

PAPER PRESENTED IN 'EXTREME EXPERIENCES IN CULTURAL TOURISM & AND INTERPRETATION'

'Shoes and ships and sealing wax and cabbages and kings': from tradition to technology in heritage interpretation.

This paper looks at cultural tourism experiences in two historic landscapes. The two landscapes represent 'extreme' histories in divergent places: the Port Arthur Historic Site in Tasmania as a landscape of punishment and penal rehabilitation, the World Heritage listed ancient city of Ayutthaya in Thailand as a landscape destroyed by Burmese invasion in the 18th century. In both places, contemporary voices and traditional practices have been reintroduced through devices that act to enhance the cultural tourism experience. The two approaches are themselves at extremes – one relies extensively on modern art and technology, the other on a continued and enduring traditional practice. Juxtaposed, they provide an inspirational insight into the way 'living' stories can enhance our engagement with heritage places.

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This paper is more about the juxtaposition of ideas and places that are themselves at extremes, rather than 'extreme heritage' as such. At the same time it creates linkages of these extremes, through an exploration of commonalities. I intend to use two extraordinary heritage places that are geographically and culturally diverse: the Port Arthur Historic Site, in Tasmania and the Ayutthaya Historical Park in Thailand. Ayutthaya has been on the world heritage list since 1991 for the monuments that remain from its period as one of the ancient ruling capitals of that region. It was destroyed by a Burmese invasion in 1767 and effectively burnt to the ground. It is in fact the scene of one of the greatest defeats in Thai history but is today revered and esteemed as a national icon, representative of the glorious past of *prathet Thai*. Port Arthur is currently included on a proposed serial nomination to the World Heritage list of Australia's convict sites. It is on our National Heritage List and, as is Ayutthaya, despite a history that is associated with extreme pain and suffering, is considered to be an iconic place in the construction of the country's national identity. It shares the fiery fate of Ayutthaya, losing many of its structures to bushfires during the 1890s. Interestingly, both places have risen from the ashes, undergone a new settlement process, become major tourism attractions, seen their communities removed through government intervention, been gazetted as historical

parks, and are today internationally significant heritage places and cultural tourism destinations.

One of the other features that both places share is a history of boats and boat building, and the focus of my paper today is the way in which this heritage is retained, presented and interpreted as a significant element of the modern day cultural landscape.

Ship building has been described as one of Tasmania's first major industrial enterprises and was a significant contributor to the colonial economy during the early 19th century. The first intake of prisoners to Port Arthur in 1830 included a boat-builder, and by 1834 a formal dockyard had been established. In that same year a Master Shipwright was appointed. As well as constructing numerous craft for government and commercial use, Port Arthur served as a repair and maintenance depot for the colonial government's fleet and also serviced visiting British warships. The Port Arthur dockyard operated officially from 1834–1848, with small scale boat building and repair work continuing for a number of years after its closure. During the operation of the Dockyard 15 major vessels and 140 small craft were constructed (Nash 2004: 40-41, 50). Its closure was embroiled in debates about its cost effectiveness, but capital values aside, during the time of its operation it made a major contribution to colonial development in terms of the training of numerous convicts who were absorbed into the colonial labour force as highly skilled workers. The Port Arthur ship building activities can also be seen as a small component in a much broader network that linked this small settlement within a much larger economic, political and commercial enterprise.

The dockyard area at Port Arthur today contains an extraordinary range of evidence of this past, and contributes to the enigmatic and visually impressive landscape of the Port Arthur Historic Site. It is a powerful reminder of the role of water transport in the everyday life of the penal community and the colonial enterprise.

It has recently been the subject of a major interpretative project that has sought to re-impose a sense of the history of ship building at the site, and to re-populate the landscape

with the presence and narratives of the hundreds of individuals who contributed to the processes and creations of the precinct. This included not only the convicts who worked in various roles at the Dockyard, but the free employees who contributed to the enterprise. Skills encompassed those of shipwrights, blacksmiths, timber carriers, sawyers, carpenters, sailmakers, charcoal burners, overseers and clerks. And of course some of the free workers were accompanied by their families, meaning that women and children were also a part of the Dockyard life. The Master Shipwrights residence was constructed at the Dockyard in 1834 and stands today as the only aboveground structure relating to the Dockyard period of use. A second house is found on the site today – it was built over the site of the former blacksmith's shop, it is post-Dockyard and served as accommodation for civil officers such as the Clerk of Works and the schoolmaster. The challenge for interpretation was to reintroduce this significant industrial and domestic narrative within a relatively small landscape precinct that visually consisted of two unassuming houses literally plonked within a sloping and grassy area that was broken by an indented channel (no longer discernable as the main slipway) and a limekiln unrelated to this phase of use. The solution was based around four main elements:

1. The introduction of a structural feature within the slipway that relied on an artistic interpretation of a vessel, imposing a relativity of size and shape yet clearly allowing it to be read as a modern intervention.
2. The re-imposition onto the ground surface of the previous industrial landscape using metal footprints to delineate the structures and features related to places and activity nodes. These are planted with a variety of grasses to allow the footprints and spaces to become clearly delineated zones.
3. The creation of a soundscape, triggered by movement, which superimposes voices and actions on the landscape.
4. The production of a small self-guided tour brochure that provides a historical context and greater information on the various activity points.

