Souvenirs as Agents of National Image Space Formation

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of the souvenir as a form of vernacular design and its role in shaping, promoting and preserving attitudes that maintain the cultural divide between town and country in Australia. While their role in locating and promoting rural places and sites is an important one, souvenirs also contribute to the pervasive stereotypes and myths that the territory outside of major metropolitan centres is unsophisticated and marginal, known in the national geographic imagination as ‘the bush’. Souvenirs rely on the familiar tropes of national identity such as the stockman, shearer, bushranger and pioneer/settler, however if the dominant narrative presented through tourism is predominantly nostalgic, masculine and retrospective, then it is hardly surprising that the gulf between ‘Sydney and the bush’ continues to permeate the political and cultural landscape in Australia. This paper will use examples of Australian souvenirs to support the argument that souvenirs while often dismissed as tacky, kitsch and ephemeral, instead deserve critical attention in their role in shaping what Meaghan Morris calls the ‘national image space’ (Morris 1988:166).

Keywords: national identity, tourism, souvenirs

Introduction

Souvenirs are the mobile designed artefacts of tourism, mass produced, often anonymously designed and regarded by many as epitomising tackiness, kitsch and ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig 1995). Since the advent of travel and tourism the global circulation of souvenirs and tourism ephemera has extended the reach of distant places, creating visual representations of places both visited and imagined through what John Urry (2002) has famously coined the ‘tourist gaze’. Although studies in sociology, popular culture, cultural studies and cultural geography have examined tourist and travel ephemera, (Morris 1988, Stewart 1993, Urry 2002, Franklin 2010, Knudsen et al 2008, Ramsay 2009, Edensor 2002, Gordon 1986, Morgan and Pritchard 2005, Dann 1996) souvenirs have not attracted focused attention from design researchers. In Australian design research souvenirs have not undergone close scrutiny beyond commentary about their place in public and private collections and in archival records of design history (Downer 2001, Butler 1993, Hetherington 2006, Spearritt 2010, Harper 2010). Despite this, the value of design history perspectives and research methods is recognised by tourism researchers who also call for interdisciplinary perspectives to ‘scrutinise souvenirs as highly significant, but underexplored material objects of contemporary tourism and travel’ (Morgan and Pritchard 2002:47). The fields of popular culture, tourism geography, tourism studies and cultural studies provide a rich interdisciplinary foundation from which to bring key concepts to expand design discourse about souvenirs highlighting the symbolic meanings carried by souvenirs and understanding their place in creating what Stratford refers to as ‘imagined geographies’ (Stratford 1999).

Almquist and Lupton (2010) call on design researchers to embrace both the utilitarian role of objects (affordances) as well as the meanings accrued through their roles and habits of use. In responding to this call, the souvenir represents an ideal object for scrutiny. If analysed from an exclusively design perspective that has a bias towards the aesthetic dimensions of objects, souvenirs are considered mass-produced, cheap, fake, nostalgic and trivial. Their utilitarian value as key rings, tea-spoons, bottle openers, tea-towels, clothing and ashtrays, provide limited and predictable reference points for understanding their affordance value. I argue that by examining the more complex and powerful meanings which are accumulated by souvenirs through the performance of tourism, a set of relations that go beyond the qualities of everyday use and aesthetics are revealed.

