

## **Contested Space in Former Colonies: What is the Role of Representations of European Colonial Heritage Outside of Europe?**

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### Abstract

The implantation and representation of the European interpretation, use and presentation of space through hundreds of years of colonialization has left a built form legacy in all continents. What do we make of such places in the twenty first century? In one interpretation they represent conquest and imposition, in another they are relics of past glories. International tourism, especially that which is packaged, has generated a third interpretation. These places are physically remote from their European origins but in some aspects representative of them.

This paper examines four such places; Portuguese religious zeal in Old Goa India; the Dutch fort at Galle in Sri Lanka; the convict settlement at Port Arthur, Tasmania and the goldfields of central Victoria, the last two in Australia and both episodes in British colonialism. These places are survivors of past eras, but they are also communities where people live and work and they are sites of mass tourism. Interpretation of the history of these places is often a conflict between representations of the suffering that took place, the grandeur created by immense wealth and the desire of the tourism industry to present them as curiosities. The representation of place and space has become a commodity as the reasons for the original settlement and development no longer exist. The suggestion is that much of what is being presented as heritage has been conveniently ‘airbrushed’.

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Representations of the spaces and urban form of Europe and their conservation as built heritage are not confined to a single continent. The implantation and representation of the European use and presentation of space through hundreds of years of colonialization has left a built form legacy in all continents. Some examples represent an attempt to simply transplant form and function at a particular period, in others there has been a considerable attempt at adaptation and modification to meet local circumstances and needs. What do we make of such places in the twenty first century? One interpretation is that these are despised places,

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symbolic representations of conquest and imposition. On the other hand some are celebrated as bygone relics of past glories and periods. A third view is of curiosities, with some taking on the elements of almost ‘theme parks’, in a global tourist market looking for the next new unusual place to visit. The question arises as Staiff (2003) asks, whose heritage is it? The question particularly resonates when these places of heritage are now sites of modern mass tourism.

All these forms and spaces, even those with a contemporary interpretation, present narratives of European themes, of events and forces, of design and creativity, and yet they are all physically, and now politically and culturally remote from their European origins. This paper examines four such themes and places as case study examples. These case studies represent aspects of Portuguese, Dutch and two of British colonialism. In each instance contemporary elements of the development of space represent different versions and presentations of the colonial experience. The four themes and places are; Portuguese Catholic religious zeal in Old Goa, now part of the State of Goa in India; military power and administration as represented by the Dutch forts of Sri Lanka with a focus on the fort at the southern city of Galle; the British penal system and its convict settlement at Port Arthur in Tasmania Australia; and the architecture and urban form of the goldfields towns of central Victoria in Australia, which for a short period with unprecedented wealth, drew inspiration from across Europe. Each place is a representation of a former nation state that was once globally prominent, but now finds itself increasingly in a European setting where borders and colonial pasts are no longer relevant to much of the day-to-day life of society.

The contemporary comprehension, interpretation and exploitation of these four representative places is mixed between their presentation as a survivor of a bygone past and their current ongoing role as places where people live and work. At the same time these places are increasingly being packaged, developed and consumed by mass domestic and global tourism which often presents them as curiosity pieces, while offering employment to local communities who now view tourism as a passing parade of affluent outsiders. As Henderson (2000) notes colonial places often represent disturbing associations and symbolic reminders of oppression. They do not necessarily sit comfortably with the current use of space whether as places of contemporary life or for economic gain through tourism.

Mindful of the economic resource these places now represent, development interests are now in conflict with the local, national and international pressures to preserve such places as sites of truly significant cultural heritage. Lowenthal (1985) in his seminal work suggests that the ‘invention’ of the past is a construct that only represents those elements which contemporary society wants to see. Hardship, suffering and cruelty are overlooked or are just a component part of the package. These places now attract ‘creative classes’ on a temporary or permanent basis who have their own version of how space should be interpreted, presented and used. Increasingly such persons are supporting cultural festivals and artistic events to express their new sense of ownership of such places as sites of creativity, as these places are often seen to represent and are portrayed

in the tourist literature. Sofield (2009:3470) refers to the role of heritage 'touristscape' in a post-colonial milieu.

This almost confusion in roles produces a contrasting set of images and roles. Adams (2010:118) notes that "despite its drawbacks, tourism may be the best hope for economic development in less developed countries." But tourism based on heritage has the potential to debase the resource. Hughes and Carlsen (2010:17) recognise that "while cultural heritage is valued as a community resource, it also often forms the focus for tourism business. The business of cultural heritage tourism essentially requires catering to a market desire to experience the past in an entertaining way."

