Safeguarding Australian heritage trade skills

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ABSTRACT
Heritage trades in the Australian context are identified in this paper as significant aspects of the nation's indigenous and non-indigenous intangible heritage which underpin the Australian ethos. It is argued that there is a pressing need to safeguard these trades and crafts within their unique cultural context by releasing them from the time warp of tradition and convention associated with pre- and early Western industrialisation. One example of this is the National Carriage Factory project being developed at the Cobb+Co Museum in Toowoomba, Australia. Based on a network of strong partnerships, this demonstration project for safeguarding heritage trades and crafts will ensure their future relevance to the nation through formal and informal training programmes for the younger generation within a framework of community practices and with support for creativity and innovation. This project offers to create economic, social and cultural wellbeing for both the artisans involved and the community in general.

Introduction

The UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* is usually linked to safeguarding traditional indigenous heritage, but in one project taking shape at the Cobb+Co Museum in Toowoomba, Australia, it is also being used as the reference point for forging a creative industry based on heritage trades, crafts and skills.

The pioneering spirit and skills of Australians, indigenous and non-indigenous, are part of this country's intangible and often 'hidden' heritage. Through their innovation and passion our forebears, both indigenous and non-indigenous, built and cared for our historic landscapes and buildings and forged the legends that underpin the Australian ethos. Today these traditions, skills, trades and crafts are under threat – changing



Figure 1
Kim Walmsley modern indigenous artist working on a project at the Cobb+Co Museum

technology and lifestyles now impose different priorities and demands on the traditional ways these skills were once passed down the generations. (Cobb+Co Museum and SQIT 2008, p.3)

Although mainly identified with non-indigenous Australians today, a number of older Aboriginal people and their families take great pride in the role they also played in the development of the country's pastoral industry through which many of the traditional 'European' heritage trades were and still are practised. [1] This source of pride and achievement is often overlooked today when Aboriginal cultural heritage is largely identified with traditional 'dreamtime' cultures. These 'dreamtime' cultures with their unique practices and skills also contribute significantly to Australia's cultural identity. So, in partnership with the traditional owners of the land and the historic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families who now call Toowoomba home, the Cobb+Co Museum, through its Binangar Centre, has made provision in its training plans for indigenous cultural heritage in its many varied and evolving formats.[2]

Considering traditional craftsmanship as an intangible may be seen as a paradox because the outcomes are tangible objects. However, traditional craftsmanship is not simply about the products; it involves the skills, knowledge, creativity and innovation essential for the continued production of artefacts in an environment that encourages the transfer of skills and expertise to new artisans to ensure the 'life' of the craft. The *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage* stresses that we must create conditions that will enable existing artisans to continue to produce their crafts while developing their skills through experimentation with new materials and methods, but at the same time ensure that suitable mechanisms are in place for the successful transfer of these skills to younger members of our communities.

The *Convention* acknowledges the range and variety of heritage trades and crafts and the ongoing dynamic nature of heritage which can accommodate transformations such as that from carriage makers of the past to motor vehicle makers today, and which will in turn create our heritage 'masterpieces' of tomorrow. (Cobb+Co Museum and SQIT 2008, p.11)

This article will argue that to ensure the successful safeguarding of traditional trades and crafts as expressed in the *Convention*, two parallel processes are required. The first is to formulate and implement innovative formal and informal training programmes, which while acknowledging both the 'traditional artisan skill' underpinning the heritage trades and their inherent dynamic and innovative nature, will enable skills and procedures to be transmitted from current practitioners to younger members of the community. The second, equally significant development is to ensure that the

safeguarding of traditional trades and crafts is integral to the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of the community, for as the Convention acknowledges, it would be a futile exercise to preserve traditional crafts if that was done without embedding that craftsmanship into *practices within communities, providing livelihoods to their makers and reflecting creativity and adaptation.* (UNESCO 2003)

A case study of the National Carriage Factory (NCF) project being developed at the Cobb+Co Museum in Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia will be used to demonstrate the inter-relatedness of these processes.[3] The Cobb+Co Museum is part of the State Museum and displays the national carriage collection, the finest collection of horse-drawn vehicles in Australia. It takes its name from the original coaching company, Cobb & Co., which operated across Australia between 1854 and 1924. Coaches bearing the name 'Cobb & Co.' also operated in New Zealand, South Africa and Japan. The NCF project embodies both formal and informal training programmes as well as providing a developmental model for a creative industry based on the heritage trades that will deliver economic, social and cultural benefits to the region.[4]

