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Considerations for a Values-Based Approach to Heritage Conservation within Canada

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To say that historic places are protected and conserved because they have value or meaning to society is a self-evident statement. After all, if they are not valued in some way, there would be little reason to conserve them. This truism is the easiest part of understanding the role values play in heritage conservation. What is more problematic is what do we mean when we speak of value or meaning and how do the interpretations of value and meaning shape decisions made to conserve places themselves?

Traditionally heritage conservation has taken a narrow view of interpreting value. Generally it has been assumed that value is determined through historical research, archaeological investigation or architectural analysis. Once the value of a place has been established, the real work of maintaining its longevity begins, which is to ensure its material integrity is protected and conserved. Charters, conventions and declarations have been written to make certain that conservation work adheres to the highest standards.

This theory appears sound enough as far as it goes, but inherent in this argument are the assumptions that values will not change and that once established, material conservation can be undertaken with little or no reference to a place's significance. Both assumptions, however, are flawed. Let's take a look at the second one first.

In 2000, the Getty Conservation Institute published a research report entitled Values and Heritage Conservation. The introductory essay was written by the editors, Erica Avrami, Randall Mason and Marta de la Torre.¹ In figure 1, they illustrate four broadly-defined, sequential steps in heritage conservation: interest, protection, planning/management, and intervention. Each step is articulated by the professionals, public interest groups, organizations and institutions which undertake the work. For example, it could be historians and archaeologists in the first step, lawyers and property managers in the second, planners and developers in the third, and architects and engineers in the last. While the people involved at each step build upon what has been done before, the groups involved tend to have different cultures and see what they are doing as discrete activities. Often what happens at the intervention stage is that architects and engineers, for example, are not aware of the full range of complex and often contradictory values which are inherent in the fabric, space and uses of a place. Conservation decisions will always give preference to some values to the detriment of others, and sometimes unconsciously so. There is no such thing as a value neutral historic place.

In figure 2 of the same report, the authors re-draw the diagram of sequential circles as a set of concentric circles. The outermost ring is interest, followed by protection, planning/ management and finally intervention. Their arrow is drawn from the outer ring to the innermost circle and shows how values drive the management system at each stage of activity. In a nutshell, this is a basic schematic of values-based management or values-centered conservation. Let me discuss how a values-based approach has been adopted in my country, Canada.

In 2000, Canada began what it calls the Historic Places Initiative, or HPI. Until this time, it was the only G8 country that did not have a national register, national standards for conservation, national heritage legislation, national financial incentives for conservation, or a national trust. Much of this has to do with Canada's constitution which gives responsibility for culture and land management primarily to the provinces and territories, except for specific responsibilities retained by the federal government. This has not stopped the federal government from intervening in matters of culture and land management, given its spending power and the peace, order and good government clause in Canada's constitution. HPI was launched through federal spending power, but in close collaboration with the provincial and territorial governments.

¹ Values and Heritage Conservation, Los Angeles, 2000, pp. 3-11.

A central part of HPI is a national, on-line Canadian Register of Historic Places.² Instead of replacing the various registers already in existence across the country, it is a register of registers. Documentation standards have been developed, of which the most important part is the statement of significance or SOS.

The statement of significance is composed of three parts: a description of the place, an articulation of its values, and a list of its character-defining elements. A place can be a building, structure, group of buildings (or structures), district, landscape or archaeological site. Values can be historical, aesthetic, scientific, social, cultural or spiritual, but are not limited to this list. Character-defining elements, on the other hand, define how the values are embedded in the place and cannot be separated from it. They are broadly defined as the materials, forms, location, spatial configurations, uses, and cultural associations and meanings which comprise the place. Not all values can be listed, nor all the character-defining elements; instead, the on-line register lists the *core* values and *key* character-defining elements. It should be noted that the statement of significance is only an on-line summary of these attributes and should not be considered as a complete record. Going back to the research files and evaluation methods used to determine value is essential to understand the full range of values and character-defining elements of any historic place. Let me give you an example of a statement of significance.

