Reimaging the suburbs: An investigation of a placemaking strategy in a deindustrialising city

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Abstract Governments at all levels and in many different countries are attempting to address the problems associated with deindustrialisation by initiating cultural planning strategies to reimagine the city and reinvigorate economies. This paper seeks to examine the discourses mobilised in two cultural heritage walks brochures being used in the revitalisation of a deindustrialising suburb in Newcastle, NSW. The article explores the myths and themes reflected in these brochures to create a discourse of place to be adopted in an attempt to address the social, cultural and economic problems associated with heavy industrial restructuring and decline.

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Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the discourses produced by reimaging and placemaking processes which are being used in the revitalisation of transitional and deindustrialising areas. It uses a case study of the deindustrialising Newcastle suburb of Mayfield to consider how specific discourses, signs and myths are employed in a placemaking project in the quest to redress established ‘negative’ images. In particular, those associated with pollution, crime and social disadvantage (Markwell et.al. 2004). In investigating the discourses contained in two heritage walks brochures, which were produced as part of a larger reimaging project for Mayfield, the article examines the tensions and silences that can result at the level of discourse in official cultural planning schemes. The article argues that the choice of a narrow heritage narrative in this placemaking process sanitised the layers of history in the deindustrialising suburb and mobilise a limited range of myths of place in an effort to link with a particular construction of Mayfield’s forgotten past – a past of leafy grandeur that existed prior to the suburb’s recent association with industry.

Making the past pay: Heritage and placemaking

It has been argued that the destabilising effects of deindustrialisation and high/late/ postmodernity have sharpened the individual and community need to revive the past (Kit-wai-Ma 1998) because, as Davison (1991: 4) maintains, heritage can offer “the consolation of a glorious, if largely fictitious, past...in the midst of a painful present.” Similarly, Ellin (1996) argues that insecurity and disconnection, what Giddens (1991) describes as ontological insecurity, fuels the desire for nostalgia and an interest in heritage among individuals and the community. Trapeznik and McLean (2000) argue that people take solace from the past and its built environments and landscapes because together they provide a sense of collective identity and belonging in a
precarious postmodern world where orientation points are often concealed. Heritage is
a social and political construction and so what is ‘remembered’ and what is ‘forgotten’
can be very different for each of the diverse groups in society (Laws 1993).

Heritage is not singular, fixed or static and what constitutes heritage can change over
time. Urry (1990:105) proposes that “almost everywhere and everything from the past
may be preserved”; for example, recently industrial artefacts like mines, mills and
warehouses have become sites to be preserved and celebrated (Ellin 1996). However,
that which is remembered, as industrial heritage, is usually celebratory, partial and
sanitised. Lowenthal (1989: 215) maintains heritage is also “what we are stuck with”
and have to live with. Even bitter experiences need to be remembered so as not to
diminish their importance in the history of a place but this remembering is rare (Hayden
1995). Furthermore, Lowenthal (1989) reminds us that aspects of heritage that we may
find distasteful today may be of interest to future generations. He argues history
explores and explains pasts while heritage “clarifies pasts” for contemporary functions
(1998: xv). Indeed, heritage has become the touchstone of memory and belonging and
an abbreviation for a host of histories and experiences.

Heritage has been both valorised and villainised as advocates and critics alike
exaggerate the benefits and deficiencies of heritage and heritage interpretation
(Lowenthal 1998: xiii). It has been argued that heritage can alter the past and suppress
creativity and the dynamism of contemporary culture (Hewison 1987; Trapeznik and
McLean 2000). Laws (1993) suggests that heritage narratives distort history because of
the need to represent the past in visually exciting and commercially successful ways.
Hewison (1987) views heritage interpretation as a readily constructed and contained
narrative that can effortlessly be transformed into a saleable commodity. Heritage’s
marketability and its assumed capacity to foster a sense of place-identity and belonging
make it a standard focal point for placemaking strategies. Initiated in the United States,
cultural heritage precincts have become a major feature of economic revitalisation and
placemaking programs in Australia, New Zealand and Britain (see Trapeznik and
McLean 2000; Jacobs 1992). Some argue that successful heritage placemaking
projects can attract tourists and visitors as well as improving the quality of life for locals
(Uzzell 1989; Gibson and Beasley 2004). However, when the focus of a placemaking
strategy is on a specific heritage narrative as a product for profit, often only those parts
deemed to have commercial value are remembered while others are forgotten
(Trapeznik and McLean 2000). Brown (1993) suggests that a focus on a narrow
heritage narrative can negate the development of a sense of place, while Jacobs
(1992:196) argues that “conservation of the built environment and the heritage values
associated with that process empower certain interest over others and reify certain
pasts above others”.

