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“A Dish-rack Full of Crockery”: Social Significance and the Sydney Opera House

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Abstract

The sculptural roof forms of the Sydney Opera House regularly attract visual analogies in the public mind. Although they are mostly referred to as ‘sails’ or ‘shells’ they have also been described through humorous metaphors like ‘a dish-rack full of crockery’. This particular visual pun, is a reference to a linocut by Eric Thake, produced in 1972, the year before the official opening of the Sydney Opera House. This analogy and its continued popularity to date evidences the social and cultural life of this building.

Much of the scholarly on the Sydney Opera House investigates the architecture and the circumstances of its realisation, whilst its reception and social significance, has received little systematic attention. Through Thake’s linocut, the paper discusses the current limitations in evaluating social significance in an Australian heritage context and proposes an alternative perspective to this problem through two scholars who bring ‘subjective experience’ to bear on the production of meaning. For Gillian Rose, visual artefacts become significant through their embodied experience, whilst Ann Game argues for the inclusion of such usually-excluded subjects like desire, memory, time and the body in the construction of meaning. By bringing these theories to bear on a specific example - Eric Thake’s visual metaphor for the Sydney Opera House - the paper investigates a new approach to social significance.
“An Opera House in every home”

In 1972, the year before the Sydney Opera House officially opened, Eric Thake (1904-82) produced a linocut of depicting gleaming white plates in a dish-rack, mimetically posed as Jørn Utzon’s architectural masterpiece, to adorn his annual Christmas Card. Although Thake is not a widely known artist, this visual pun titled An Opera House in every home is a popular metaphor for this building. Thake’s Christmas cards were vehicles for his sharp wit and sense of humour, they were “private statements intended for those who knew him.”1 Probably his best known image, this linocut is now widely reproduced on postcards, aprons and tea towels, the “Sydney Opera House as a dish-rack full of crockery” is a part of the visual rhetoric of this building.

On the surface it might appear that this work of art and the popular analogy it has inspired is an innocuous and trivial link to a work of architecture such as the Sydney Opera House. This image is part of the cultural significance of this building, but is not part of the building’s current heritage listing. This disparity reveals the complex relationship held between the Sydney Opera House as a building, and as an object of social value. Thake’s linocut is not part of the building it is an interpretation. But this interpretation embodies social values held for the building, how can this image inform us on the social significance of the Sydney Opera House? Is An Opera House in every home tangible or intangible? The original artwork has materiality but as a metaphor it is a social practice. How is its appeal in both these forms, a public expression of the significance of the Sydney Opera House? Further, what does Thake’s witty pun reveal about the social climate at the time of its production and how can this be understood now? The paper does not seek to find concrete answers to these questions, but rather to use Thake’s analogy to explore how it reveals social significance of the Sydney Opera House.

The Sydney Opera House and Cultural Heritage.

The Sydney Opera House was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2007 as a monument of universal value for art and science2. Although this building is a popular tourist destination as well as a cultural landmark in Sydney, the inscription, like much of the
literature on this building emphasises its material qualities. The Sydney Opera House is renowned for its aesthetic beauty, its engineering innovation and the political drama of its construction. The significant social and cultural role which the Sydney Opera House plays in the lives of its local, national and international communities has received less attention than its aesthetic or scientific qualities.

The inscription on to the UNESCO World Heritage List is the most recent effort to instate legal protection for this building. The Sydney Opera House is also listed on national, state and local registers. In 2005 it was listed on the National Heritage List, in 2003 on the State Heritage Register of New South Wales and as early as 1980 it was entered on the Register of National Estate. Further, the Sydney Opera House also exists on non statutory lists like the Royal Australian Institute of Architects’ Register of Significant Australian 20th Century Architecture, (1990), the National Trust of Australia (New South Wales) Register, (1983) and the International Working Party for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modern Movement (DOCOMOMO) Register, (2000). These are a testament to the level of esteem held for this building.

