

**Rethinking the Sprit of Place:
*Conceptual Convolutions and Preservation Pragmatics***

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Abstract: Bringing theories from anthropological, psychological, and environmental disciplines together, this paper proposes a definition of the notion of spirit of place, its constituents, and how the tangible and intangible aspects of a place and culture evoke such a spirit of place and memory of it. It then uses that conceptual framework to critique the current definitions of constructs such as tangible and intangible heritage and heritage values, showing their conceptual convolutions and limited practicality in preservation. The paper then discusses how such definition could lead the conservation policies and practices as well as social & economic sustainability of a historic place. Finally it presents a case study of a World Heritage site in Sri Lanka in order to illustrate the thesis postulated in the paper.

1. Introduction

Even though the conservation movement across the world has made significant paradigm shift from purely monument- and professionals-centric focus into a place- and community-based approach, it seems there still are some theoretical misconceptions in the discipline that hinder an effective, efficient practice of conservation. This paper is an attempt to clarify some of these conceptual convolutions in order to develop a pragmatic approach to cultural landscape preservation based on the notion of the spirit of the place.

2. Conceptual Convolutions in Conservation

Perhaps the most important conceptual issue that is very relevant to our discussion of the spirit of place is the definition given to the tangible and intangible cultural heritages. While the term tangible generally refers to the built heritage, the term intangible refers to the practices, expressions, knowledge and skills that communities, groups and sometimes individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. According to the UNESCO definition, it is usually expressed in one of

the following forms: oral traditions; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2003). These definitions seem to suggest that, firstly, the built heritage does not have any intangible properties and, secondly, this so called intangible heritage cannot be 'felt' or experienced. Thirdly it disconnects the built heritage from the rest of the expressions of a cultural heritage. For example, the built heritage reflects the practices, knowledge, and skills of a community on design and construction. Furthermore monuments and sites do possess certain symbolic meanings and memories associated with them that are not directly tangible. The rituals and festivals conducted in these sites, social systems rooted in them, and arts and crafts associated with them are also attributes that make these places unique, significant, and valuable. In the similar manner, oral traditions, rituals, arts and crafts, etc are certainly tangible. This means that built heritage as well as traditional practices, arts & crafts, rituals, etc are all tangible cultural heritage which has some embedded intangible aspects that deem valuable to preserve.

An anthropological view on culture will help clear this conceptual convolution. One such view has been advocated by Rapoport (2005), which attempts to explain the connection between the culture and the built environment, thus making it more relevant to our purpose. Culture is an ideational concept; therefore it is intangible. It primarily constitutes a range of world views, values, attitudes, and norms of a society (Rapoport, 2005). This ideological system, which is intangible, is expressed through tangible social and physical forms, which includes the built environment, people's behavior, arts & crafts, rituals, food, clothing, etc. Even the natural landscape is a part of the culture since the way the nature is managed, used or abused by a particular community reflects their cultural attitude towards nature. The natural landscape is then in fact a part of the cultural landscape too.

What this really means is that what we are trying to do as preservation of cultural heritage is to preserve the intangible heritage – ideological system and memories of a culture – by preserving its tangible forms of expression, which include the significant places, objects, and practices. It should now be clear that we preserve is the aspects of material culture in order to sustain the ideological basis of a culture. I would, therefore, rather redefine the terms tangible heritage as monuments, sites, oral traditions, rituals, arts & crafts, etc and intangible heritage as the cultural ideology (of the past and/or still continuing) embedded in those tangible forms.

This conceptual clarification is quite useful in many aspects of the conservation philosophy and pragmatics. As just mentioned above, it clearly defines what is preserved (tangible expressions of cultural ideology). It is also helpful in the current practice of value-based management of heritage, which attempts to define why we select certain heritages for preservation. Here, heritage is defined into value categories such as aesthetic, archaeological, architectural, cultural, economic, historical, scientific, social, etc. The significance of heritage is also articulated, either by ranking the defined values, or in terms of geographic (local, regional, national, or universal) importance, or in terms of uniqueness (exceptional, high, moderate, little, or intrusive). It should be clear that these value categories and their significance levels are in fact an evaluation of the importance of a cultural ideology of the past and/or the present. For example, a certain tangible heritage (a monument, site, craft, or a practice) may have an exceptional aesthetic significance, which makes it conservation-worthy as it expresses the cultural ideology (values and norms of aesthetics) of a particular community at a particular time.