According to Uzzell (1988), heritage interpretation is assisting in the economic renewal
of many declining and deindustrialising areas. In transitional districts, industrial
heritage maybe celebrated and heroic representations of the male industrial worker
offered in a way that obscures the loss felt by the workers for their jobs, lifestyle and
identity (Taylor and Jamieson 1997). Industrial heritage in deindustrialising areas is
often represented in symbolic form through postmodern architectural constructions or in
the naming of places (Mills 1988). Indeed, the practices of naming and renaming often
play a significant role in heritage strategies. As indicated by Carter (1987:xxiv), it is
through naming that a place is transformed symbolically into “a space with a history”.
Furthermore, Darian-Smith and Hamilton (1994:3) argue that naming and renaming can
be acts of “erasure” - forgetting and remembering. The practice of naming and imaging
intrinsically excludes other meanings culminating in a standardised, fixed
representation of place (Hopkins 1994).

This article looks at the discourses of place and heritage evidenced in two cultural
heritage walks brochures produced for Mayfield, NSW as part of Newcastle City
Council’s (NCC) broader cultural planning agenda for the suburb¹. The brochures were

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produced by the Cultural Industries and Practices Research Centre at the University of Newcastle in consultation with the project steering committee which consisted of Council, business and community representatives. An examination of the heritage brochures provides an insight into the practical application of a cultural planning strategy and the way in which dominant themes and myths of place and heritage are mobilised in discourses in the service of creating a sense of place. My analysis reveals how these official texts attempted to create a new place image through the mobilisation of selected heritage and built remnants. Like many deindustrialising transitional places, Mayfield has a long and multi-layered past and it is first necessary to give a brief account of the suburb’s history. It is also necessary to develop an appreciation of how Mayfield is positioned within the discourses of Newcastle.

A Tale of Mayfield and Newcastle

Mayfield is a residential and industrial suburb located in Newcastle, New South Wales. It is situated on the banks of the Hunter River and is one of the oldest suburbs in the port city, with the first white settlers arriving in 1822. Mayfield was historically a significant site for the Awabakal people who enjoyed a plentiful food supply from the land and the river and a source of stone for tools (Heath 1998). In the 1880s wealthy businessmen and their families began to settle in the Mayfield area in order to escape the pollution and overcrowding of the burgeoning central settlement of Newcastle. These new Mayfield residents built large houses on the ridge south of the river prompting the daily newspaper The Newcastle Herald and Miners Advocate in 1898 to described Mayfield as the “Toorak of Newcastle” noting the beauty of its “green fresh fields” (Docherty 1983:107). The suburb’s reputation as a rural retreat and place of parks and pleasure gardens continued until the opening of the BHP steelworks in 1915. Industrial development also led to a rapid housing development which transformed Mayfield from a rural retreat for the wealthy to a predominately working class community.

Docherty (1983) argues that the BHP steelworks became a recognisable sign within and outside Newcastle - a sign linked with the myth of progress. However, Andrew Metcalfe (1993:5) claims that this earthy image depicts a city which emerged from the swamp (of the Hunter river lands) but never moved far from its beginnings. The struggle between nature and progress is represented by the continual need to dredge the harbour of its muddy sediments that disrupt shipping movements or progress. Metcalfe (1993) suggests that the imagery of Newcastle pivots on the theme of masculinity that associates the myths of heavy industry with the claiming and controlling of nature. However, as he goes on to explain, the price of progress was pollution, noise and ugliness (1993:11).

