Buggering Around in the Backyard: Creating Attachment to Place through Archaeology and Material Culture

Steve Brown

Abstract

Archaeologists create strong attachments to the places they investigate, in particular through the performance of excavation. However, the social value of archaeological places to archaeologists is rarely considered when it comes to conservation management planning of excavated heritage places. While community values, particularly values held by Aboriginal people, and scientific values are commonly identified, assessed and managed in *Burra Charter* terms, the social heritage of places to the discipline of archaeology is not. Explorations of place attachment to my own backyard can contribute to reflecting more broadly on the social value of heritage places to archaeologists, both individually and collectively. The thoughts presented here reflect initial explorations of attachment to place in personal terms. I am interested in exploring my attachment to, and identity connected with, the suburban space at 85 Fairview Street in Arncliffe (FSA) because I believe it can bring insights into the historical and contemporary attachments of other people and groups to their special places. This study provides an opportunity to look at concepts like social value, intangible heritage and associative landscapes, which are hotly debated and contentious in today's heritage discourse.

Genesis

The idea for this paper has two origins … and a desire. The first origin lies in the cultural heritage research I undertake for the New South Wales Government. In part this work looks at how community attachment to place is managed on public lands reserved for conservation. The Culture and Heritage Research Section, Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water (NSW), has spent over a decade studying the social functioning of place attachment. The research has caused me to reflect on my own feelings of connectedness to objects, place and landscape.

The beginnings of this deeper reflection, the second point of origin for this paper, coincided with my 2007 purchase of a house in the Sydney suburb of Arncliffe. This reflection was initially motivated by my bower bird-like collection of the material traces of the history of FSA, comprising objects from both within the house and from the yard. The connection between the physical and sensory, my emotional response to place, objects and species, is a central point in my exploration of my own attachment to place (cf. Mulcock 2008; Tarlow 2000).

And then there was the matter of 'desire' and in this case the desire to excavate. Opportunities to participate in or direct excavations can be rare for most Australian archaeologists working in cultural heritage management within government. Besides being a core disciplinary skill and a method for investigative research, archaeological excavation can provide a stimulating, lively and shared human experience.

In my reflections on place and belonging within an Australian suburb, I am influenced by the historically-informed work of Peter Timms (2006) and Peter Read (2000), but also critiques of Read's work, for example by Linn Miller (2003) and David Trigger (2008:305). I am also interested in the more anthropological approaches to place, belonging and 'nativeness' explored by anthropologists such as David Trigger in Australia and Michele Dominy (2001:27) in New Zealand and also Tim Ingold (2000:5), as well as the geographic/ethnographic study of the suburban backyard by Lesley Head and Pat Muir (2007), and ecological approaches to gardens developed by Jamie Kirkpatrick (2006) in Tasmania. While my interests are cross-disciplinary, my particular perspective is one that is informed by the practice and theory of archaeology, which contributes a spatial and temporal connectivity to place in relation to the material and symbolic.

In broad terms I am interested in the connections between the tangible traces of history and the intangible feelings for place and how these elements give rise to a sense of place or belonging. I am also interested in juggling spatial scale – my field study area is a suburban block, a bounded space of 347m^2 in size, but I am also interested in the landscape setting of the area, and 'the nexus between identity and landscape' (Taylor 2009:12).

