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PRESERVING HISTORIC URBAN DISTRICTS: ISSUES OF CULTURE CHANGE, STRESS, AND CULTURE-SUPPORTIVENESS

Kapila Dharmasena Silva
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the nature of culture change and stress, its resultant issues related to preservation programs, and the methods of dealing with such issues. It formulates a conceptual framework for culture-supportive preservation and then reviews a range of contemporary preservation practices and policies in order to identify successful ways of making historic preservation a stress-responsive and culture-supportive development activity. Six basic strategies are identified: having appropriate attitudes, greater community participation, identifying core/peripheral aspects of culture & built-form, incremental development, and cultivating financial and institutional support.

INTRODUCTION

Historic preservation intends to retain the cultural landscape and the identity of a community. Nevertheless, the inevitable pressures for development result in a change of culture, creating a stressful situation that threatens the identity, lifestyle, and social cohesion of a community. Thus, preservation of historic townscapes should be responsive to culture change: It should facilitate the desirable growth while maintaining the identity of that culture. This paper analyzes

the issues of culture change and its resultant stress in preserving historic urban landscapes, and identifies how preservation activity becomes stress-responsive and culture-supportive. The emphasis is on the socio-economic and behavioral factors than on the physical and technical aspects of preservation.

CULTURE CHANGE, STRESS AND COPING MECHANISMS

Culture is an ever-changing phenomenon. Although it is inevitable and natural, what is undesirable is radical, abrupt, and rapid culture change, which could create a critical, stressful situation in a society (Rapoport: 1983). Culture change becomes stressful when the circumstances of the change are unpredictable, and consequently, when that society loses its sense of control over the change. Accordingly, stress is synonymous with selection pressure. It arises out from the process of matching a situation against the value system of the culture. Stress is then due to excessive deviation from optimal levels set by a particular value system. This deviation is aggravated by a lack of control and predictability over the stressing change and its pace (Rapoport:1978) (Fig. 1).

Due to continuous culture-change, some degree of stress is always present within any socio-cultural system. Stress-coping mechanisms thus generally exists in a society, and in a critical stressful change, those coping mechanisms would be unable to handle the perceived impact. This may lead a culture to restore

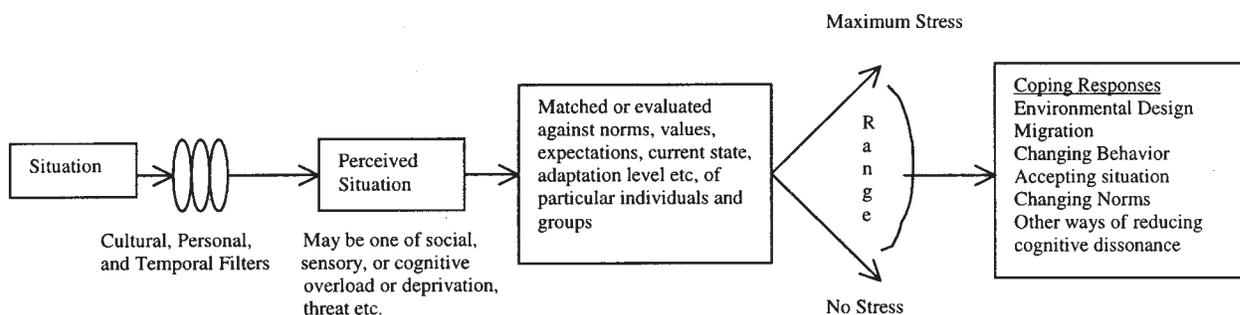


Fig.1. Model of Culture Change and Stress (Based on Rapoport:1978:247)

homeostasis, mainly by restoring a sense of control and predictability over the changing situation and by reducing the cognitive dissonance between the perceived impact and the reality of the situation. Restoring this equilibrium is achieved by many coping-responses as elaborated in Fig 2. All these response mechanisms may vary cross-culturally and be used complementarily.

The model suggests that certain changes to the physical environment reduce the stress by affording a context that is familiar, predictable, and controllable. Thus, historic preservation becomes a stress-responsive mechanism: It controls the change in the physical environment and regulates the homogeneity that communicates the cultural identity of the community.

