

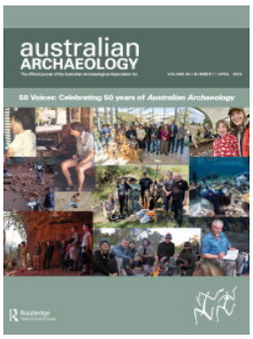
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Australian archaeology and heritageLeadership and legacy

Lynn Meskell

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50 VOICES

Australian archaeology and heritage: Leadership and legacy

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On accepting this invitation for the 50th anniversary of *Australian Archaeology* and looking back on what makes archaeology in Australia distinctive, I want to highlight the decades-long crossover between archaeology and heritage and the particular way that the discipline has been framed and practised. These disciplinary strengths and specifics have come from taking seriously Indigenous knowledge and engagements since the early 1980s. This has rendered archaeology and heritage more methodologically and politically aligned, more collaborative, and responsive to community needs. Such a participatory and lived approach necessarily blurs the traditional divides of archaeology and heritage work that still remain siloed and entrenched in other countries. These developments have also been reflected in the pages of *Australian Archaeology*, that regularly publishes on ethics, Indigenous scholarship and critique, as well as the role of the discipline as it intersects with environment, education, legislation and government.

Australian archaeologists were some of the first to flag the problematic Western hegemony in archaeological management (Byrne 1991), building upon novel ethical approaches to archaeological practice and conservation by pioneers like Sandra Bowdler and Sharon Sullivan. These scholars and the generation that followed effectively sought to capture a sensitivity to attachment, spirituality and practice, masking the lines between material and immaterial. In the main, that work was focused upon Indigenous Australians, but it was later extended to the nation's migrant communities and their newfound experiences. Indeed, community and collaborative archaeologies have been the mainstay of the discipline for decades, while these required intentional crafting as new ethical modalities, and only relatively recently, in the United States. New frameworks such as those elevating the importance of 'social significance' (Byrne et al. 2001) sought to move beyond traditional models of assessment and value not only in national parks and conservation zones, but in cultural resource management, academia, museums and beyond. Overturning older notions that heritage is merely material was championed by Australian archaeologists, decades ago, while colleagues elsewhere are still wrestling with such categories. Furthermore, such pioneering approaches proved vital in extending those methodologies to Asian contexts, to the specificities of spiritual heritage and place-making, concealing the distinctions between the categories of nature and culture in the process (Byrne 2007, 2014, 2021).

It is probably the case that I have an overly positive view of Australia's postcolonial engagement with Indigenous issues; spending much of my career teaching in the United States that may be understandable. Apologies to Indigenous Australians offered formally and at the highest state levels, have not been enacted in the same way in the US. And while these remain symbolic gestures, they still represent incremental achievements towards recognition and reconciliation, and some early attempts to redress issues of Native Title (Lilley 2000) and decolonisation (Lilley 2006), long before these issues were taken up by other nations. Yet while Australian archaeology, with its focus on Indigenous pasts and the violence of colonisation, might be a world leader in this regard, it does not mean that more cannot be done. As Brown (2022:93) argues in his critique of recent reframings of 'contact' and 'cultural entanglement', archaeologists need to 'develop language, in local Indigenous languages as much as English, that is specific to each situation and place' to address the onslaught of cultural and natural violations that accompany settler colonialism. And while the rest of us look to Australia to practise exemplary Indigenous archaeologies, practitioners there and elsewhere, still need to do much more to respect and promote Indigenous rights to culture, heritage, land and wellbeing.

As an Australian abroad, I have witnessed the global impact of Australian archaeology and heritage scholarship not only in academia but in broader intergovernmental settings, including the United Nations. First, there was the huge impact of the

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1979 Burra Charter on the wider international stage, in both archaeological and heritage practice, that offered alternatives to all the charters and conventions that came before, derived from Eurocentric, monument-centered perspectives. The original Burra Charter and its later iterations has had significant global influence stemming from its ability to encompass evolving notions of heritage, within ever changing social, political and economic contexts (Mackay 2019). Australia ICOMOS developed the Burra Charter to accommodate the Australian setting and thus it reflects the nature, multifaceted values, and historical circumstances of the nation's vast array of heritage places. Its dynamism has been lauded, though it has still attracted critique for not going far enough in recognising community-driven expertise and living culture. Building off Burra, archaeologists (Ireland, Brown, and Schofield 2020) have further drawn our attention to '(in)significance', which entails the places or objects deemed unimportant, unworthy of consideration, lacking in power, and thus not warranting official protection. Pushing beyond Burra, these authors (Ireland, Brown, and Schofield 2020:827) maintain that (in)significance offers a heuristic device for thinking through the inherent duality of value concepts and value attribution practices and their effects and impacts. And so the reflexivity and recursiveness of heritage work continues.

Australian archaeologists have played active and high-profile roles in ICOMOS and UNESCO, specifically in the World Heritage arena. They are highly proficient and well-regarded. They were also some of the first to identify World Heritage politics and problematics (Askew 2010). Most are committed to publicly promoting a human rights agenda with specific attention to Indigenous rights (Larsen and Buckley 2018) within UNESCO's processes of nominating and inscribing sites to its List. Recognising that Indigenous values are under-represented as World Heritage (Smith et al. 2019), Australian archaeologists worked on the Budj Bim Cultural Landscape nomination, showcasing a 6000-year-old Gunditjmara eel aquaculture system, and recognising its Indigenous knowledge and management system, retained through oral transmission and continuity of cultural practice. Successfully inscribed in 2019,[1] Budj Bim is not only testament to the scale, complexity and antiquity of this site, but to the Gunditjmara's struggle to overturn European misunderstandings of the complexity and sophistication of their culture and history (McNiven 2017). This is indeed difficult heritage and it exemplifies one of the major challenges that remain: to fully support and promote Indigenous archaeologists to senior decision-making roles who will shape how Australian archaeology is practised and presented not only at home, but to the world.

[1]https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1577/.

Disclosure statement

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