

Retreat from the City: Representations of Sense of Place

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Word Count:

5,508

Key Words: (6 max)

Place, rural, sense of place, representation, place attachment, planning

Abstract

People create and construct *place* intellectually, intuitively and based on experience. One's *sense of place* is manifested in thoughts, feelings, actions and at times visual representations of places. Whilst some disciplines analyse paintings and photographs and how they represent different landscapes, very little has been written on how planners have used or could use a range of creative media to represent sense of place.

Using a rural case study near Cowra NSW, a property historically known as Riverslea, framed within a larger research project entitled *Layers, Lenses and Landscapes*, artists and planners were asked to respond to the same site and their own sense of that place using a creative medium of their choice. This paper briefly describes the overall research project and documents the process and the actual representations created to capture the artists' sense of place using different media (painting, photography, creative installations (sculptures and objects), story-telling (multimedia video and interviews), and soundscapes.

Discourse analysis provides a way of understanding relationships between seemingly disparate ways of knowing a place and allows an exploration of understanding place which traditionally may have dismissed as too vernacular or whimsical for serious consideration. This research challenges the traditional ways by which planners attempt to document place and peoples' sense of place.

Introduction

There are many ways in which to approach the understanding of rural places and hence urban places, grounded in disciplines such as architecture, history, geography, planning, sociology, anthropology and ethnography. A research project entitled *Layers, Lenses and Landscapes* sought to combine the methods used in these disciplines, and the insights which they offer in articulating sense of place, and in the knowing of rural place. The aim of this project was to better understand how people make, know and become attached to rural places. This study helps uncover how people articulate a sense of a place and how the individual understanding of place connects to the history of an area and its physical manifestations within the landscape and then how those understandings can be represented in different ways.

“Places and objects define space, giving it geometric personality. Human beings not only discern geometric patterns in nature and create abstract space in the mind, they also try to embody their feelings, images and thoughts in tangible material” (Tuan 1977, 17). Tuan goes on to suggest that objects and places are subsequently valued. Marshall and Corkery’s (forthcoming) current work builds on this and suggests that the ‘value’ of a green space is articulated most often when people become attached to a place – consciously or unconsciously. Value and connectedness are manifest through (amongst other constructs) protection of and caring for the site, sharing the memories and experience of that landscape with others, and contributing to a collective social construction of that place. It may also be expressed through artistic or creative media. This paper challenges the traditional ways by which planners attempt to document place and peoples’ sense of a place and presents new ways of articulating sense of place.

Planning approaches to documenting [sense of] place

Academics typically understand *place* theoretically by unpacking concepts such as space, place, place-identity, place-attachment, sense of belonging, spirit of place, imageability, mapping, iconography, and other such concepts. Documentation of ‘planning space’ typically does not include direct experience or the more subjective qualities of space but more often orders land use efficiency on maps with calculated area and ratios (Relph 1976). Sandercock (2003) and Landry (2006), more recently suggest that few planners approach their practice using sensory experience despite some authors calling for the senses to be considered as a primary consideration of design. When documenting *sense of place*, planners most often take a very traditional, reasonable planning approach whereby the site in question would be ‘ground-truthed’; textually documented; and theoretically conceptualised to understand and articulate the sense of a place. I agree with Sandercock and Landry and further suggest that very few planners would undertake a sensory audit of place through the use of the five senses believing that “a human being perceives the world through all his [sic] senses simultaneously” and that “the information potentially available to him [sic] is immense” (Tuan 1974, 10). And still fewer planners would explore the use of a qualitative medium (other than photography) such as representative artwork or other creative media to document place.

This paper documents a process used to capture the sense of a rural NSW case study using traditional planning methods and whereby different artists were asked to capture their sense of this same place using their media of choice which resulted in painting, photography, creative installations (sculptures and objects), story-telling (multimedia video and interviews), and soundscapes. Artistic media can augment the documentation of and hence contribute to an ongoing creation of sense of place and its layers of meanings (Cresswell 2009).

Case Study Site

The case study for this project was a 40ha site located a 30 kms southeast of Cowra in central NSW. The site under review is a small section of, what was at one time, part of a large sheep station historically known as Riverslea which was very socially, culturally and economically valued in the Cowra region. The smaller site contains a number of buildings, including a shearing shed with historic value, shearers' quarters, and has frontage on the Lachlan River. Although it is located close to Cowra, the site is actually located within Boorowa Shire. The site, colloquially known as the Riverslea Woolshed has recently been acquired by a Trust (under the name of The Corridor Project), which is running a broader project to interpret and manage the land with the intent to turn it into a creative industry producer of culture and the arts, research and education. For purposes of this paper, the site is referred to as the Riverslea woolshed.