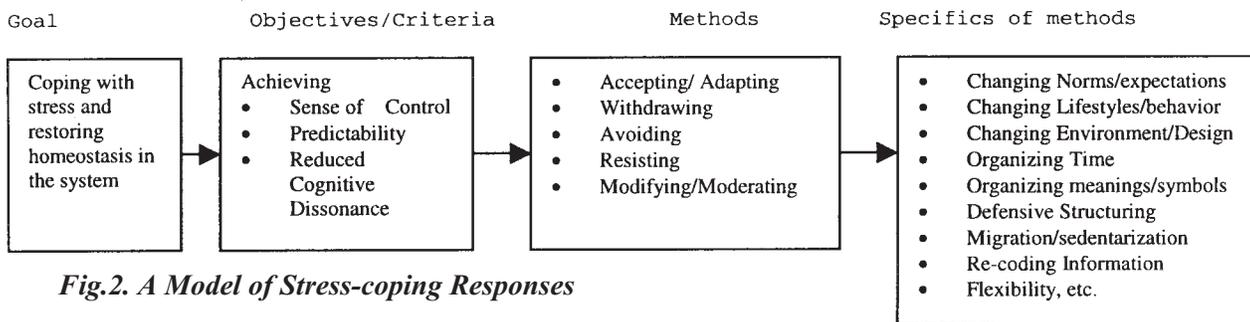


Fig.2. A Model of Stress-coping Responses

Maintaining homogeneity of the environment renders a sense of familiarity and predictability, nurtures the attachment to place, and erases any excessive incongruity between the known environment and the reality. It moderates the change and forms defensive structuring (resisting mechanism) (Siegal:1970). This 'turn to past' is important to cope with rapid cultural and environmental change (Appleyard:1979, Rowntree & Conkey:1980, Sell & Zube:1986).

ISSUES OF CULTURE CHANGE AND STRESS IN PRESERVATION

Nevertheless, historic preservation itself can become a stress generator in many forms, losing its validity as a stress coping-mechanism. It is usually a development control mechanism, and hence, seen as hindrance to growth of a historic setting, which restricts the physical change of the existing building stock and new infrastructure and economic improvements. This would be stressful to some groups of the community, especially developers and local business communities, having controlled their freedom of action and access to resources (Del Rio:1997). Moreover, as culture change continues, the preserved environment would not cater

for the changing needs over time. This is much valid in 'living' historic towns - those accommodate and serve a large population and contemporary needs of living - than in 'dead' museum towns. Such inflexibility in preservation programs creates stressful situations.

In the preservation activity, all the decision-making comes from architects or planners: Yet the people who would be living in these preserved environments and their aspirations, memories, and lifestyles are largely forgotten. Further, the preservation program may press certain groups to leave their properties due to acquisition of some historic buildings, and also may deprive them not compensating adequately for those losses. The most susceptible groups to stresses of rapid change -

the elderly, the poor, or ethnic minorities - may be totally left out from the decision-making process too (Sell & Zube:1986). Protests from those stressed groups and the conflicts among different local groups may be detrimental to the preservation program. Local authorities and national governments will have many conflicting agendas among them, and also, between them and local community groups.

Preservation activity may generate many other ill effects too. Preserved areas usually become tourist attractions, and there may be associated problems of congestion, crowding, limiting local people's access to amenities, increase of prices of the facilities and goods, which may be unbearable to the local community, increased unwarranted activities - crime, prostitution, vandalism etc-, and many issues of environmental pollution (Penfold:1988, Sowa:1994). Some of the novel activities and physical features or symbols introduced to the preserved setting may not fit with people's image of the setting and the culture. All these, if unattended, may be unacceptable and hence stressful to the local community.

TOWARDS CULTURE-SUPPORTIVE PRESERVATION

Consequently, preservation activity should achieve three objectives: first, maintaining continuity of important aspects of the culture; second, facilitating a desirable level of growth and change in both physical and socio-economic environments; and third, by achieving the first two, making preservation a less stressful development activity. In order to have both continuity and change of culture, it is imperative to know what is to be continued, what is to be changed, and how change is matched with the continued aspects of the culture. To be less stressful, the rate of change should be moderated to a level that is manageable and predictable. To maximize the gains from such moderated rate of change, preservation activity further needs greater flexibility in terms of resource utilization, time, policy, and organizational support, etc. To make it meaningful, it should also consider all groups of society and their expectations.

