

DESIGNING THE INTERPRETATION INTERFACE: Quality communication design as an aspect of visitor experience in nature-based tourism

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Abstract

The practice of communication design gives visual form to the interpretation or presentation of a place to tourists and visitors. Research shows that interpretation can lead visitors to develop an appreciation towards a place, through gaining knowledge, understanding and empathy for that place (Stewart et al 1998). The communication of information and ideas through interpretation is critical in fostering a positive attitude of stewardship and protection towards a place, which can also lead to sustainability of the environment and the host community (Moscardo 1999).

Given that interpretive information can affect visitors' knowledge, attitudes, behaviour and experience in tourist settings, it is critical that the designed interface that delivers this information communicates successfully and meaningfully with visitors.

The paper focuses on three Tasmanian tourism sites that represent different interpretive perspectives, discussed here as 'Romantic', 'postmodern' and collaborative. The author examines Urry's theory of the 'tourist gaze' in relation to interpretation (Urry 2002), and presents deliberate strategies employed by artists, designers and interpretation professionals to engage audiences in multi-sensory ways, taking interpretation in natural places beyond a superficial visual experience towards a deeper, more meaningful engagement with issues, ideas and attitudes.

Ideas of nature, wilderness and landscape have been formed and communicated over time through text and image, and by the landscape itself. Images, words and, this article will argue, the designed interface of interpretation help form people's understanding, empathy for and behaviour in natural places. Communication design gives visual form to the interpretation or presentation of a place to visitors. This paper examines the way communication design mediates between places and visitors, with specific reference to three Tasmanian sites: Cataract Gorge, Strahan Visitor Centre and Leeawaleena-Lake St Clair.

Site interpretation

In museum, tourism and heritage usage, 'interpretation' is the umbrella term given to the communication activity in visitor centres and museums. Interpretation used in this context aims to inform, reveal meaning and to provoke questions from an audience about a particular place or object (Tilden 1977). Site interpretation is concerned with communicating concepts of place to visitors *in situ*. It is often concentrated in tourism sites such as national park visitor centres, and walking and driving trails. Interpretation is far from a recent phenomenon; instead, it is part of a long tradition of storytelling, encouraging the appreciation and understanding of place. Stewart et

al (1998) trace the relationship between place and interpretation back to ancient Greece and the role of the *periegete*, who was:

[a]n expert local guide who led people around, pointed out notable sights, described the local rituals, explained customs, and told traditional stories of historical and mythical events associated with the place. A written commentary describing a place, a travel guide was known as a *periegesis*. No *periegesis* have survived but the sentiment of those times has, and is echoed in the modern day definitions of interpretation (1998, p. 257).

Interpretation design

Interpretation design—the way in which messages are communicated through a visual interface in interpretive settings—is the focus of this paper. The designed interface includes the media itself (print, video, audio, digital) as well as the messages presented via this media. When engaged in interpretation projects, graphic designers and communication designers work with a team of other professionals, including historians, writers, educators, scientists, architects, fabricators and artists. In response to a client's brief, designers devise a communication strategy which includes recommendations about the most appropriate media to convey a given message. This media may include, but are not limited to, two-dimensional signs, brochures and panels; three-dimensional models, sculptures and installations; audiovisual soundtracks; multimedia presentations; interactive computer devices; walks; talks; dramas; and in some cases, even scents. Interpretation design however is not limited to media choice and production. The designer's primary task is to give visual form to the raw material that already exists as ideas, texts, concepts, photographs, artefacts, documents and objects. Central to a designer's brief is a focus on messages, and finding strategies to effectively communicate these messages with audiences.

It has been well argued by design writers Bonsiepe (1965), Kinross (1989) and Robertson (2003) that there is no such thing as 'pure information'; neutral or value-free design, and that every symbol and design decision expresses myriad values (Robertson 2003, p. 8). When visiting interpretive sites, where concentrated information about complex concepts such as wilderness, nature, ecology and history are to be communicated, it is important to identify not only which stories are being told, but also to analyse how communication design itself frames and constructs messages. Given the ubiquitous reach of design into everyday life (through advertising, packaging, signs, publications and so on) and the public's resulting familiarity with design codes and conventions, the actual interface of design can appear transparent. However, although frequently unacknowledged, designers along with image-makers and writers are also active participants in constructing and contributing to ideas about nature, landscape and the environment.