Documenting Sense of Place: Ground-truthing

This landscape architecture technique saw the research team transect the case study site – documenting the physical realities and experiential qualities of the land and systematically recording these 'truths' to build up a snapshot of the case study site at a point in time, which served as the beginnings of a longitudinal documentation of the landscape.



Ground-truthing of Riverslea Woolshed site
(photos: Marshall 2008)

Documenting Sense of Place: Textual Documentation

Over a four day intensive field trip and extensive desktop study, the regional environmental, economic and socio-cultural contexts of Cowra and Boorowa shires were documented. This included briefly summarising the region's history, describing the natural environment, the social and cultural settings, the economic milieu, and analysed the relationships between the region and the Riverslea woolshed site. From a planning and place management perspective, opportunities and threats for the region and the site were also identified and considered within Cowra shire's 30 year vision planning document for the region.

Archival research and collection of texts was conducted through searches of relevant archives and local history collections. The emphasis was on texts which in some way represent the case study site. This included, but was not be limited to, maps, aerial photographs, drawings, scientific reports, newspaper articles and title deeds.

Documenting Place and Sense of Place: Theoretical Conceptualisation

In order to thoroughly understand place and sense of place, and further how best to document the latter, space and place literature must first be articulated.

Relph (1976, 8) recognises that "the various forms of space lie within a continuum that has direct experience at one extreme and abstract thought at the other extreme." 'Space' is more

abstract than 'place'. What initially started as a mathematical construct (of space) "has evolved from an abstract concept of qualitative measures to include a belief that space is the result of social forces (Harvey 1989; Lefebvre 1991)" (Steinmetz, 2009, 43). "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (Tuan 1977, 6).

Tuan (1977) goes on to suggest that place moves beyond being a geographical construct when people experience it and form a relationship with other people and neighbouring lands, attaching to it a collective consciousness of symbols, meanings and values. Place (as a concept) is complex and powerful and hence discussed in many disciplines (Cresswell 2009). It is bound up with related concepts of place attachment (Low and Altman 1992, De Jong 2002), place identity (Lippard 1997, Hiss 1990), place-making (Landry 2006, Coates and Seamon 1984, Dovey et al. 1985), topophilia/the love of place (Tuan 1974, Rykwert 2000, Ogunseitan 2005), spirit of place (Norberg-Schulz 1985, Davis 1992) and placelessness (Relph 1976), to name but a few. Each of these terms could be unpacked and theorised for this paper but instead the focus is put on place and sense of place and their interconnectedness.

Despite its complexity, place "has the ability to direct and stabilise us, to memorialise and identify us, to tell us who we are in terms of *where we are* [as well as *where we are not*]" (Casey 1993, vx). For Relph, through phenomenological factors "such as location, landscape and personal involvement, some assessment can be made of the degree to which these are essential to our experience and sense of place" (1976, 29).

"A sense of physically being and feeling 'in place' or 'at home' can then be regarded as a sign that an individual has established an emotional tie to a place. This emotional bond is necessary for cultivating a sense of place, along with the requirement that an individual needs to be physically intimate with the place at the same time" (Holloway and Hubbard 2001, 75).

Relph (1976). believes a sense of place can be authentic and genuine or inauthentic and artificial. " 'Authentic' sense of place implies that a fundamental, lasting truth about a place is known, going beyond the ephemerality of the constantly changing modern work and tapping in to an unchanging genius loci, or unique 'spirit of place'" (Holloway and Hubbard 2001, 76) Both Relph and Tuan believe that a disconnect to place is occurring in postmodern world. Having a superficial experience of a place or constructing normative knowledge about a place or landscape would only be a shallow, 'flatscape', inauthentic relationship (Holloway and Hubbard 2001).

'Place identity' is subjected to an imposed, created and manufactured construction of that place, while 'sense of place' remains personal, found, and grounded in the lived experiences (Carter and Squires 1993). Not all of our experiences in place are positive and hence the love of place can exist at first sight (as Lippard suggests) be cultivated within one's imagination over time or not be cultivated at all – but a sense of place can still be documented. Tuan argues that "familiarity breeds affection when it does not breed contempt" (1974, 99) – either way, I believe the power of place should not be underestimated, as I discovered through my own research on the Riverslea woolshed site.