What are the available specifics of these methods and how should they be implemented in preservation schemes? Based on the literature, the strategies generally prescribed in preserving historic urban-scapes are identified and reviewed using the above conceptual

tations. It does not require a drastic change, but to be more realistic about the preservation program: Its need, objectives, limits, means, and outcome should be clear to all parties - both to the authorities & community (Penfold:1988, White & Roddewig: 1994, Huth:1987). In preservation, there should be no over promising and then under-delivering.

Different opinions towards preservation among development organizations and the community are detrimental to the project. Consensus building, negotiation and mediation is necessary before any action (Elliott:1999). People should have neither a nostalgic view of the past for the mere protection of old architecture nor negative views of preservation as hindrance to growth or historic areas as "slums" (Padula:1997, Del Rio:1997). Also, looking only for financial benefits by local authorities and business community needs attitude change. Qualitative benefits of preservation such as increased civic pride, enhancement of town's cultural heritage, and its improved ambience cannot be measured in terms of money. Yet it indirectly effects the commercial activities and the value of the building stock (Van Huyck:1989). Preservation authorities must be prepared to learn from mistakes too, as it allows identifying alternative strategies (Huth:1987).

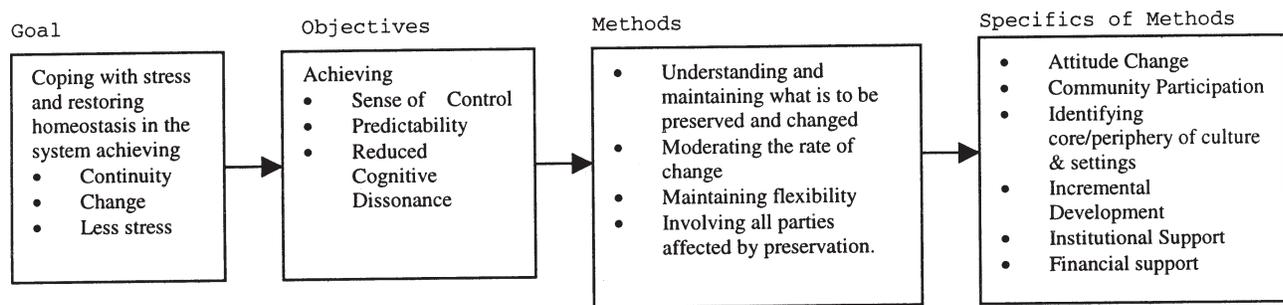


Fig.3. Model of Culture-supportive Preservation

framework. Six basic strategies for culture-supportive preservation are identified: having appropriate attitudes, greater community participation, identifying core/peripheral aspects of culture and built-form, incremental development, cultivating financial and institutional support (Fig. 3).

Attitude Change

This is perhaps the most important for the success of preservation programs. Attitude change means the desirable adjustments to the value system and expect-

Creating public awareness generates desirable attitude change. Lack of awareness can be costly, both in unintentional destruction to the heritage and unnecessary resistance to preservation activity. Legislative protection of heritage alone will not be successful (Van Huyck:1989). However, while government officials and developers keenly pay lip service to community participation in public, in private many tend to be quite skeptical about the ability of the general public to understand the issues in preservation. If people lack the proper knowledge, it is the responsibility of those officials to provide them with it (Sell, Zube, &

Kennedy:1988). This may be, perhaps, the most desperately needed attitude change.

Community Participation

Community participation brings the desired attitude change for the preservation activity. It helps both planners and the community to be realistic of the project, to understand each other's perspectives, and to feel committed to achieve the best results (Del Rio:1997). Involving all affected parties, including the elderly, the poor, and ethnic minorities, directly and indirectly, from the very beginning of the project gives them a sense of control over the change (Winkel:1981, Huth:1987, Schuman:1987, Ventriss:1987). What is required is an active, systematic approach to obtaining public input in the planning and implementation, adequate awareness programs, and a feedback mechanism to mitigate problems and conflicts (Sell et.al:1988).