In the 1990s because of technological and global economic change, the Newcastle steelworks gradually was downsized and in 1999 the plant closed. With BHP’s closure the symbolic representation of the Newcastle worker as resilient, masculine and working class was reappropriated by a heritage discourse which is contained and sanitised (Stevenson and Paton 2001:6). These discourses of Newcastle position the suburb of Mayfield as the ‘problem’ suburb within Newcastle. Interestingly, the mythologies of Newcastle parallel myths and signs used to situate Mayfield within Newcastle. Mayfield is the local bearer of the myths associated with industry and BHP that Newcastle bears nationally.

The loss of BHP was keenly felt and not just because of the loss of potential and actual employment. The majority of jobs were actually lost during the 1980s when the plant was restructured (Stevenson and Paton 2001). Rather, it has left a symbolic void in the imaging of Mayfield. Since BHP’s closure many local businesses have closed or relocated leaving the main street (Maitland Road) looking abandoned and neglected. In an effort to address the closure at both the symbolic and material levels, Mayfield became the focus of a Newcastle City Council (NCC) cultural planning process that
included a number of placemaking strategies, such as the Mayfield Cultural Heritage walks initiative which produced the brochures examined in this paper. The heritage walks project was an initiative of Newcastle City Council and the Mayfield Mainstreet Committee (a local business alliance) and was seen as a means of revitalising the declining main street shopping precinct by attracting residents onto the streets, and new business and visitors to the area. In focusing on images of the suburb’s heritage it was hoped that Mayfield would shed entrenched images of its more recent industrial past. The brochures were launched in 2003 as part of a city wide heritage festival and have become the centrepiece of Mayfield’s placemaking program. To this end the heritage walks brochures were placed throughout the suburb and in the tourist information centres in Newcastle. Furthermore, the initiative has become a ‘show case’ for suburbs throughout Newcastle and is consistent with the Council’s broader objectives of diversifying the city’s economy and encouraging a shift towards a more consumption based economy focused on tourism, culture and heritage (Newcastle City Council 2005).

Re-placing Mayfield

The heritage walks brochures focus on two distinctive yet interconnected narratives. The first brochure entitled “Mayfield: Toorak of Newcastle?” concentrates on the period when the Mayfield ‘aristocracy’ took up residence on the ridge overlooking the Hunter River and their built legacy. The second brochure, entitled “Mayfield: Living the Life”, seeks to recall a narrative of working class life in the suburb. But, as argued below, it too centres on the built remnants of the wealthy and the establishment, such as the church. The heritage brochures attempt to create a contained narrative which is easily packaged for marketing. In seeking to reimage Mayfield, these placemaking texts endeavour discursively to replace the ‘negative’ and ambivalent discourses of struggle, industry and social disadvantage, with a narrower heritage narrative linked to remembering and marking a forgotten past which is more saleable and more in line with discourses of gentrification.

The heritage that is valorised in the “Toorak” brochure is one of a hidden ‘past glory’. The irony of this choice of words is indicated in the brochures’ questioning title “Mayfield: The Toorak of Newcastle?”. This reference seems incongruous in a place of social disadvantage and even more so in a suburb so closely linked with industry. In the “Toorak” brochure the river becomes a metaphor for Mayfield and engages an environmentally pristine, untouched nuance, which is signified in the use of words and phrases, such as “white sands”, “floodplains”, “wetlands” and “paper bark forests”. The photographs of a country river and gardens reiterate this myth of nature and the rural. The “Toorak” brochure in other words seeks to silence the BHP industrial narrative and convey a story of Mayfield as it existed before the arrival of the steelworks, which was not just a Mayfield of nature but also of affluence. This passage from the brochure exemplifies the affluent past consolidated in the stories of the wealthy landowners:

Mayfield was one of Newcastle’s most desirable and fashionable places to live, especially from the 1870s until the arrival of the BHP steelworks in 1913...John Scholey was a butcher, property developer, businessman and later Mayor of Waratah three times (which included Mayfield). He chose the highest point on the ridge to build his magnificent house, which was completed by 1884, and the gardens extended all the way to Crebert St. The Scholeys were like the royal family of Mayfield. It is said that when Mrs Scholey wanted one of her servants to do something, she would simply clap her hands. She and other members of the ‘Mayfieldocracy’ were sometimes known as the ‘Handclappers’.

