Understanding Cultural Landscapes Discussion paper.

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Understanding cultural landscapes

‘A cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium. The cultural landscape the result.’

*Carl Sauer*¹

Landscape ‘is never simply a natural space, a feature of the natural environment.[E]very landscape is the place where we establish our own human organization of space and time’

*John B. Jackson.*²

Landscapes are complex phenomena. In addition to the assemblage of physical features on which geographers and others focused until the last thirty years or so, it is now widely accepted that landscapes reflect human activity and are imbued with cultural values. They combine elements of space and time, and represent political as well as social and cultural constructs. As they have evolved over time, and as human activity has changed, they have acquired many layers of meaning that can be analysed through historical, archaeological, geographical and sociological study. Our research theme of Understanding Cultural Landscapes has the potential to develop applied research projects of international significance, bringing together scholars from diverse disciplines.

In March 2004, the *Natchitoches Declaration on Heritage Landscapes* was adopted at an International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) International Symposium. This declaration focuses on cultural landscapes in terms of the ‘interaction of people and nature over time’. The majority of *World Heritage* [INSERT LINK TO APPENDIX HERE] listed cultural landscapes are ‘evolved continuing landscapes, where people and nature dwell together’.³ Most cultural landscapes fit into this category: they are living landscapes, changing as the culture, climate and natural surroundings change within and around them. The character of the landscape thus reflects the values of the people who have shaped it, and who continue to live in it. The culture itself is the shaping force.

Landscape is a cultural expression that does not happen by chance but is created
informally or by design.

Thinkers about heritage and cultural landscapes are increasingly recognising the need for
cultural and natural elements to be considered together. Both elements are essential parts
of the construction of cultural landscape. They are also key components of a sense of
place. Landscapes need not be monumental or rare in order to mediate between the
natural and the social. John B. Jackson argues that the ‘commonplace aspects of the
contemporary landscape, the streets and houses and fields and places of work’ can tell us
a great deal about history and society; about how we see ourselves and how we relate to
the world. Such vernacular landscapes, or ‘landscapes of the everyday’ are fluid
‘identified with local custom, pragmatic adaptation to circumstances, and unpredictable
mobility’.  

**Landscape and cultural exchange**

Jackson compares a landscape to a language, with ‘obscure and indecipherable origins’. Like a language, ‘it is the slow creation of all elements in society. It grows according to its own laws, rejecting or accepting neologisms as it sees fit, clinging to obsolescent forms, inventing new ones’. It is the subject of perpetual conflict and compromise ‘between what is established by authority and what the vernacular insists on preferring’.  

Landscape can also be viewed as a place of cultural exchange, a site at which practices and processes of cultural exchange become forms of cultural heritage. Shaped by ideological discourse, landscapes can also be understood as texts susceptible to analysis by means similar to those in which literary and other texts are analysed. Poetry, prose, painting and film represent landscapes in different textual forms. The eye of each writer, painter or filmmaker selects and frames images in a singular way. Their views can become part of a society’s image of itself, as they are reproduced or influence others. The paintings of Heysen, Drysdale, Nolan, and the Indigenous artists of the Western Desert and the Hermannsburg school have all interpreted the arid inland of Australia. Their images have become part of the national myth of the Outback and have themselves influenced the way that others see that space. In a similar way, different social groups and individuals will look at the same place through different eyes, and perceive its meaning in different ways. **[Rick Hosking to add something about landscape and writing here]** Indigenous people, European explorers, missionaries, pastoralists, international and domestic travellers all looked or look at similar landscapes and experience different versions of reality.

**Cultural diversity**

Understanding the cultural landscape of Australia is an integral part of the process of examining and celebrating Australia’s cultural diversity. The elements of this project will include Indigenous culture and places, migration and settlement history, political and social structures, monuments, creative arts and other forms of past and present cultural expression. Australian post-colonial cultural landscapes have been created by a diverse

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4 See, for example, ICOMOS, ‘Declaration’.
5 Jackson, p. xxi.
6 Jackson, p. 148
range of cultural groups, operating within a political, legal and planning system derived from England. Their consequent diversity, and their meanings for different cultural groups, have been little studied.

The international recognition that landscapes have cultural value and intangible attributes has, however, been significantly influenced by Australian research on Indigenous Australian connections to land, and the associated concept of country. Places of contemporary social significance are part and parcel of how Indigenous people construct their social identities today, but are also intimately linked to longer term patterns of maintaining social identity. Overlaid on this, however, are the repercussions brought about by contact with Europeans, who placed very different cultural values on the same physical landscape. The expansion of the colonial frontier radically altered the ways in which Indigenous people could relate to the old physical places and spaces, and brought new layers of meaning to the same places. One of the main aims of a current project conducted by the Department of Archaeology’s Claire Smith and Heather Burke is to investigate these new layers of meaning as they were constructed on both sides of the frontier in the Northern Territory: by the Indigenous people who, through dispossession and marginalisation, were continually having to reshape their old worlds, and by the European colonists who were engaged in the process of actively constructing a new world for themselves. It is the dynamics of these competitive social landscapes, perhaps more than any other, which have created the potentially conflicting heritage values of today.

The research of Victoria Haskins from History is concerned with Indigenous and post-colonial Australian experience.

The combination of knowledge and research expertise that this ASRI will assemble opens exciting opportunities for new research initiatives in the areas of cultural diversity, and memory and landscape.

**National and regional identity**

Connection with familiar landscapes forms part of political and cultural identity, as people feel they belong to one place, one region, one country. This recognises that a cultural landscape is more than just the sum of its physical places; it is equally concerned with the spaces between places and how these are given meaning, as well as the documentary and oral history stories that are woven around both. The deeply social nature of relationships to place has always mediated people’s understandings of their environment and their movements within it, and is a process which continues to inform the construction of people’s social identity today. Landscape values accrue historically. Victoria Haskins from History is researching in this area.

