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To preserve or not to preserve – remembering the painful sites of history

Prisons, massacre and internment sites may be the ugly face of history but the heritage status of such places poses unique challenge for those who manage and visit such sites, academics believe.

In a new book, *Remembering Places of Pain and Shame – Dealing with Difficult Heritage*, edited by Professor William Logan of Deakin University and Dr Keir Reeves of Melbourne University and to be released in December, the question is asked whether there are some places whose history is so painful that they shouldn't be preserved.

The book, based on research funded through the Australian Research Council Discovery grant, looks at the management challenges posed by places of pain and shame in Australia and around the world. Sites include places of massacre and genocide such as Myall Creek, Auschwitz and Hiroshima, war time internment sites such as Cowra Japanese War Ceremony, civil and political prisons such as Port Arthur and Norfolk Island and places of benevolent internment such as Kew Asylum, the Woomera refugee centre and Bonegilla migrant camp.

"In the past there was an elitist view of what constituted heritage, but heritage is not just mansions and cathedrals," explained Professor Logan who is UNESCO Chair of Heritage and Urbanism at Deakin University.

"Increasingly we have as a society and as heritage professionals become interested in the aspects of our heritage that reflect the painful and shameful incidents of our past". So UNESCO and the World Heritage Committee broadened the definition of places of cultural significance to include places of pain and shame.

"Places like Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Gorée and Robben Island were placed on the heritage register because such places would remind us of the awful things we did in the past and so we would avoid doing them in the future.

"The inclusion of these places on the register in a way takes us back to the original constitution of UNESCO which states 'that since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed', but the definition of what is culturally significant can be problematic.

"If all forms of social behaviour can be regarded as part of one's culture where do you draw the line?"

Professor Logan said Ku Klux Klan rituals would be considered culturally significant by some groups who might argue for their preservation. "Similarly there are efforts to make Anlong Veng, the site of Pol Pot's grave in Cambodia, into a heritage tourism destination," he said.

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“There is a case for allowing these places to be destroyed. Unfortunately there are people in Cambodia who still treat it as a shrine.

“A chapter in the book written by Colin Long, also from Deakin University, and Keir Reeves puts the argument that where these are relics of the perpetrators of pain and shame that they should be allowed to disappear. Keeping places where people suffered, there is a message in that; there is no useful message in keeping Pol Pot’s house.”

Professor Logan said among the challenges for heritage and tourism professionals in interpreting such sites was ensuring that the interpretations encouraged people visiting them to think in useful and positive ways.

“I am not a supporter of Dark Tourism – travel to sites associated with death or suffering – where some people go to get a kick out of it. Our task in interpreting these places of pain and shame is to do it in a sensitive way rather than treating them as places of entertainment so people can get ghoulish pleasure out of it.”