

Authenticity in More than One Dimension: Reevaluating a Core Premise of Historic Preservation

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[A]uthenticity is a vehicle through which [people] can experience a fantasy past that may never have been, but that nevertheless holds meaning for each person who imagines it.

DYDIA DELYSER¹

The relationship between fantasy and authenticity has long been a taboo subject in historic preservation and is symptomatic of the discipline's reluctance to tackle subjective phenomena. The "social responsibility"² of historic preservationists to protect the public from "false images" and the dangers of "invoking fantasy"³ is an example of the fervor to which subjective meanings have been effectively eradicated from the

few white men in elite positions more than 50 years ago and has changed little since then.⁷ One of these foundational principles is authenticity, or the way in which "real" historic places are differentiated from "fake" places. Not only is there more than one kind of authenticity, but fantasy may play an important and unacknowledged role in helping to define this concept.

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extant building or landscape fabric. This fabric-based perspective demands that sufficient materials

profession and may even represent the "misguided" social engineering of the masses, as some critics charge.⁴ In particular, the traditional, fabric-based definition of authenticity ignores a diverse range of subjective meanings that may, in fact, be immensely important to stakeholders.

If there is truth to claims that historic preservation is based on ambiguous premises⁵ and "lacks a logical basis" to substantiate its activities⁶ then maybe our core assumptions need to be revisited. Perhaps it is time to reevaluate the theoretical foundation of a discipline that was defined in almost total isolation from the public by a

must exist from certain periods of time; with insufficient fabric there is a lack of authenticity. Authenticity has additional connotations beyond a direct connection with building and landscape fabric, however. One need go no further than to look at how the word is used in everyday language: An "authentic" Italian cannoli is not required to be the original and only cannoli ever created, but must simply employ authentic ideas and correct items in its construction. Thus, in this sense, authenticity is not fabric-centered, it is idea-centered or constructed from meanings. Authenticity is also used in connec-

tion with an occurrence, as in an authentic experience—such as a trip to Venice, Italy, compared to “The Venetian” in Las Vegas—replete with experiential overtones. In this last instance, authenticity is therefore experience-centered.

Researchers Jamal and Hill describe these types of authenticity as “objective,” “constructed,” and “personal” authenticity.⁸ This paper will use the terms “fabric-based,” “constructed,” and “phenomenological (experiential)” authenticity.

FABRIC-BASED AUTHENTICITY

Fabric-based authenticity forms the core of traditional definitions of historical integrity, such as the seven aspects of integrity described by the National Park Service.⁹ Objective values are associated with this kind of authenticity, wherein “original” building or landscape fabric or fabric that has witnessed the passage of events from an important period of significance, remains extant. The goal behind applying objective values is to achieve a high degree of detachment in the assessment process and attempt to quantify, when possible, as with rarity value or the number of historical facts associated with a particular place. These values are the domain of educated experts—either academics or professionals—who use their skills to define value based on their own discipline’s standards; as a result the public may have difficulty in understanding the rationale behind these kinds of expert-value definitions. (Sometimes even experts from disparate disciplines will not even agree on these values.) An example is an architectural historian who places a high value on a building, such as the Villa Savoye by Le Corbusier, because it is rare example of design genius.

CONSTRUCTED AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity can also be defined through the lens of ideas or meanings rather than physical fabric. In this sense, a heritage object that is deemed authentic achieves this state through culturally or socially approved ideas or meanings that can exist independently of physical reality. For instance, in Japan, authenticity is defined in this manner. The “1,000-year old” temples in Japan may actually contain very little original fabric from their construction, but what is preserved are the ideas embodied in their construction rather than the actual construction materials; as a symbol, the temples are preserved. Every year, a painstaking process rebuilds parts of these structures. The methods used in doing this activity employ traditional crafts; much care is taken to preserve the symbolic ideas conveyed by the temple through replicative design. Preservation of fabric is a secondary concern.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL (EXPERIENTIAL) AUTHENTICITY

Phenomenology is the philosophical study of beginnings applied to the highly personal, individual experience in the “lifeworld.” It seeks to uncover the subjective elements of personal experience the moment they occur before subsequent personal reflection reduces the richness of the experience. Phenomenological authenticity focuses on the individual’s experience of being in and relating to the world¹⁰ by utilizing Merleau-Ponty’s foundational work as “a way of thinking through the body in its participatory reaction with the world” to reveal emotional attachments to certain places.¹¹ For instance, upon entering the Notre Dame Cathedral, one might immedi-



Contemporary social, cultural, and experiential values are key to understanding how everyday people value ordinary places, such as this landscape in Bisbee, Ariz.

