

Historic Preservation and Cultural Diversity

(invited paper)

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INTRODUCTION

The study of the nexus of historic preservation and cultural diversity is relatively recent. The issue of interpretation and identification of sites related to culturally diverse groups is rooted in the perception that historical sites are complex documents capable of many readings. Indeed, the reason for preserving historical sites is precisely because they are the most comprehensive historical documents which exist, telling us about building technology, social mores, local geology and climate, economics, politics, art and aesthetics. Historic sites have also been destroyed, from the Bastille to the Mostar Bridge, because of this ability to carry meaning.

The inclusion of cultural diversity issues in the development of thematic contexts for the designation of historic sites means that we accept many historical sites, particularly in the United States, as not just the product of a single culture or event, but as descriptive of complex, multivalent societies made up of many different cultures and world views. It also means that different communities, often perceived or self-identified as oppressed or non-mainstream, have begun identifying and demanding recognition for historical sites which may not fall within existing categories for designation, or within existing thematic contexts constructed by the larger society. This has coincided with a growing democratization in the identification and interpretation of historic sites. There are many reasons for this: increasing public concern about the pace and nature of change to the built environment, increasing need for grassroots funding and involvement in the preservation and management of historic sites, increasing academic attention to the quotidian, and increasing personal interest among all groups in historic sites as expressions of self-hood.

Indeed, while gentrification and the selection of high-art, high-priced sites for designation and preservation are among the factors which have served to make preservation traditionally perceived as a white, upper class preoccupation, today preservation is increasingly becoming a powerful (and relatively politically acceptable) means for minority groups to assert their place in the history of the United States. This paper will discuss a number of examples, some within the context of an architecture school studio experience, which

demonstrate the possibilities for a broader, more inclusive, and, frankly, more interesting approach to two critical issues in preservation: the identification and interpretation of historic sites.

IDENTIFICATION OF RESOURCES

The identification of an historic site is not an automatic process. The National Register, through the National Park Service, has propounded criteria for decades which are aimed as establishing a standardized basis for identifying sites at the local, state and national level.' At least as important are:

- The interests of those doing the identification,
- The education of those doing the identification,
- The availability of cultural histories,
- The availability of the resources,
- The social and political will of those doing the identification.

Typically, the identification of resources is done either by individuals with specific missions or causes, or in response to the mandated need for a survey as part of environmental mitigation, zoning compliance or other law. In both these cases, architectural historians are the likely professionals involved, and they are most likely to identify sites either with significant features of architectural value, or done by significant architects or builders. It is unusual to have social historians, geographers, anthropologists or others with different interests involved in that process. The result is that sites which are important for their role in diverse cultural histories, but not likely to be covered in a course in architectural history, are frequently neglected.

The education of those doing the selection is equally critical to their interests. We do not value a history or a site without some authority backing us up. If vernacular architecture, or roadside architecture, or the dog-run cottages of the south, are not taught as being important to those doing the identification, they will not be seen, let alone seriously studied.

For that reason, the availability of cultural histories is critical to the identification of sites which describe those histories. Whether it is the identification of rural farm out-

buildings which help us understand the lives of black tenant farmers following the civil war, or of sites of the Japanese internment during WWII, or of sites, such as the Stonewall Inn, which have played a role in Gay and Lesbian Liberation movements, without the historical research it is impossible to develop the thematic context which is necessary for designation.

And because these histories have either not been developed, or developed outside the ken of those doing the identification of historic sites, or, even more critically, because many of these sites have been in areas not protected by economic or political power, many of the historical sites needed to tell these stories have already been destroyed. Dolores Hayden's Power of Place project included an example of attempting to tell an important story without the resource present. Biddy Mason Park in Los Angeles describes with plaques the fascinating history of a black woman who came to LA in the 19th century and had a significant social impact in the city. But a parking garage sits on the site of her homestead today.

Finally, the identification of these resources is political. Unlike historical sites like the houses of Frank Lloyd Wright, which are generally perceived as above the political fray, being eligible by virtue of aesthetic or architectural significance, the designation of sites which tell the story of minority histories are embroiled in controversy. Some of the debate arises from still-present conflicts between groups, some from the need for public funding, some from the lack of consensus that historical sites without aesthetic merit are worthy of preservation.

INTERPRETATION OF RESOURCES

In the same manner, the interpretation of sites, how we tell the story, even how we preserve the site, is dependent on the education and interests of those doing the interpretation, the site's owner, the perceived audience, funding and political will.