Words, images and place

Jay Arthur claims that 'to know a landscape is to know it through the ideas that inform our response to it' (2001a, p. 211). In describing herself as a 'lexical cartographer' she draws attention to the ways in which ideas about landscape are transmitted through language. Using tourist brochures, magazine articles, newspaper reports, speeches and government documents, she gathers words that have accumulated around particular places, arguing that different 'maps' can be created depending on the lexicon used to describe a place. Arthur's lexical map of Lake

Pedder demonstrates the power of words to describe the diverse constructions that surrounded the passionate debate over the future of the lake in the 1960s. Following are the different ‘lexical constructions’ of the lake as seen through the eyes of developers, conservationists, bushwalkers and the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission:

Accessible to all
Ecological tragedy
Watery grave
Engineering marvel
Man-made pond
Flooding a paradise
Hiding what was given in trust
Spectacular trout fishing
Magnificent views
Design stroke of genius
Unique ecosystem
200 or so lakes quite as pretty
Natural energy source
Jewel of the south-west
Irreplaceable species
Glacial outwash
Enchanted shore
Worthless wilderness (Arthur 2001b)

‘Reading’ these maps through text demonstrates the power of language to construct and present places quite differently. If language alone has the capacity to create discernibly different views of a place, what happens when language is extended by or combined with images to communicate about place? In his article ‘The photo that changed us’, Tim Bonyhady (1996) pays tribute to Peter Dombrovskis, and to the political and imaginative potency of his photograph *Rock Island Bend* when used by the Wilderness Society in the lead-up to the 1983 Federal election. Bonyhady argues that this single image was pivotal in creating public interest in saving the Franklin River, influencing the declaration of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area in 1982 and a change of Government.

In both examples, Arthur’s text and Dombrovskis’ image required the participation of a designer to communicate with the intended audience. Arthur’s lexical map is part of a National Museum of Australia exhibit called *Tangled Destinies*, which explores the changing understandings of place. Here an exhibition designer has made decisions about the text’s placement, font, size, weight, spacing and colour in order to communicate most effectively with the audience. All these decisions have an impact on how the message is transmitted and received. Similarly Peter Dombrovskis’ image did not reach the masses unassisted: it was incorporated into a campaign consisting of posters, advertisements, magazine covers, how-to-vote cards and even sheet music. These items are all artefacts of design and, despite being ephemeral, are wide-reaching in their impact.

Such artefacts are relatively traditional and straightforward forms of communication design. In Tasmania the expansion of nature-based tourism has seen a growth in interpretive sites such as visitor centres and trails. In contrast to the examples above, these interpretation design projects are complex, multi-disciplinary and team-based, are usually large in scale, and employ a diverse range of media. The following discussion and case studies focus on how these complex communication design projects communicate about place.

Interpretation, tourism and Romanticism

Interpretive planner Don Aldridge (1989) describes interpretation as a Romantic pursuit, with its emphasis on natural forms, landscape, beauty, emotion and the subjective experience. Historically defined as the period 1798–1832, the Romantic Movement's influence on the arts and thought in Europe and North America extended well into the latter half of the nineteenth century. Romanticism emphasised poetic mystery, emotional intensity and individual hedonistic expression. This emotional intensity extended to the natural world, and an appreciation for impressive scenery and nature developed. Nature was regarded as not only providing refuge from industrialisation and urbanisation, but as having intrinsic value independent of human use (Mendel 1999, p. 276).

The development of national parks and the activities of interpretation have links with values originating from Romantic Movement. According to sociologist John Urry, Romanticism was responsible for the development of scenic tourism where nature of all sorts came to be widely regarded as scenery, views, and perceptual sensation, giving rise to a more positive attitude towards 'wilderness' (2000, p. 20). Urry developed the notion of 'the tourist gaze', where the visual sense is privileged over the other senses in the tourist experience. One form of the tourist gaze is the 'romantic gaze', that:

involves further quests for new objects of the solitary gaze, the deserted beach, the empty hilltop, the uninhabited forest, the uncontaminated mountain stream and so on. Notions of the romantic gaze are endlessly used in marketing and advertising tourist sites especially within the 'west' (2002, p. 150).

Urry argues that travel, tourism and photography led to a prioritising of the visual sense and a separation from other senses, such as touch, smell and hearing. Photography and other new technologies allowed the gaze to be reproduced and circulated via postcards, guidebooks, photographs, arcades, dioramas, mirrors and plate-glass windows (2002, p. 148).

Tourism and its visual by-products became the driver for the communication interface we now associate not only with tourism but also with interpretation. Resonances of the Romantic view of nature and wilderness, first used two centuries ago, are still evident in contemporary language, communication and imagery used in interpretation of the natural environment, including interpretation in modern-day Australian national parks, reserves and recreation areas. The interpretive display at the Cataract Gorge in Launceston, Tasmania, illustrates this point.

