteenth and early 20th century. The site is redolent of both a brief ‘frozen moment’ when it was occupied and also of the effects of the passage of time since then.

In addition to the historic and aesthetic values of the site itself, part of the formal heritage values for the site are for its social significance for the public of Australia:

(National Heritage Values Criteria G Social Value) In Australian popular memory, the place is strongly associated with the heroic endeavors of a group composed mainly of Australians in the early 20th Century in one of the wildest and least known natural environments on earth. The place has symbolic cultural value in the stories of the AAE particularly Mawson’s epic return from the tragic far eastern sledging expedition and the role this has had in legend building and national psyche. (AAD 2012 p44)

While there is some guided site interpretation provided to the few tourists that visit in the short summer season (late Dec to early Feb), there is little focus on providing interpretation for the public who can’t visit there at all and for whom the site is very significant as noted above.

For those who can’t visit the site interpretation is provided on the AAD website that has both historical information and photographs (www.antartica.gov.au). The Mawson’s Huts Foundation website has further information of the hut structures on the site (www.mawsons-huts.org.au). However, neither websites deal much with the site as a whole or the broader sledging expeditions made by the AAE, apart from historic maps.

The AAD has prepared a good draft interpretation plan for the site that broadens the suggested off-site interpretation to include plays and film documentaries (AAD 2011 section 3.5). The Mawson’s Huts Foundation proposes to construct a replica of the Main Hut on the waterfront in Hobart that will assist in raising funds for works expeditions and allow visitors to get a sense of the life experience of the AAE members (Mawsons Huts Foundation 2012).

A replica is a good idea in that it will allow many Australians to share something of the experience of AAE members. However, more can be done to place the AAE in its physical setting—the hut valley enclosed by low rocky hills on the very edge of a huge ice sheet. Interpretation that provides viewers with an enhanced sense of place of the huts in their landscape will improve an appreciation of the breathtaking challenge and audacity of the AAE and other similar Heroic Era expeditions.

While it would be challenging to create this landscape sense of place on the waterfront of Hobart, various virtual 3D aids exist to enhance a landscape experience—walk through virtual tours can explore the broader landscape beyond the huts to artifact fields, the survey markers and food caches and beyond these to the deadly crevasses of the ice sheet. When the 3D imagery is combined with GIS data it allows all sorts of real history and information to be experienced by the viewer. For example, the scientific survey and experiments undertaken by the AAE around the main hut valley could be redone through virtual interpretation. The point is not about pretending to be Mawson but appreciating the physical environment which was after all the purpose of this endeavor. I have visited the site for two works expeditions and for me the
ultimate sense of place was to experience these small timber huts in a vast, still and foreboding landscape—the gingerly purchased hut is perhaps a metaphor for our tenuous understanding and engagement with Antarctica. Interpretation that creates these landscapes can be used to provide people who cannot visit the site something of that experience.

Davidson Whaling Station Historic Site, Twofold Bay, Eden, NSW

Davidson Whaling Station was the longest operating and last to close shore based whaling station in Australia. Located in the Kiah River inlet within Twofold Bay just south of Eden on the NSW south coast, it was established by the Davidson family in the late nineteenth century and employed Aboriginal whalers to hunt baleen whales in the waters of the Bay. A unique aspect of the site is the relationship between the whalers and pods of Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*) who worked with the whalers in hunting and were rewarded with the remains of whales caught. This aspect is not known elsewhere in the world. The site was gazetted as a Historic Site in 1985 under the NSW National Parks Act 1967 and is managed by the NSW NPWS.

Visitors can do unguided walks around the 27ha site and until recently a descendant of the Davidsons did seasonal guided tours. In 2010 NPWS engaged GML who worked with sound and sculpture artist Dr Nigel Helyer and Doppio Design to prepare an Interpretation Plan for this site (GML 2011 p1).