Myths of height, lofty position and dominance are important. Occupancy of the highest point on a ridgeline was a symbol of the wealthy residents’ control, or claiming, of the river lands and, in turn, symbolically Mayfield. The following passage illustrates how
the heritage discourse within the “Toorak” brochure was also embedded with the notion of nature and the rural as well as being “a place” for the elite:

It [Mayfield] was a place for the social elite, some of whom built their villas along the ridge lines where they could admire the views, as well as take symbolic advantage of their elevated positions. ‘Delightful surrounding scenery and easy access to the city by rail’ spruiked an 1851 advertisement.

The wealthy claim possession over the river lands from their ridge top “villas”. The Hunter River is positioned in this discourse as a “source of life”, a pleasure ground with beaches and gardens with the water imagery symbolising Mayfield as a place of dreams and escape. The narrative of affluence lies in stark contrast to the discourses of heavy industry and is indicative of the contemporary tensions between the prevailing image of Mayfield and the reimaging process. BHP within the “Toorak” brochure has been transformed from a dirty, dangerous and dominating place into a tamed, unambiguous piece of art - “you can see the industrial sculpture of the steelworks”. The photographic images of the steelworks site that accompany the text in the brochure include a leafy picture of the heritage-listed former administration building, belying the way in which the BHP steelworks dominated the physical and metaphorical landscape.

In contrast to the “Toorak” brochure the “Mayfield: Living the Life” brochure seeks to be a narrative of life in Mayfield with BHP. However, because of the fragility of the built remnants of the suburb’s working class past, the stories of working life are told primarily through the architecture of the wealthy and elite. As Markwell et. al. (2004: 466) explain, the practical difficulties of project implementation and the constraints of the heritage brochure format, make it difficult to deconstruct and represent complex issues of class, gender and ethnicity. Nevertheless, stories in the “Living the Life” brochure try to evoke the sights, sounds and flow of life in Mayfield with the BHP steelworks. The following passage gives an example:

The establishment of BHP and other modern manufacturing factories created a different rhythm and tempo. Changes of shift were marked by siren and whistle. Workers on their bikes, whole rivers of cyclists would race to get to work on time.

In the “Living the Life” discourse the rhythm of the river and nature that featured in the “Toorak” brochure has been replaced by the “rhythm and tempo” of industry. But this is not the polluted, dangerous history of industrial Mayfield, it is a heroicised, contained industrial past (heritage) which is described through metaphors of prosperity and progress. For example, the river image is used in the phrase “whole rivers of cyclists” as an allegory for a thriving industrial time of full employment during long Post War boom of the 1950s and 1960s.

The representation of BHP and of Mayfield’s industrial past as heritage in the “Living the Life” brochure serves to ‘other’ industry from the contemporary Mayfield. As such, the odious impacts of industry like pollution, noise and danger are forgotten, and a depoliticised and romanticised depiction of industrial heritage in the reinvented form of BHP is represented. There are some references to the destruction of the landscape by BHP in the “Living the Life” brochure. For instance, the passage below remembers how sections of the river lands, which were once the playground of children, were buried to create land for an industrial dumpsite as the BHP steelworks expanded.

Did you also know there used to be a beach in Mayfield? A popular spot for swimming, rowing and picnics was Shelley Beach…Shelley Beach now lies buried beneath tonnes of infill.

As well as the “lost” islands and beach, the brochure describes an elaborate “pleasure garden” and Chinese market gardens which are now also gone. But apart from passing
references to these lost social and physical landscapes, the heritage walk tied the narrative to the built environment because participants need markers in the landscape (not memories) upon which to hinge stories. In addition, Newcastle City Council and its Mayfield Mainstreet Committee preferred the grand and remarkable past (not the buried and invisible) because of its connection to symbolic progress and power and because they are powerful reimagining stories. As such, even industrial stories of places and people are often told from the built remnants of the wealthy plant managers and not from a working class perspective. For example, in the “Living the Life” brochures it is a renovated stately house that is used to tell a story of BHP rather than the steelworks site:

This mansion was built originally as the Work Manager's house for BHP and, at one stage, Essington Lewis, who became Chief General Manager of the BHP company resided here... BHP seemed to pursue a policy of locating their managers close to the plant and to the worker's housing.

