Overlapping dialogues: The role of interpretation design in communicating Australia’s natural and cultural heritage

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature: ...........................................

Date: ...........................................
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Abstract

This research investigates the development of interpretation design in Australia during the period 1980 – 2006, and its role in presenting natural and cultural heritage to audiences in visitor settings. It establishes Australian interpretation design at the intersection of two professional fields, interpretation and design. Where heritage interpretation originates from a background of spoken language, through narrative and storytelling, graphic and communication design have origins in visual language, communicated through images and text. This research positions interpretation design as a new field within design and traces its emergence as a hybrid of spoken and visual traditions of communication.

The study gives visibility to this previously undocumented and un-theorised hybrid field of design and creates a thematic conceptual framework within which to locate its historical, conceptual and practical origins. In substantiating interpretation design as a new field, three avenues of enquiry were considered; documentation and analysis of the visual artefacts of interpretation design, locating interpretation design in a wider conceptual and professional context through literature reviews, and consultation with designers in order to understand the challenges and problems in this new mode of design. Further, to facilitate designers to continue to work effectively in highly collaborative, complex and cross-disciplinary professional environments a conceptual collaborative tool was developed for use by interpretation design project teams. The conceptual tool integrates the theoretical and practical findings from this research and is based on a pattern language approach first developed by Christopher Alexander et al (1977).

The research is conducted from a design perspective, and integrates theoretical and professional knowledge from related fields into interpretation design practice. Through a progressively widening interrogation of the literature, professional contexts, and designed artefacts of interpretation design, this new area of design is examined from a number of perspectives, building up a multi-faceted framework for understanding its historical, conceptual and practical dimensions. A Grounded Theory methodology was adapted to develop the theoretical framework of this study and to gather a wide range of relevant data. The practical outcome of the research was developed using a Pattern Language methodology originating from a problem-based design approach in architecture (Alexander et al 1977) and underpinned the interpretation of data.

Conclusions of the research found that despite invisibility within the discourse of Australian design, designers working in this specialised field of practice have, since the early 1980s, contributed to projects which shape ideas, attitudes and visual representations of natural and cultural heritage in Australia’s most widely visited and valued sites. Designer’s practice is identified as part of an ongoing process of both contributing to Australian cultural narrative and being influenced by the legacy of culture. Contemporary interpretation design is highly cross-disciplinary and collaborative, characterised by a differentiated professional practice with dispersed networks of stakeholders. While interpretation design is located within a larger framework of the professional practice of interpretation, there exists many opportunities to enrich and better inform designers by integrating wider pools of knowledge that intersect the activities of interpretation, including education, tourism, visitor studies and psychology.
Table of contents

Acknowledgements iii
Abstract iv
Table of contents v

PART ONE

Chapter 1 – Introduction 1
  1.0 Overview of the study 1
  1.0.1 Background 1
  1.0.2 Scope of the study 3
  1.0.3 Australian context 3
  1.1 Research framework 4
    1.1.1 Aims and objectives 4
    1.1.2 Research motivations and questions 5
    1.1.3 Research methodology 6
    1.1.4 Thematic conceptual framework 7
    1.1.5 Significance of the study 8
  1.2 Thesis structure 9

Chapter 2 – Theoretical perspectives and research methods 10
  2.0 Introduction 10
  2.1 Design theory and research 10
  2.2 Theoretical framework 11
    2.2.1 Overview 11
    2.2.2 Theoretical assumptions 11
    2.2.3 Methodological approaches 13
  2.3 Research Methods 19
    2.3.1 Research process 19
    2.3.2 Literature reviews and thematic development 19
    2.3.3 Public discourse 20
    2.3.4 Designer’s survey 21
    2.3.5 Artefact documentation and analysis 22
    2.3.6 Archival texts 22
    2.3.7 Sites 23
  2.4 Summary – Theoretical perspectives and research methods 23

Chapter 3 – Literature Review – interpretation and design 24
  3.0 Literature review interpretation 24
  3.0.1 Origins of interpretation literature 24
    3.0.2 Practice-based literature 25
    3.0.3 Research-based literature 26
    3.0.4 Australian Literature 26
  3.1 Issues in interpretation 27
    3.1.1 The rise of ecotourism environmental issues 28
    3.1.2 Emotive issues and contested heritage 29
  3.2 Literature on interpretation design 30
  3.3 Literature review Design 31
    3.3.1 Design – definitions and keywords 32
    3.3.2 Shifts in design 33
  3.4 Design discourse 34
    3.4.1 Social dimensions of graphic and communication design 35
    3.4.2 Hybrid areas of design 36
    3.4.3 Collaboration in design 37
    3.4.4 ‘Wicked’ and second generation problems 39
    3.4.5 Australian graphic design 39
  3.5 Summary: literature review interpretation and design 41
PART TWO