This article commences with a review of the heritage trade and craft traditions and current international attempts to preserve them. Reference will be made to some of the research that has been undertaken and to the flexible training pathways advocated by the Cobb+Co Museum and the Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE (SQIT), part of the State's vocational education and technical training system. Finally, the significance of the community's support for the NCF project will be analysed as a critical aspect of the sustainable safeguarding and transmission of heritage trades, crafts and skills to the next generation.

Heritage trades in a time warp

Currently in Australia, as in other OECD countries, heritage trades and crafts are caught in a time warp of tradition and convention associated with pre- and early Western industrialisation. The medieval trade guilds enshrined the traditional apprenticeship system in centuries of practice until the advent of industrialisation. The guild system opened the gate to journeymen, encouraging them to increase their skills through a broad range of work experiences, often in different counties or even countries. Such a journey could culminate, over time, in peer recognition as a master tradesman or craftsman through the presentation - and acceptance – of a masterpiece before the relevant trade guild (Cobb+Co Museum and SQIT 2008 p.14). Quality workmanship, innovation and creativity were the hallmarks of skilled tradesmen in the pre-industrial era. Rudolph Ackermann is a typical example of a qualified tradesman who worked in the English carriage market in the late eighteenth century but was trained in continental Europe. His father was a saddler in Saxony and Rudolph learnt his skills as an engraver in Dresden where he studied drawing. He travelled to Switzerland where he worked with a master coach painter to learn lacquering and gilding, and then to Paris to work as a carriage designer. Finally, he set up his own business as a master carriage designer in London where he published many fine colour plate books of fashionable carriages (Ford 2009 p.56).

The advent of industrialisation, however, heralded the demise of the apprenticeship system. It witnessed the general movement from tradesman to factory foreman, supervising less qualified workers who only had responsibility for a limited number of tasks. The former master was transformed into a factory owner, relocating himself from the workshop floor to the office, from hands-on operations overseeing his apprentices to accounting and marketing concerns. The highly respected Brewster carriage works in New York demonstrates this evolutionary process in the second half of the nineteenth century. James Brewster's traditional craft shop in New Haven (1810-1832) operated on the apprentice-journeyman-master system, using hand tools and a minimal division of labour, tightly controlled by the owner-master, but the firm only achieved limited output. The transitional Craft Shop run by Brewster and Collins (1832-1837) witnessed the start of the decline of the apprentice system and the advent of specialisation brought about by the division of labour. Both these developments would contribute to the rise of J.B.Brewster & Company and Brewster & Company (1856-1890s) – both very substantial factories characterised by separate owners employing an extensive system of foremen and wage labour, dominated by regular working hours and piecework, with

few or no craft titles and rationalised production using machinery rather than hand tools which led to a very much increased output. (Kinney 2009 p.71)

Not unexpectedly, there has been little interest in OECD countries over the past century in maintaining the traditional apprenticeship system for trades that seemed to be superseded by new products and services. There were, of course, pockets of time-honoured heritage trade activity across these countries especially in regional areas. In Toowoomba, Col. Ferguson's small carriage workshop continued to operate until the early 1970s, repairing the museum collections of horse-drawn vehicles and supplementing its income by building 'original' Cobb & Co. coaches for collectors and as tourist attractions. Innovation and creativity became the hallmark of the firm's carriage work, necessitated by the dwindling supplies of original vehicle components.