Past site interpretation focused on the physical remains at the site associated with the domestic life of the Davidson family their house *Loch Garra* as well as the technology of whaling, such as the try-pots used to boil down whale blubber for oil. While not inappropriate, this interpretation is a bit inward looking misses the wider physical and historic context, including the adjacent Twofold Bay where the whaling occurred.

The Interpretation Plan identified a series of broad themes, strategies and associated implementation initiatives for the site.

The beautifully treed and calm site sheltered within Kiah inlet is a far cry from the busy and smelly industrial site that it was. To bridge the gap between the site then and now three key themes and a number of strategies and associated initiatives and techniques have been recommended. The most important theme is that of *place* and the interaction between humans and whales at this place.

An absolutely fundamental aspect of the site’s history comes from the natural landscape itself; rich feeding grounds off the coast that sustained whales during their migrations, combined with the large and deep Twofold Bay provided an inviting shelter for baleen whales such as humpbacks but the Bay also became a trap that the Orca used to hunt and kill these whales (GML 2011 p22).

The Yuin Aboriginal peoples have for centuries benefited from these whale events and have developed practices and beliefs associated with both the Orca and baleen whales; it is possible that, like the Davidsons and the Aboriginal whalers who worked for them, the ancient Yuin actually worked collaboratively with the Orca. This broader ancient cultural landscape can be
extended further to include a route known as the Bundian Way that ran from beyond the mountains of the Great Dividing Range to Twofold Bay (GML 2011 p23).

In the past the site had partially removed itself from the ocean setting in its presentation and direction to visitors. Recommendations in the Interpretation Plan focus on ways of communicating a sense of place that starts with geographical influences in the broader Twofold Bay landscape and includes initiatives to provide water access and use and display of whale boats. Beyond the site the Plan supports links to regional paths and tourism opportunities such as the Bundian Way, the Sapphire Coast Heritage Tourism Strategy, the Wilderness coast and other existing whale watching activities.

While the artifacts of family and whaling remain key to telling the site story, the Interpretation Plan focuses on initiatives that don’t mess with the site’s current character nor add a clutter of signage but allow a sense of place to be developed, particularly using electronic techniques to communicate the broader the landscape story. This would start with upgraded website material that is both an international marketing tool for potential visitors to Australia and also a cache for a wealth of downloadable material to be used on self-guided walks around the site and for audio visual material augmented by artworks to interpret the sights and sounds of the site when it was operating (GML 2011 p107).

For sites such as Davidson Whaling Station that retain evidence of a compelling historic story that is directly connected to the formation of a particular landscape, it is critical that visitors appreciate this connection so that they remain grounded in the fundamental story of the site while also being able to place themselves at different points in time at the site.

The Sydney Cricket Ground

The Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG), Moore Park, is located in an area that was once bordering on swamps that drained south to Botany Bay that was part of a wider expanse of land traditionally occupied by the Cadigal (or Gadi, Gadigal) people.

The SCG has been part of a swathe of land in public ownership since it was proclaimed as Sydney Common in 1811 by Gov. Lachlan Macquarie. The site has been an important focus for leisure and sporting activities for the people of Sydney since the mid Nineteenth century and is possibly the longest continually used site for cricket matches in NSW, with the first formal match occurring in 1854. It has strong associations with some of the country’s most prominent sportspeople, sporting events and sporting achievements and holds undoubted social value in the wider community. Its layered history is reflected in its architecture; elements of which represent changing styles in the state and across the country. It has been important in the development of a diverse range of sporting activities (including athletics, tennis, cycling, and three codes of football), changes in these sports and with associated technologies. The SCG (and the nearby Sydney Sports Ground) played an important role in the building of colonial and national identity from self-rule through to Federation (GML 2012 p1).
The SCG has continually evolved with a series of redevelopments in the last several decades changing its appearance markedly, notwithstanding the retention of the iconic Members and Ladies Stands.

