

Historic Preservation, Significance, and Phenomenology

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Most current efforts in American historic preservation differentiate "valuable" from "non-valuable" places. This approach is referred to as "significance" and leads to designations such as the U.S. National Register of Historical Places—a list of buildings, structures, and landscapes with purported historical significance. Four National Register criteria—(1) events from the past, (2) people from the past, (3) architectural merit, and (4) archaeological significance—are used at the federal, state, and local levels to distinguish so-called "important" from "unimportant" places.

This designation process relies on ambiguous principles established through an empiricist-positivist paradigm assuming as real only phenomena directly observable by the senses (Tainter & Lucas, 1983). Ignored in the designation process are dimensions of significance derived from experience and socio-cultural values (Wells 2010a; Waterton, Smith & Campbell, 2006, 349). As a result, preservation practitioners routinely overlook the values of local populations and instead exert their profession's expert judgments in determining which places have historical significance (Mason, 2003). As Hudson and James (2007, 258) charge, preservationists too often focus on "explaining why places have been designated, and the consequences of this, rather than finding out why people value places."

Legal frameworks, which discourage subjective meanings because they are difficult to defend in a court of law, exacerbate this reliance on professional values to determine significance. For instance, the primary reason for the 1977 Secretary of

the Interior's Standards was to provide objective, defensible criteria for the new federal historic-preservation tax credit. Municipalities established local historic preservation ordinances based on the Standards, even though there was no federal requirement to do so.

Today, almost every aspect of historic preservation in the United States is interpreted through the Standards' ten directives addressing the rehabilitation of historic properties. The criteria for these directives can be traced to the Venice Charter (ICOMOS, 1964), the Athens Charter (Congress in Athens, 1931), the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings Manifesto (Morris, 1996/1877), and the writings of John Ruskin (1989/1849). Whether intentional or not, historic preservation has done a remarkably good job at preserving the preservation views assumed by a white, British, upper-class, male, nineteenth-century value system.

But ask most people not inculcated in this expert value system why they appreciate historic places and inevitably their response relates to an emotional attachment to place. Such experiences have a basis in the lifeworld and, as Elliott (2002, 54) advocates, lend themselves to phenomenological interpretation:

The phenomenological approach is of particular relevance when dealing with the questions of significance for preservation. ... If a historical place is such a phenomenon, then the term 'significant' should be used in preservation to describe places whose physical character and matrices of historical, mythical, and social associations can and do evoke experiences of awe, wonder, beauty, and identity, among others.

One could argue that the philosophic origins of historic preservation do, in fact, have a basis in the

lifeworld. For instance, the widely accepted godfather of preservation, John Ruskin (1819/1849, 186) wrote:

For, indeed, the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, not in its gold. Its glory is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity.

Ruskin's "voicefulness" here refers to the emotional impact of an historical place on its experienter. Alois Riegl (1966/1903, 64) took this idea further by identifying two contrasting sets of preservation values: First, "age value," which "addresses the emotions directly"; and, second, "historical value" which "rests on a scientific basis." Riegl's designation is significant phenomenologically because it distinguishes preservation values grounded in lifeworld experience from those values grounded in expert judgments.

As historic preservation matured in the twentieth century, however, preservation doctrine eviscerated subjectivity from its practice. Any mention of emotional experience was criticized for creating "false images" and romanticizing the past (Cliver, 1992). Creating so-called "truthful" historic environments is traditionally a major emphasis of historic preservation practice to this day (Wells 2010b).

In my research in Charleston, South Carolina, where the first U.S. historic district was created in 1931, I discovered that historical meaning is regularly related to residents' lifeworld experiences (Wells, 2009). I found that Charleston residents defined an authentic place through how their environment evoked what I call *spontaneous fantasy*—the power of a place to catalyze imagined memories about the past. My informants described how their presence in certain neighborhood places would trigger a vignette of the past to materialize in their mind's eye. Through phenomenological interpretation of these accounts, I found that, often, this experience related to the environmental appearance of patina and decay. Where there was no obvious sign of age through decay, there was no spontaneous fantasy. The decay was essential for the resulting sense of mystery and discovery (see photographs, following).



An informant in the author's dissertation research took this Charleston photograph in the moment he saw, in his mind's eye, Civil War soldiers marching up these steps.

The argument here is that, far from being a tangential pursuit, phenomenology should form a core methodology for understanding how people are attached to older built environments. The discoveries of phenomenological investigation could then be used to identify what is and is not significant preservation-wise. In addition, one could better determine how preservation practitioners should engage in interventions to preserve people's attachments to historic environments.

There are several reasons, however, for why the integration of phenomenological research in historic preservation is difficult to achieve presently. Preservation practitioners typically have little social-science background, and social scientists, geographers, and environment-behavior researchers have shown limited interest in historic-preservation research. In addition, American graduate programs in historic preservation seem currently disinterested in educating historic-preservation practitioners in environment-behavior and phenomenological methods.

One driver of change may be the increasing interest of non-Western countries in historic preservation. In China, for instance, cultural differences have helped trigger a flexibility in interpreting environmental authenticity through local cultural values (Agnew & Demas, 2004). Driven by a need to recognize aboriginal values, the Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS, 1999) and the Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS, 1994) have opened the door to cultural pluralism, though still embedded in the positivistic framework of traditional preservation practice.

While the importance of contemporary social, cultural, and experiential values in historic preservation has enjoyed an increasingly wider debate over the past decade, there is a concern that this movement has already been eclipsed by the desire of the field to be associated with environmental sustainability.

In this sense, one positivistic paradigm is substituted for another as historic preservation remains staunchly associated with technological solutions and unwilling to grapple with fundamental, subjective issues regarding the valuation of place. If, ostensibly, we are preserving older places for the benefit of *people*, then why does historic preservation regularly ignore or reject their experiences and values?



For the informant who took this Charleston photograph, the ruts in the flagstone helped catalyze an image of cotton wagons delivering goods to a distant warehouse.

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