Attempts at reviving heritage trades

Today there are a few isolated attempts to revive and preserve traditional trades and crafts and these are generally associated with 're-invented and revitalised' heritage sites. Stemming from the economic decline of the 1980s there have been some concerted efforts, notably in Great Britain, to rejuvenate former industrial sites as 'living' heritage precincts like Ironbridge Gorge in Shropshire, the Rhondda Valley Coal Industry Interpretative Centre in Wales and Wigan Pier's 'The Way We Were' Heritage Centre. Not only were the buildings given a new lease of life, but former employees of the sites were also provided with the opportunity to maintain their trade and craft skills. Some critics make the distinction between 'crafts' and 'trades'[5], defining the former as *part of the constructed heritage industry, even to the extent that the craftspeople become part of the exhibit.* (Urry 1990, p.214) In contrast, trades like those of harness-makers and wheelwrights are frequently more valued as they are seen as *genuine historical reconstructions of authentic methods and techniques.* (Rojek 1993, p.194)

More recently, again in rural England, research by the Museum of English Rural Life has attempted to 'preserve' through documentation some rural trades and crafts as practised by individuals who appear to be motivated by lifestyle choices. Interestingly, the trend here, in contrast to the situation at the former industrial sites, is for such individuals to have little or no cultural or



Figure 2
Master blacksmith Terry Drennan working at the Cobb+Co Museum



Figure 3
Creative blacksmithing produced by Terry Drennan

social connection to the source of the craftsmanship being revived. (Smith 2009, p.21) In neither case is there any formal training underpinning the system and maintaining and improving the heritage crafts' and trades' skills.

Mention should also be made of the eco-museum concept whose forebears were found in the folk-museum movement initiated in Scandinavia with the opening of the Skansen open-air museum in 1891, dedicated to safeguarding the buildings, rituals and customs of fast-disappearing rural lifestyles across Sweden. Later recreations of heritage sites highlighting traditional trades and crafts include Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia and Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts in the USA.

The modern concept of the eco-museum was made popular in France in the 1970s by Georges Henri Rivière. Today, eco-museums are located throughout the world with more than four hundred registered on the international database. Besides their prominence throughout Scandinavia, they are also expanding in Italy and throughout Asia, and are best exemplified there by the development at Halong Bay in Vietnam. The most practical definition of an eco-museum is a community-driven museum or heritage project that *aids sustainable development* defined as maintaining a *total environment, social, economic and cultural, as well as safeguarding natural resources.* (Davis 2007, p.199) Eco-museums embrace business development, tourism, and training in the safeguarding of significant environmental or historic landscapes and buildings, and occasionally the safeguarding of traditional customs, including crafts and trades.

The Cobb+Co Museum heritage trade training concept

In contrast to the approaches mentioned above, the Cobb+Co Museum's position is to ensure that a regional creative industry will be forged through the heritage trades with a formal mechanism by which these trades, crafts and skills can be transferred to the next generation.

To achieve this aim a unique partnership has developed between the Cobb+Co Museum and the Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE (SQIT) that have been located together for more than twenty years on the old showground site in the centre of Toowoomba.[6] In 2008 the partners completed a major research project on

the scope and availability of heritage trade training both in Australia and overseas. The subsequent report, *Heritage is in Our Hands: a Review of Heritage Trade Training (the Report),* developed options for new ways of training people in heritage trades for the NCF project. It articulates *a new approach, based on teaching and learning flexibility that recognises the value of different learning pathways*. For this project to flourish, flexible learning approaches delivering diverse training pathways will *hold the key to success*. To demonstrate the process, five case studies were presented in the report covering areas of master craftsmanship in heritage building, traditional craft paper making, indigenous cultural heritage, heritage clothing and jewellery and vintage vehicles. It is envisaged that any specific discipline could be accommodated within the proposed learning pathways for Heritage Craftsmanship. (Ibid. pp.35-40)

The NCF concept was motivated by the revived community interest in heritage expressed through the following:

- the rapidly rising value of older homes, especially those preserving heritage architectural features
- community interest in restoring former public buildings, especially old court houses, railways stations and post offices and giving them a 'new lease of life' as prominent community markers,
- the popularity of heritage machinery clubs, vintage and veteran car clubs, steam train societies, vintage aircraft and air shows,
- the variety and membership of historic re-enactment groups,
- heritage based tourism products and marketing campaigns featuring heritage values,
- genealogical society membership and research activities,
- the publication of family, local and business histories,
- community celebrations of historic milestones,
- annual festivals and events incorporating historic themes,
- prime time television programmes devoted to antiques, archaeology, museum conservation and tracing family histories, and
- the implementation of a new Australian national curriculum which for the first time includes history as a compulsory core subject for all primary and secondary students.