Case study: Cataract Gorge and Cliff Grounds, Launceston, Tasmania



Figure 1 Left and right, Cataract Gorge and Cliff Grounds, Launceston, Tasmania
Images:the author

Cataract Gorge was developed in the nineteenth century as a recreation place for the residents of Launceston. With its awesome cliffs, a Victorian teahouse (complete with peacocks), winding paths, bridges and lookouts with opportunities for solitary vistas and personal reflection, the landscape can also be ‘read’ as a cultural artefact preserved intact from an era when the influence of Romanticism was widespread. The Gorge also presents Romanticism’s visual counterpart, the aesthetic code of the ‘picturesque’ devised by William Gilpin¹. The contemplation of nature is available from a distance without having to clamber along the river rocks and get wet or dirty, thanks to the nineteenth-century design of paths and structures reclaimed from the ‘wilderness’ of the river gorge.

The Romantic sentiments and ideals that underpin the design of the Gorge as a recreation space have been reinforced and perpetuated by the language used to describe the site. A text written in 1900 for *The Cyclopaedia of Tasmania* envisages the future value of the Gorge as a tourist site, and is expressed in Romantic terms:

¹ William Gilpin (1724–1804) used the term ‘picturesque’ to mean ‘expressive of a peculiar kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture’. Gilpin’s ideas arose from an increased interest in the natural world during the eighteenth century, especially as part of recreational and educational travel, and represented the convergence of travel and artistic recreation. Gilpin’s series of illustrated tour books in the 1790s codified picturesque landscape as irregular in line, rough and rugged in texture, intricate in detail, and sharply contrasting in light and shadow.

All along the path every available gully and nook has been planted with tree ferns, natives and other shrubs. In all available nooks have been placed rustic seats, and where there has been space on the path or perched up on risky heights, reached by rough stone steps, are rustic retreats much appreciated in the heat of summer. The park itself is beautifully laid out, and there is an extensive lawn from which hundreds are enabled to listen to sweet music from the bands which play in the pavilion close by during the summer months ... The Cataract Cliff Grounds were handed over to the Launceston Municipal council on 1st March 1898, and they are doing what they can to make them, if possible more attractive still. The opening up of the Cataract Gorge has already done much to attract tourists to Launceston, and if well looked after and made popular will prove a veritable mine of wealth to the city (1900, pp. 53–54).

More than one hundred years later, the contemporary text forming part of the current interpretive display at the Gorge echoes a similar Romantic perspective:

Welcome to the Cataract Gorge Reserve, a place filled with stories and memories of our recent and distant past. Here nature and beauty combines with examples of engineering resourcefulness and community vision to create a place of drama, romance and respite. The First Basin on the Southern Side is an open area, surrounded by bushland. It is Launceston's 'beach'. In contrast, the shady northern side named the Cliff Grounds is a Victorian Garden where wilderness is exaggerated with ferns and exotic plants where 'nature is enhanced by art' (Launceston City Council, 2004).

References to Romantic themes—and Urry's notion of the 'romantic gaze'—can be found in both texts, such as the theme of nature providing a respite from the city; identification with the subjective moods of nature; and the opportunity for solitary reflection. The Gorge texts are an example of how ideas about place are communicated and transmitted through language constructs used over and over again, even in the most recent site interpretation. This particular Romantic vision, also reinforced through the design of the interpretation panels at the Gorge, similarly finds expression in other forms of design. For example, the label on the export beer produced by the local Boag's brewery features a vista of the Gorge typical of Urry's 'romantic gaze'. The image, an aged nineteenth century illustration with a solitary view, sells beer and markets the local tourist site while perpetuating an essentially Romantic vision of nature.

Interpretation: going beyond the tourist gaze

In a number of ways it is reasonable to assume that Urry's notion of the 'tourist gaze' and in particular the 'romantic gaze' is a stance towards natural places automatically adopted by visitors. The visual sense has continued to dominate the arenas of tourism and travel and communication within it. The tourist gaze serves many of the interests of interpretation, which aims to foster a heightened perceptual sensitivity to landscapes and place in order to encourage a protective attitude by its visitors. Interpretation relies on and perpetuates characteristics of the tourist gaze in order to communicate with its audience. Interpretation draws attention to the special and extraordinary features of a place, often by highlighting the contrast between urban and natural places. It encourages lingering and contemplation through revelation, provocation and questioning (in the language of Tilden), and also mindfulness, quiet fascination, flow and restoration (Moscardo 1996, Kaplan et al 1998, Falk & Dierking 1992). Museum studies research

has found that in interpretive settings, people have aesthetic, spiritual and ‘flow’, as well as learning, experiences (Hein 2000). These descriptions resonate with Romantic values and themes; i.e. emotional intensity, poetic mystery and a semi-spiritual connection with nature. Further, interpretation perpetuates characteristics of the tourist gaze by encouraging visitors to capture aspects of the place through the purchase of publications, postcards and other souvenirs.