This manner of defining the value and significance of the tangible heritage in relation to its intangible cultural ideological basis is important when we consider the community-based approach to conservation. The way the values are currently defined (historic, scientific, archaeological, etc) clearly indicates that these values are defined by professionals and academics, and not by the local community. As I have pointed out elsewhere, it is essential to engage the local community in the conservation effort by helping them to understand the significance of their heritage, giving them the responsibility of taking care of it, and facilitating them in the process (Silva, 2006). Rather than imposing a value system as a top-down professional approach, getting the community to define the value of their heritage – both in the tangible form and its intangible ideological base - should be a vital step in the value-based management.

It should be reminded that the cultural ideology itself is in a constant transformation and there are, in most instances, dominant ideologies and marginalized ideologies that may contest the dominant paradigm. Some of these discourses may be simply historical and some may still be continuing. Most of the dilemmas in conservation practice arise from these conflicting values systems held by different constituencies, and thus it is important to understand what ideologies have produced the cultural landscape, what attempts to eradicate it, and what would sustain it in the future. For example, this understanding is useful in urban conservation, where living historic urban areas require a balance between the preservation and new development. It should help both professionals and laymen alike to understand what cultural ideology has guided the past, what

cultural attitudes determine the nature of urbanity today, what conflicts and similarities exist between the two types of ideologies, and how to reach a compromise.

3. The Spirit of Place in Conservation

This same argument on tangible and intangible heritage is applicable in rethinking the spirit of place as well. I argue that the spirit of the place is an experiential quality, unique to a particular place. This experiential quality is a combination of tangible attributes (of buildings, landscape, objects, people, activities, etc) and intangible attributes (cultural attitude towards environment and its use, symbolic meanings embedded in the place, historical memories, personal attachments, emotions, preferences, etc) of that place.

Any given place will have a spirit of its own. It may be very distinctive and one of a kind, or rather indistinctive, and may have a very strong presence or rather a feeble presence. The spirit of a place may be powerfully felt because of the distinctive tangible or physical attributes of the place, even if the place does not have any significant symbolic intangible attributes. Similarly, a place might be very indistinctive in terms of its physical environment; but it may have a strong spirit perceived by its community as it evokes significant symbolic associations known to that community. Blended with very unique physical and symbolic attributes, certain places may have extremely powerful presence.

Experiencing the spirit of a place may be collective as well as extremely personal. It requires developing a certain emotional connection to the place, in terms of a memory, preference, or identifying oneself with it. It also requires a certain level of understanding of the place's symbolic dimensions, which would further strengthen such place attachments. And finally, people cherish the memory of the place and/or the experience of its spirit in their minds.

I argue that what we actually conserve is the spirit of the place, by sustaining its tangible and intangible attributes. The conserved place in turns refreshes, sustains, and strengthens our memory of and the attachment to it. In preserving cultural landscapes, our ultimate motivation is then to retain the memory of certain symbolic dimensions and the physical features of the environment that evoke the spirit of the place. One could even rank the features and symbolic meanings in an environment in terms of their contribution to the evocation of the place spirit and thus identify what features and meanings are highly central to it and what features and meanings are less significant or

peripheral to the place spirit. This helps us to decide what to preserve and what not to.

This overall experience of the spirit of the place can also be defined in its **core-dimensions**. These core-dimensions of the place spirit are, in fact, evoked by the collective of stronger tangible features and significant intangible meanings associated with the place. Similarly, we could identify another set of dimensions that are detrimental to these core-dimensions (thus, to the spirit of the place), which can be called **risk-dimensions** of the place spirit. **An integrated approach to conservation and development should thus focus on managing the spirit of the place, by fostering and promoting the core-dimensions of the place spirit and eliminating the risk-dimensions.** In terms of preservation pragmatics, it now becomes easy to distinguish between what needs to be preserved for posterity (which are the spirit of the place, its core-dimensions, and the tangible & intangible attributes central to these dimensions) and what could be allowed to change (which are risk-dimensions to the place spirit and those tangible & intangible attributes that are peripheral or less important to the spirit of the place).