Information should be freely available to all participants on how their opinions would be processed and their expectations would be met. For gaining participation, personal interviews, telephone surveys, training sessions, open hearings, etc may be useful (Ventriss:1987). Regular media coverage, newsletters, cultural events, tours, and information centers, etc may sustain the interest, demonstrating the project's progress (Penfold:1988, Del Rio:1997). The community could also be actively engaged in the design process of new settings within the area (Sanoff:1978). Where appropriate, participants may be paid too (Syme, Macpherson, & Fry:1987).

Supporting formulation of community organizations and consulting them is important. Also, community leaders play a major role in lobbying for action, mobilizing support, fund-raising, and planning the project (Penfold:1988, Huth:1987). Leadership may come from elected officials, professionals, community-based organizations, and even from private sector developers (Wagner, Joder & Mumphrey:1995).

Identifying Core & Peripheral Characteristics of the Culture and the Built Fabric

Achieving a balance between the change and continuity of the culture requires to identify and retain the core elements of the culture, both in the physical and social environments, and also to identify the unimportant peripheral aspects of the culture to allow the desirable change. Syncretism between the traditional and

new core elements of the culture will bring better results. Identifying these core/peripheral elements requires understanding the cultural mechanisms that link people to their environments rather than simply preserving the architectural features within the area. Culture-supportive design does not mean 'copying' the traditional or popular environments; yet lessons need to be derived through an analysis of the socio-cultural and physical environments in concern, based on a conceptual model (Rapoport:1983).

It is usually the whole building fabric, rather than individual buildings that matters most to the identity and of a setting. The quality and character of a town reside in the sum of its multiple and often fragmented interrelationships - in spaces between buildings, buildings themselves, the social mix of people, its activities & events, and the wider geographical setting of the town (Murtagh:1997, Ouf:1999, Huth:1987).

Observations, public surveys and interviews, residents' cognitive map analyses, behavior mapping, activity mapping, etc (Sanoff:1991) may help to understand people's perceptions of core/peripheral elements of the place. It is equally necessary to have the outsiders' views as well, as they may identify most vital aspects of the town's character. Studies by Worskett (1969), Francis (1984), Low & Ryan (1985), Penfold (1988), Whitman (1997), and Silva (2000) demonstrate some useful methods. Available methods should be properly studied and modified depending on the cultural, geographical, and temporal situations. Further, criteria should be developed based on the identified characteristics as guidance to new constructions and activities for proper syncretism of the new and the old.

Incremental Development vs. Major Renovation

There are two approaches to implement a preservation program. The first, incremental development relies on many small projects to gradually renovate the town's heritage over an extended period of time. The second initiates a single major renovation project with a clearly defined time frame. Both have proven successful, but the incremental approach has been used most often.

Incremental renovation enhances a project's flexibility. It allows the project to monitor its progress, detect eventual changes in the needs of the area and people, and to redirect the program along new and better strategies. It eventually brings the desired change in pub-

lic values and expectations too. It further allows making more custom-fitting solutions to issues such as finding suitable uses for old buildings and incorporating new buildings into the area (Huth: 1987, Murtagh:1997). Incremental conservation of the building stock is economically viable and creates better urban vitality and natural historic look (Ouf:1999). Incorporating new recreational and cultural functions, such as new convention centers, public museums, amphitheaters, etc, may recuperate some of the symbolic role of town. There also will be demands for hotels, housing, and modern amenities (Del Rio:1997, Sowa:1994). New constructions and provision of new amenities require many resources. Hence, phasing out the preservation activity is necessary. However, incremental preservation need a clear agenda, realistic objectives and a strong comprehensive preservation plan that encompasses the different phases of the development and the guidelines for each phase (White & Roddewig:1994, Ziegler & Kidney:1980).

Conversely, a major renovation would freeze the area denying such gradual change and flexibility (Penfold:1988). The increases in the pace and extent of change make it more difficult for people to adapt, leading to a climate of greater conservatism and negative attitudes towards preservation (Sell et.al:1988). Some times, better solutions for preservation generate from the failures and by-products of major renovation programs (Huth:1987).

Cultivating Institutional Support

Institutional support initiates the project, prepares a plan, canvasses the public participation, amasses and manages the resources required, enacts legislations, and implements and maintains the program and preserved district. Usually local municipalities are expected to play a key role in this connection, along with supports from provincial and national governments (Sowa:1994, Wagner et.al:1995). Involvement of a local authority gives a sense of assurance to people that the program would bring better improvements to the town's life.

