



Vitruvius on the Plains

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Symbolic Integrity of Historic Urban Landscapes: The Forgotten Dimension in Urban Conservation

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This paper makes a case for paying attention to the symbolic dimension of historic towns in their preservation and development, discussing what it is, how it binds all other dimensions of a place together, how to identify it, how it will guide new designs in old contexts, and how it can be instrumental in establishing socioeconomic sustainability of historic urban landscapes. The paper illustrates this thesis taking the World Heritage Town of Kandy in Sri Lanka as an example.

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Introduction

The global heritage conservation movement is increasingly making conceptual and pragmatic shifts from being primarily focused on the formal, visual, material, and structural integrity of historic places toward a more comprehensive value-based approach, including the evaluation of historic monuments and sites in terms of their tangible and intangible values and spirit of place (Quebec Declaration, 2008). While admirable, these new conservation approaches could still be improved by addressing attributes of historic environments that are crucial yet so far overlooked. Such a forgotten aspect is the symbolic dimension of historic places.

Symbolization, which is the storing or investing of meanings in aspects of nature in the process of their transformation into cultural products, is fundamental to human life and gave us the evolutionary advantage over other species (Rowntree & Conkey 1980). Symbolization is an act of our mind: we mentally categorize, differentiate, associate, and label everything in and around us and then impose that cognitive structure on the environment (D'Andrade 1995; DiMaggio 1997). The built environment is one of the most important products of this symbolization and transformation of nature into habitable place (Rowntree & Conkey 1980). It is a repository of meanings, and a physical expression of symbolic categories, schemata and domains evoked in our minds

(Rapoport 1990). Meanings we associate with environments are primarily culturally derived: These cultural schemata – worldviews, beliefs, values, ideals, norms, etc. – then shape our personal interactions with environments, evoking personally derived memories, preferences, affections, and other associations that we attach to our surroundings (Rapoport 1990; Silva 2004). Environments communicate those meanings back to us: These environmental meanings guide us on the rules of the place; remind us of our past connections to the place; and explain the cultural significance of the place. Environmental meanings then become one of the ways we relate ourselves to certain locale, time, events, group, and to a culture, thereby defining our identity (Geertz 1973; Lowenthal 1975). Symbolic dimensions of environments thus play a vital latent function in our lives, orientating ourselves in a spatial, temporal, and social world.

Historic landscapes are then repositories of meanings, which are products of a certain cultural paradigm of a bygone era. Symbolic content in historic places reconnects us to that past and that cultural paradigm. Since reconnecting people to their past is a primary objective of heritage conservation (Lowenthal & Binney 1981), preserving symbolic integrity of historic places should then be an essential activity to be undertaken along with the usual practice of preserving their physical (formal, visual, material, and structural) integrity. In fact the objective of strengthening the physical integrity of historic fabric should be to preserve the symbolic integrity and the cultural memory embedded in the historic place. Yet, symbolic dimension is the least understood and largely forgotten dimension in the contemporary inquiry of conservation. This paper is an attempt to address this issue.

Contemporary Conservation Inquiry and Symbolic Dimensions of Place

This oblivion of symbolic content in preservation practice is perhaps partly due to the difficulty in reading environmental meanings. As social and personal constructions, meanings we associate with places are elusive and transformative by nature: Meanings could be idiosyncratic; they may be read differently by diverse groups in the same culture; and they change in tandem with cultural changes in society. Some meanings may last long without change; some transform slightly; some alter their semantics completely; and some vanish entirely from the societal memory (Rapoport 1990). This complex, subtle and transformative nature of symbolic content and the resultant difficulty in understanding that complexity does not necessarily qualify their neglect in conservation, nonetheless.

Historic places, as part of material culture, are physical manifestations of the operative cultural paradigm of a certain historic time. The meanings they carry, therefore, are also a product of that past and may or may not be a part of the contemporary culture that is guiding the communities who live in those historic places today. If meanings associated with a place today are in some manner related to those historically embedded

in that place, the local communities would elicit them easily, understand their connection to the place and its past, and take pride in preserving their heritage. Any disconnect between the historic and contemporary meanings of place could threaten the very existence of that place and the efforts taken to preserve it. Consequences of such cultural dissonance between the past and the present can be grave: The fate of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan is an extreme example of such a scenario, and reminds us of the importance of understanding the transformation of cultural meanings associated with a particular historic landscape in the process of preserving it for posterity.