If the docent leading a tour, or the historian (assuming one was involved) writing the interpretative guide, is neither interested in nor conversant with the history of minority sites, the story will not be told. Only recently, for example, have some southern plantations begun including discussions of the slave economy and the living conditions and settings for slaves. In at least one apparently successful recent example, descendants of the owners tell the story of the main house, while descendants of the slaves take over the tour for the fields and outbuildings. Even today at the Alamo, in what one historian calls the "Second Battle of the Alamo," the complex story of American and Tejano settlers fighting the imposition of taxes, arguing about slavery, and seeking reinstatement of the liberal Mexican constitution of 1824, is subsumed in the symbolism of a shrine to martyrdom and the battle for Texas independence.*

The audience for historic sites, their ethnic composition and expectations, also determines what is interpreted. For historic sites to start fully interpreting their ethnic histories,

diverse audiences need to visit the sites. Of course, the sites will not attract those audiences unless the interpretation is there. The need for many sites to reach out to audiences in their area is a powerful incentive for developing programs and stories of relevance. At Rancho Los Alamitos, in Long Beach, California, the home of a wealthy Anglo ranching and oil family, the Bixbys, is the setting for multi-cultural festivals and other events based on the interpretative premise of "an island in a sea of change." Within that framework, the Statement of Significance suggests, the Ranch can "illustrate patterns of lifestyle and land use, from the sprawling cattle ranchos of the Spanish and Mexican periods, to the tenant farming community of the early 20th century, and, finally, the modern urban and suburban development."³ Programs illustrate that all families in California are immigrants, and came to a place that had other cultures already in residence; that growth and change happens to everyone even while cultures and peoples adapt and stay coherent. Conversely, at the Adolphus Stern House, the oldest wood frame residence in Texas, located in Nacogdoches, we are told that Stern was a German immigrant, but not that he was Jewish, as were many of the early pioneers who helped build, and even fund, the independent Republic of Texas. After all, how many Jews visit small historic sites in East Texas? It would appear none are involved in its interpretation.

The entertainment value of historic sites also mitigates against some interpretations. The "Disneyland" expectation of a clean, fun Main Street with numerous shopping opportunities runs counter to the interpretation of a site as the setting of oppression, poverty, or struggle. Heritage tourism, sometimes identified as one of the fastest growing industries in the world, and central to the funding for many historic sites, both implies entertainment (to many travelers and site administrators), and sets up a commodification process in which a local culture's resources must be made palatable and interesting to the paying public, regardless of the changes wrought in local cultural practices or in the accurate depiction of the site's meaning and history.

Private foundations and governmental agencies are increasingly sympathetic to minority concerns in historic sites. The City of Chicago has embarked on a program for official designation and preservation of districts which tell diverse stories, including a controversial proposal to designate North Halsted as a Gay and Lesbian neighborhood. Private funding, which is still critical to most historic sites, is rarely found in the minority communities, however. Sites in poor neighborhoods, or which tell histories perceived as irrelevant or uninteresting to wealthy donors, will simply have a harder time, unless the sites still have economic value.

Finally, the political struggles over the interpretation of historic sites are dramatic. Witness the attempt to preserve Manzanar in the Owens Valley of California. As vituperative as the debate about the Smithsonian's proposed exhibit on the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan, the battle to preserve Manzanar aroused heated arguments about whether or not the Japanese Americans at the site were really confined or free to

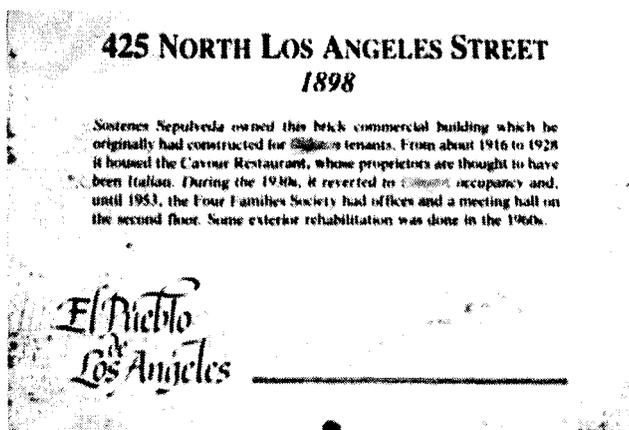


Fig. 1. A plaque on a building at El Pueblo vandalized to remove the word 'Chinese.'