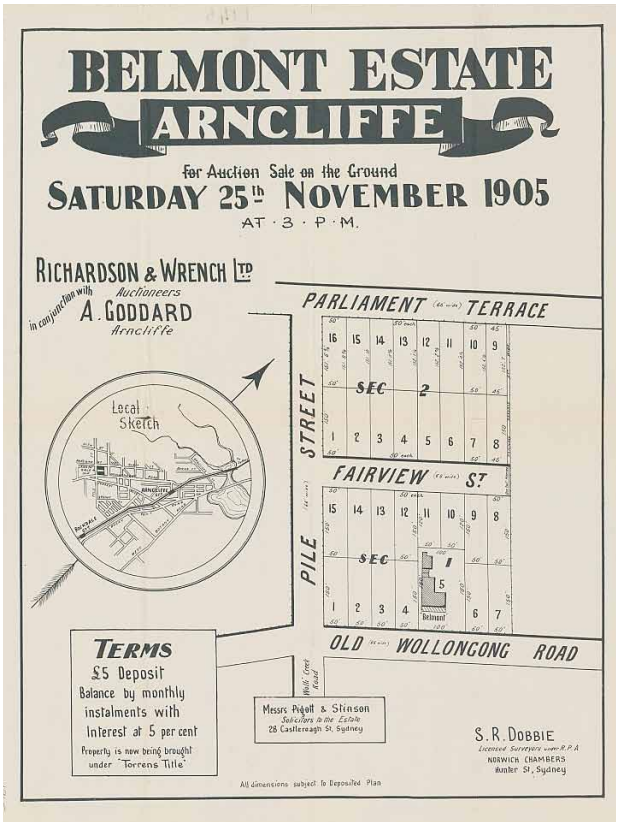

Figure 1 1905 auction sale notice for Belmont Estate, Arncliffe (Source: State Library of New South Wales).

The Setting

Arncliffe is a suburb in southern Sydney, located 11km south of the Sydney CBD in the City of Rockdale. It lies within the lands

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of the Gameygal clan, who occupy an area around Botany Bay, of the Darag Nation or Language Group (Attenbrow 2002:23).

Arncliffe was settled by people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including British, Irish, Chinese and German. Modern-day Fairview Street lies within the 61 acres of Crown Land first purchased in December 1861 by the pastoralist Thomas Hill Bardwell (Rathbone 1997:27-30). In 1881, the brothers Thomas and Alexander Milsop each purchased approximately six acres of Bardwell's land and in 1884 erected two identical Victorian houses – called 'Belmont' and 'Fairview' – on Wollongong Road. Following the death of Alexander Milsop in 1891 and Thomas in 1905, 'the last of Arncliffe's great estates' (Rathbone 1997:114) were subdivided and Fairview Street was created.

Belmont Estate, Arncliffe, was advertised for auction on 25 November 1905 (Figure 1), including Lot 3, Section 2, which was to become 83 and 85 Fairview Street. Fairview Street, initially comprising the southern half of the block between Wolli Creek Road and Wilsons Road, was first listed in the 1907 Sydney Sand's Directory and the first residents of the street are listed therein from 1911.

The late Federation-style buildings at 83 and 85 Fairview Street were built in 1913/1914. The property at 85 was occupied by Laurence Weidenhofer from 1920 until the early 1930s. After c.1932 the property was owned by the Tasker family – first by Clarence Roy Tasker and after 1969 by Clarence's son, Kenneth Andrew, until mid-2007. The Taskers were of German descent and were market gardeners from the early 1930s until 1967. They owned and operated market gardens in Rockdale (Patterson Britton & Associates *et al.* 2002).

My partner Allan and I purchased FSA in August 2007. In the first weeks of ownership we stripped floor coverings, reopened two sealed fire places and removed the dilapidated 1950s-style kitchen, in the process collecting objects including coins, toys, bottles and newspapers. In all the areas that we dug in the backyard physical traces of history appeared.

Forming Attachment

Drawing on autoethnographic methods (Edgeworth 2006; Ellis 2009), I will make some observations on forming attachment to FSA. I will underpin this with the view or hypothesis that attachment has a physical dimension with regard to both place and materiality.

The first point relates to the idea of accommodating strangeness or 'getting to know'. By this I mean asserting emplacement by getting to know the history of the place and its surroundings, getting to know the local landscape, flora and fauna and getting to know local people and communities. I will illustrate with examples.

In getting to know the *history* of the place, I find myself attracted to the physicality of history; history that has mass and volume and can be handled. Thus, learning that the property at FSA was occupied by Laurence Weidenhofer from 1920 until the early 1930s is made real and exciting by a dusty yellow card recovered from behind a blocked fireplace in the front bedroom, marked in neat inked hand-writing: 'Mrs L. Weidenhofer Fairview Street Arncliffe New South Wales'. Associated with the luggage label were a number of pharmaceutical bottles (Figure 2) – 'Nyall Corn Remover' (purchased from George Campbell's Pharmacy, opposite the Railway Station in Arncliffe); 'Elliot's

Figure 2 Pharmaceutical bottles (Photograph: Allan McLean).

Eucresol Inhalant' – an antiseptic preparation for the treatment of Whooping Cough; and 'Marmola' prescription tablets for the treatment of obesity.

A second example of physically connected history is a small fragment of ceramic hearth tile recovered while excavating a hole for a pond in the backyard. The tile fragment comes from the lounge room fireplace where at some point (most likely the 1970s) a row of tiles were removed when a pot-belly stove was installed. Another example is a plaster Waratah motif, a decorative element of the house's internal air vents, recovered from under the house. The broken element dates to the time of construction of the house (1913/1914) when an air vent was damaged and discarded.