Representations of place
A shared concern with representation of place is common to the disciplines of design, tourism and cultural geography and provides a conceptual and material nexus to commence the investigation of souvenirs. Communication designers combine images and text to create a ‘visual’ language of communication. Their lingua franca is representation – how things are depicted – and they are primary agents in the global traffic of images, simulations and virtual reality. Concerns with representation are also shared with the activities of tourism (Ringer 1991, Dann 1996) and cultural geography (Stratford 1999). Oakes argues that tourism, perhaps more than any other business, is based on the production, re-production and re-enforcement of images (Oakes 1993). Representation is fundamental to the construction of places as destinations, and images play a vital role in tourism where many of its products are ‘confidence goods’, purchased in advance of the experience through brochures and advertisements and increasingly through the internet and virtual reality (Gratzer et al 2004), (Liu 2005) (Guttentag 2010). While representation of places through images is central to tourism transactions in advance of the experience, representations of place in the form of souvenirs, also play a part of the post-visit experience. Gordon has constructed a typology of souvenirs which include a group she calls Pictorial – those that rely on images such as postcards, photographs and illustrated books and are fundamentally image-based (1986:140-142). Gordon argues that the power of pictorial souvenirs are enhanced by their travel by mail, sent as messengers from places of heightened, extraordinary experience and received back in the realm of the ordinary (1986:141).

Writing in 1986 Gordon’s conception of pictorial souvenirs as global travelers, is pretty much superseded in an instant by representations of place that are expanding exponentially with the advent of Web 2.0 technologies. The circulation of representations of tourism is no longer controlled through official channels of tourist business and government agencies. Increasingly tourists also post images to social media sites such as Facebook, photo sharing social network sites such as Flickr, and travel consumer review sites such as TripAdvisor. On any day a search engine such as Google Images, will yield a staggering number of results on any travel destination. In June 2012 a search for images of Uluru (also known as Ayer’s Rock) in Central Australia returns about 1,550,000 results in 0.16 seconds, the Taj Mahal about 19,200,000 results in 0.24 seconds. This volume of images signals overwhelmingly that the contemporary tourist experience, both prior to and after the visit, is mediated by and saturated with representations. The contemporary ‘tourist gaze’ includes views afforded through first-hand experience of places as well as the highly constructed and extreme representations available through hyper-real interfaces of virtual reality technology that simulate tourist experiences. While highly stimulating and spectacular environments can be accessed through virtual environments, however it is important to recognize they are also highly fabricated by designers. The fluidity with which contemporary tourists participate in both first hand and mediated experiences, whereby the interface of any number of screens is becoming less noticeable but increasingly necessary in planning and experiencing tourist activities, means that the involvement of designers in constructing these experiences, representations and virtual world is more complex and interventionist than ever before. Therefore close critical attention needs to be paid to designers’ contributions to the fabrications, manipulations and distortions of places that form the fundamental activities of place marketing and destination creation.

Fictive domains and imagined geographies

Souvenirs as artefacts generated by both the official and unofficial activities of tourism, are active agents in the construction of multiple and sometimes conflicting geographies of place, destinations and national identity. Souvenirs are strongly tied to place in that their spatial references allow them to be mapped and geographically located. Several dimensions of the souvenir can be mapped, the places they represent, where they were sourced, where they were produced and where they finally end up. The places they represent are the easiest dimension to accurately identify as most souvenirs of place have ‘greetings from …’ or ‘a souvenir of…’ emblazoned on them, while others literally include maps to represent place (see Figures 1 and 2).
Figure 1: The Snowy Mountains souvenir tea towel. A summit souvenir, Printed in Australia, linen, circa 1960s
The function of souvenirs as mementos makes it possible to locate the place of purchase, however the place of production is less easy to map, and frequently bears no relation to place they represent. Tracing the mobile life of souvenirs and their final destinations poses practical challenges, with some researchers using a process of ‘following’ (Cook 2006) in order to investigate the way souvenirs forge connections between people and places. Geographical mapping locates souvenirs by using a tangible and literal set of co-ordinates. Understanding their relational qualities, requires an acknowledgement of the meanings, symbolic and affective dimensions of souvenirs, a process tied to the cartography of meanings and imagination that recognises their affective dimensions through the meanings people attach to them. Ramsay (2009) acknowledges the relational dimension
of souvenirs arguing that souvenirs become meaningful in ways which are entangled with representations of place, the past and geographical imaginaries. The concept of imagined geographies is particularly useful when considering souvenirs as representations of mythical places, places which are constructed as destinations through the activities of tourism and marketing. Souvenirs as objects of popular culture thus contribute to building shared imagined geographies, a concept cultural geographers use as a way to understand ‘terrains spaces, places, landscapes, and so forth which are imagined, and which may or may not have physical expression’ (Stratford 1999 p171). Souvenirs are in a sense, ambassadors from these mythical places, presenting collages of selected elements or what Roland Barthes would call ‘flashes’ of tourist destinations. Barthes contends that tourists focus on flashes, topics, sights and activities of significance rather than attempting to offer a coherent picture of the place they are visiting (1982:3).