go, whether there were armed guard towers, whether the site should be interpreted as a misguided act of cultural animus, or as the appropriate move in a time of war.⁴

CASE STUDIES

El Pueblo de Los Angeles

Commonly referred to as Olvera Street, the name of the small shopping district which is part of the site, El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Site was created in the late 1920s by Christine Sterling, a white socialite, to celebrate the city's Hispanic heritage and to save some of the oldest structures in Los Angeles. The historic site was created largely because, at that time, the Latino population of LA was so small. Indeed, while the Spanish founded the city in the late 18th century, by the middle of the 19th century European immigrants from Italy, France, England, Germany, and the Eastern and central US, far dominated the population. The Historic Site today is 44 acres, and includes buildings which housed an Italian Winery, French Restaurant, and Chinese Tong Halls. Yet, as LA City Councilman Mike Hernandez recently said, "It's our turn now." The interpretative plaques which describe Chinese American involvement with the site have the word Chinese scratched out. The festivals, shops, food, and all other experiences for visitors to the site are "Mexican." The buildings which do not house Mexican-related history, merchandising or cultural services, including an early power station, the first multi-story hotel in LA, buildings built for the Chinese, are vacant and deteriorating. Despite the fact that no one actually knows the location of the original pueblo, Olvera Street has become the place where the Mexican-American community in Los Angeles asserts its pride of place. Even buildings such as a 1950s bank, or the formerly art deco Bisquiluz Building, have been redone in a Mission Revival style; misinterpreting their actual history for the sake of cultural identification and heritage tourism.

Parenthetically, the Pobladores, the original group of settlers, included only 2 pure-blooded Spanish. The remainder of the 44 were *mestizos* and *mulatos*, *Indios* and *Negros*.⁵



Fig. 2. The art deco Bisquiluz Building (to the right of the church) was transformed by cultural commodification into the Mexican revival style of adjacent Olvera Street.

St. Elmo Village

The first preservation studio I taught at USC used as its subject St. Elmo Village, a small African-American artists' community in central Los Angeles. The ten buildings which formed the complex were largely farm buildings, simple cottages, even chicken coops, from the early part of the century reorganized on the site as the area became increasingly urbanized. The studio helped support a design charrette organized by the Design Professionals Coalition as a result of the LA riots.⁶ Students built models, worked as "pencils" for the architects involved in the charrette, published a book, and then prepared their own rehabilitation schemes.

During the course of the charrette, one of the architects prepared a series of drawings for what she described as the "bungalows." Indeed, the drawings showed stone porches and other typical features of the California bungalow. Unfortunately for historical accuracy, the actual residences are plain cottages, and that fact is part of the site's importance: a group of very simple, "dumb" buildings can be transformed by the artist's brush and presence into an extraordinary environment of learning and support. The architect needed what she worked on to be better than it was, but neither history nor the village did.

Fiji

In summer 1995, I led a preservation studio in Levuka, the original colonial capital of Fiji. Today it is probably the last relatively intact whaling town in the South Pacific.' This studio was aimed at exploring issues of heritage tourism and vernacular architecture, as well as seeing if preservation ethos' differed substantially between Fiji and the US. The eight students and I first spent a week in Hawaii looking at historic sites which characterized the region's history (such as Waipahu Plantation), and also at its traditional architecture. Fiji and Hawaii share a similar history, although they are 3000 miles apart. Both were island archipelagos brought under western control in the 19th century. Their primary economic



Fig. 3. The simple cottages of St. Elmo Village, transformed by the artist residents and students into a singular cultural institution.

engine was sugar cane, and today is tourism. Their indigenous populations were overtaken in numbers and power by immigrants from other countries brought in to work the plantations. In the case of Fiji, however, the Melanesians initiated a series of coups in the 1980s which greatly reduced the power and the population of the former guest workers, Indians from the subcontinent.