Getting to know the *flora* of our area was a deliberate decision early on in our occupation of FSA to grow only plants native to the Cooks River Valley in the backyard. This has motivated us to understand the physical landscape and the local native flora (Benson *et al.* 1999). Thus our plantings favour species known, or likely, to have inhabited the deep clay soils of Wianamatta Shale country and shallow sandy soils of Hawkesbury Sandstone in our locale.

Our very local form of ecological restoration provides scope for cultural and historical analysis of 'nativeness', 'local traditional knowledge', and 'belonging' to place, as has been examined from an anthropological perspective, for example by David Trigger *et al.* (2007) and Tim Ingold (2000). Of relevance here is Tim Flannery's (1994:390) view that a strong sense of Australian identity can *only* be achieved through the acquisition of detailed and accurate ecological knowledge.

The second point to make regarding the idea of accommodating strangeness relates to our own inhabiting of the space, our own embodied learning. When we inhabit the space, we experience it and we deliberately and subconsciously shape it when we *impose*, *create* and *discover* personal connections to people, other places and events.

For example, the imposition of personal connection is illustrated by Allan's inheritance from his grandmother of a margarine container with seeds of her favourite bright red,

Figure 3 Doris' peony poppies (Photograph: Allan McLean).

Figure 4 Toy cars (Photograph: Allan McLean).

peony poppies. These are a spectacular annual flowering plant – vibrant, pom-pom like flowers – and are reminders of Doris and her vibrant character. Thus we insert into the garden landscape a plant species that has direct connection to a loved family member. They are a celebratory connection, rather than, as Ruth McManus has described, 'tending memories to the departed' (McManus 2008:175).

In considering our connections to Doris's poppies, I am drawn to a phrase I have read in reference to pastoral herders in southern Africa – 'personal identity points' (Smith 2005:178). In our case the poppies act as markers that characterise our particular connections to place.

Similarly, other plant species are reminders of places and identity points – such as the 'square-leafed' succulent that derives from a cutting from a roof top garden of a building I previously lived in, in Darlinghurst, Sydney. Objects are also memory triggers like the Chinese gate post, covered in Buddha images, purchased from a favourite nursery in Fitzroy, Melbourne.

We *create* connections to people and places through the act of making our garden. For example, many of the rough sandstone rocks that feature in the dry stone walls and edge the vegetable beds were collected with Allan's parents from a quarry near Mittagong, where they live. Some plants are gifts from friends (an Acacia from Denis and Daniel; ferns from my yoga colleagues John and Adrienne); flannel flowers remind me of whale watching at Botany Bay; and the 'coverup' plant named after Edna Walling provides a sense of connection to an iconic garden designer.

Finally, the act of *discovering* is itself a process of connection to place. The objects or artefacts recovered from the garden and house imbue us with a sense of past people and activities, like the many toy cars (Figure 4) and marbles that tell of children energetically and playfully occupying the space.

Re-encountering the collected objects, as they are washed, rebagged and labelled and later analysed is a reminder of imaginings of past activities that the traces might represent ('double artefacts' – Edgeworth 2006:5). However, their rehandling also brings back memories of the times and places of their discovery. That is, they serve as reminders on two time scales – one is an interpreted history of the property before we inhabited it and another our own recent memory of engagement with the objects and place. In this sense the repetitive viewing of, and regular interaction with, the objects may serve to reinforce connections to place, our place, by integrating our recent experience with past experiences.

While we deliberately insert ourselves and our meanings into our suburban block, we also respond to its features and we are shaped by it. The orientation of the block and its relation to the movement of the sun, as well as the position of the house, 'determine' which plants can be planted in which locations. Thus the sun and structures exert agency in the ways our garden evolves and to varying degrees conditions our relationship to the space.

Investigating Attachment

Denis Byrne has observed that 'Attachment is not something that can be excavated by archaeologists or drawn to scale by heritage architects' (Byrne in Veale 2001:Foreword). In the study of national park landscapes, attachment is made up substantially of people's memories, and this is because those people whose attachment we document no longer inhabit the landscape we are studying. That is, attachment is framed in reference to the past, from recent memory to deep time.

