

Article for *musings*

Interpretation Plans

Interpretation – what does it mean and why is it important? Respected interpretation specialist Professor Sam Ham says that interpretation is meaning making that will instil in people a newfound empathy and reverence for their own natural and cultural place in the universe.¹

So what is the role of the interpretation specialist? Professor Sam Ham's answer would be to find ways to make the visitor to your place connect with it and the people associated with it so that they come to realise the significance of that place on an emotional as well as a mental level.

That task is the one I set myself every time I approach the development of an interpretation plan for a new place or site. The question is always "so what is special about this place? Why does its interpretation matter?" There are many reasons why good interpretation matters from the economic spin-off of increased tourism to the sense of community pride and newly forged identity that comes from knowing more about your own place.

We are moving into an unprecedented era in which the youngest, best educated, most adventurous retirees are set to become a powerful economic and social force. They are looking for self-fulfilling, educational, stimulating experiences and they are looking for them all over Australia. Any organization involved in heritage, tourism, the arts, culture and infotainment had best have something they want to see and do and talk to their mates about.

So how does the local history museum in one small agricultural town differentiate itself from any other local history museum in the small agricultural town down the road? They do it through good interpretation and through telling stories about people. Buildings and objects, no matter how fascinating, no matter how beautiful, will not engage the minds and the hearts of visitors. For that you need people.

So where do you start? Generally with discussions with all the interested parties from the CEO of the shire to the tourist bureau workers to the bus drivers who might come by to the local historical society to the museum committee, teachers, traditional owners. This is an exercise in gathering information about what people's hopes and aspirations for what you are doing for them will bring through to who doesn't want anything changed to how people perceive what currently exists to how they perceive tourists and visitors. Who is the interpretation for? These consultations are also a time to make suggestions about what the place might need for interpretation rather than what the stakeholders might want. It is a time to talk about what the latest developments in interpretation are, why high-cost, high-maintenance multi-media interpretation that they have seen in big city museums might not work for them. It's a time to make suggestions about inclusions or methods that might seem a little "out there" for the community.

Then, if you are lucky, there is a curator, or other person who knows the collection, place or site extremely well. Sometimes there might be two or three who know specific bits very well. These people are invaluable and you spend a lot of time talking to them and finding out what is important, what has special meaning, where

¹ Ham, Sam H., *Meaning Making – The Premise and Promise of Interpretation*, Edinburgh, Scotland, 4 April 2002. (University of Idaho, 2002)

the connections are, what are the interesting people stories. The information that you gather from these consultations takes time to build and usually involves around three visits to the site.

If the interpretation plan includes a style guide or recommendations for specific exhibitions then at least one or two visits are undertaken with an exhibition designer to discuss ideas, look at what exhibition furniture already exists and get people's aspirations and hopes for how the new interpretation will look and what it will do. This is also a good time to talk about how much certain things are likely to cost. People often underestimate the cost of audio-visual or multi-media productions. Even the cost of producing good quality, long lasting signage can take some people by surprise.

Now I approach the building, site, exhibition or collection that requires interpretation as a visitor would pretending to know nothing and wanting to learn about what I am seeing. I ask fundamental questions of the existing interpretation such as what, why, how and where and look to see if it provides the answers. I look for what is successful and at what gaps, biases or out-dated information there might be and I make notes about iconic objects or stories and about different ways that the new interpretation might be done. I look to see if there is something for every visitor demographic. What would I be interested in if I was a seven year old visiting or, for that matter, a seventy year old? I try to find an answer to these questions that can become an integral part of the interpretation plan. If I am working with an exhibition designer I like to look at the existing interpretation with them and find out what they are thinking about all of the things that I am looking for answers to.

In addition to looking at the existing interpretation I look at other important issues that are related to interpretation such as what is the comfort level of the visitor in this place, both physically and emotionally; are there any health and safety issues that need addressing, for both visitors, staff and volunteers; what level of access is available for people with disabilities or for people with limited literacy

Having done a lot of talking and looking, I go away and begin my own research. The Batty Library, State Records Office and world wide web are resources that I find invaluable. I am also eternally grateful to the historians who have gone before me and worked diligently on producing the histories of towns and suburbs – their usually very well researched books are a blessing. Local studies collections and librarians usually also have a wealth of information and knowledge.

When I have reached a point where I feel that I have researched widely and deeply enough then I am in a position to suggest themes and storylines to the client. Hopefully my prior discussions will have primed them to what I come up with. Usually I cover those themes that I know are close to the hearts of those who have diligently preserved the history of a place but I am also aware that to capture the minds and hearts of visitors, there must be something that they, too, can relate to. Also it is important to speak to a wide demographic of likely visitors and to enable them to see themselves reflected somewhere in the interpretation. I often use the analogy of TV soap operas. "Why" I ask, "are TV soap operas so successful and so long-running?" The answer is that audiences love them; people love soap opera and if you dig deep enough there is a little soap opera in every community. I always encourage the inclusion of a little soap opera story in any interpretation plan I do; the soap opera of real life, especially historical, intrigues people and helps to make that connection with the heart if not the mind! Its just that if interpretation does not provoke or relate to visitors, revealing something they did not already know, then it

will fail in its job of communicating the important ideas, messages and feelings that you are trying to get across.

In writing the interpretation plan it is necessary to link a number of storylines to a theme and then to outline what objects, specific stories, information, oral histories will go together to support each storyline. It is also necessary to link appropriate and different methods of interpretation to telling different parts of the story. For example, a silver tea set may have belonged to a family that settled a new agricultural area, needing to clear land and build shelter and not being able to transport many goods to the area and for reasons beyond their control could not make a go of the new settlement. The tea set is now in the local museum collection and becomes an important object in the interpretation of failed settlement as the only object of value that the family retained after walking off the land. To support the story of failed settlement there could be a photograph of the hand-hewn timber house that the family lived in and perhaps failed crops. There might also be photographs of the family at work. There may also be documents relating to the land grant, bank overdrafts or letters of demand. Recorded oral histories or extracts from diaries of people who experienced the hardships of the failed farming ventures could be added. Depending on the time of the failed settlement it might even be possible to find and add film footage. Perhaps a small computer based interactive component could be added whereby the visitor is asked to make the same kinds of choices that a new settler would have had to make.

The interpretation plan should also contain recommendations to do with visitor, staff and volunteer comfort, health and safety and disabled access. Sometimes it is necessary to include recommendations on ways of improving collection management and storage.

Finally once all of this has been done there needs to be some indication of how to logically go about implementing the interpretation plan. Usually it is necessary to break the implementation up into stages as it is rare that any organisation, site or collection will have enough funds to undertake all of the recommendations of the interpretation plan at the same time.

In addition to breaking up the implementation into stages there needs to be some indication of the costs of undertaking each stage. This requires very detailed thinking about who needs to be involved and what work needs to be undertaken.

In the end, all of this talking, researching and thinking has to be conveyed in a written document called the interpretation plan. The interpretation plan, once written, should be a working document that is constantly referred to and used to plan with because it, together with a conservation plan, is the fundamental document that will guide your site, collection or organisation to a place where it engages the hearts and minds of the people who visit it in its own special, unique way.