Chapter 4 – The professional context – design

4.0 Introduction
4.1 Defining the field of graphic design
4.1.1 Origins of graphic design
4.1.2 Technological challenges to graphic design
4.1.3 Shifts in naming – graphic design to communication design
4.2 Transformations in graphic design
4.2.1 Shift from service to knowledge economy
4.2.2 From objects to systems
4.2.3 From linear to complex problems
4.2.4 Summary of shifts
4.3 Historical context 1980 – 2006
4.3.1 The postmodernisation of design practice
4.3.2 Australian graphic design practice
4.3.3 Graphic design’s contribution to discourse about national identity
4.4 Summary – The professional context – design

Chapter 5 – The professional context – interpretation

5.0 Introduction
5.1 Defining interpretation
5.1.1 Origins of heritage interpretation
5.1.2 Heritage interpretation – definitions
5.2 Contemporary practice of interpretation
5.2.1 Objectives and motivations for interpretation
5.2.2 Australian site interpretation
5.3 Regulatory framework of interpretation
5.3.1 Protected areas
5.3.2 Communication mandates
5.3.3 Interpretation and education programmes
5.4 Summary – The professional context – interpretation

Chapter 6 – Interpretation design

6.0 Introduction
6.1 Features of interpretation design
6.1.1 Collaborative and complex
6.1.2 Human-centred approach
6.1.3 Integration of interpretation and information
6.2 Issues in Australian interpretation design
6.2.1 Indigenous heritage and contested histories
6.2.2 Emotive issues and ‘hot’ interpretation
6.2.3 Ecotourism and environmental issues
6.3 The practice of interpretation design
6.3.1 Design stages
6.3.2 Design process
6.3.3 Interpretation designer’s workplace
6.4 Summary – Interpretation design
6.4.1 – Interpretation design project summary

Chapter 7 – The professional context – tourism

7.0 Introduction
7.1 Tourism research
7.2 Tourism – theoretical concepts
7.2.1 The tourist gaze
7.2.2 Myth
7.2.3 Authenticity
7.3 Tourist profiles
7.3.1 The ‘post-tourist’
7.3.2 Ecotourists and nature-based tourism
7.4 Tourism and interpretation design
  7.4.1 Tourist markers and artefacts of tourism 91
  7.4.2 Interpretation and the tourist gaze 92
  7.4.3 Representations and substitutions of place 93
7.5 Summary – Tourism 94

Chapter 8 – The conceptual context 96
8.0 Introduction 96
8.1 Nature
  8.1.1 Definitions - Natural and cultural heritage 97
  8.1.2 Deconstructing nature and culture 99
8.2 Wilderness
  8.2.1 Wilderness – contemporary definitions 104
8.3 Landscape
  8.3.1 Landscape and interpretation 107
  8.3.2 Semiotics and landscape 109
8.4 Place
8.5 Summary – The conceptual context 111

PART THREE 112
Chapter 9 --Tourism ephemera 113
9.0 Introduction 113
9.1 Tourism artefact analysis
  9.1.1 Word maps 128
  9.1.2 Tourism artefact design 128
  9.1.3 Scenery to lifestyle 131
  9.1.4 Comparisons with elsewhere 131
  9.1.5 Tasmania as a resort 131
  9.1.6 Wilderness branding 132
9.2 Summary – Tourism ephemera 133

Chapter 10 – Interpretation design: site visits and case studies 134
10.0 Introduction 134
10.1 Site Visits 134
10.2 Case studies 135
10.3 Summary – site visits and case studies 153

Chapter 11 – Perspectives of interpretation designers 155
11.0 Introduction 155
11.1 Findings from designer’s survey
  11.1.1 Designer’s survey 155
  11.1.2 Interpretation designers and their projects 156
11.2 Interpretation designers issues
  11.2.1 Complexity and the interdisciplinary nature of interpretation projects 158
  11.2.2 Experience of collaboration 159
  11.2.3 Challenging aspects of interpretation projects 160
  11.2.4 Skills needed for interpretation projects 160
  11.2.5 Design management and project management 161
  11.2.6 Ideological commitment 162
11.3 Summary – designer’s perspective 163
List of images