Examining the values and meanings that communities associate with their historic environments should therefore be a critical step in conservation. In the current practice of value-based management, heritage is defined in terms of value categories, such as historic, scientific, archaeological, and/or aesthetic significance, etc. This way of articulating heritage clearly indicates that the values are defined by professionals and academics, and not by the community who live in these historic areas, whose every day decisions both individually and incrementally affect the historic fabric and the significance of it (Silva 2006). This issue is critical in the context of “living” historic urban areas, which confront inevitable pressures for modernization, development, and growth. Communities want to see their living environments upgraded with contemporary amenities and represent the *Zeitgeist* (Silva 2001). The conventional manner of defining heritage significance and its embedded values seems to be too idealistic or abstract and far removed from this reality. They neither capture these grave socio-economic concerns nor offer solutions to them. People require concrete answers to the problems they immediately feel. The value-based approach thus needs to clearly delineate how heritage could foster the physical and socioeconomic growth and vice versa (Silva 2006). Identifying meanings people associate with their historic environments and defining the value of heritage based on what it means to local communities is quite instrumental for successful conservation.

Furthermore, defining heritage into tangible and intangible divisions, another aspect in the contemporary conservation practice and an attempt to address the symbolic dimensions of heritages, is nevertheless conceptually convoluted (Silva 2008). While the term tangible generally refers to the built heritage, the term intangible refers to the practices, expressions, knowledge and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage. It is usually expressed in the forms of oral traditions; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; traditional craftsmanship, and the like (UNESCO 2003). These definitions seem to suggest that, firstly, the built heritage does not have any intangible properties; secondly, this so-called intangible heritage cannot be “felt” or experienced; and thirdly it disconnects the built heritage from the rest of the expressions of a cultural heritage. Intangible heritage should have been defined as the system of cultural values and meanings (which includes the belief systems, knowledge bases, etc.) that gave birth to the tangible heritages, which include all forms of material culture (built forms, artifacts, etc) and practices (rituals, oral traditions, arts & crafts, etc) (Silva

2008). Conservation of tangible heritage is then an attempt to conserve the intangible heritage – the symbolic content – that is both historically and currently associated with the heritage site.

The recent introduction of the notion of spirit of place into heritage conservation is an attempt to rectify some of these conceptual issues (Quebec Declaration 2008). Nevertheless, the manner in which intangible heritage is articulated and symbolic content of historic place is ignored in the Declaration indicates that there are still conceptual confusions in the conservation field with regard to what tangible and intangible heritages mean and how they are related. Conserving the spirit of historic place thus requires rethinking. The above argument on tangible and intangible heritages is applicable here too. Spirit of place can be defined as an experiential quality, unique to a particular place. This experiential quality is a collective result of tangible attributes (of buildings, landscape, objects, people, activities, etc.) and intangible attributes (associated symbolic meanings) of that place (Silva 2008). Spirit of place is, therefore, not just a product of the elements of its past; it is also an outcome of its present. Conservation of the spirit of historic place thus means the sustenance of both tangible and symbolic attributes of the place, which could be historic and/or current.

It was mentioned above that symbolic dimensions of environments act as a medium for connecting people with their places and that communicating their encoded meanings back to people is the most important function of places (Rapoport 1990). Conserving symbolic integrity, therefore, is the most effective way to achieve functional integrity of historic places. Symbolic dimensions are an integral part of the spirit of historic landscapes and are intricately linked to their physical – formal, visual, and material – dimensions. As spirit of place is a symbiotic evocation of symbolic and physical attributes, preserving symbolic integrity is vital to the sustenance of the physical integrity of historic places.

These conceptual clarifications of symbolic content of historic places and its relation to the notions of spirit of place, tangible and intangible heritages, and physical place dimensions, help us to delineate the manner in which symbolic aspects of historic areas could be understood and effectively utilized in conservation and new development within historic urban landscapes.