Tourism operates within themes of escape and contrast, breaking with monotony and the routine of work, and projecting the attractiveness and uniqueness of the ‘other’. MacCannell in his seminal work The Tourist (1976) argues that tourism operates by creating myths, whereby tourists desire to recover mythologically senses of wholeness and structure, absent from everyday contemporary life. This can be encountered in the course of a holiday—in a world which is in some way more whole, structured and authentic than the everyday world tourists inhabit in their everyday lives. Myths are captured, created and communicated by the advertising industry, by art directors and designers and manifest themselves in artefacts of travel such as souvenirs, highly fabricated, fictive constructions of place. Souvenirs are part of particular kinds of imagined geographies of travel, or what Susan Stewart refers to as ‘fictive domains’. Her book On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, one of the most influential, poetic and sustained studies of souvenirs, links the search for authentic experiences with authentic objects:

As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgic myth of contact and presence. ‘Authentic’ experience becomes both elusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antique, the pastoral, the exotic, and other fictive domains are articulated. In this process of distancing, the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object, a memory standing outside the self and thus representing both a surplus and lack of significance (Stewart 1993:133).

Stewart’s elusive fictive domains are inscribed on souvenirs, on the mythical landscapes they represent and the stereotypes of places and the people that inhabit them. Elsewhere I have examined specific myths and metaphors have developed around a selection of places in Australia by analysing the designed artefacts of tourism (Woodward 2009). Here I want to examine a particular type of ‘pictorial’ souvenir (Gordon 1986) the Australian souvenir tea towel, especially those produced from the 1960s through to the 1980s in order to observe how attitudes towards places are communicated. As a group these artefacts reflect a particular slice of time which very much reflect European settler culture and the textual associations that gather and circulate about places through tourism. They come from period in time before post colonialism, and the globalization of space and image. Tea towels are of interest because they refreshingly fall outside of, yet often reflect, the highly self-conscious official state and national tourism campaigns. For cultural geographers material artefacts such as these tap into deeply entrenched notions about people and places and importantly provide non-official discourses and representations of place, which may support or contest the dominant messages carried in officially sanctioned place marketing campaigns and policies (Stratford 1999, Edensor 2002). Although not yet tested, their potential power is not to be underestimated, as a benign presence in people’s domestic spaces, mobile messengers of places not visited, constructing utopias, stereotypes and myths.

One of the powerful constructs promoted through the souvenirs is the Australian geographic imaginaries of the city and the country, Sydney and the bush, the coast and the inland. These souvenirs communicate and celebrate places on a local scale; a roadhouse, a town, landmark, product, song, mythical and real characters, all part of the pictorial narrative of national identity, as the examples in the tea towels in figures 3-6 show:
Figure 3. Archer River Roadhouse tea towel, Cape York, Queensland. Printed in Coffs Harbour, Radford screen prints, linen.
Figure 4: Waltzing Matilda souvenir tea towel, Winton, Queensland. Linen
Figure 5: Kelly Gang souvenir tea towel, Glenrowan, Victoria. Designed in Australia by Jonef, linen.
Figure 6: Gemstones of Australia souvenir tea towel, Lightning Ridge, New South Wales. Lamon, designed in Australia, made in Ireland, linen.