When documenting sense of place, humanistic geographers purported, especially in the 1970s, that human experience, feelings and emotions are essential preconditions for understanding people-place relations (Holloway and Hubbard 2001). As such, Sartre's existentialism and Heidegger's view of being relationally in the world are critical to understanding how people devise meaning from interactions with other people and in relation to places (Holloway and Hubbard 2001).

These conceptual notions must be thought of in relation to Dovey (1985) who believes that phenomenology is a framework from which place should be examined. Lived experiences,

subconscious or unconscious are linked to intention (Holloway and Hubbard 2001). “Phenomenologists aim to recover the moment of intentionality in order to strip away the accumulated layers of conscious meaning and conceptualization (including academic theorization) that hide the ‘true essences’ of the initial moments of encounter with phenomena” (Holloway and Hubbard 2001, 70).

A phenomenological approach to representing sense of place (using different creative media) was constructed for each individual artist; that is, they each have a unique relationship with the site and ‘know it’ to varying degrees based on time, connection and type of experiences the following responses were put forward. The architect Dylan Gower, one of the sculptors, Phoebe Gower and two children, Mila and Anya Gower, are the current property managers of the site and live on a neighbouring property and have ‘known’ the property for over 10 years. The other sculptor, Rachel Cogger, soundscape artist Jarred Tulloch and story-teller/multimedia video producer and sensory auditor Nancy Marshall are all planners who have stayed on the site intermittently over a two year period and are specifically studying the site. The photographer, Susan Trent, and painter, Melissa Rowley, have only stayed on the site for a couple of days with the specific intent of responding to their sense of the site using their creative medium.

Documenting Sense of Place: Sensory Audit

The following table documents my response to the site using a personal sensory audit. It was an attempt to respond to the critique of planning research and practice (Porteous 1990 and Tuan 1977) that suggests planners pay lip-service to the multisensoriality of landscape and argues that the sense of space and character of place are conditioned by the interplay of the senses. The personal prose is supported by visuals in the left hand column.



My own experiences on the site made me realise you have to **touch** Riverslea to know it: The landscape is ever present here... there is a heightened awareness of life when you crunch the grasses below your feet on a hot summer’s day; when the sun gets so hot the air is suffocating and you take refuge in the Lachlan River and know when to lie low in the canoe where the tree hangs over the bank.



You don’t know Riverslea until you **smell** it One interviewee said “I love the smell of sheep – to me that means money.” Another said “You can smell a shearer for miles!” A third: “I can smell drought. The dryness.” The lanolin in the wood is ripe in the shed as is the imagined smell of 10,000 sheep, working shearers doing 150 a day and a choking diesel engine to run the clippers. We are immersed in smellscapes, we breathe them in.



You don't know the property until you taste property – the moisture of the fog on your skin and moisture in the air that lets you **taste** the earth and water that is Riverslea. Its tastes and feels are memorable in the varying seasons and differ by the time of day and night.



You don't know Riverslea until you **hear** it – the individual cadence of rain droplets on the tin roof of the shearer's quarters turning into a hammering of sheet rain and lightning that illuminates the sky, and the hundreds of cockatoos screech goodnight when the sun goes down and within hours, a kookaburra's laugh welcomes in the morning.



You don't know Riverslea until you **see it** – the landscape by moonlight and starlight; the quintessential Australian shearing shed, the purposefully placed granite boulders, and antique hills. For many who lived on this land, their dreams became as lofty as the skies. For others, the land shackled them. It was hard labour and the relation with nature became a 'love-hate bond'. Either way, they left their 'ephemeral signature' on Riverslea (Tuan 1974).

(photos by Gasbag Studios, 2008)

Sensory Audit of Riverslea Woolshed Site – Marshall 2008

So, my sense of this place became an experience of my own senses – its metronomic time and landscape intensify sensations and sentiments. The landscape is ever present here. For me, its sense of place merged into a spirit of place – yet to be articulated.

Documenting Sense of Place – Creative Representations in Exhibition

Two public exhibitions of the works created during the research projects have been held – one in the Riverslea woolshed itself and one held over three days in a rented shopfront in the nearby town of Cowra. The *in-situ* woolshed exhibition was very positively received as every attendee had a direct connection to the site. The in-town exhibition, although a step removed from being showcased on site, was also well-received but the interaction with the attendees was, for some, less personal and simply appreciative of the creative works as pieces of art. For them, it was less about the place and its identity and more about the representations, in and of themselves.