Systematic programs to conserve and preserve these places through physical restoration and by formal recognition in planning instruments have heightened their profile. Each of the four case study locations is recognized as a World Heritage site or there is an active campaign to seek listing. All are recognized formally at their national level as representational of an important past period. With this recognition and profile, tourism, both mass and special interest, has arisen but largely it has been of the exploitative type. Thus the representation of place and space has become a commodity, as the reasons for the original settlement and development no longer exist or at least only exist to provide a marketing theme for brochures and websites.

Significant ongoing research questions are raised in the subject places. How are these colonial representations to be seen? How can they realistically be preserved when their presentation represents an era long gone and not willingly embraced by contemporary residents? The suggestion is that much of what is being presented as heritage has been conveniently 'airbrushed'. Waitt (2000) provides a detailed examination of an area known as 'the Rocks' in Sydney Australia. It is now a site of up-market shops, restaurants and boutique accommodation at the foot of the Sydney Harbour Bridge looking across the water to the Sydney Opera House. But it was once the site of the city's worst slums in the very buildings that have been converted to these new uses. Waitt notes that much of society is now fragmentary and as a consequence the true meaning of places is conveniently forgotten or overlooked. Logan and Reeves (2008) refer to these situations as 'difficult heritage'.

This paper explores four such places that provide evidence of the themes I have referred to. Each is contrasting in the role and purpose of the colonial settlements and represent three different colonial powers.

Goa is a former Portuguese colony on the Arabian Sea coastline of India. This enclave was founded in the early sixteenth century as a trading post. Religious zeal quickly saw it associated with the imposition of Roman Catholicism and the some of the worst excesses of the Inquisition. As Axelrod and Fuerch (1996:37) describe the role of the Portuguese as "desiring to preserve much of the precolonial village economic

structure, yet determined to force their Goan subjects to total conversion to Catholicism, the Portuguese created policies that had a dramatic impact on Goan culture and identity.”

In a contemporary Indian context the 2006 census identifies that there are still some 360,000 Indians (26% of the population of the State of Goa) who are adherents to the Christian religion. The Portuguese in the city of Old Goa which stood as the capital of the colony for over 300 years quickly went about the business of building churches. Old Goa and specifically its churches have led to its registration on the World Heritage List. The three most significant churches still stand, their size and elaborate internal and external decoration and grandeur are a testament to the imposition of religion. In the words of the UNESCO World Heritage Listing for Old Goa, “the churches and convents of Goa, the former capital of the Portuguese Indies – particularly the Church of Bom Jesus, which contains the tomb of St Francis-Xavier – illustrate the evangelization of Asia. These monuments were influential in spreading forms of Manuline, Mannerist and Baroque art in all the countries of Asia where missions were established.”

What is to be made of this place in the twenty first century? Saldanha (2002:96) notes, “contemporary change in Goa is very much connected to tourism. The palm-ringed beaches, low prices, reliable climate and a certain easy-going way of life attract more than a million visitors yearly, culminating around Christmas.” This leads to what he describes as a struggle over the meaning of Goa’s time and space (Saldanha 2002:97). He observes that such places struggle to define themselves “especially perhaps those places formerly colonized by European powers.” The contemporary scene is strange indeed with poor Hindi female laborers weeding the church gardens, while itinerant sellers with fake Rolex watches pester tourists who visit vast European churches dripping with gold that cater for tiny local congregations.

The second city is Galle, with its dramatic fort on the southwest tip of Sri Lanka facing the Indian Ocean. First established by the Portuguese in 1505 but essentially built by the Dutch who were in command from 1640 for over one hundred and fifty years. The fort features a massive fortified wall of solid granite. The Dutch built Galle from a small local trading port into one the finest examples of a European fort and Dutch administrative centre seen anywhere in the world. In the words of the UNESCO World Heritage Listing citation, “it is the best example of a fortified city built by Europeans in South and South-East Asia, showing the interaction between European architectural styles and South Asian traditions.” Capitalising on a rocky promontory jutting out into ocean the fort was so well built that it has survived largely in tact. Even the 2004 tsunami couldn’t dislodge its inhabitants who watched the water swirl around them and devastate the newer city built on the gentle slopes inland. The old walled city is slowly being brought back to life by some targeted conservation works but the ‘restorative’ action is primarily by tourist operators who are progressively acquiring former shops and houses to convert into boutique accommodation and shops. The inhabitants of the fort now find that their house prices have climbed steeply and that locals can no longer

afford to buy into an area that had fallen into repair.