In 2012 GML was engaged to prepare an Interpretation Strategy for the SCG as a whole in response to condition of consent of a major redevelopment of the ground that is currently underway (GML 2012 p1). The challenge for the Interpretation Strategy was how to tell the amazing stories of people and events associated with the SCG that engages visitors and spectators in a way that does not in the end become of series of sporting anecdotes from the past unconnected to now. Another challenge is that the spectator experience at the place is already full of competing messages and signage, often all swept away in the drama of the moment.

Like the other two sites discussed above, the draft Interpretation Strategy that I was involved in has as its core the idea of creating a sense of place. This starts with the original landforms and landscape, the mid nineteenth century military occupation of this area that led to the establishment of the SCG and continues to weave around the buildings and structures that have inhabited the SCG to provide a canvas on which the project the stories events and people. In this way those stories are then connected to the place itself in both an historic and current sense. The visitor/spectator can then place themselves there at a different time and hopefully feel more connected to the place, even if the structure they are sitting in watching sport is itself recent.

The vision in the Interpretation Strategy for the SCG precinct is to create a sense of place that visitors identify with and respond to, for both the precinct as a whole and its component areas. This sense of place will communicate the key storylines for the SCG that include the layers of cultural landscape history, the evolution of this place within a broader recreation landscape setting, as well as the range and evolution of sports and entertainment events that have occurred here. The connection between sports, sports people, specific events and place will complement the storylines of evolution. This interpretation will more broadly engage all visitors to the place and use appropriate contemporary technology to bring alive the sights and sounds of this iconic part of Sydney (GML 2012 p95).

While the Interpretation Strategy contains recommendations in relation to interpreting the physical ‘real thing’ aspects of the place (including artefacts and memorabilia, reconstruction of parts of the 1924 Scoreboard currently in store and expansion of the role of the SCG Museum) it is new electronic media such as Apps and wireless devices that will be important tools in communicating a cultural landscape and inculcating a strong sense of place. By allowing current spectators to bring up on their phone a map of the exact spot where the 1930s Bodyline series catches were taken or to stand where a spectator ‘had a go’ at John Snow in the 1970s will tap by tap reinforce the connection between event and place and create in visitors their own sense of place—as suggested in the Strategy to build the notion of the SCG as the ‘home of sport’ that links the sports and the place.
Discussion and Conclusion

The usual model for interpretation is that the significance of a place creates the messages and stories are then selected to illustrate these heritage/environmental messages. Interpretation too often conveys ‘the message’ of significance as a one way experience—the viewer receives the message.

However, there is potential for a far greater meaning to be had when the process explains a place so that the viewer/receiver first forms a sense of place and then is in a better position to appreciate the different historic themes interpreted.

I have provided three interpretation case studies to talk about the importance of allowing viewers of heritage places to experience a sense of place upon which they create their own response. I have made the following sorts of recommendations regarding place making:

- at Mawson’s use the icy landscapes that were the reason the AAE were there;
- at Davidson Whaling Station emphasise the reasons why the whales and people were drawn to Twofold Bay; and
- at the SCG use the actual places were events occurred to build a connection and sense of place with spectators.

With a focus of place making (a combination of landscape, human interventions/constructions and time) the viewer can see both the evolution of that place and its current state and form their own personal sense of place through which they can view and respond in their own way to the interpretive messages. Telling the stories in history works much better when those stories are connected to and become the story of place. New media and particularly 3D imagery that use relational database material are going to be hugely powerful tools in telling the story of place.
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<td>Historic images of Davidson Whaling Station Historic Site including whale carcass (NPWS) and current site (GML)</td>
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<td>Sydney Cricket Ground early Twentieth Century (left) and 1932 (right) (SC&amp;SGT)</td>
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References


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Mawson’s Huts Foundation and Australian Geographic Society Prospectus—Mawson’s Hut Replica 2012

Author Biography

Geoff Ashley is a built heritage specialist and Director of Context PL, Melbourne. Geoff has considerable experience in the assessment and conservation of heritage places and landscapes as well as experience in providing interpretation for these places. Geoff has been involved in each of the projects included in this paper that were undertaken while he was with the heritage consultancy of Godden Mackay Logan in Sydney.