“‘Story’ conveys a range of meanings, from anecdote, to exemplar, to something that is invented rather than ‘true’, in the sense of strictly adhering to widely agreed-on facts” (Sandercock 2003, 183). **Story-telling** was presented in two formats. A documentary style multimedia video created

by Nancy Marshall and technically produced by Kira Sachs was filmed on site and documented interviews with the research team/artists and some of the ideas behind their creative works and what it was about the site that inspired them. Ethnographic, in-depth interviews were conducted with people who had or still have a relationship to the site (having worked the land or owned the property). These were audio-recorded and displayed in the exhibition through the use of textual quotable quotes – this brought the richness of their stories and their voices to the exhibitions. They are also peppered, in italics, throughout this paper, like this one: *Riverslea was 10,000 acres but it was a bigger place than that...* The stories of their lived experiences and memories of times spent in the region and on the site were told in their own voice which intersect with other sites of knowledge and accumulated as layers of history, sequences of actions and are inherent in the very landscape (Potteiger and Purinton 1998). The interviewees generously welcomed me into their Riverslea stories and lived experiences and were considered to be a part of the exhibitions.

Paintings Artist Melissa Rowley, working in the medium of watercolour on cold-pressed cotton paper, reintroduced the human element into the empty woolshed – they are figurative images of working shearers and the activity that once went on in that place. The artist reconsidered capturing the landscape and qualities of the Australian Heidelberg artists as they had in oils more than 100 years before and decided not to produce a direct reflection of what she had seen or experienced on the site. Instead, she responded with something that was absent and long gone from the site. The woolshed itself provided the inspiration for her response and the works of Tom Roberts, particularly *Shearing the Rams* of 1890. The shed seemed to be a dormant relic which needed the life of the shearing days – the hard physical labour, the movement and the animals re-introduced in order to re-create an essential aspect of the site which absence she felt was tangible. As her response developed, she came to view the site as a cultural landscape, a place which had impacted the lives of numerous generations, and was continuing to do so. What had at first seemed to be so dormant, was in fact an entity with a continuing influence on those who experienced it.

For the creation of a sense of place in art, there needs to be a layered understanding of a place as a cultural landscape, one which is not limited by aesthetic concerns. The works of the Heidelberg period to this day take pride of place in Australia's cultural mythology (Galbally 1986). This period of artistic creation saw the representation of the first feelings of true intimacy with the land after a long period of post-colonial picturesque Romanticism.



Neath Summer Skies of Cloudless Blue (Photo: Chapman 2009)

The archetypal Australian experience was understood through the depictions of regional landscapes and the celebrations of physical labour. Even though most of the Australian population lived in cities, the intense nationalistic sentiment of the period meant that the scenes presented to them in the works of Roberts, Streeton and McCubbin were of real bush life, uniquely Australian and integral to national identity. The extremes of isolation which underpinned bush life helped shaped the celebrated Australian qualities of resourcefulness, stoicism and 'mateship'. One project interviewee noted: *There are different aspects of art that remind me of 'here'. It gives me a sense of rightness...destiny and comfort of where you are.*

Professional **photographs** by Susan Trent of Gasbag Studios realistically captured this place from behind a lens and through a photographer's eye. "Through photographs, we see, we remember, we imagine: we 'picture place'" (Schwartz and Ryan 2003, 1). The photographs captured scale from the vast midnight skies to the minutiae of an insect. They captured our imagination with the materiality of the wood and corrugated iron of the quintessential Australian woolshed and the truthful depiction of temporal and natural spaces on the site. *This place – its got a presence hasn't it? Some places have a really pronounced presence that makes the hairs stand up on the back of your neck.* Photographic mobiles by Mile and Anya Gower were done by young amateurs i.e., children who currently spend considerable time on the property. They were given disposable cameras to capture the site from a child's perspective. Although the tactile and playful mobiles were relatively small in size and naïve in content, by no means were they incidental.