For instance, Australia’s national heritage legislation has recently changed, so that the new National Heritage Register will be formed around the theme ‘Distinctively Australian’. Cultural Tourism,’s Jane James is currently leading a research team identifying potential themes for heritage interpretation as part of the new approach to heritage management, and further consultancy opportunities are likely to arise as the national government attempts to identify what is distinctively Australian and worthy of inclusion on the national register. As this work progresses, it will need to take into account the layers of meaning in our landscapes, and ensure that Indigenous and non-
Indigenous valued places are included. It will also need to acknowledge that Australia is a settler society, whose minority cultures contribute extensively to its contemporary identity.

In Legal Studies, Cheryl Simpson is editing a book entitled *Law and Cultural Heritage*, which will examine the contexts within which cultural heritage laws are framed and the ways in which their administration influences perceptions of place value. Lyn Leader-Elliott is contributing a chapter analysing the ways in which the heritage assessment criteria of social value and aesthetic value are applied at local level in South Australia, using world war memorials in the Barossa Valley as an example.

[Aspects of the work of Australian Studies staff Shannon Dowling and Steve Hemming could be included here.]

The significance of place in shaping historical identities by examining a community’s presence or sense of place is another area of cultural landscape study, such as Des O’Connor’s research into the history of Italian settlement in South Australia.

[Other researchers from languages studying aspects of place and identity may also have intersecting interests here.]

One aspect of Richard Maltby and Mike Walsh’s proposed project on film distribution and exhibition in South Australia in the 1930s involves examining the relationship between cinema-going and community, and the place of the cinema, as a site of cultural exchange, within the social organisation of the community it served.

**Tourism and landscape**

Travel and tourism activities are built around the quest for experience, and the experience of place and landscape is a core element of that quest. We see landscape through our existing mindsets, influenced in part by what we already know or expect, in part by the things which interest us most: history, vegetation, food and wine, visual arts, spirituality, and so on. These different mindsets have a profound influence on the ways that travellers experience places.

Tourism images and ‘branding’ create expectations of a particular sort about a destination (place), and can also lead to a shift in regional or local activities to meet these artificially created expectations. The tourist experience is dominated by the meanings these expectations give to places, rather than physical encounters alone. Tourist places are mostly constructed by outsiders. Most research into the ways in which images of places are created has originated in the practices of marketing. There is considerable scope for applied research into the cultural processes by which cultural landscapes are identified and represented as tourism destinations, and the ways in which these representations influence travellers’ expectations and experiences in those places. Lyn Leader-Elliott’s research is concerned with analysing these relationships between cultural landscape, sense of place, the construction of tourism destination images and the organisation of tourism experiences. She is also planning related research projects comparing the values ascribed by resident community members to a region or place with those allocated by promotional media. Chris Fanning is planning research into cultural artefacts such as
‘Big’ objects and murals as community representations of identity for tourism consumption.

It is the constant desire for new experiences that drives tourism, rather than a quest for authenticity. Therefore it is up to those concerned with heritage and cultural integrity to engage actively with the tourism industry so that aspects of life and landscape important to cultural identity, including connection with place, are maintained. The work of Heather Burke and Claire Smith in the Barunga project has the potential to inform research for culturally appropriate interpretation of Indigenous places and histories, as well as its significant contributions in other areas. Jane James has recently completed a project involving the narrative interpretation of landscape at Naracoorte Caves World Heritage site. Donald Pate, Lyn Leader-Elliott and the archaeologists working on the ARC-funded Hills Face Zone project have identified material cultural heritage (mostly from the post-colonial period, although they still hope to achieve some progress on incorporating Indigenous places). In addition to archaeological identification and recording of historical cultural landscapes (both relict and evolving), this project will produce a framework for interpreting cultural landscapes for tourism.

Global and Local landscape representation

Analysis of tourism-driven representation of cultural landscapes also raises a number of issues connected with globalisation/localisation, and with the consumption by the developed world of the cultures and cultural landscapes of developing countries.

The proposed 2006 conference can be constructed around the ideas presented in this paper, and others that emerge through discussion. Expressions of interest in Understanding Cultural Landscapes research have so far been made by staff from:

Archaeology
Cultural Tourism
Migration Studies
English
History
Australian Studies
Screen Studies
Womens Studies

References


Jackson, John B., *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984)


Appendix: UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Landscape Categories

Three main categories of cultural landscapes have been identified for World Heritage Landscapes.

1 Clearly defined landscape designed and created intentionally by man. The most easily identifiable, this category embraces garden and parkland landscapes constructed for aesthetic reasons which are often (but not always) associated with religious or other monumental buildings and ensembles.

2 Organically evolved landscape. This results from an initial social, economic, administrative, and/or religious imperative and has developed its present form by association with and in response to its natural environment. Such landscapes reflect that process of evolution in their form and component features.

They fall into two sub-categories:

- a relict (or fossil) landscape is one in which an evolutionary process came to an end at some time in the past, either abruptly or over a period. Its significant distinguishing features are, however, still visible in material form.
- continuing landscape is one which retains an active social role in contemporary society closely associated with the traditional way of life, and in which the evolutionary process is still in progress. At the same time it exhibits significant material evidence of its evolution over time.

3 Associative cultural landscape. The inclusion of such landscapes on the World Heritage List is justifiable by virtue of the powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element rather than material cultural evidence, which may be insignificant or even absent.


While these categories have been developed for places of world significance, the ideas underlying them, together with those developed by the US Park Service, provide a useful framework for considering living contemporary landscapes.

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See Birnbaum