However, I would note the marked absence of its social and cultural significance in its formal recognition on these statutory registers. The listings concentrate on the building as a work of architecture rather than as a social space or place of national identity. The Sydney Opera House is an important work of architecture, but as well, it is a national symbol, a tourist destination and a prominent civic space. The Sydney Opera house features frequently in mass media and memorabilia to signify and celebrate Australia and is a major tourist attraction, it receives approximately 4 million visitors each year. In 2003 the sails of the Sydney Opera House were graffitied with ‘No War’ in red paint, in protest of Australia’s impending involvement in the conflict in Iraq. These social uses, practices and associations centred in, around and about the Sydney Opera House are as yet not formally recognised as heritage.
The social significance of places is an emerging area within the field of critical heritage studies. Heritage conservation, and the documents used to legally protect places of cultural significance, have traditionally focused on the fabric of sites and have tended to overlook less tangible aspects of cultural heritage\(^6\). This trend is evident both in an Australian heritage context under the “ICOMOS Australia Burra Charter 1999” and at the World Heritage level under the “UNESCO Convention concerning the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage” which was adopted in 1972\(^7\). Recently, however, with the instatement in 2003 of the “UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” the definition of heritage has been formally broadened to include:

>“practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals.”\(^8\)

The Burra Charter has since its inception had a broader conception of heritage than the UNESCO 1972 Convention through its broader definition of ‘place’ rather than ‘monuments and sites’ respectively. It identifies cultural significance under four areas; aesthetic, historic, scientific and social or spiritual value. The original document, adopted in 1979 has been reviewed periodically to retain its relevance to current thinking in heritage. The current 1999 revision of the Burra Charter encompasses intangible aspects of places like; use, setting, related places and related objects, associations, meanings and interpretations, items not previously included\(^9\). However, the focus still remains on places having a physical location that is tangible in some way, even though their intangible aspects are now acknowledged.

Although the Burra Charter seeks to include the intangible attributes of places, I would assert that its criteria are not equally located in the heritage site. In the case of the Sydney Opera House, the aesthetic and scientific aspects are evident in the fabric of the building. As such they are more likely to have tangible documents associated with them. Their expression in tangible form facilitates their assessment and documentation as heritage. Whilst social or spiritual value is attributed by communities to a place of cultural significance, in its use,
through the creation of related objects and in the meanings, association and interpretations held for the site in question. This criterion is in itself expressed more through intangible aspects, in locations other than the site, or as ritual practices which leave little tangible evidence. Social value, I would argue is a criterion less embedded in the fabric of place, and is more evident in the social and cultural life, which exists around the site. This disparity perhaps indicates why social value is less developed as a heritage criterion than aesthetic, historic or scientific.

**Social significance in Australia**

Interest and research into social significance has burgeoned in Australia in the past decade and a half. The question of social significance or social value has produced a number of seminal papers in Australian heritage theory. However, the incidence of sites being listed under this criterion of cultural significance remains low¹⁰ and reveals the difficulties practitioners have in defining, describing and measuring social significance at present. In the case of the Sydney Opera House, the absence of social value as part of its heritage listing is revealing, perhaps, of how this building’s spectacular architectural significance tends to eclipse everything else.

Australian scholars Annie Clarke and Chris Johnston note that early listings in Australia, like in other countries, emphasised natural, indigenous and historical environments¹¹. As the conception of heritage has shifted to encompass the complexity of cultural significance an interest in contemporary places as heritage has emerged. This broadening has raised critical inquiry into the less historic aspects of heritage like social significance. In Australia a key “discussion paper within the Australian Heritage commission [by Sandy Blair and Marilyn Truscott, which] triggered the exploration of social value in 1987.”¹² This field of research was then established by Johnston’s seminal report entitled “What is Social Value?”¹³ in 1992. Clarke and Johnston note that this increase in attention to the subject of ‘social value’ resulted in an

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**Proceedings of the XXVth International Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand**

Geelong, Australia, 3-6 July 2008
“increasing recognition that heritage places are located in cultural landscapes in association with other places, and that these landscapes are made meaningful by people through processes of memory, traditions, and attachments through personal and community experiences”.14

According to Shaun Canning and Dirk Spennemann social significance, however, remains under represented in the criteria for which places are listed. Their survey of local government listings in New South Wales provides empirical evidence that this increase in interest and broadening of the conception of heritage has not resulted in a significant increase in the practical evaluation of the social value of sites and monuments under investigation15.