Woolshed Materiality (photos: Gasbag Studios 2008)

Creative **installations** came in different forms. A three-dimensional sculpture of a shearer and a sheep by artist Rachel Cogger reminds us, at the human scale, the activity level and physicality of shearing. The most prominent feature of the Riverslea site to this planner was the woolshed. Her artistic sensibilities and social imagination were instantly intrigued by the built form of the property, the smell, the aesthetic value, the materials, the creative space inside and the history and folklore of the shed. A shearer and a sheep were the quintessential elements that had been long removed from the shed and so the human scale sculpture brought the shed back to life and reinstalled a fundamental element that was part of its historical industrial practice. *Bloody oath it's hard work – I was doing 150 a day...the brothers used to do about 200.* The lacquered, amber resin made the appearance of the sculpture look older than it was. A second sculpture by Phoebe Gower was esoteric and represented the nature of topography and landscape of the region. It represented the granite boulders, hills and dales and its genius loci – spirit of place. *We're spiritual people. We can feel a presence – artefacts and cultural objects are like the footprints of our ancestors who walked our lands.* The final installation included two dimensional light boxes which are architectural drawings that represent the building blocks of the site's built form from an architect Dylan Gower's viewpoint. Tacit professional knowledge and actual 'scaled' sketchings formed the basis of this work.



Three-Dimensional Shearer and Sheep with artist Rachel Cogger (photo: Marshall 2009)



Two-Dimensional Light Boxes (photo: Cogger 2009)

The **soundscape** installation by Jarrad Tulloch blends nature and technology to record the sounds of Riverslea – from dawn to dawn. Traditional interest in soundscapes has primarily been focused on noise and unwanted sounds (Porteous 1990). Noise studies in Environmental Impact Assessments measure noise levels and assess their impact on sensitive receptors. In urban settings, soundscapes are particularly complex as it is difficult to determine the origin and relationships between sounds (Malnar and Vodvarka 2004). Sounds in rural landscapes are very often singular, identifiable and meaning-makers. This response was a high tech response to a very primitive aspect of the site but no less important compared to a visual response which is most often given primacy. This installation captured, in reality, the intangible aspects of the sound of peacefulness and silence.

Concluding remarks

The overarching method proposed for this project was discourse analysis. This method was broadly hermeneutic and based on the understanding that there is no single relationship between reality and its representation. Discourse analysis is based on the work of post structuralist theorists, particularly Derrida (1987), Barthes (1973) and Foucault (1972, 2002), and is interdisciplinary and intertextual in application. It provides a way of understanding relationships between seemingly disparate ways of knowing and between the social, economic and political sites in which they are produced.

Discourse analysis has been used for several decades in the humanities and to some extent in the social sciences. In many disciplines, these methods are frequently used as a primary means of analysis. However, discourse analysis is not widely applied in the examination of place. In disciplines including architecture, planning and geography, the use of discourse analysis can still be subject to great criticism. This is not necessarily because it has been applied without rigour, but because it is often poorly explained or not well situated within its theoretical context. Discourse analysis has also been used simply as a way of enlivening quantitative analyses of place, or more traditional forms of qualitative analysis, rather than as scholarly and significant methodology in its own right.

Some of the best theorised applications of interpretive approaches to the understanding of place are by Daniels and Cosgrove (1988), Boyer (1994) and Dovey (1999). Discourse analysis thus allows for an exploration of sites of knowledge which in contemporary western society may be

dismissed as too vernacular or whimsical for serious consideration, as well as a reconsideration of the way in which accepted ways of understanding a place have been created. This is particularly relevant for the understanding of a rural place, in which myth and folklore may be commonly accepted as legitimate ways of knowing a place than more scientific methodologies. Rigorous qualitative data management processes will be used as the next stage of this research to bring together interrelated theoretical directions on sense of place, the knowing of a rural place and place representation (Rowley and Marshall 2010).

There are continual layers of meaning and markers at the Riverslea woolshed site, many of which are yet to be understood or remain hidden in our collective consciousness. There are many lenses from which to feel and think about space, place and the site. The landscape is ancient, nurturing, and present. A phenomenologically-based, creative works approach of understanding place allowed different artists to express themselves through a refined talent and emotive outlet. It allowed an exploration of sites of knowledge which, in academia and in the planning profession, may be dismissed as too qualitative or vernacular for 'factual' documentation of a sense of a place. "The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual [or other] expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which the reader [or viewer] is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience" (van Manen 1997, 36-37).

The built environment disciplines, working at a variety of scale, all feel partially responsible to 'make our cities' (Landry 2006) or 'create our rural settings' with 'place' and 'place-making' strategies becoming increasingly applied in practice. As such, there are many ways through which planners can approach the understanding of *space* and *place*. The sense of place documentations and artwork exhibitions are a reconsideration of the way in which accepted ways of understanding a place can be created and used meaningfully by planner. This research offers our representations of Riverslea's sense of place and our shared continuation of the Riverslea woolshed story.

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*The author would like to thank Melissa Rowley and Rachel Cogger (Research Assistants) for their assistance with this article.