

Volume One

Perceptions of the Past: Creating a Heritage Trail in Hamilton East

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'Heritage is sexy,' well, according to Gavin Mclean at least (McLean 2001, 158). The concept of heritage has been at the forefront of many debates about history in recent years, principally in relation to the protection of heritage sites, and their connection to our understandings of the past. My research builds on the findings of two large-scale investigations in the United States and Australia, on 'the presence of the past' in people's lives (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998; Hamilton and Ashton 2003). Recently, the 'Centre for Research, Evaluation and Social Assessment' conducted a focus group study into the perceptions and expectations of heritage in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Warren and Ashton 2000). My research takes these findings, and the issues raised by other secondary literature, to investigate the implications for a community heritage trail project. As a member of the Hamilton East Community Development Group, the driving force behind the heritage trail, I created a survey to gauge people's understandings of heritage, and their perceptions of the benefits of a heritage trail to the community. This paper outlines some of the conclusions of this micro-study on perceptions of the past, and the concept of heritage, in a Hamilton suburb, and raises questions that can be considered on a larger scale.

The suburb of Hamilton East provides an appropriate back drop from which to consider the notion of 'heritage'. The area is noted for its 1930s architecturally designed state housing - Hayes Paddock - as well as including several buildings that are listed with the Historic Places Trust. Within this small area there is a river walking trail, several parks, a school and commercial buildings (see figure one).

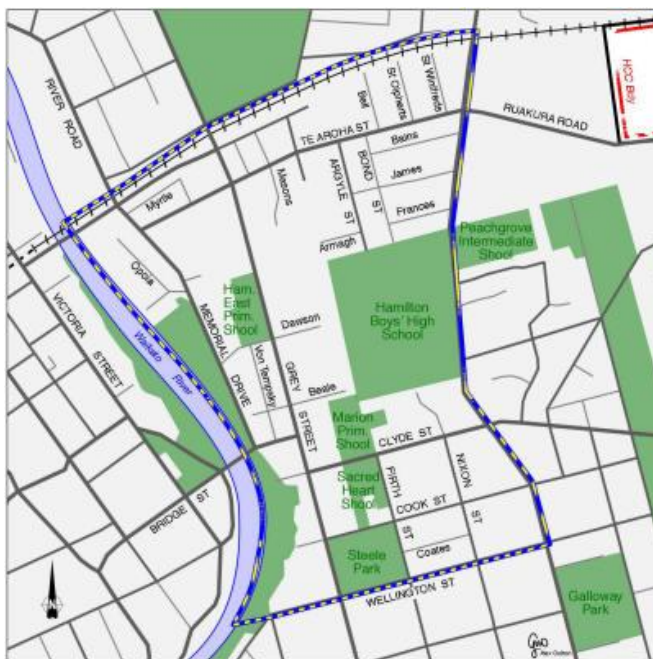


Figure One: Hamilton East Heritage Trail (blue boundary)

This area, plus the public debate about heritage, provides a window from which to focus on the diverse understandings of 'heritage' and what people consider important heritage sites in the area. The inclusion of interpretation and context, and its ability to add understanding, can be a considerable strength of heritage forms. I also discuss the need to consider issues of inclusivity pertaining to the surrounding community, and the tensions resulting from the different stakeholder views of these issues.

While heritage has been a topic of much discussion, there seems to be little consensus as to what the concept of 'heritage' entails, and there is much discrepancy between academic and public perceptions. Whilst many people understand the role that heritage plays in protecting historic sites, namely 'old buildings', there has been little discussion of the role heritage can play in constructing the past in a broader sense. Beyond the protection of sites, and the economic benefits that come from increased tourism, there is much scope for examining other 'social' and 'cultural' benefits of heritage forms and these ideas are presented in this paper.