Canning and Spennemann, as well as Clarke and Johnston attribute this lack, in part to the professionalisation of the heritage practitioners over the years and the archaeological or architectural perspective that has dominated the industry. Practitioners, who mainly come from archaeological and architectural backgrounds, have focused on their professional strengths and thus focused on the assessment of the tangible aspects of places, namely the fabric, form and function. Currently more sites are listed under the aesthetic, historical and scientific criteria, than under social and spiritual value. Canning and Spennemann continue:

“The methodologies currently employed in Australian cultural heritage management […], cannot assess social value in anything but a cursory manner. The established (and dominant) methods of quantifiable measurement, such as those used in the physical or natural sciences, are in no way appropriate for the assessment of social value. These dominant positivist techniques cannot accurately determine the depth of community feeling and attachment to cultural or natural environments – the very attributes that create a sense of place or identity.”16

‘Sense of place’ like ‘social value’ remains an elusive and amorphous concept to define. Ways of assessing and documenting emotional attachment, and community feeling as a
response to the built environment are areas that are more commonly addressed from the disciplines of social sciences rather than architectural history and theory. Engaging with communities, especially extensive ones such as those of the Sydney Opera House, is a logistically difficult, expensive and time-consuming process. Further the increasingly educated and professional standing of heritage practitioners, as Canning and Spennemann argue, has a tendency constrain community input via professionally devised criteria. Spennemann suggests it is the lack of anthropological training of heritage practitioners, in addition to limited resources and time frames, which greatly contributes to difficulties in assessing the social significance of heritage places.

The influence of Intangible Heritage

Scholars from the emerging field of intangible heritage have critiqued the traditional focus on fabric as the source or location of heritage. Dawson Munjari, argues that central to this perception is that “cultural heritage was deemed to be stable, and static and having ‘intrinsic values’ as well as qualities of ‘authenticity’”. This constitution of heritage in the material has also served, according to Munjari, to create distance between the site and everyday life. This distance dissociates heritage from the initial social values, which inspired its protection through heritage listing:

“Cultural heritage should speak through the values that people give it and not the other way around. Objects, collections, buildings, etc. become recognized as heritage when they express the value of society and so the tangible can only be understood and interpreted through the intangible.”

As I have previously argued, evidence of social value is less likely to be located in the fabric of place. Rather it is expressed in the social and cultural life that occurs on and around the place. In the case of the Sydney Opera House its use as a national symbol in mass media or in memorabilia attests to the social esteem held for this building, in particular. The ritual, by three quarters of tourists to come simply to experience the architecture first hand is an intangible practice through which the social value of this building is created and expressed.
The use of visual analogies for the building like Thake’s *An Opera House in every home*, is an expression of the relationship communities have with this place.

The categorisation of heritage significance is now understood to be a much more complex phenomena, that the preservation of historic sites. There is increasing recognition of the way intangible aspects of heritage create social value which motivates the desire to protect significant places. The construction of social significance, as an intangible lived cultural experience, is more aligned with the social sciences than architecture or anthropology. I would suggest that the work of theorists working in these fields, such as sociologist Ann Game and geographer Gillian Rose can thus inform an approach towards the evaluation of social significance in heritage theory and practice. Although their research is not directed at heritage sites, their theoretical approach to the construction of meaning through subjective elements like memory, association and experience, is an approach, which embraces the community attachment which lies at the centre of social significance.

Game’s approach to sociology and the production of meaning, is theoretically useful for its inclusion of emotion and experience in its construction of sociological knowledge. In her book “Undoing the Social” she critiques sociology’s positivist position, by bringing deconstructive theories to bear on this area of academic research. What is primarily useful to draw from Game’s work is not her critique against sociology’s dominant paradigm, but rather her approach to the construction of meaning or significance in both the physical and the emotional experiences of the individual. Game’s deconstructive reading of sociology, positions ‘theory’ as a writing practice, a story, a narrative or in her words a fiction. She argues that the dominant view in which theory is seen as abstract representation of the real, ignores or excludes affective qualities like memory and emotion from the sociological realm. Further, she argues against the hegemonic view that only empirical research is a valid representation of reality, as this results in a disregard of the body and experience, in memory and association. Game places subjective experiences, memories and associations at the centre of social meaning. This perspective, I would suggest, brings community and individual experiences to bear on the question of social significance in a heritage context. The social
value of sites is temporally embodied in the activities, expressions and artefacts created in response to the site.