PHOTO BY JEREMY WELLS

ately feel sensations of awe and wonder accompanied by a spine-tingling sensation. This initial, emotional reaction to a place is what phenomenology attempts to understand, which is why it is frequently used in medical research to study people's experience with pain. Research in sense of place and place attachment by humanistic geographers, such as Yi-Fu Tuan¹² and David Seamon,¹³ is also based on phenomenology. If we accept that the emotional bond with a place has a phenomenological basis then the fundamental basis of historical authenticity resides

fantasy. According to Rodney Harrison, "ruin and decay [evoke] the phenomenological sense of 'being-affected-by-the-past'" and foster a "creative space within which new memories can be evoked and created."¹⁴ What is the nature of this process of "being affected"? Inevitably, the answer leads to the creative act of the imagination. Robert Riley refers to the term "vicarious" as a type of landscape experience

in which the real, observed landscape leads to an internally experienced landscape that is far richer and more personal than the 'real' landscape. Vicarious is an inadequate name for this experience, but it does dramatically mark the distinction from the 'real,' or observable, landscape experience, and it is at least as adequate as the other terms that come to my mind—fantasy landscape or internal landscape narrative.¹⁵

After all, "the most perfectly preserved building or document becomes evocative, indeed, 'historical,' only through our imagination."¹⁶

In my own dissertation research in historic Charleston, which employed a phenomenology-based analysis followed by a survey, I found that one way in which the local residents define the authenticity of their neighborhood is through their

experiences of spontaneous fantasy. Ann, a resident of this area, told me

that her neighborhood gives her "a bit of melancholy sense [where] things are overwhelmed by the passage of time" because to her, this place is filled with mystery and intrigue. In a similar sense, Dave described how historic Charleston is like a time

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in individuals' life experiences. Other forms of authenticity—fabric-based and constructed—must therefore rest on this phenomenological platform.

The experience of the lifeworld is by definition highly subjective and prone to

machine to the past, while Sam, looking at a balcony, described how in his time travel to an antebellum era he saw in his mind's eye "people sitting out there and just yaking and so forth with a mint julep." The experiences my informants related were deeply personal and emotional and as such very difficult to resolve into the objective measures of significance required by traditional methods. Moreover the "memories" they were sharing were often not factual and involved fantasies.

Environments that are more likely to engender spontaneous fantasy are also considered to be the most authentic. In this research I discovered a strongly positive correlation between spontaneous fantasy and the appearance of patina (or decay) in the environment. There was also a positive correlation between spontaneous fantasy and residents' emotional attachment to their neighborhoods. Historic Charleston, therefore, is "authentic" to the local population because of increased levels of place attachment catalyzed by spontaneous fantasy.¹⁷

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Recognizing and understanding the different dimensions of authenticity requires a shift to a "values-centered" approach, moving away from the "fabric-centered bias" that currently dominates the field.¹⁸ A values-centered approach "gives[s] priority to the memories, ideas, and other social motivations that drive the urge to physically preserve the built environment."¹⁹ In essence, it redefines the role of the preservation professional from directly characterizing significance to one in which the professional learns what is significant to a local population and then uses these meanings to guide the management of a historic place. Thus, the preservation professional

no longer solely generates ideas and meanings independent of a local population, but rather employs a range of social science methodologies to collect meanings from this population in synthesis with traditional fabric-centered ideals. Once gathered, these social, cultural, experiential values can help to create a far more holistic assessment of historical significance than is commonly practiced today.

City planning has long relied on community input to help guide decision-making processes, as has historic preservation. Understanding authenticity from a pluralistic perspective would be a natural progression to existing communicative-based planning processes. Preservation professionals often already unofficially acknowledge how local populations value historic places. The next logical step is to officially recognize the values of these people in the preservation planning and management process. What is currently missing is a guiding framework that would allow preservation professionals to quickly and effectively employ rigorous social science research methodologies. While some solutions exist, such as the rapid ethnographic assessment procedure,²⁰ there is much to be desired in common, everyday guidance that professionals can use. The first step, however, is for the field to acknowledge the need for this information and the importance of pluralistic interpretations of authenticity. **FJ**

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