

Threats to the Spirit of the Place: Biased Interpretation

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Abstract. The Spirit of the Place is the emotional response to the Place; it's an abstract, wordless form of understanding; this is why it is unattainable, and yet it can be destroyed. Technology provides increasingly precise data, but its interpretation depends on how we perceive the Place and what we *want to perceive* in the Place. Nationalism and Cultural pride strongly influence what we want to perceive in the Place. Transmission of World Heritage to future generations relies heavily on "telling the Story;" to reveal not only historic data, but also the greatness of the human spirit in its struggle for perfection and in all its weakness. We may conclude that, trying to homogenize an idea in order to keep it politically correct leads to ambiguity and relativity, and might dangerously dilute the message.

1. Inward World; the Search for an Ideal

The Spirit of the Place is an emotional response to the Place; it's an abstract, wordless form of understanding. The Spirit of the Place is born in the aftermath of human events, conferring importance to the place in which such events occurred. The emotional response to the Place is both personal and collective; this collective comprehension goes higher to an ideal state in the collective consciousness and thus becomes unattainable.

The Spirit of the Place is related to but does not belong to the "monuments" themselves, understanding as "monument" an object which has been "designated" as a monument by a given organization. The Spirit of the Place is previous to any designation and does not require a designation to exist. Irrevocably grounded in the Present, interpretation is subject to local forces; the Story that must be told to the public may be filtered by cultural pride and nationalism. This is one of the potential dangers of interpretation catering to cultural pride or to a myth constructed around a Place whose features elicit strong pride in the owners: Biased interpretation.

2. Tailored Story: What do we want to perceive in the Place?

Cultural Identity and Nationalism are closely related. Authoritarian governments and aggressive politicians generally resort to rhetoric of cultural identity to lure their bases. There is commonly a Myth around which the concept of national identity sets footing; this myth refers to the often mythical vision we have about ourselves, about our nation, our people, and our motherland; about “our” collectivity; in all, the “place” where we belong; an intangible home. This “intangible home” is the intangible quality of Nationality; the quality nationalism attempts to safeguard from foreign forces. Nationalism especially arises in times of crisis, when people need something to hold onto. In this context, the Intangible Home may be reflected into the Spirit of the Place, making the Spirit of the Place a political tool.

The Norms of Quito (ICOMOS 1967) declare that cultural heritage could be used as a tool for economic development by developing nations. The Norms of Quito were formulated at a time when dictatorships were strong in Latin America; restoration plans devised at the time contemplated sites representative of the Nation in order to strengthen a sense of cultural identity, which could be equated to political support to the ruling parties, thus perceived as patriotic. This was clear to the Military and its related intellectuals in the case of Panama. The State devised a number of important conservation and restoration programs and projects focusing on the big and visible monuments of Colonial past; it was through this effort that modern concepts of Conservation and Restoration arrived to Panama from the top and down, after the Military Coup d'état in 1968 (Tejeira Davis, 2004). Panamanian Conservation programs had strong Nationalistic character, Hispanic heritage put forward.

After the fall of the dictatorship in 1989 there was a general sentiment of guilt associated with open expression of nationalism; the reason behind it was that the Military and its political apparatus had taken hold into the national pride, making it synonym of militancy. Yet the first stages of the dictatorship gave momentum to modern conservation and restoration in Panama, the last stages brought a darker side. The Spirit of different places related to the Motherland in Panama were affected by such associations, but in the following years as the population began to overcome the trauma of the American Invasion (20 Dec. 1989) and the long decades of the dictatorship

itself, it was once again safe to show concern about the general topics of the nationality. It seems like even after great strain on the people and their culture, the Spirit of the Place can be partially restored to a previous stage in the minds of the people. Looking forward to safeguard the collective memory of humanity, such resilience is both encouraging and humbling.