The lack of anthropological expertise in Australian practitioners is noted in Canning and Spennemann’s research. Following on from Game’s position in which social significance can be seen to be articulated through the practices, expressions and artefacts produced in relation to places like the Sydney Opera House, an anthropological approach could provide a framework for assessment. Although Rose is a geographer, her work on visual methodologies draws on ethnography to understand the meaning of visual artefacts. Rose emphasises the value of analysing visual material in its context, as well as in an embodied manner. Her theoretical position aligns with Game’s; she sees meaning as a relational interaction between image and individual. For Rose “the significance of an object does not pre-exist its social life.” Her anthropological approach uses the visual artefact to elicit the embodied meanings attributed by people. She continues:

“This [is a] performative understanding of the co-constitution of image and observer [which] thus demands a fine-grained analysis of how images and people relate to each other in specific times and places, producing each other in particular ways as they do so.”

I would assert, that the consequence of this line of thought allows the investigation of social significance through the relationship people have with apparently insignificant objects, like souvenirs and representations in mass media, tourist performances around buildings, or the use of analogies to describe an esteemed building. These activities engage the tangible objects of the souvenir and the building respectively, with the intangible memories, practices and association to inform the assessment of social value. This approach provides a temporal and embodied perspective towards the definition, description and assessment of social significance.
Domestic performance; architectural ingenuity

An anecdotal diary entry that makes reference to Thake’s visual analogy is an illustration through which to explore the preceding discussion on social significance. The fleeting reference to Thake’s artwork by a young Australian mother abroad, is an example of the relevance of this visual analogy in contemporary life. On the 11th of November 2006, Lauren Purcell writes:

“…..with all the baths he’s been getting he’s probably cleaner than our crockery anyhow. Which reminds me... there's a pile of dirty dishes in the kitchen waiting for me... A mummy's work is never done!! It's actually daddy's work in this house but they've been sitting there since Sunday and are starting to rival the Sydney Opera house for architectural ingenuity…….” 28

The young mother describes the unruly havoc her son’s illness is causing in her home. An Opera House in every home is inspiration for a new interpretation of mess and disturbance to daily routine. She uses the metaphor of domesticity against the structural ingenuity in the precarious pile, awaiting scullery. The relationship between the young mother and the stack of plates is, like Rose asserts, “co-constitutive”; the young mother is attributing meaning for the Sydney Opera House through her rendition of unclean crockery as an ingenious structure and Thake’s visual analogy, of the Sydney Opera House as a dish-rack full of crockery gives her chaos some personal significance and homely comfort whilst away from home.

Conclusion

Social significance has remained in the background as a criterion for listing places in Australia. Recent thinking in critical heritage, in particular that concerned with intangible heritage, asserts that the cultural significance of places is not intrinsic to their material fabric but rather is located in the value we place on them. This interpretation of social significance is more closely aligned to sociological or anthropological perspectives towards the meaning of places. I would argue, that the difficulties encountered in articulating social value, in an Australian context, are due to this emphasis on the tangible at the omission of the intangible.
Social significance, unlike aesthetic, historic or scientific is less likely to be located in the materiality of sites, but rather in the lives of communities. The practices, memories and associations which people form with places are intangible elements, which exist, in the cultural life of places. These meanings are constituted through the expressions, uses and artefacts with which people engage. The theoretical position from which Game and Rose approach the production of meaning questions the dominant paradigm in which significance is firmly located in the materiality of sites. This raises questions regarding the way architecture is valued, protected and conserved. Heritage conservation has done much to uncover the deficit of attention towards the way buildings interact in the social and affective lives of individuals, however, an understanding and methodology for the definition, description and measurement of social significance remains elusive and problematic.

Endnotes

“A Dish-rack Full of Crockery”: Social Significance and the Sydney Opera House


14 Clarke and Johnston, (2003), 1 (unpaginated).


20 Munjari, (2004), 13 (italics in original text).


28 Excerpt from blog by Lauren Purcell, on Tuesday 11th November 2006 http://littleswagman.blogspot.com/2006/11/for-frantic-masses.html).