

Conservation Panel: The Challenge of Preserving Places of Memory

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Heritage conservation as it relates to architecture and the built environment has changed drastically in the recent past. The origins of modern architectural conservation date from the early 19th century, and throughout most of that history, practitioners in the field have focused on the extant physical fabric that because its age, substance, setting and form are deemed to be essential to significance. The values perceived in fabric have shifted periodically and according to national idiosyncrasies — from the historic (or documentary and cognitive) to the aesthetic (or artistic and hedonistic) — and that shift colored the way significant architecture and historic sites were preserved. A whole sequence of different theories arose to support an ethical preservation practice that sought to preserve the values perceived to be inherent in the historic fabric at any given time and place (E.g., Ruskin, Viollet-le-Duc, Brandi et al.). In spite of the variations among the theories, they all shared one thing in common: historic preservation relies on the existence of physical, tangible evidence of the past - on immovable material culture.

In the past few years, a new trend has emerged that associates historic episodes and events with specific places where there is no tangible evidence documenting their occurrence (See Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place*). While this particular phenomenon has always been present and necessary in most societies, it has never formed part of the historic preservation field proper because of its reliance on human memory and not any materials that can be preserved.

The challenge that this presents to the traditional field of historic preservation is daunting. As it finally came to gel in the late 1960s, international preservation theory advances the notion that both the historic and aesthetic qualities of historic fabric need to be respected in their full integrity and authenticity. This is so that all information residing in that fabric can remain unchanged, but be subjected to varying interpretations by different stakeholders and by sequential generations. In other words, historic fabric is seen as an unbiased, objective witness of events past, allowing for an ongoing interpretation (a human construct) of that fabric that is subjective and changing.

The rise of sites of intangible memory is disturbing to traditional preservationists because it takes them to uncharted fields of preserving a particular interpretation of events passed without any tangible proof, which first, is dynamic, biased, subjective and constantly evolving; and secondly, requires ethnographic and anthropological skills that the traditional preservation professions (architects, landscape architects, materials conservators, engineers et al) simply do not possess. Knowing that oral traditions and myths grow out of a seed of truth, historic fabric has always served as the anchor for a factual basis. The discovery of Troy, for instance, has enabled us to assess what in Homer's *Iliad* is fact and what is fiction or poetic license. Furthermore, without tangible proof, the oral tradition lends itself to elaborative and embellishing manipulations that can be used to advance specific agendas of all types.