These trends are not limited to Toowoomba or even to Queensland. There is a worldwide increase in public interest in retaining those icons of the built and movable heritage that say so much about our cultural history. As stated in the foreword to the report, we are very conscious that the skills necessary to conserve and maintain these valued cultural heritage icons, both tangible and intangible, are at risk of being lost for ever. We also know that there may be a very limited time-window available for action before many of these skills will be lost permanently. (Cobb+Co Museum and SQIT, 2008, p.3)

For many years the Cobb+Co Museum has been delivering workshops in a number of heritage trades and crafts. Initially these were limited to trades associated with horse-drawn vehicles which are the focus of the Museum's collection, and associated equine trades. However, since 2006 there has been a diversification in

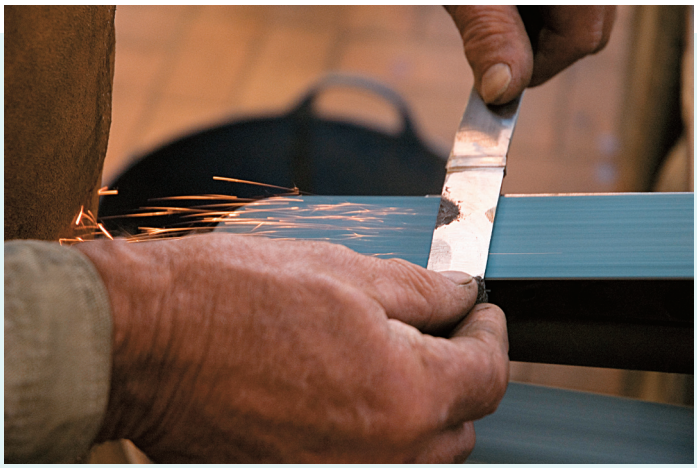

Figure 4
Knife making class at he Cobb+Co Museum

the workshops offered to include such fields as lead lighting and copper foiling, bookbinding, silver-smithing and silver casting, traditional sign writing, leather work (besides plaiting and harness making) and felting. In 2009 the Museum offered thirty different workshops and the first series of heritage trade workshops for young people aged between twelve and sixteen. An annual *Have a Go Festival* each February enables potential students to 'try their hands' at various heritage trades and crafts.

Embedding the heritage trades into community development

As important as the actual training mechanisms will be to the safeguarding of the heritage trades, crafts and skills, it is essential that this education and training underpins and fosters a culture of creativity and innovation which will lead to economic, social and cultural development in the region. The NCF project aims to position the Cobb+Co Museum as an emerging post-modern museum where

intangible heritage complements ... tangible objects, memories, songs, cultural traditions and (heritage trades) *are seen as embodying culture's past and future.* (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, p.81)

The NCF project has also been firmly positioned within a creative industries' model, seeking to nurture the creativity and skills inherent in the heritage trades and to promote the combination of cultural heritage with entrepreneurship (Cunningham 2006, pp.5-7). It aims to be an example of what can be achieved when culture, commerce, education and entertainment converge. (Landry 2003, p16)

Using the region's strengths in education, learning and training, and the quality and quantity of its natural, cultural and intangible heritage products and services, the cultural-products industries which will be developed will be environmentally friendly and employ highly skilled, well-paid, creative workers. (Scott 2007, p.1478) They will also contribute to the quality of life in the places where the artisans congregate and enhance the image and prestige of the local region.

Galla has referred to this project as:

One of the most impressive demonstration projects, bringing tangible and intangible heritage together through the First Voice, that I have come across in recent years.

(Galla 2008, p.17)

His reference to the 'First Voice' is another distinctive component of the NCF project. The hyper-local community, the primary stakeholders of the Cobb+Co Museum, represent the 'First Voice' and have taken this project to their hearts. Members of the business community have spearheaded the NCF Appeal Committee which has not only raised thirty percent of the project cost, but has also planned and implemented the public relations campaign which was successful in





Figure 5
Lyn Swann teaches lead lighting at the Cobb+Co Museum

Figure 6
Traditional signwriter Peter Tierney working at the Cobb+Co Museum

acquiring State Government support to enable the project to proceed in a time of financial downturn.[4]

This project involves many community partnerships between the Cobb+Co Museum and education and training providers, tourism organisations and operators, retail outlets and many other local and regional businesses. This project will work towards significantly improved economic outcomes for highly skilled heritage artisans earning a living from their involvement in education and training and through the production and promotion of quality hand-made merchandise and as participants in the tourism trails and significant events.