The third example is drawn from Tasmania – Australia’s island state, where at Port Arthur the British built a model penitentiary and generally housed the worst of the worst convicts. Located on an isolated peninsula in an idyllic setting, the prison was physically separated from the mainland by guard dogs. It used such methods as prisoners prevented from seeing or hearing other prisoners and flogging for minor offences. The prison ceased in 1877 and then much of it was burnt in a forest fire that spread to the site. For years all there was to show was an almost ghostly outline of the stone and brick buildings that remained. Then tourism discovered Port Arthur. ”The buildings and ruins that dot the landscape also serve as reminders of post-convict uses and meanings; of a thriving tourist town set amidst the ruins of a past that has sat curiously, but uncomfortably, within the present” (Steele 2005:71). All that was shattered in 1996 when a mentally disturbed man from Hobart with a dislike for tourists killed 35 people in a shooting rampage at Port Arthur. Tourists who visit now see not only the site of mass brutality in the nineteenth century but pass the memorials to those gunned down as tourists in the latter years of the twentieth century. How does one make a place of such a story, is it in fact a place? All the remaining relics of the buildings that once housed hundreds of prisoners are mere shells, in a theme park like setting. The place appears to exist without its central purpose. It essentially only exists as a tourist attraction. Ironically the Australian Heritage Places Inventory describes it in these terms, ”Port Arthur Historic Site is of great historic cultural heritage value to Tasmania and Australia for its ability to demonstrate the convict period from 1830 to 1877 and its ability to demonstrate the subsequent developments of the site, *particularly as a tourist attraction and the attempts to down play the site’s convict history.* (Author emphasis)

The fourth place is the goldfields of Victoria in Australia. These goldfields are extensive and cover an area of about 25,000 square kilometers. It was, from the middle of the nineteenth century, the most productive gold area in the world and it attracted thousands of persons from across the world. The exploitation was of the landscape which was literally pushed aside in pursuit of the wealth that lay beneath it. While there is still limited mining, the reality is that most of it has settled back into cities and towns with their own employment or agricultural base. The area is now home to about half a million people who are largely oblivious to their past and are only reminded by the large dumps of spill from the mines that still dot the urban and rural landscape, and the exceptionally grand public buildings and private houses that were built that represent the wealth of the times but now often sit as reminders of long gone money. Lennon (1997:10) quotes Professor Weston Bate’s claim that the goldfields is one of the world’s great cultural areas because of its unique role in Australian history, because of the unprecedented inland development and the extensive transplantation of nineteenth century urban culture to this part of the world.

Tourists now come to see these places but they are often points of conflict for local residents, many of whom

despise these gold heritage landforms. Many of these landforms are overgrown with trees and other vegetation and are now seen as fire traps. This was demonstrated on 'Black Saturday' (February 2009) when significant numbers of heritage properties were burnt and there were calls to clear the landscape. Significantly a particular area of the goldfields, known as the Mount Alexander Diggings, have now been the subject of a call by the Premier of Victoria for an application for world heritage listing.

Each of these four places represents a past period of exploitation of the original native residents, a plundering of resources and systems of wealth and power long gone. Is their future representation to be largely places visited by tourists on package deals that spend a day in such destinations largely unaware of the role and history of such spaces as they move through? Their only reminder when they return home, a collection of digital images and some cheap souvenirs bought to ward off the locals who descend upon them looking for a quick return from the new moneyed classes, ironically many from Europe. Is the fate of these places to now once more be places of exploitation or is it possible that with concerted effort they can be presented as what they truly represent?

Ac that swept across much of the world from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. It touched many places and in some it left almost indelible representations. Much of what was associated with that period in world history is now associated with greed and exploitation. Exploitation of the indigenous population, the landscape, the environment, and the natural resource base. The landscape was seen as something to be transformed for the use of humans and religion was imposed by aggressive regimes on native populations. Vast areas were conquered in the process. In many respects the most lasting impressions and impacts were twofold. Firstly, the mass destruction of forests and vegetation – the clearing of land for agriculture and in those specific places where cities or places were built as sites of power and command. Secondly, sites and places that were totally transformed to serve a specific colonial purpose such as military bases, centres of legal and religious administration, goals and penal settlements or mining. These were places of immense investment and now long after they have served their purpose some remains are still to be found. Enough at least that some have become sites of tourism, much of it international. We now have the irony that places that were once centres of European colonial exploitation are now largely commandeered by the local population who are devising means to 'exploit' the unsuspecting European tourist.

What can we make of such places? Are they in fact real places any more or just overdone tourist places, almost theme park like, where the real dark history that many of them hide has been airbrushed out so that they can present their best side. The fact is that real people live in these places, they are now home to an often unusual mix of indigenous people, descendants of colonialists and people from other nationalities brought in to serve a particular role. They share diverse ethnicities, languages and religions. This mix is now often the basis of an expanding tourist industry that promotes the unusual juxtapositions as an added

attraction. The use of the past as a lure to attract visitors often appears to lack any clear historical interpretation and direction as to what is being marketed as a tourist attraction.

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