3. The symbol of Panama City: The Tower of Panama Viejo's Cathedral.

Panama City, the first European city on the Pacific shore of the Americas, was founded as a terminal city of the transisthmian road for the riches from the Americas to Spain. It was burned down by pirate Henry Morgan in 1671. In the year 1673, Panama City was officially transferred to a new site, which is today's Historic District of Panama City. The ruins known as Panama Viejo (Old Panama) were abandoned and eventually taken over by the forest. When Panama became a Republic in 1903, there was not an official account of Panama's history. To this effect, in 1908, Juan B. Sosa and Enrique J. Arce were commissioned to write a History of Panama in four years (Contract outlined by Law 26 of 1908), a step towards a definite national history: "Compendio de Historia de Panamá," (1911) in which the importance of Old Panama in the history of America is asserted (Gasteazoro, Sosa and Arce, 1999). Samuel Lewis's article "La Catedral de Panama la Vieja" in 1916 and Juan B. Sosa's monography "Panama La Vieja" followed in 1919. Old Panama was rediscovered in all its potential as a powerful national symbol thanks to its great importance in the history of America, at the beginning of the 20th century. There was growing interest in Panama as tourism destination, especially to behold the works in progress of the Panama Canal. 1911 and 1912 saw about 20,000 tourists visiting the worldwide famous Gaillard Cut. As tourism soared towards the end of the construction of the Panama Canal, many Panama Guides were published abroad, including William Scoullar's Blue Book of Panama (1917) (Pizzurno 2007, 1). Old Panama was a more modest point of interest. Farmers working the land amongst the ruins were expelled and a road was built for better access (Tejeira Davis, 2004).

Old Panama was declared Public Monument by Law 12 of 1912. The Bolero song "Panama Viejo" by Ricardo Fábrega (1905 – 1973) is an example of romantic sentiment around Old Panama (Figure 1).

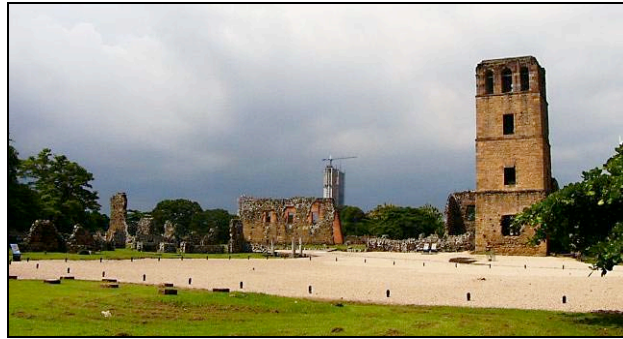


Figure 1. The Tower of Panama Viejo's Cathedral

It is important to realize that over 200 years, Old Panama had been glorified as a magnificent city with an untimely fate, the cathedral's tower the most visible ruin; now a national monument, the myth woven around the old city came into play with more force. Foreign travelers had written their accounts; drawings had been made, legends had been told. There was a strong Spirit there, fueled not only by factual history but also by cultural pride, now canalized by the law. This sentiment focused on Hispanic heritage and the fact that Old Panama had been the first European city on the Pacific shore, the starting point of the expeditions for the colonization of Central America and the Andean region; the geopolitical importance Old Panama had was a key source of pride for the Panamanian elite, of Spaniard descent, to display before immigrants and the Canal Zone.

Yet Law 12 of 1912 declared Old Panama a Public Monument, it also puts it under control of the Municipality of Panama; later Law 9 of 1918 abolishes that disposition. In 1919, 400th anniversary of Panama City, Decree 2 of 1919 prohibits unlicensed archeological excavations. There wasn't a Master Plan or detailed policy for the ruins of Old Panama; attempts at preserving the site were scattered and most efforts centered on archeology practices. As Panama City expanded from its new site (today's Historic District of Panama City) in the decades of 1940-50, Old Panama, the only land owned by the State in the city's expansion area, was invaded by self-built housing, evolving into an economically depressed suburb. Via Cincuentenario, a road built to commemorate the Panama's 50th Anniversary of Republican life (1953), was built across the ruins and eventually turned into a vital, heavy-traffic road.