4. An Example from Sri Lanka

To illustrate this argument with an example, let us now turn to the City of Kandy in Sri Lanka, which was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1988. Located 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 city underwent a larger reconstruction program in order to incorporate cosmological and religious ideals within its built fabric during the reign of the last Sinhalese monarch in 1803-1812. It was extended during the British occupation yet without much modification to the historic city (Duncan, 1990). 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 for 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 celebrational 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.

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 core-dimensions, which include the **senses of sacrality, historic solemnity, scenic serenity, and well-being**, all complimentary to each other. Findings further indicated 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.

The ‘**sense of sacrality**’ of the city is derived primarily due to the presence of the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha (enshrined in the Temple of the Tooth Relic), the four guardian deities of Kandy, and the two great monasteries of the Sri Lankan Buddhist Order. Not only has the existence of these institutions but also various religious and cultural meanings associated with them collectively generated this sense of sacrality of the city. The ‘**sense of historic solemnity**’ of the city is derived mainly as a result of Kandy being the last capital of the Sinhalese monarchy. Most of the historic institutions, both physical structures as well as associated traditions, and many memories of the bygone era are still alive today. This sense of historicity is closely related to the sense of sacrality as the key monuments that represent the historic Kandy are religious and regal institutions. The ‘**sense of scenic serenity**’ of the city is derived principally from the dominant natural landscape, which is comprised of the surrounding hills, the Lake, Mahavāli River, Botanical Gardens, the panoramic views, and the like. It is not only the scenic beauty of the natural landscape that matters but also the serene ambience it creates. This tranquility is in turn associated with the sense of sacrality of the city; it is thought to be the ideal environmental quality to exist in a sacred place. This dimension of scenic serenity is also related to the sense of historicity of the city, as all key landscape features are connected to many historic events or persons. The ‘**sense of well-being**’ is closely connected to the above three core-dimensions. Participants seem to perceive the city as an ideal place to live: They seem to have a deep sense of attachment to Kandy as they have lived there for generations. The stress-less slow pace of the city life, comfortable micro-climate, a great sense of community, a compact place with all the necessary amenities available within walking distance, a charming landscape, the sense of historic timelessness, and, as residents’ believe, a certain sense of bliss that emanates from the presence of the Sacred Relic and the guardian deities are all come together to render this sense of well-being of the city. It became clear in the study that the quality of social life in Kandy is closely connected to these core-dimensions of the spirit of the city.

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.

5. Conclusions

The main purpose of this paper has simply been to point out that the current definition given to tangible and intangible heritages needs rethinking. In this re-conceptualization, I contend that tangible refers to all forms of material culture which we preserve in order to sustain the intangible cultural ideological system which constructed that material reality. Conservation is meaningless if it is devoid of attention given to this underlying cultural value system. This conceptual clarity in turns helps to define the place of the spirit of place in the conservation discourse.

The notion of the spirit of the place can be considered a quite useful construct in conservation as it brings many theoretical ideas in conservation together. It is created collectively by both the significant tangible and intangible attributes of the place. This helps identifying what to preserve and what not to. It evokes strong memories and images of the place in beholder's minds and develops emotional connection to the place. Its core-dimensions and dimensions that are detrimental to it can be defined and dealt with in an appropriate manner. As demonstrated in the study in Kandy, the local community can clearly articulate these dimensions of the place spirit they experienced, and thus, it helps engaging the community in the preservation of their heritage. Since it is an experiential quality, locals and visitors alike can define its constituent dimensions and what place attributes might have generated such spirit. Heritage values, therefore, can be defined in terms of experiential dimensions of the place. When identified, the core-dimensions of the place spirit can be utilized in the promotion of the local economy, in which preservation is suitably balanced with economic development. Since the experience of the spirit of the place happens in the present, the nexus between the past, present, and the future becomes clearer.

Another premise of this paper is to suggest that the constructs and concepts we apply in the conservation discourse should be articulated in more tangible and definable manner so that they can easily be utilized in deriving the conservation practices, which facilitates the local communities to get engaged with. The notion of the spirit of place is one such useful construct which is usually shrouded in mystical poetics that many cannot comprehend. The paper attempted to frame it in more tangible, practical terms, believing that conceptual clarity delivers better preservation pragmatics.

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