The resources we were looking at in Levuka dated from the turn of the century, and included the oldest (and still operating) hotel, public school, Masonic lodge and private club in the South Pacific. While we visited several traditional villages, and looked at bure construction and patterns of use, we were not invited to Fiji to preserve those resources. Rather, we were invited to work on resources which were built by westerners 'like us.' Among the design exercises were urban design charrettes for four sites in the town. The most interesting of these was the shop houses along Beach Street. Fijian towns are traditionally inhabited by descendants of the Indian immigrants, who are the merchant class today, while villages are occupied by Fijians (indigenous Melanesians). In Levuka, the shopkeepers live behind their stores in buildings which are officially designated historic structures. Because the town is full, and the surrounding land is Fijian village land,

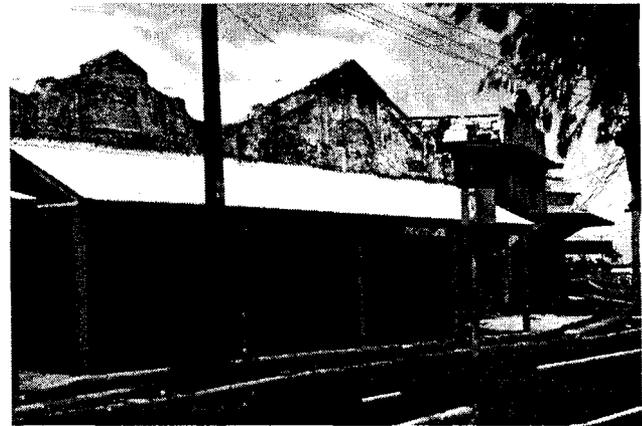


Fig. 4. Typical Beach Street businesses, c. 1890s, of Levuka, Fiji.

there is nowhere for the growing Indian families to move. Yet, expanding their homes threatens the historic character and is currently forbidden by ordinance. The student project was to develop a design prototype which maintained the significant features of the buildings, particularly their appearance along Beach Street, while allowing for increased height in back.

For the students in the class, confronting this mix of cultural diversity, racial animosity, and historic preservation, was an eye-opening experience. It forced the students to take nothing for granted: the meaning of a place, level of interest or concern, history of care or neglect, all varied from site to site, and from inhabitant to inhabitant. Because it was Fiji, the students knew their own limitations, and were sensitive to these issues. As Olvera Street and St. Elmo Village make clear, however, even in the United States preservationists need to operate with the same kind of sensitivity, free of cultural biases or assumptions; or at the least, working with a heightened consciousness of their own cultural position. Levuka is unusual in Fiji in that these kinds of issues can be relatively freely discussed. Fortunately, it appears that many of the race-based laws passed during the coups are about to be abandoned. Levuka itself is a candidate for designation as a World Heritage Site.

Parenthetically, a difficult part of the studio was getting approval from other faculty to go to Fiji in the first place. "We don't mind you doing preservation, but on things worth preserving. In Europe, for instance...." "As long as you study the cultural response to climate...." Only a few faculty spoke up in defense of everyday vernacular architecture as an appropriate subject for architecture students' study. Despite many who speak out against the phenomenon of architecture as a "sport of kings," the inexpensive, the ordinary and the common, is still a difficult sell for preservation programs in architecture schools; although, perhaps, easier in programs housed in departments of history or American studies.

WHAT TO DO

There is still a lot that needs to be done in order to make historic preservation and cultural diversity the partners which

they can and should be. Critical among these is increased research, changing interpretation, broader venues for education, and changing the attitudes of preservationists, community activists and politicians.

Research

Gail Dubrow at the University of Washington has been doing pioneering research in Asian-American and women's histories, relating them to historic sites.' She describes the need for greater research into alternative histories of place. An interesting example of this kind of research is a recent demographic analysis by Jerry Lee Kramer and William Colburn,⁹ who overlaid previously prepared maps which identified gay and lesbian residential patterns in Minneapolis/St. Paul, onto a map of historic districts in the two cities. The locally-designated historic districts had over twice the density of gays and lesbians compared to the rest of the twin cities (+30%). This indicates a strong correlation between the in-migration of gays and lesbians and the conservation and rehabilitation of historic neighborhoods in Minneapolis/St. Paul. Numerous past anecdotal studies have extrapolated similar correlations to a significant gay and lesbian role in the revitalization of inner city neighborhoods. To many politically involved gays and lesbians, that has raised real issues when their community is participating in the supplantation of one minority group by another, and then, eventually by the dominant culture. This pattern has been seen in cities such as London, New York, and San Francisco, dating back at least to the late 1960s.

Change Interpretations

Interpretations at historic sites need to be modified to accommodate changing audiences, and to more accurately reflect the diverse histories most sites actually document. This is not a new phenomenon. Throughout the history of the preservation movement in the United States, sites have been identified, deemed significant, and interpreted in varying ways depending on the time and place. Over the past 120 years, since Mount Vernon, society has selected historic sites first which commemorated Revolutionary and Civil War battles and the lives of great men, later because of the aesthetic and architectural merit of the property, while today sites are identified and interpreted in terms of the way they describe the everyday lives of people in times past. Even Williamsburg has been looking for ways to make itself more "common" and therefore more authentic. The inclusion of alternate cultural histories is a natural next step in this development.