The remainder of this paper discusses these aspects with the help of an actual example, the Town of Kandy in Sri Lanka, which was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1988. Nestled in the central hilly areas of Sri Lanka, Kandy was the last stronghold of the Sinhalese monarchs from 1592 to 1815, when it was ceded to the British by the Kandyan aristocracy under a treaty. The monumental ensemble, the focus of the present conservation effort, includes the old royal palace, the Temple of the Tooth Relic of the Buddha, headquarters of the two main Buddhist monasteries, the four shrine complexes dedicated to the guardian deities of the country, and a man-made lake. In addition, there are many historic religious and secular buildings located in and around the city. Its main event is the annual pageant known as the *Āsala Perahāra*, which is a celebratory procession that circumambulates the city in honor of the Relic and the city's

guardian deities in July/August. There are many continuing traditions of arts and crafts, religious rituals, social systems, political significance, etc associated with Kandy, which makes it a main cultural and religious center of the country today. A recent study conducted in Kandy demonstrated how the symbolic dimensions of the historic city play a paramount role in its conservation and development (Silva 2004).

Aspects of Symbolic Dimensions in Historic Places

For residents of Kandy, the city evokes a very strong sense of the spirit of place, defined collectively by some city features and symbolic meanings associated with the city (Silva 2004). The place spirit of Kandy in fact is a juxtaposition of several dimensions, which include the senses of sacredness, historic solemnity, scenic serenity, and well-being, all complementary to each other. These dimensions are essentially symbolic by nature, evoked based on the cultural meanings associated with the history of Kandy, religious intuitions, remaining traditions and practices of the bygone era, natural landscape and the cool climate of the surroundings, the amenities provided in the city for contemporary life, the city's high ranking among other cities in the country, and, more specifically, the Sacred Tooth Relic of the historic Buddha enshrined in its main temple complex. This finding points out that the spirit of a historic place can be articulated in terms of a set of dimensions, which are primarily symbolic by nature, yet evoked collectively by the meanings associated with the place and its other physical attributes. These dimensions can be defined as core-dimensions of the historic place.

Findings further indicate that there is a set of risk-dimensions, which include the growing physical congestion of the city, the ailing and ineffective bureaucratic system, the inappropriate social behavior of some people, and the ethnic/religious tensions in the town/country. City residents perceived these to be "threats" to the quintessential spirit of Kandy. These risk-dimensions are also symbolic by nature; they are meanings associated with the perceived problems in the city. It seems that while core-dimensions of the place capture the most unique qualities of the place, the risk-dimensions indicate what aspects could threaten the core-dimensions, and thus should be eliminated to maintain the spirit of place.

Furthermore, the city economy in Kandy is indeed closely dependent on its place spirit too. For example, an analysis of the promotional literature on tourism and real estate market in Kandy, which are the main economic activities of the city, revealed extensive use of images of and verbal references to the sacred and historic monumental ensemble of the city, the natural landscape, and the annual pageant (which is sacred and historic), etc in defining what Kandy is. They subtly portray Kandy as an ideal place to live because it is sacred, historic, serene, and comfortable. In other words, the core-dimensions of the Spirit of Kandy are the amenities upon which the city economy is based. The economic sustainability of the city thus depends on the preservation and fostering of these core-dimensions and eliminating the risk-dimensions.

New developments should therefore match these core dimensions and reduce the risk-dimensions.

Residents also topologically and symbolically organize the city into three main domains: the surroundings of the main temple complex, which is thought of “sacred”; the downtown core, which is considered a “civic area”; and the area around the western entry to the city, which is associated with “recreational” activities. Residents prefer the area around the temple most, and the downtown core least. Topographical profiles of the city also seems to relate to these three topological and symbolic domains, moving up from the western entry toward the downtown core and then climbing up to the area where the main temple complex and historic royal palace is located. This city profile and the progression from the entry toward the main temple complex indicate a symbolic hierarchy and a progression from “profane” area to a “sacred” area. This symbolic structure and profile of the city determines the functional and design quality of new development that should occur within these three areas in the city.

Kandy was historically associated with two main meanings; it was considered representing the City of Gods and the City of Universal Monarch (Duncan 1990). Today residents of Kandy are familiar with fragmented aspects of these historical narratives and consider the city as representing the City of the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha and a City of the Hero Kings of Sri Lankan history (Silva 2004). This indicates that even though the historical meanings are no longer associated with the city in their original form, they have transformed into two narratives that are still affiliated to the historical ones and are more relevant to the contemporary realities. This historical affinity of the current symbolic content of the city makes the city’s heritage still pertinent to its residents; their life is closely related to it, and thus makes them proud about their heritage. This appreciation in turn helps the preservation of Kandy’s heritage. It is thus critical to ensure the continuation of the current meanings associated with the city by fostering the traditional practices, arts and crafts, and public education programs that inform residents about the historical continuity of the city’s symbolic content.