Despite these similarities, there are also aspects of site interpretation that operate contrary to the tourist gaze. Some interpretive sites developed by designers can be analysed as presenting interfaces framed by other philosophical perspectives; building on and extending Urry’s notion by encouraging multi-sensory engagement, rather than privileging the visual sense. Designers work with interpreters to connect visitors with their surroundings through first-hand experiences of touch, smell, sound and taste. Research in museum studies has found that multi-sensory exhibits produce longer viewing times (Paterson & Bitgood 1998), lead to learning (Perry 1992) and permit greater access to information (Hein 2000). Examples of multi-sensory approaches in national parks include guided walks (especially night walks where visibility is reduced), touching exhibits and objects, listening to the local soundscape or audio presentations, and tasting and smelling plants.

Designers and artists’ collaborations

Artists working in collaboration with interpreters and designers offer strategies that engage sense, emotion and imagination to understand places. Utilising arts approaches in interpretation also offers multi-sensory ways of understanding places. Jan Dungey writes:

The enquiring body and the enquiring senses are as important as the enquiring mind, and the arts offer different ways of developing the enquiring senses; different approaches to looking, listening to, touching and knowing places. Arts approaches encourage different ways of ‘sensing’ places and understanding sensory information. (1992, p. 230)

Multi-sensory interpretation allows tourists to engage with place in a richer and deeper way than that proposed by Urry. Where the tourist gaze creates a visual aestheticising of the world, distancing the tourist, interpretation that deliberately engages its audience in an experiential or multi-sensory way strives to engage people with issues and ideas, not just camera superficiality.

The relationship between artists and the natural and cultural environment has always been strong in Tasmania. Since 1997 the Department of Tourism, Parks, Heritage and the Arts has actively fostered this relationship, offering emerging artists ‘Wilderness Residencies’ in national parks. Designers working on visitor centre projects have successfully collaborated with artists to communicate about place, history and ideas through their unique and particular language. Examples of such projects are the visitor centres at Strahan, Freycinet, Hastings Caves and Lake St Clair. Lynda Warner, designer for the Strahan Visitor Centre, speaks of the benefits in using artists in such projects:

Most obviously the role of an artist can lead to a different level of interpretation where another stimulus of thought can operate. Evoking a visitor into another way of ‘reading’

in conjunction with the more conventional approach of the written word can add an exciting dimension to a project (Warner 2003).

Similarly, in writing about art in public places David Cranswick advocates the ability artists have to connect people with places:

The inclusion of artists in multimedia disciplinary teams moves way beyond the public sculpture tradition of the 'object in space' to a deeper level that can inject another dimension into a project which takes it beyond existing design practice (1998, p. 47).

The Strahan Visitor Centre and the indigenous exhibit and cultural trail at Leeawalweena (Lake St Clair) can be used as examples to elaborate on particular multi-disciplinary, multi-sensory design approaches to site interpretation.

Case study: Strahan Visitor Centre, Strahan, Tasmania



Figure 2 Left and right, Strahan Visitor Centre, Tasmania
Images: the author

Jennifer Garton-Smith argues that the postmodern inclusion of multiple voices and stories in heritage spaces, such as visitor centres, breaks down the authoritarian single point of view and is more focussed on the audience. She writes:

The established boundaries of constructions of the past are being broken, as heritage spaces, especially popular culture spaces, adopt strategies such as juxtaposing different

stories and giving the visitor an opportunity to speak. The result is a rich compilation of texts (1999, p. 140).

‘A rich compilation of texts’ is an apt description of the Strahan Visitor Centre on Tasmania’s west coast. Often described as ‘an ark with a novel inside’ (Robinson 1994, p. 68), the design of the Visitor Centre and its postmodernist juxtaposition of media, text, stories, images and sculptures reflect the complex debates and competing viewpoints that surround Tasmania’s west coast. Designer Lynda Warner explains:

...the building itself is an expression of the ongoing conflict between that natural and the industrial that is so characteristic of the south west. Its almost violent polarities; steel, wood, rock, glass, corrugated iron, convey a sense that the Centre itself is not seeking to be some New Age touchie feelie building in which one can become at one with the wilderness, but rather a building that is seeking to understand and explore some of the great conflicts that have shaped the area—physically, intellectually, aesthetically (Warner 1999).