In the city where I live, Victoria, Canada, Chinese immigrants during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries built and remarkable district called Chinatown. It is the oldest, permanent Chinatown in Canada and has been commemorated as a national historic site. There are a number of quite interesting hybrid oriental/occidental designed buildings. One of the most impressive is the pagoda-like Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association Building and Chinese School (see photograph 1). This is how the City of Victoria has described the description of the place, value and character-defining elements on the Canadian Register of Historic Places:

Description of the Place

The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and Chinese Public School is a unique freestanding two and one-half storey building located on one and one-half commercial city lots in Victoria's Chinatown District. It is distinguishable by its spacious set-back situation within the streetscape, a unique pagoda-style roofline and tower, and an eclectic blend of architectural detailing.

Heritage Value

The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and Chinese Public School is an important symbol of perseverance in the face of Western Society's discrimination against the Chinese community in the early twentieth century. The school was constructed in 1909 by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) in response to racial and cultural segregation imposed by the school board and government, which banned Chinese-born students from City schools until they spoke English. Although no longer the sole source of education for Chinese children in Victoria, as it was originally, the school continues to provide education to members of the community in a supplemental nature. It is significant that the Chinese Public School has continued to perpetuate the knowledge and appreciation of Chinese language and traditional cultural values to generations of the local Chinese-Canadian community for almost one hundred years.

This historic place is also valued as a monument to the strength and philanthropy of the CCBA, which was once the most powerful Chinese organization in Canada. This building, which continues to maintain an Association office, is a testament to that organization's long-standing commitment to provide social and cultural leadership for its community. It is important to Victoria's heritage because it is an embodiment of the Association's original functions, established in 1884: to lobby against discriminatory laws and taxes, to arbitrate and maintain peace and order in Chinatown, to provide fundraising and relief, and to administer a hospital, cemetery, and school for the Victoria Chinese Community.

Architecturally, it is valued as one of Victoria's most important buildings. An impressive and unique character-setter within this neighbourhood, this is one of the most outstanding buildings within one of the oldest Chinatowns in North America. Its freestanding and spacious setback within the streetscape and its eclectic architecture - designed by Scottish architect David C. Frame - make it a unique and valuable landmark in the City of Victoria.

Character-defining Elements

² See: www.historicplaces.ca

The character-defining elements of the Chinese Public School include:

- Its freestanding nature which contributes to its landmark status, seen in characteristics such as front and side setbacks, and the small courtyard at front.
- Elements which define the lot occupied by the school, including the fence and gateposts.
- Design details which contribute to its Chinese character, and support the heritage character of the streetscape and the Chinatown District, including its pagoda-like roofline, prominent tower, and Chinese characters.
- Eclectic elements of its architectural design which contribute to its uniqueness within the city, such as the trefoil fretwork in the second floor balcony, orientalized bracketed eaves, and the first and second floor window muntin pattern.
- Its uses as both a school and a Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association office, and as a school for teaching subjects including Chinese history, culture, and language.

Once the values and character-defining elements of a place are identified, they drive the subsequent conservation process outlined in the Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada.³ Figure 1 from the Standards and Guidelines illustrate the four broad steps for heritage conservation. First, the heritage values and character defining elements of a place are identified through a statement of significance. Next, the primary conservation treatment is determined. This could be a choice between preservation, rehabilitation or restoration.⁴ Following this decision the appropriate standards for each level of treatment have to be reviewed to guide any intervention decision. And finally, depending on the type of historic place being considered, the conservation guidelines outline the best practices to be followed in paired columns of recommended/not recommended actions.

To ensure that the heritage values of a place are respected, both the values and character-defining elements from the statement of significance are embedded in the standards. Standard #1, for example, states:

Conserve the heritage value of a historic place. Do not remove, replace or substantially alter its intact or repairable character-defining elements. Do not move a part of a historic place if its current location is a character-defining element.

In any conservation decision concerning a historic place, such as our example of the Chinese Consolidated Association Building and Chinese School, the heritage values and character-defining elements as defined in the statement of significance must be understood and integrated into the conservation standards and guidelines before the standards and guidelines can be applied.⁵ Going back to the two models proposed by the Getty Conservation Institute above, the Canadian system follows the second example of concentric circles. Material conservation is undertaken with direct reference to the heritage values of a place. So far all seems straightforward.