Studying the process of my attachment to FSA is not so obviously about past history but is linked to recent experience and constructing initial connections to place. But my recent

experience also acknowledges that I am at a 'meeting place' of past history and present on at least two levels. First, there is my lived historical experience with family, friends and with places where I have grown up, lived, worked and travelled. Second, there is the history of FSA itself. The temporal meeting of self (my known) and place (unknown/other) is thus recent, but imbued with historical antecedents. Or in cultural landscape terms, FSA is a landscape where past and present collide.

Ideas associated with cultural landscapes may provide one way in which to try to understand and explain my experience of attachment to place. Cultural landscape commentators, like Ken Taylor, Jane Lennon, Christopher Tilley and Julian Thomas, generally consider cultural landscapes to be living landscapes where changes over time result in the creation of a series of layers, each layer able to tell a human story and a story about the relationship between people and the environment (Taylor 2009:12-13). Cultural landscapes are also understood to reflect the values of people who have shaped them and thus culture is a shaping force (Basso 1996).

The reverse of this, in the case of FSA, is that my values shape the landscape Allan and I inhabit and will create a layer of occupation and meaning, and will leave an imprint visible to future archaeologists and other observers. Our physical imprint is reflected in the landscape modifications we make, the objects we emplace or discard and plants we grow.

My engagement with, and experience of place is a cultural construct and a dynamic and complex process of interaction between physical components, activities and symbols/meanings (Relph 1976 cited in Taylor 2009:12-13) (Figure 5). The *physical components*, like the house, the recovered objects and the plantings we introduce and nurture, are imbued with cultural meanings we ascribe to them. The meanings of the material traces we recover are not what they were to those who have handled them in the past, but meanings that are contextualised within my own experience and object interpretations.

I have suggested that the interaction between physical components, activities and symbols/meanings, as represented by Doris's poppies or Mrs Weidenhofer's label, create personal identity points or tangible markers that evoke our particular connections to this place.

A final point that I would like to touch on in place attachment is the role of agency: the idea of agency assists the exploration of my attachment to FSA. Agency in archaeology is often associated with 'putting people back into the past', and most definitions would centre around the relationship between the constitution of the actor, in terms of cultural and psychological structures, and behaviour (Robb 2001).

But my interest in agency lies in what Russell Hitchings (2006), a human geographer, describes as 'multiple agencies'. Hitchings has examined the changing ways in which people and plants live together in the domestic gardens of north London. Hitchings has argued that 'material culture', by which he means all physical things including plant species, possess some kind of agency and this agency is experienced by human actors:

> Material culture, as a concept, is suggestive of control. Yet, when we acknowledge it, it becomes clear that all the physical things we handle have a degree of independence (Hitchings 2006:364).

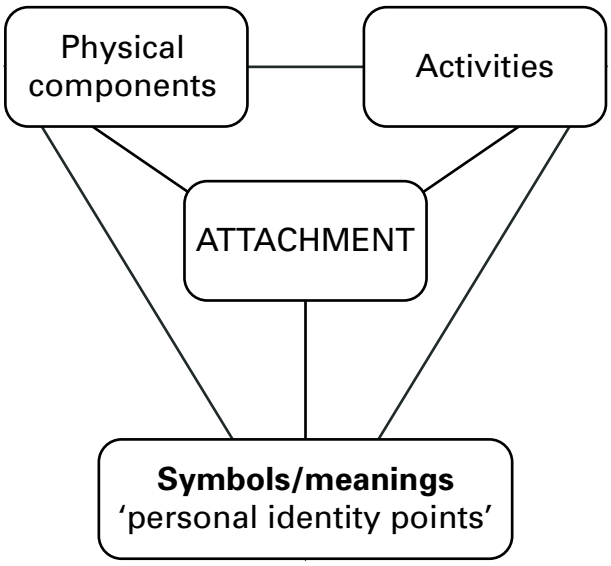

Figure 5 Place attachment (after Relph 1976).

Digging Deeper

This report began from a standpoint that archaeologists create strong attachments to places they investigate. Does this matter? I suggest that it does because archaeologists, through their practice, are engaged in *making* meaning, place and memory. While embedded in making meaning, place and memory in the present, archaeologists are concurrently investigating how people, non-archaeologists, in the past participated in this same practice. Archaeologists can critically self-reflect on the entanglements of place attachment in the present and past utilising notions such as experienced agency. For my part, I have commenced excavations at FSA, drawing on reflexive ethnographic methods, to further explore my own deepening feelings of place attachment and to investigate how material culture is intrinsic to this process.

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