The Tower is simply known as Old Panama's Tower (la Torre de Panama Viejo). From being primarily associated to heritage of Spaniard descent, the tower became a larger symbol in contact with

diverse cultural groups which are other faces of Panamanian nationality, such as Blacks and Indians. The plaza was habilitated as public space, typically used as a scenario for dances and performances on national festivities and other cultural events. As many others, I fondly remember Elementary school field trips to the ruins of Old Panama, namely the tower. It was a desolate place with a fence, lawn and a garrison. The Cavalry Squadron Compound was in the middle of the ruins of Old Panama. A row of buildings hosting the cavalry were lined up next to the ruins of Old Panama's cathedral; behind it, the stables and other facilities formed a large square (Figure 1). These remained till the American invasion in December 1989. After the invasion, the buildings behind the tower disappeared, and the row of buildings next to the tower were reused as a handcrafts market. Such a strong Panamanian military presence restricted much access to the ruins, but the military would allow school field trips to the tower and part of the surrounding remains. This is how the Tower of Old Panama came to be part of the imagery of the military; by taking over the site in the most prominent place among the ruins, the garrison of Panama Viejo (Cuartel de Panama Viejo, Figure 2) associated its own image of authority with sentiments of nationalism evoked by the ruins.



Figure 2. Cavalry Squadron Compound

After the American Invasion, Panama's Military morphed into a national police force (Policía Nacional) and the Tower made a smooth transition into their insignia, which prominently depicted the Tower of on a blue background (Figure 2). This insignia was used from 1990 to 14 April 2007, when it was replaced. The reason for this new change is simple: the police is still trying to shed its negative image associated with the dictatorship. Thus the Tower, which was already under consolidation repairs under administration of Patronato Panama Viejo, shed both its associations with the Military and maintained its

prestige as a symbol of Panama's cultural identity; the Spirit of the Place had survived largely unmarred from the former manipulation of its image by ultra-nationalism associated with the military rule.



Figure 3. Police patch with the described insignia.

The new insignia features the Harpy Eagle, Panama's national bird (Law 18 of 2002), a new symbol of national identity.

The Patronato Panama Viejo was created in 1995; conformed by the National Institute of Culture (INAC), Club Kiwanis, the Panamanian Institute of Tourism (IPAT) and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corp. (HSBC); this non-profit organization administrates the archeological site of Old Panama. "The philosophy of preservation that the master plan is based on recommends the respect of the site's historic course and, thus, the undertaking of the least necessary works in order to achieve this aim. No reconstructions are proposed *because the site's ruinous condition is crucial characteristic of the site's authenticity*" (Patronato Panama Viejo, 2007). Patronato Panama Viejo carries research, maintenance, archeological studies and conservation on the archeological site. The logo of the organization features the Tower with a palm tree beside it.

As expected, the most visible project of the Patronato of Panama Viejo has been Old Panama's Tower. Since 2001, Patronato Panama Viejo in collaboration with the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional (AECI), initiated the task of developing the Cathedral's preservation project under the master plan. The two main objectives were, to consolidate the tower's walls and to assemble a viewpoint inside the tower with the aim to provide interaction with the monument and to facilitate understanding of the Cathedral, its tower and Old Panama in their own context.

In 2007, The World Heritage Committee approved the extension of the Historic District of Panama, with the Salón Bolívar, on the World Heritage List to include Old Panama under the cultural criteria (ii), (iv) and (vi); the official name was changed to: Archaeological Site of

Panama Viejo and the Historic District of Panama.

4. Prima of Perceptions

Nationalism and Cultural pride strongly influence what we want to perceive in the Place. The Tower of Old Panama, after two centuries of abandon, acquired a highly romanticized image over its factual historic background; it was a melancholic symbol of ruined greatness. The value, meaning and emotion that give rise to the Spirit of the Place in Old Panama, largely symbolized by the Tower and Hispanic heritage, changed in every stage as the perception of Panamanians of themselves changed, but its core myth remained the same; its Story as one of the places symbol of the Panamanian nation, a witness that has stood there from glory to tragedy, showing resilience and dignity in
t h e f a c e o f Time.

Acknowledgements

Figure 2 is a photo courtesy of CMH Online, a public service by the U.S. Army Center of Military History. *Selected Just Cause Photograph*. Internet. Available from <http://www.history.army.mil/documents/panama/jcpic/pictures.htm>; accessed 12 July 2008.

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