This was a \$300,000 project that took almost a decade from inspiration to realisation. It was officially opened by the Tasmanian Minister of Tourism, Arts and Environment in

May of this year and we are confident that we have introduced a cultural tourism experience that is of international merit and certainly one of best-practice. In terms of technology it uses state-of-the-art equipment yet the overall effect is one of simplicity. (soundscape)

While Port Arthur is a place that has seen the demise of a traditional industry and its subsequent vanishment in the landscape, boat building at Ayutthaya continues as part of an unbroken practice that spans centuries. Ayutthaya at the time of its glory was a substantial river port, and the ancient part of the city was contained on a small island, surrounded by a series of rivers and canals. Water transport – and reliance on boats – was an integral component of this way of life, and has only in recent years undergone a period of decline. Boats however continue to play a significant traditional role in Thai life, from the annual long boat races at Ayutthaya, to the continued use of Royal Barges by the King on ceremonial occasions. Rather than facing the challenge of reintroducing a history and experience of boat building into the landscape, the community at Ayutthaya is struggling with finding a way to prevent the demise of a centuries-old traditional craft that is an integral part of a way of life associated with water.

Although developments, including railway transport, have affected the water lifeways of the Ayutthaya communities, the heritage of living and working on the water is not one that has been totally lost. A number of districts and villages in Ayutthaya are named with boat associations – *Ban Sao Kradong* (Mast Village), *Ban Samphao Lom* (Sunken Junk Village) – and *Wat Rua Khaeng* (Racing Boat Temple), the site of the annual long boat races that have a long history in Ayutthaya.

Fishing remains as a commercial past-time in the waterways of Ayutthaya, and one can commonly see single fishermen on the river in small wooden boats. One of the fishermen I spoke with fishes from the boat that was once his father's, and is proud that his father has the skill to make water craft. He notes that there are fewer boats on the Ayutthaya canals and rivers today, with boats such as those belonging to the water traders – *rua kam pan* – being almost gone as goods are carried by road. The decrease in water transport has

obvious impacts in an environment where new sailors learn their skills from the older people. Similarly, there has been a decline in boatyards, and skills associated with building and repairing boats, and in the traditions that are an integral part of boat building practices.

Khun Paitoon Khaomala, a now-retired teacher of boat building, told me he remembers as a child being given his own small boat as it was the only way he could travel to school. For many years he taught boat building at the Ayutthaya Industrial and Ship Building Training Centre College, which when it was established in 1839 was the first such school in Thailand. He has spent his life studying Thai boat design, but has also been involved in numerous projects that have seen adaptations of new designs, technology and materials. The series of books he has written are today used as texts by various boat building schools. He tells us:

The inspiration for my endeavours has been to provide knowledge and understanding to develop a pride in later Thai generations in the expertise and accomplishments of their ancestors, particularly in the Thai Royal Barges that have become famous worldwide. (Quoted in Chutintaranond 1996: 173)

There is no country in the world with as many different boats and watercraft as Thailand. I am a native of Ayutthaya and my life has evolved around the water since I was a boy. Today it is important that we protect our waterways and vessels. (ibid: 176)

Khun Paitoon is very concerned that the skill of building traditional Thai boats will be lost, as so many young people find that careers in boat building depend on understanding and practising modern techniques, materials and designs. He recalls that before the bridge that now spans the river and before the good roads, the only transportation was by boat and that most households would be able to make their own form of floating transport, even if it was just hollowing out a log. Today such simple practices are forgotten and even fishermen will buy a boat rather than make one themselves. Not only are the skills

being diminished, but he laments that even those who buy boats have little understanding of wood or design that would help them purchase the right craft. With this in mind he set up the Thai Boat Museum in Ayutthaya as a place to not only show visitors the important aspects of traditional crafts, but also to teach the skills of building scale models to the community, both young and old: 'I can do something important to preserve Thai culture, because boats are an important part of Thailand – even before Ayutthaya the river was here, same as now ... even the King travels by boat'.

The traditions of boat building also involve knowledge of decoration and of the rituals and ceremonies that accompany the process from the time a tree is cut to the launch of the boat. For example, the paintings that can be seen on the rear of a boat are representations of *Ra Hoo*, the water spirit, and the skill to paint these designs is an important part of traditional boat building. Khun Paitoon is still invited to perform the ceremony to launch new boats, and he is concerned that there are few artisans left who have the knowledge of these ceremonies.