Discourse on heritage, and what is understood by the term, goes far beyond the boundaries of New Zealand. This idea has been increasingly discussed in the international history and cultural studies arenas in recent years. David Lowenthal (1998) eminent heritage critic, describes heritage not as history, but rather a celebration of it. Lowenthal (1998), while alluding to the celebratory nature of heritage, dismisses heritage for presenting a 'rosy' view of the past, and lacking the analysis and questioning ability that history possesses. Conversely, I believe that heritage gives us the opportunity to acknowledge the past, and does not inevitably mean that heritage is unable to analyse it. Admittedly, in many cases, previous, and current, heritage forms lack the examination obvious in formal constructions of the past. However, by becoming involved in the creation of heritage forms, historians are able to ensure that analysis is indeed present, rather than dismissing it for its absence. A closer investigation of this issue is vital if we are to resolve the concerns we have with previous constructions, and to ensure meaningful representations for today's communities.

Another way of looking at heritage is presented by cultural studies academic Bella Dicks (2003), who conducted extensive investigation into the establishment of the Rhondda Heritage Park in South Wales. Dicks (2003, 134) suggests that heritage is "history made visitable". This 'visitability' helps explain the constructed nature of heritage trails, and alludes to how it permits the public to 'interact' with the past at heritage sites. Dicks (2003, 121) also suggests that heritage sites provide a "public platform for the past-self", and thus, considers the role of community agency in determining what elements of the past are acknowledged and how constructed evidence is displayed to create a sense of self-identity.

Nationally, however, there seems to be a somewhat different understanding of heritage, and to a certain extent, little consideration for it beyond the aesthetic appeal of the built environment. This is conveyed by New Zealand's leading heritage scholar, Gavin McLean (2001), in his assertion that the bulk of professionals employed in the heritage sector are art historians or architects, and this shows precisely where the focus lies within heritage protection: the aesthetic appeal of the built environment. Academic Historian David Hamer (1997) advocated that the responsibility of asking 'why' we should protect heritage sites lies with the historian, in an attempt to look beyond the aesthetics to the wider social and cultural significance of sites.

I conducted a survey to solicit information about the establishment of a heritage trail in Hamilton East. Surveys were distributed at two Hamilton meetings - a Heritage Trail meeting and a meeting of candidates wishing to be elected as Hamilton City Councillors. In total 30 surveys were distributed and 17 were returned. When asked, '*what do you understand by the term heritage trail?*' People responded with terms such as 'history' and 'historic', that it would include 'buildings' and would depict 'culture and heritage'. Whilst at first glance, this appears to be a positive response, it is difficult to distinguish accurately what they intended by these terms. As I have already indicated, concepts of what is included in heritage forms, such as heritage trails, generally focus on the built environment and this was reflected in the survey findings, which acknowledge it as a significant component of heritage. When asked to suggest what sites could be included in the

trail, historic buildings were the most prevalent suggestions. As two registered category one historic buildings are to be included in the first stage of the trail, this was not surprising. Other built sites included: bridges, Hayes Paddock houses, churches and schools. The special mention of the Hayes Paddock area relates directly to a recent attempt to get a heritage protection order put in place to stop new residential developments, and preserve the area's unique character as a state housing precinct. It is for this reason, and not the role the area has played in the social development of the community, that it was considered important.

This is not to say that the built environment was the only suggestion for sites to be included, in fact they went far beyond this. Recognition of Māori sites can be seen as a positive reflection of the understanding of the bicultural past of the area, and the need to recognise that sites are historically significant for several reasons. Natural environmental sites and their role in the development of the community can be seen in suggestions to include the Waikato River, and public parks and gardens in the trail. The inclusion of churches and schools is noteworthy, as it acknowledges the role these institutions have played in the social and cultural development of the community. These suggestions have presented a rather expansive view of what 'heritage' is, and what is historically significant. It also presents the idea that something does not necessarily have to be 'historic' to be heritage, and that 'cultural heritage' is just as vital to the community.

These ideas are reflected in the findings of American historian Jannelle Warren-Findley (2001, 14), who has investigated the role of heritage in New Zealand, and found that historic landscapes "allow for the telling of the social, cultural and environmental history of these places". With regards the construction of this history at sites, the interpretation adds an understanding of the context, and allows the public a deeper connection to the events and ideas of the past.