I now want to turn attention to the first of the two problems I posed, namely, the belief held by many heritage conservation professionals that once values are established they are not likely to change, at least not in the short-term. This certainly appears to be the case with statements of significance on the Canadian Register of Historic Places. If they form the basis of future conservation decisions, one assumes that values should remain constant otherwise it calls into question the entire

³ Government of Canada, 2003.

⁴ Preservation is defined to mean the action or process of protecting, maintaining, and/or stabilizing the existing materials, form, and integrity of a historic place or of an individual component, while protecting its heritage value. Rehabilitation is the action or process of making possible a continuing or compatible contemporary use of a historic place or an individual component through repair, alterations, and/or additions, while protecting its heritage value. Restoration is the action or processes of accurately revealing, recovering, or representing the state of a historic place or an individual component, as it appeared at a particular period in its history, while protecting its heritage value.

⁵ This practice differs greatly from the US Standards and Guidelines which reference the visual heritage character of a place, presumably determined by the site's conservators, and no reference is made back to the reasons why the place was listed on the US National Register in the first place.

conservation process. But do they remain constant even in the short term and is it even possible to have just one set of values at a place?

Although not in Canada, I would like to begin my discussion with a well-known place of undoubted historic value. The reasons for its value and who holds what values are highly contested, namely, the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas (photograph 2). For the most part, it had an unexceptional history. The Mission San Antonio de Valero was founded by Franciscan missionaries in 1718. By the early nineteenth century it was used as a military post, but not much of consequence happened there until 1835 when fighting occurred between the Mexican government and American settlers. It culminated in the thirteen day siege by Santa Anna and the Mexican Army ending with the Battle of the Alamo on March 6, 1836. All subsequent history is predicated on the contested significance of that battle for each of the participants.

The Anglo-Americans who came to Texas were for the most part southerners of Scots-Irish descent; protestant, proud, irascible and violent by nature, and hyper-Jacksonian by political belief. As frontiersmen they were born risk-takers and land hungry. While espousing values of liberty and freedom, many were racists and slave owners, exhibiting a clash of values with their northern brethren which would soon culminate in the US Civil War.

The Mexicans, by comparison, had just gone through their own War of Independence from Spain and was a republic of about equal size and population to the United States. It had a liberal constitution which had abolished slavery. Political views ranged from liberal to arch-conservative and authoritarian, the latter of which was personified in the President, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna: Catholic, arrogant, contemptuous and racist as well. While emblematic of the Mexican ruling-class, Santa Anna stood in contrast to many Tejanos who held their own views of liberty and equality, typical of liberal democratic revolutionaries throughout Europe and the Americas, but who stood on the other side of a cultural divide from the American revolutionaries. That these two complex civilizations would collide in the Texas Revolution with the winner-take-all was perhaps inevitable.

A number of the facts of the battle are hazy or contradictory, but that does not matter. Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, William Travis and the other defenders of the Alamo became instant martyrs and heroes and entered American myth and legend. The complexities of the two civilizations were soon forgotten in the popular imagination. For Americans the Alamo came to symbolize the fight for liberty and freedom over tyranny and authoritarianism, a kind of Manichean battle between the light and the dark, the same values held today by another Texan who has the American military mired in Iraq. For the Mexicans it is the reverse. The loss of Texas and the Treaties of Velasco is a short step to the disastrous Mexican-American War and the loss of California, Colorado, Utah and most of Arizona and New Mexico in Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848). Santa Anna's arrogance and hubris pale in the light of American imperialism and the insulting peace treaty forced upon the Mexican people. It raises questions not just about the past, but of the present as well, where thousands of Mexicans seek work in territory many believe were wrongly taken from them. Social and cultural symbols and metaphors replace historical facts and analysis. Such symbols are further compounded by pop culture re-interpretations of the battle adding even deeper layers of meaning to the Alamo.