Image 1: Text from Jay Arthur's Tangled Destinies exhibit at the National Museum of Australia. 101
Image 2: Peter Dombrovskis Rock Island Bend, Franklin River, South West Tasmania 102
Image 3: Nambung National Park – Pinnacles Desert, Western Australia. 108
Image 4: Tasmanian Tourism wordmap 1900s – 2000 126
Image 5: Tasmanian Tourism wordmap 1900s – 1950 127
Image 6: Tasmanian Tourism wordmap 1960s – 2000 127
Image 7: Tourism wordmap 1920s – 1930s detail. 128
Image 8: The Illustrated Guide to Tasmania 1900. Image source: State Library of Tasmania 129
Image 9: (left) Picturesque Tasmania July 1921. Image source: State Library of Tasmania. 129
Image 12: Floor Plan Bowali Visitor Centre, Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory, Australia. 135
Image 13: Bowali Visitor Centre, Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory, Australia. 136
Image 14: Reg Mombassa, Alone in the Bush, Federation Tapestry, Melbourne Museum. 138
Image 15: Martin Sharp, Celebrations 2001, Federation Tapestry, Melbourne Museum. 139
Image 16: Leeawaleena – Lake St Clair. 140
Image 17: Lake St Clair visitor centre. 140
Image 18: The fibre sculpture, Lake St Clair Visitor Centre, artists: Muriel Maynard, Lola Greeno and Vicki West 142
Image 19: Larmairremener tabelti cultural walk. 142
Image 20: Tourists in front of the penitentiary building, Port Arthur Historic Site, Tasmania. 145
Image 21: Tourists outside church, Port Arthur Historic Site, Tasmania. 145
Image 22: Anne Ferran, 'In the ground, on the air’, 2006, Port Arthur Project 2007 146
Image 23: Lola Greeno and Vicki West,’ Premaydena’, Port Arthur Project 2007 146
Image 24: Cataract Gorge, Launceston, Tasmania 148
Image 25: Cliff Grounds, Launceston Tasmania 148
Image 26: James Boag’s beer packaging 150
Image 27: Cataract Gorge, Launceston, Tasmania 150
Image 28: Strahan Wharf Centre, Strahan Tasmania 151
List of figures

Figure 1: Thematic contexts of interpretation design 7
Figure 2: Overview of research process 16
Figure 3: Overview of Grounded Theory and Pattern Language methodological approaches 18
Figure 4: The professional context of interpretation design 42
Figure 5: The professional context – design 43
Figure 6: The professional context – interpretation 59
Figure 7: Interpretation Design Process Map 80
Figure 8: The professional context – tourism 86
Figure 9: The conceptual context of interpretation design for natural heritage 96
Figure 10: Part Three – research process 112
Figure 11: Part Four – research process 165
Figure 12: The patterns within the language are connected to each other through an overlapping network structure 184
Figure 13: Interpretation Design Pattern Language Layout 192
List of tables

Table 1: A summary of shifts in graphic design 49
Table 2: Postmodernisation of design adapted from Larry Solomon chart 53
Table 3: Definitions of interpretation currently in use 62
Table 4: Interpretation Project Stages 78
Table 5: Tasmaniana Collection Decade:1900s 115
Table 6: Tasmaniana Collection Decade:1910s 116
Table 7: Tasmaniana Collection Decade:1920s 117
Table 8: Tasmaniana Collection Decade:1930s 118
Table 9: Tasmaniana Collection Decade:1940s 119
Table 10: Tasmaniana Collection Decade:1950s 120
Table 11: Tasmaniana Collection Decade:1960s 121
Table 12: Tasmaniana Collection Decade:1970s 122
Table 13: Tasmaniana Collection Decade:1980s 123
Table 14: Tasmaniana Collection Decade:1990s 124
Table 15: Tasmaniana Collection Decade:2000s 125
Table 16: Designers and interpretation projects 157
Table 17: Differences between captive and non captive audiences (Ham 1992, 7). 168
Table 18: Pattern 1 Control. 172
Table 19: Pattern 2 Comfort 173
Table 20: Pattern 3 Personal connection 174
Table 21: Pattern 4 Challenge and curiosity 174
Table 22: Pattern 5 Participation and interaction 175
Table 23: Pattern 6 Variety and multi-sensory. 176
Table 24: Pattern 7 Flow and quiet fascination. 176