When we were organising the official opening of the Port Arthur Dockyard we entertained (albeit briefly) the notion of incorporating some form of tradition with the formal launch. Other than the sacrifice of a champagne bottle across the nose of our new sculpture, none of us could readily nominate any particular practice or ceremony that would be appropriate. The point is not necessarily that such customs and traditions do not exist – further research on our part would have no doubt brought them to light – but that the considerable effort and research that had allowed us to reintroduce the story and sounds of boat building into our Dockyard precinct had ignored the arena of traditions and ceremonial practices, all of which would have been and no doubt remain as an integral part of the 'life' and practice of ship building.

One of Khun Paitoon's more spectacular model boats, of a royal barge, is on display at the Ayutthaya Historical Centre, which is the major visitor and interpretative centre for the Ayutthaya Historical Park. He has also created models that have been presented not only to the Queen of Thailand, but also to the Queen of England. He is, however, unable

to obtain any support from the government for his museum, which is a small operation in the grounds of his own home. He has been visited by representatives of the Thai Fine Arts Department, who he believes commend his efforts, but have not provided any assistance otherwise. They do not seem to acknowledge that his efforts are heritage related, and rather he was advised that he should approach the Tourism Authority of Thailand for funding as a tourist project. This deeply concerns him, as he is confident that boat building is an important part of the heritage of Ayutthaya, and is in danger of being lost. It is not just a tourist attraction.

However, the correlation between the two arenas is certainly being explored, particularly through training programs in model boat making that can provide community members with a way to participate in the preservation and restoration of part of their heritage, while at the same time being able to derive an economic benefit. Several Ayutthaya village communities have elected to concentrate on the production of model boats as a handicraft activity, the products of which will be primarily consumed in the tourist market. However, both the villagers and Khun Paitoon place value on the activity as being more than a tourist enterprise with economic benefits: they acknowledge that the skill itself is an important part of their heritage.

For value to be more than that accrued through commodification, there is a reliance on a connection with the past that involves an object – in this case a traditional model boat – in a broader historical and experiential context. The object is otherwise little more than an illusory image of the original, stripped of the symbolic connection with past lifeways and lacking narratives and meanings. It is through such symbolism and ability to inspire narratives and memories that Khun Paitoon's models are given the power to link people, practice and place, and connect the present with the past in the immutable relationship between people and water. Such attributes are not available 'off the shelf', or retained through absorption in the tourist enterprise. As noted by an Indonesian writer, 'You cannot buy cultural values, or the dignity of the ancestors and their achievements' (I Made Sutaba 1998).

I suggest that a common goal in both places is to work towards the retention, or perhaps reinvigoration, of the sense of identity that is crucial for the relationship between a product as a commodity and a product as a form of heritage, resulting from a sense of shared time, space and memories. At Port Arthur we have tried to do this through voices and sounds, and through a re-reading the physical landscape: a 'production' that is based on technological innovation and considerable financial input. At Ayutthaya attempts are being made to retain the practices and skills and traditions that are an integral part of the history of boat building. The irony is that at Port Arthur we have used a contemporary artistic medium to reintroduce a life-sized rendering of a ship. At Ayutthaya, the perpetuation of traditional boat forms relies on the re-creation of ship images through miniaturisation. Certainly an excellent example of extreme approaches!

This reinforces the notion that heritage is influenced and constructed by people, in a process that is an integral part of collective representations and social reproduction. Culture as change recognises that people adapt, innovate, borrow and assimilate in response to multiple encounters, events and contacts, whether enforced or voluntary. Over time, new practices also become traditional. It is to be expected, however, that the more enduring component of tradition will be its core values, reflections of belief systems and forms of expression. This highlights the ability of modern societies to collectively project ourselves into the future, based on a shared identity that is derived from the product and place. While our contemporary representations are grounded in the past, in traditional skills and their points of origin, they are at the same time modern products, in the sense of their contemporary status and the significance and meanings that are attached to them today, much of which is grounded in the relationship with their makers, whether they be technicians, artists, writers, artisans or heritage professionals.

At both places, it can be seen that an effort is being made to recognise that the actors – the people – must have much more than a 'hypothetical status', so that the material evidence is awarded no greater reality than the people who produced it. The consequence of ignoring the significance of action is a negation of the linkages between places, which renders the landscape as little more than an artefact.

There are obvious merits in applying approaches that help to provide a sense of historical continuity and a common belonging and identity, and that can also encourage a transmission of skills and practices. From the extremes of convicts to kings, Port Arthur and Ayutthaya can be seen to make a contribution to both local and national heritage that is more properly a coordination of places and landscapes with the enduring traditions and stories that give life to both past and present communities.

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