A brilliant investigation of the Alamo in myth and history is given in [A Line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory](#) by Randy Roberts and James S. Olson. In their Preface, Roberts and Olson write:

Many historians have considered what happened at the Alamo, but few have explored the changing meaning of the battle. As a result, the story of what happened, why it happened, what it has meant, and what it still means has been left to an assortment of guides, politicians, television executives, and movie producers. More than 150 years after the storming of the Alamo, two of the most important interpreters of the event are Walt Disney and John Wayne.⁶

In "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World," historian Mike Wallace points out that Walt Disney was far from indifferent to history.⁷ From his childhood of hardship and poverty Disney grew up wanting to create a perfect America, a main street which was always happy and fun, a Frontierland where the good-guys always won, and Davy Crockett was an up-standing, backwoodsman, American citizen, quite unlike the southern Anglo-American and self-promoter he really was. Despite how fast and loose Disney or John Wayne played with the facts, a general understanding of the history of Alamo and what it means in the United States are interlinked with these simplistic, cinematic interpretations.

⁶ (Touchstone, New York, 2001) p vii.

⁷ [Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory](#), (Temple University Press, 1996) pp 133 - 158.

Values and meanings do not just come from the facts; societies construct them from a variety of sources and these constructs can have the authority to shape the psyche of a community or nation.

From the Alamo example we can see a number of the assumptions of values-based management. First, values are not discovered, but are socially constructed. This is certainly true of history which is constructed not merely on the facts, but upon the historian's understanding or interpretation of the facts. In the example of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and School Building given above, reference is given to the racism of the white majority. This interpretation fits nicely with Canadian multiculturalism prevalent today and an official righting of past inequities, but not with Chinese racism and the fact that for the most part the Chinese chose to live apart from the larger society, a picture which is beginning to emerge from new research and a re-interpretation of the facts, but currently unpopular.

The second assumption of values-based management is that values are contingent or situational. This hypothesis is most obvious when we examine how values have changed over time. A recent movie (2004) of the Alamo has Billy Bob Thornton playing Davy Crockett. Instead of the "aw-shucks," nice guy played by Fess Parker for Walt Disney's idealized America or John Wayne's tough, unreflective patriot from the Cold War era, Thornton's Crockett is uncertain and hesitant. He is a man who can see too many sides to the story, a post 9/11 hero in an America torn and divided over the Iraq war. The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, as another example of contingency, will not alter the decisions of past Boards no matter how out of date they are with current sentiments, because the past still has its rights to its values. Instead, the Board has started to re-commemorate some national historic sites with the new interpretations added along with of the older ones.

Multivalence or a multiplicity of values is the third assumption of values-based management. According to the modern worldview there is one fixed reality. Postmodernism has raised the notion that context and reality are interrelated. Change the context and the shape of reality changes. This is certainly true when dealing with normative phenomena, such as values. Any single place can reflect many points of view and this multivalence leads to a rich understanding of the past. The problem with narrowly defining significance is that many of these other views can be lost, resulting in irreversible conservation interventions which capture only a small portion of the overall significance.

The last values-based assumption is that values, by their nature, will conflict with each other at some level. Conflict is embedded in the multivalence of the Alamo, the different interpretations of value of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association Building and Chinese School, and many of Canada's national historic sites. These ideas are very nicely summarized in the *Declaration of San Antonio* (1996) prepared by the ICOMOS committees of the Americas, as a commentary on UNESCO's *Nara Document*. In part it states:

An understanding of the history and significance of a site over time are crucial elements in the identification of its authenticity. The understanding of the authenticity of a heritage site depends on a comprehensive assessment of the significance of the site by those who are associated with it or who claim it as part of their history. For this reason, it is important to understand the origins and evolution of the site as well as the values associated with it. Variations in the meaning and values of a site may at times be in conflict, and while that conflict needs to be mediated, it may, in fact, enrich the value of the heritage site by being the point of convergence of the values of various groups. The history of a site should not be manipulated to enhance the dominant values of certain groups over those of others.⁸

Exploring these ideas a little further, I would like to introduce one more theory for consideration flowing out of postmodern philosophy called discourse theory. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner nicely summarize some of the key elements of discourse theory in their book, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* as follows:

Discourse theorists argue that meaning is simply not given, but is socially constructed across a number of institutional sites and practices... For Foucault and others an important concern of discourse theory is to analyze the institutional bases of discourse, the viewpoints and positions from which people speak, and the power relations these allow and presuppose. Discourse theory also interprets discourse as a site and object of struggle where different groups strive for hegemony and the production of meaning and ideology.⁹

⁸ http://www.icomos.org/docs/san_antonio.html

⁹ (New York, The Guilford Press, 1991), p. 26.