Looking beyond understandings of the term 'heritage' to the role that it plays in constructing the past, there is again much disparity in academic and public deliberation. In the New Zealand situation, McLean (2000, 88) sees heritage as providing contextualisation for "the values of the places and objects being conserved and restored". While the ideas of protection and restoration are at the forefront of this assertion, it is clear that McLean (2000) perceives the benefits of heritage forms as going far beyond this. By relating historic sites to events and ideas of the past, people will be able to gauge the role that the sites have played in the social and cultural development of the area. An explicit example of this in the Hamilton East situation can be seen in Beale Cottage, which is commonly conceded to be one of the oldest houses in Hamilton. However, establishing context with regards its role in the social history of the area as a doctor's surgery in the late 19th century will allow a deeper understanding as to its historic significance.

When asked if the trail would be good for the community, respondents replied with expressions such as 'ability to protect sites', 'awareness', 'identity and pride' and 'sense of place'. These ideas allude to the public perceptions of heritage and history, and present a wider understanding of some of the social and cultural benefits of a heritage trail for the community. Furthermore, increased knowledge and appreciation of the past was seen as a major benefit of the heritage trail. This relates to Bella Dicks' (2003) discussion of the 'public past-self' and ideas of community agency.

As I have shown, there are many understandings of heritage and what can be included in heritage forms. While there is little cohesion between academic and public understandings of heritage and history, the public meeting discussion and survey responses exhibited perceptions that were somewhat homogeneous. There seems a positive outlook with regards the benefits of a heritage trail in the Hamilton East area: but what do these benefits include? As a community group, we hope to focus on ideas relating to community cohesiveness, and we want to include as many sectors of the community in the process as possible.

This informed our decision to hold a public meeting, conduct a survey and work with other interest groups in the area. In addition, we are including a variety of social and cultural historic sites in the trail, to give an overview of how the area developed into the diverse community that it is today. Discussion at the public meeting emphasised not only the bi-cultural past of the area, but also the multi-cultural status of contemporary Hamilton East.

Despite this, there is an underlying tension between the economic and 'social' or 'community' benefits that will result from the trail's creation. While the protagonists of the economic benefits see the community benefits as a positive side-effect of the trail, there is a distinct focus on how the trail can increase tourism and there was much accentuation that we must 'link the heritage trail to the local economy'. This idea has been more ardently urged by the councils involved - namely Environment Waikato and the Hamilton City Council - who appear to be only willing to support the community group project if they can see financial benefits for the area as a whole. This was seen in discussions with council members who emphasised the idea of 'living heritage' for its economic benefits. Another perceived benefit of the heritage trail was the restoration of sites. This idea was coupled with the ability to protect sites for the future, so that our understandings of the past are retained, and future generations are able to make their own interpretation of heritage sites. This links with ideas about education on the past, and was emphasised as an integral benefit of such a trail to the community.

I am not suggesting that a heritage trail can be only of *either* economic *or* social benefit to a community, far from it. What I have attempted to show is that the economic advantages should not be seen to 'outweigh' the social benefits. This was reflected by Bella Dicks' (2003) research that found the economic emphasis on the Rhondda project as an economic asset which competes with the next local area. This created division within the communities involved, something that we hope to avoid with our heritage trail project. This concern is also supported by the investigation into the perceptions of heritage in New Zealand by Julie Warren and Elizabeth Ashton (2000, 25) who found that "economic benefits of heritage should be sought only if they benefit conservation, and are captured by local people".

The wide divergence in the understandings of heritage is clearly reflected in my investigation into the process involved in creating a community heritage trail. While many of these findings are specific to the Hamilton East project, I believe it raises questions that should be considered by heritage professionals involved in other community projects. There is an explicit need for historians and heritage professionals to consider the perceptions and definitions of heritage within the communities they work alongside in projects such as this. This would allow heritage trails, and other heritage forms, to illustrate a wide-ranging representation of past events and ideas. Exactly how to construct a balanced view of the past, which allows room for some of the more negative aspects of our history, is an obstacle I am still to overcome in this project. Nonetheless, simply by recognising this concern, I believe that the Hamilton East project is one-step closer to being able to address it, to the satisfaction of the stakeholders concerned.

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