Warner describes how the collaboration between herself and co-designer Stephen Goddard, writer Richard Flanagan and architect Robert Morris-Nunn was important in extending communication:

Richard did not want to repeat the old myths, but to provoke and challenge the visitor and get them to rethink all that they normally take for granted. All the major and minor fixtures were all designed to tell a story, so even if a visitor wasn’t interested in reading the words they would still understand what they were saying. In other words the interpretation was embedded in the building fabric (1999).

Rather than shy away from these often literal confrontations in history, this multidisciplinary team have skilfully and deliberately chosen to communicate in a way that breaks down the single authoritarian viewpoint and gives voice to multiple stories. Instead of perpetuating the (often passive) tourist gaze, such interpretation demands that visitors actively confront complex and contradictory issues.

Case study: Leeawaleena-Lake St Clair, Tasmania



Figure 3 Left, Leeawaleena-Lake St Clair, Tasmania
Right, *The fibre sculpture*, Lake St Clair Visitor Centre, artists: Muriel Maynard, Lola Greeno and Vicki West
Images:the author

Lake St Clair, known as Leeawaleena to Aboriginal people, is the site of an interpretation project with the theme of indigenous connection to country. The Leeawaleena Aboriginal Cultural Walk in Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park is a collaboration between designer Julie Hawkins, artist and interpretation officer Julie Gough and indigenous artists Muriel Maynard, Lola Greeno and Vicki West. Jointly developed by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council and the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, it arose to address the lack of Aboriginal interpretation in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.

The project is an interconnected interpretation strategy that includes a fibre sculpture and woven basket, an interpretive bushwalk, a brochure, and text panels. The fibre sculpture, housed in the Visitor Centre, is the central vehicle for making metaphorical and material connections between inside and outside, past and present, people and land. The following extracts from the artist's brief summarise the rationale for the sculpture:

The central theme proposed for Lake St Clair Visitor's Centre is that of indigenous connection to country. This theme strongly recognises and demonstrates the continuing relationship with the land by indigenous Tasmanians over many tens of thousands of years. The basis of our ongoing relationship with the land is that people and land are intertwined together. One means of expressing this physical and spiritual interconnectedness at Lake St Clair Visitor Centre is through the hands of fibre artists (Gough, 2000).

The three indigenous artists made the work in response to a residency at Leeawaleena in 2000. The woven sculpture pays respect to the nine Aboriginal Nations of Tasmania, and physically affirms the continuation of indigenous culture—in spite of the persistent European version of history that describes Tasmanian Aboriginal culture as having disappeared with the death of Truganini in 1876. Vicki West speaks of how she as an artist responds to place and history:

My work is a way of retelling history from our perspectives—to dispel the myth that we are not here. I use my artwork to celebrate past, present and future through connection to place (Parks and Wildlife Service Tasmania 2001).

Audience attention is drawn to the thoughts and commentary of the indigenous artists, documented in the brochure and the panel text, bringing their involvement and process to the fore. This project deliberately (and literally) weaves the information held inside the Visitor Centre with the natural environment outside, encouraging visitors to make that connection with the land themselves, and reinforcing the message of the indigenous connection with country. Richard Hale, Visitor Services Ranger at Leeawaleena-Lake St Clair, observes how the fibre sculpture and other interpretive elements of the project fit together for visitors:

I like to think that there are visitors going ‘wow’ inside when they see it, when they read the brochure and the signs, go on the walk and put the whole thing together. It’s the only interpretative project that people have talked to me about at a deep emotional level, and talked about crying when they’ve been along the walk (Hale 2004).

Conclusions

The multi-sensory, arts-based interpretive strategy used for the Leeawaleena Aboriginal Cultural Walk demonstrates how intelligent and sensitive interpretive design can both convey and enhance a message. Hale’s description of a visitor’s profound response to the project also confirms the thought that modern tourists, especially those seeking a Greener, more educative experience of eco-tourism, have responses that go beyond Urry’s notion of the ‘tourist gaze’. While it is possible to identify how this concept has served and formed tourism and interpretation in the past, the deliberate strategies and collaborations between interpreters, designers and artists engage audiences on levels that go beyond camera superficiality. Interpretation’s aims of changing attitudes, challenging myths, engaging people with issues and transforming ideas resonate with the approaches used by designers and artists in communication with their audiences. While building on a Romantic foundation still evident in some Tasmanian interpretive practice, successful interpretation design seeks to engage people in multi-layered understandings and experiences of place.

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