Town and Country, Sydney and the Bush

Souvenirs are portable, sometimes short lived and frequently overlooked or not considered as seriously as ‘high’ design or fine art objects (Robertson 2003). These souvenirs fall into the category of objects broadly known as Australiana, which Meaghan Morris contends contribute to the construction of the ‘portable (and competing) mythologies of place’ (Morris 1988, 169-170). From a cultural studies perspective Morris argues that there is a history of ignoring of Australiana and that these objects deserve critical attention for their contribution to what she calls the ‘national image space’ (Morris 1988:166). Whitehouse describes the national image space as:

the public zone in which popular histories, aesthetic symbols, ideas and myths circulate and endure
I propose that souvenirs also share this image space as they give visible form to competing notions of place which contribute to the ideological framing of history and cultural understandings. Stratford reminds us that ‘images or representations are never without context, history, politics, thus representation is always ideological’ (1999:171). An examination of examples of souvenir tea towels from the Australian state of New South Wales (Figures 7 and 8) reveal the ways in which the geographies of tourism are enduringly ‘fixed’ in time and space inhabiting the geographic imaginations and domestic interiors of their owners who may in fact never pay a visit to the places themselves. These designs include snapshots of people and places including stockmen, skiers, cities, skyscrapers, beaches, architecture, landscape fauna and flora. Sydney is depicted via the panoramic gaze and modernist architectural landmarks. The inland settlement of Broken Hill is communicated by images of progress, mining and agriculture, engineering feats, war heroes and civic pride. Rather than a single coherent picture they form ‘flashes’ representing the two geographic imaginaries of the colloquial phrase ‘Sydney or the bush’.
Figure 7: Broken Hill, The Silver City souvenir tea towel, New South Wales. A Summit souvenir printed in Australia, linen.
While their role in locating and promoting rural places and sites is an important one, souvenirs also contribute to the pervasive stereotypes and myths that the territory outside of major metropolitan centres is unsophisticated and marginal, known in the national geographic imagination as ‘the bush’. Colloquially the term ‘the bush’ has come to refer to any region outside of the major metropolitan cities. Attitudes towards ‘the bush’ are often couched in pejorative terms, and reflect deeply entrenched assumptions that these areas are marginal and unsophisticated (Gibson 2010:3). Souvenirs rely on the familiar tropes of national identity such as the stockman, shearer, bushranger and pioneer, settler, however if the dominant narrative presented through tourism is predominantly nostalgic, masculine and retrospective, then it is hardly surprising that the gulf between ‘Sydney and the bush’ continues to permeate the political and cultural landscape in Australia. Whitehouse argues there is a need for critical design histories that look beyond the construction of national identities, to the legacy of design’s
involvement in the construction of history and the process of colonisation, which involve the shaping a utopian visual history for white Australians which also obscured and denied their violent treatment of indigenous Australians (Whitehouse 2007). Similarly this paper calls for a more critical examination of the legacy of the artefacts of tourism and also designer’s role in the construction of pervasive stereotypes of town and country, inland and coast, or in Australian vernacular the city and the ‘bush’. I have argued that while souvenirs accumulate complex and powerful meanings through the performance of tourism, and are significant artefacts of communication contributing to national imagined geographies. It is time for a deeper examination of historic and contemporary souvenirs to better understand their seemingly benign role in perpetuating pervasive stereotypes of rural, country and inland life in Australia.

References


**About the author**

Margaret Woodward is Associate Professor of Design and Associate Dean (Research) Research in the Faculty of Arts at Charles Sturt University, Australia. She is co-founder of the Creative Regions Lab at Charles Sturt University and a researcher in regional creative industries. In 2012, Margaret was a Research fellow in Creative Industries at Charles Sturt University and her ongoing research in *Agritivity*, interpretation design and Living Labs is redefining creative industries in regional Australia. A national leader in these emerging fields, her interdisciplinary research connects researchers in key fields of design, heritage interpretation, geography, tourism and agriculture. Through her creative practice, Margaret explores culture iconography through designed artefacts such as tourist ephemera, souvenirs and heritage interpretation centres.