The business community supports the project because many see it as capable of strengthening the regional economy through enhanced experience-based tourism ventures which will attract a very diverse range of visitors to events and activities, as well as high yield participants involved in training, education and learning programmes.

Finally, support has grown as the community has come to appreciate that the project can create a vibrant culture based on the region's natural, cultural and intangible heritage, which will become a capital asset, providing important patterns and symbols promoting a distinctive community identity. Already it is obvious that the community is deriving enjoyment and a sense of well-being from participating in cultural heritage traditions and sharing knowledge, skills, ideas, beliefs, values, spirituality, standards and responses.

The concept of using heritage trades and crafts to provide economic outcomes is not new. Examples range from the Smithsonian

Folklife Festival where thousands of craftspeople have walked away with millions of dollars in sales of their textile weavings and basketry, their pottery and paintings, their woodcarvings, metal smithing and jewellery, (Kurin 2007, p.17) to North Carolina's *Hand Made in America*, a project where a whole region is marketed for its craftsmanship. (*Hand Made in America* 2009)

Conclusion

The *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* has provided the inspiration for the NCF project. Its emphasis on formal and informal transference of skills from current practitioners to the younger generation, within a framework of community practices and support for creativity and innovation, underpins the NCF project. But equally important is the opportunity this project offers to create economic, social and cultural well-being both for the artisans involved and for the community in general.

Research and experience dictate that to succeed, we will have to establish flexible learning pathways for the teaching of the heritage trades. We will also need new terminology for many of the concepts related to the heritage trades. At present, many of the terms we use are still firmly ingrained in the Australian psyche as being *past, old, pre-industrial, historic and not relevant,* discouraging any rapid and immediate change of attitudes on a national level.

More locally, however, community acknowledgement of the creativity and innovation involved in the NCF project has been a major break-through. Its implementation will necessarily continue to adapt to changing social, economic, cultural and environmental conditions, thereby releasing the heritage trades from the time warp in which they often find themselves locked.

NOTES

1. At the Cobb+Co Museum the story of an all-Aboriginal droving team is not unique, nor is the role of a skilled Aboriginal saddler working in Toowoomba in the second half of the twentieth century. Similarly, there are now moves by some traditional Aboriginal communities to incorporate a museum component into their new cultural centres to enable their communities to preserve their stories of life as domestics and pastoral workers alongside their 'dreamtime' cultural traditions.
   Likewise, one of Australia's best known Aboriginal songwriters, Kev Carmody, grew up on a pastoral property west of Toowoomba and spent his early working life as a wool presser until the demise of the smaller pastoral properties in the early 1970s. His songs embody the rich rural oral traditions of both his Irish father and Murri mother, and his pastoral days are remembered for the harmonic rhythm of life which was destroyed when he moved to the city. (Carmody, K., *Biography*)
2. As part of the Museum's programme to identify and help meld indigenous and non-indigenous aspects of our national traditions, a demonstration project in which Aboriginal artist, Kim Walmsley, worked with a local blacksmith and harness maker, created a show piece work of art by drawing together 'European' and 'dreamtime' intangible heritage traditions.
3. The construction of the National Carriage Factory commenced in July 2009 and it will open in September 2010.
4. Creative industries have been defined by the Creative Industries Taskforce in the UK as *activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property.* (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 1998, p.3)
5. The simple definition that trades are based in industry, and crafts in cottages and homes has not applied in the NCF project, as the term 'craftsman' is often taken to mean a 'skilled tradesman'. The Cobb+Co Museum has adopted the stance that the term 'heritage trades' refers to both trades and crafts and that 'master craftsman' is a term valued by many of our practising artisans, be they classified as a tradesman or 'craftsperson'.
6. The Cobb+Co Museum is building the National Carriage Factory on land supplied by SQIT which will become the focal point for heritage trade training in the country.

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