Many other sectors of the community, those who have not left obvious (ostentatious) ‘marks’ on the landscape, are excluded also from the heritage discourse. This includes Mayfield’s culturally diverse community, the homeless, the disabled and young people, all of whom are significant segments of the demography of the suburb (ABS 2001). These silences are mentioned on the back panel of both brochures, as follows:

...many ... [layers of history] are invisible, having few if any traces in the landscape.” Little evidence remains of the Goori people (a local name for Indigenous people) ... women’s history is also often difficult to ‘see’ in the landscape ... there are many other stories that have been left out.

In addition, the reality of contemporary industrial Mayfield is also a silence in this discourse.3

The placemaking project of which the brochures are a part, is intended to dispel well established negative place images and to attract residents, shoppers, new businesses and visitors to the suburb, particularly the main shopping strip. The ‘rich’ or elite heritage discourse is an important pillar for the Mayfield Mainstreet Committee in its reimagining strategies and a focal point for ‘Mayfest’ an annual festival held in the suburb. The heritage theme has been sustained by initiatives such as the suburb’s logo and streetscape improvements and the seating and heritage colour schemes. In addition the Committee has revived old traditions like the ‘Miss Mayfield’ Competition, one of the few community ‘heritage’ activities which has attracted young people. Nevertheless Mayfield is unlikely to become a heritage destination for many tourists. It is unclear how these strategies are going to herald the economic deliverables anticipated by a heritage-led recovery, apart from connecting with a desired gentrified population which may take up residence in the future, bringing Mayfield back to its grand past.

Conclusion

As the city and its symbols are negotiated and contested, the mobilisation of images and identities of place are central to the legitimisation of urban renewal strategies in transitional neighbourhoods (Stevenson 1999). This paper raises questions about the way in which reimagining and placemaking have become combined in contemporary cultural planning strategies. The academic literature provides the theoretical underpinnings of the practice of contemporary placemaking processes suggesting that suburban placemaking is being built on two inherently oppositional goals - ontological security and economic development - each of which are being mobilised in the service of the other. Although notions of the economic are being privileged in placemaking, as
local councils follow a neo-liberalist shift towards entrepreneurial city management, this is not necessarily the case at the level of discourses. The research in Mayfield found that economic discourses are rendered virtually invisible in the placemaking example examined, in favour of discourses of place framed around the heritage of a forgotten past and a sanitised version of industry.

The article argues that the particular heritage focus of this placemaking process obscures working class memories of a past dominated by ambivalence towards industry in general, and BHP in particular. Instead the heritage focus attempts to silence or sanitise this past in a way that positions it as a more marketable form of place identity. This study highlights the competing paradigms of placemaking in which placemakers and planners must select images from the many competing and contradictory stories. One of those, as I have discussed in this article, is heritage. Others include the stories of the contemporary population or that of current cultural activities that are being undertaken. Nevertheless in this case, the Mayfield Mainstreet Committee and Newcastle City Council selected a heritage theme principally because of the suburb’s superb remnant housing stock. Placemaking projects aspire to enhance the sense of belonging and place. However, official programs concentrate on narrow images, often grounded in heritage discourses which discursively and materially may exclude the most socially marginal.

This study suggests that there is a sanitisation of industry and working class struggle through heritage-focused placemaking strategies which are an aspect of cultural planning processes, particularly in deindustrialising transitional cities and suburbs around the world. This study does not lay claim to representativeness, which would be difficult to achieve given the limitations of a case study. The case study method makes it impossible to determine whether the discursive shifts identified in Mayfield are being repeated in other areas; however, this does not diminish the importance of micro studies for illustrating local experiences often obscured in larger analysis. At a time when cultural planning and placemaking in deindustrialising places are privileging heritage narratives, this article critiques this position and suggests there is a need to develop strategies which acknowledge broader definitions of place and address more directly the social and ontological dimensions of place.

Bibliography


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1 I was involved in the production of the Mayfield cultural heritage brochures in my capacity as research assistant at the Cultural Industries and Practices Research Centre (CIPS) at the University of Newcastle which was engaged to produce the brochures.

2 The wealthy and prestigious suburb of Toorak is located in Melbourne, Australia.

3 While BHP may have closed the OneSteel plant (in Mayfield West) and many other industries are still operational in Mayfield and a large new industrial development called Steel River is also being constructed in the suburb.