Not only did residents identify the historical places as vital for the city’s spirit of place, they also recognized some contemporary institutions, such as the public market, public library, central bus station, railway station, etc, as places of significance. Findings revealed that these places were identified as salient to the city’s place spirit not necessarily due to their architectural merit but mostly for their symbolic merit, i.e., the degree to which these places play a significant function in the life in the city. This clearly indicates that new developments in the historic city should contribute immensely to the city’s symbolic functional integrity as an ideal place to live by serving important functions for its civic life. Moreover, the same criterion is applied to rate the saliency of the historical monuments for the city’s sense of place. This fact underlines that heritage, in order to be valued by the community, has to have some relevance to the contemporary civic life either in practical or symbolic terms.

Conclusions

An integrated approach to conservation and development should thus focus on managing the spirit of the historic place, by fostering and promoting the core-dimensions of the place spirit and eliminating its risk-dimensions. As these dimensions are products of both physical and symbolic attributes of historic place, conservation of symbolic integrity is essential in cultural heritage management, as well as preserving its physical integrity. Similarly, new designs in the old context should advance core-dimensions by enhancing both physical and symbolic integrity of the place. New developments could modify those attributes – physical and symbolic – that are less important in determining core-dimensions. Novel functions selected should fit the symbolic structure – domains and profile – of the location; they should also cater to civic life immensely, so that new projects are perceived to be an integral part of the spirit of the place. Meanings currently associated with the place should be studied to find out the degree of transformation and affinity they have with those that were historically associated. Efforts should be taken to sustain any practices, rituals, crafts, etc that retains such affinity and to engage the public in reviving the memory of those meanings, if they are relevant to today's life. Community should be informed of the nature, fate, and value of the historic meanings if they are now defunct and irrelevant. Historic place that is conserved and developed in this manner will, in turn, refresh, sustain, and strengthen the community's memory of and the attachment to it.

Even though meanings associated with places are complex, subtle, and transformative, they can still be elicited. Historical-interpretive research involving archival, archaeological, and oral material can be conducted to reveal the meanings associated with the place in the past (e.g., Duncan 1990, on Kandy's historical allegory). Symbolic dimensions at present can be elicited by a range of research tools, including interviews, surveys, cognitive mapping, free listing tasks, etc involving the residents and visitors alike and through analysis of contemporary literature, such as newspapers, commercial advertisements, postcards, tourism promotion brochures, etc. (Silva 2004). Such investigations should be undertaken well before the historic place is nominated as a significant cultural heritage, and the findings should be utilized in making the nomination itself and policy – and action – decisions of the conservation approach. Since environmental meanings transform over time, periodic studies of the symbolic dimension of the place – its content, change, and value placed upon by the community – should be carried out, and findings could be carefully adopted to direct the conservation policies, regulations, and actions. Such studies afford an excellent opportunity to garner public participation and support for heritage conservation. Historic place meanings that have transformed drastically and become irrelevant for the present could be difficult and undesirable to revive. But they can be studied, identified, recorded for posterity, and be utilized in heritage interpretation and public education.

Methods of investigating the symbolic content of places, listed above, may be applicable to any location. Yet care should be taken to make necessary adaptations to match the specific scenarios at hand. Nature of place meanings and local sociopolitical dynamics that affect the construction of these meanings are certainly different across places. The categories of core-dimensions identified in Kandy may not be directly applicable even to similar cases such as many historic cities in South, Southeast, and East Asia, most of which are products of comparable cosmological meanings. Most historic places in the world may be devoid of such complex religiopolitical meanings, even historically. Nevertheless, any given place at any given time holds meanings associated with it by its society. The integrity of that symbolic content, irrespective of its nature, guides the activities which occur in that place. The theoretical approach presented in this paper acknowledges that reality and is thus formulated to be accommodative and adaptive to such diverse situations.

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