The City of Pasadena has several historic districts, a fairly comprehensive survey, and a strong office of historic preservation within the building department. Recently, however, consultants such as Ronald Lewis have been describing an alternative model of identification to that used by traditional surveys. This was done partly in response to the fact that the survey had resulted in historic resources being unevenly distributed around the city, with many poorer districts having

none. Rather than utilizing the criteria developed by the National Park Service, it was proposed that each neighborhood identify those sites in their community which they would like to see preserved. It could be a tree, a church, or even an otherwise nondescript building which had sufficient associations with community members that they wanted to keep it around. The rationale was 1) to challenge the concept that preservation professionals have the right, whatever their expertise or education, to determine which resources have meaning or convey memory to individuals within a community; and 2) to recognize each community's need or right to a physical record of their presence. If the community is to play a role in preserving a resource, it should have a say in identifying that resource. Obviously, this is a polemic that bears further debate.

Broader Education

Professionals need to be better educated about the role all types of cultural resources can play in documenting our history; not just authored and vernacular architecture, but transportation corridors, cultural landscapes and urban districts. Preservationists, particularly historical architects, need to learn to appreciate, where appropriate, anonymous and common cultural resources. And preservationists also need to broaden the mission of the field beyond the conservation of individual structures, to use preservation as a mechanism for empowering minority groups, for hiring minority at-risk youth, and broadening community involvement in their own neighborhood's past and future.

The public also needs to be better educated about historic preservation, and its opportunities for relevant historical education and for economic development. Part of this is introducing preservation and design education into elementary schools, and part is pointing out how preservation is contributing to such things as affordable housing and community stability.

Community Involvement

With increasing democratization has come increasing politicization of historic sites. This means that historic preservationists must become adept at many of the strategies other design professionals have had to adopt: community outreach, advocacy, and significant public involvement. For historic sites to be relevant, the neighborhoods in which they reside need to be able to understand them and adopt them. Preservation should not (just) be seen as a series of expert decisions on material conservation and period furnishings, but as a dialogue between place and inhabitant over time.

In the face of increasing merchandising of the past and of "authentic experience," cultural diversity provides one of the best ways to keep preservation from descending into Bed and Breakfast purgatory. It is a way to reinvigorate sites and neighborhoods. Historic preservation as a discipline can only benefit from the involvement of new groups, with new needs, attitudes, and visions.

NOTES

- ¹ Criteria for Evaluation are stated in the brochure: "The National Register of Historic Places," prepared by the National Park Service of the US Department of the Interior, Washington DC 20240; and in the Code of Federal Regulations under 36 CFR 60 and 36 CFR 63.
- ² Susan Schoelwer, *Alamo Images: Changing Perceptions of a Texas Experience*. (Dallas: DeGolyer Library and Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), p 18. Also see: Matovina, Timothy M. *The Alamo Remembered: Tejano Accounts and Perspectives*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).
- ³ From the "Statement of Significance," Rancho Los Alamitos Foundation, Long Beach.
- ⁴ M Yaquinto, "Manzanar Camp Designated as Historic Site," *Los Angeles Times*, (February 20, 1992). See also subsequent articles about the designation and rehabilitation of the site.
- ⁵ Jean Bruce Poole, "The Meeting of Cultures at El Pueblo," unpublished manuscript, (1996). Poole is Historic Site Curator for El Pueblo.
- ⁶ Design Professionals' Coalition & St. Elmo Village, Inc., Design Charrette Final Report, Los Angeles, (1994).
- ⁷ For additional information, see Gerald T. Takano, "Learning from Levuka, Fiji — Preservation in the First Colonial Capital," *Cultural Resource Management*, Vol. 19, No. 3, (1996), National Park Service, Washington DC.
- ⁸ Gail Lee Dubrow, "Redefining the Place of Historic Preservation in Planning Education and Practice," *Planning Theory* 13, (1995).
- ⁹ William Colburn, a Detroit Historic Preservation consultant, worked with material developed by Jerry Kramer, University of Minnesota, for a forthcoming doctoral dissertation on Gay and Lesbian Population Densities in various cities of the midwest and western US.