Non-profit organizations can assume responsibility for long term running of these areas. Seeking private sector and community leaders support, organizing fund raising events, and helping developers in their work can be handed over to these organizations. This overcomes the city level inexperience, financial limitations, staff commitments, etc. Presence of a single managing authority that has the power, independence, and

financial resources for development promotion, control, and rehabilitation is seen valuable (Huth:1987, Ouf:1999, Wagner et.al:1995). In the absence of such an authority, development and preservation activities may be designated among different institutions, leading into many problems such as lack of strong commitment, coordination, policy, and efficiency (Abu-Ghazze:1998). Also, having preservation legislation is a crucial institutional support. It regulates the change & growth, quality & safety of the preserved setting, financial management, public participation, conflict resolution, and give the project an overall legal basis. (Mynors:1984, White & Roddewig:1994).

Cultivating Financial Support

This does not only mean fund raising for the preservation program and giving financial incentives to people to maintain historic buildings. It also includes the economic revitalization of the preserved town, which is of great consequence to its success and survival (Litchfield:1988). Economic revitalization should be based on some form of theme such as tourism and culture-led or housing-led revitalization (Tiesdell, Oc, & Heath:1996). Expansion of both formal and informal economic activities and creating markets for a newly developed or preserved place is necessary. The local business community is a key group here. Outside investors should also be consulted as they may usually see the potentials than the locals who see only risks (Huth:1987). Small-scale businesses usually create a desirable ambience in the area, which offer more individual and very small group oriented activities and make the place alive (Del Rio:1997, Ouf:1999). Both economic and financial analyses of economic revitalization are necessary. The economic analysis checks whether the proposed investments are making any benefits to society as a whole, while the financial analysis examines the specific costs and benefits that different groups will realize as a result of these investments, and asks whether each such group will individually gain or benefit from them. This is important for sustainability, maintaining a positive cash flow, and lessening the impact of preservation on town's poor residents (Serageldin:1997).

Making preservation an attractive investment can be achieved by giving financial incentives (tax abatements, credits, freezers, etc) to the community (Morris:1992). However, excessive incentives to the private investors could bankrupt the municipality while higher taxation may discourage private investment, thus striking a balance is necessary. The choice of subsidy is based on some indication of what ordinary citi-

zens prefer and not on the values of planners (Netzer:1997). Historic area should be capable of generating revenue from admission fees, heritage tourism, and adaptive-reuse of buildings, to pay for its preservation. The revenue thus generated may be used as "revolving funds". Such funds may dwindle in time, yet before it disappears entirely it does a great deal of work and helps to achieve a better incremental preservation (Zeigler & Kidney:1980, Murtagh:1997). Some finances may support the legal aspects of the preservation planning, promotional activities, public education and participation, heritage management training, research, documentation, and implementation costs (Penfold:1988).

CONCLUSION

This paper is not a recipe for preserving historic townscapes. The specific methods should be considered more as theoretical notions than practical instruments for ready-made application in preservation. They should be continuously re-evaluated and modified by application and comparison with other preservation projects. In application, they should be reviewed within the specific context given. Cross-cultural studies bring more validity to the approach. In doing so, developing countries set the best paradigm for the application, evaluation, and refinement of it. Culture-supportive preservation is extremely important for developing countries, where the problems are more acute, because of increased criticality of stress created by modernization in these largely traditional societies (Rapoport:1983).

In the case of developing countries, incremental approach to preservation may be more applicable due to their unstable political and economic situations, inconsistencies in public policy, ad hoc development, and lack of technical, financial, and human resources. Preservation will necessarily be spasmodic: Prioritizing preservation areas, phased implementation, freezing certain areas from development for some time, etc would be more practical (Abu-Ghazze:1998, El-Shakhs:1994). Other development projects can incorporate important cultural and historical settings within their purview in a suitable manner. They can generate additional resources, infrastructure, economic and social revitalization etc, which would be supportive for later preservation efforts (Van Huyck:1989). A cost-effective and comprehensive incremental approach to preservation based more on labor intensive, affordable, and indigenous resources, is suitable than capital intensive, high-tech, and imported solutions.

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