In 2005, INAH very kindly invited me to speak at a conference it held in San Miguel de Allende to explore the changing meanings of authenticity as they might apply at world heritage sites. My good friend, Dr. Nelly Robeles Garcia, asked me if I would speak about SGang Gwaay World Heritage Site at the southern end of the Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii) in Canada, where one can still see the last remaining historic Haida totem poles in their original location. It is a place with multiple stakeholders who hold conflicting views of the place. As I began to sort through my research, I discovered that notions held by these different stakeholders were shaped by the character and purposes of these institutions they represented. Here is what I wrote:

To understand where significance lies, one not only has to identify what the range of values might be, but also to understand them within the contexts of the stakeholder groups who created them.

Historical value, for example, frequently does not mean the same thing between stakeholders. Behind the traditional cultural heritage values are sets of over-arching or meta-values held by different stakeholders which will shape or broker how and which cultural values are sought and what information is gathered to support the arguments. Since, under a values-centered approach to conservation, values are considered to be socially constructed (exogenous) and not found (endogenous), it follows that authenticity, which is how the values are both tangibly and intangibly expressed, is shaped by the same social constructs.

For the Haida people the totem poles at SGang Gwaay cannot be understood outside of their cosmological world-view. Physically they are integrated with the place and the place is integrated with the land, sea and sky. Culturally the place connects the present generations with the ancestors, spirit ancestors and the Creator before them. The raising of each pole was accompanied by an elaborate ceremony called a potlatch. It did not just confirm the rights of the chiefs and other high dignitaries, but connected them and the poles to eternal truths, outside of time and space. The poles are meant to eventually rot and return to the earth as part of the sacred circle of life and death.

By contrast archaeologists are western-trained scientists not pursuing an ontological truth, but knowledge as we know it through empiricism. While history is open to a selection of facts, based on differing interpretations of the past, archaeology purports to be a much more phenomenological discipline. While the hermeneutics of archaeology tries to be as phenomenological as possible, the findings are still open to the interpretation of the particular archaeologist undertaking the investigation. Nevertheless, all archaeologists want to see the least amount of disturbance at SGang Gwaay in order to protect archaeological evidence which may not be uncovered for years to come.

Before SGang Gwaay became a World Heritage Site, it first had to become a national historic site, which occurred in 1981. Canada's national historic sites are not always the best or oldest places of their kind in the country. Often they are ones which have the ability to tell different aspects of Canadian history written on the face of the land. Guided by the National Historic Sites Policy, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada is interested in telling the whole story of Canada rather than commemorating increasingly more of the same kind of sites. The importance and integrity of SGang Gwaay is not just about itself, but about how it expresses certain themes within this Canadian context.

SGang Gwaay as a World Heritage Site appears compatible with the place as a national historic site, but the term "outstanding universal significance" does imply that values are constructed to meet different ends. It is inscribed under section (iii) of the criteria in the Operational Guidelines which states it must "bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared." The nomination report describes the place as bearing a "unique testimony to the vanished civilization of the Haida Indians..." The site and people are treated archaeologically. However, a living, thriving Haida culture still exists and the continuing significance of SGang Gwaay to the Haida people is still honored. Although the Haida feel reverential about the place and do not want to disturb their ancestors still present at SGang Gwaay, for them it remains an evolving cultural landscape, not a relict landscape.

And finally there are cultural tourists who come to the place. A reality for all cultural site managers is that cultural tourism is the fastest growing segment within the tourism industry, particularly aboriginal tourism. Never before has the world seen so many people with such high incomes. Many of these people are retired and want the rewards of their hard work. Places like SGang Gwaay beckon and the tourists want access to the place. The site, however, is fragile and cannot bear extensive visitation. While limits are put on annual visitation, cultural tourists bring cash for the local economy and to turn those away means less money in local circulation.

These discourses certainly do not neatly align with each other and what usually happens is that each group tends to promote its own discourse over the others hoping to become dominant, if not the only, interpretation. It certainly seems to be the case with World Heritage Sites where there is a tacit belief that the outstanding universal values trump all others. This struggle for dominance is referred to as hegemony by Best and Kellner.

Hegemony occurs when the value system of the dominant group in society is so pervasive that the values of other groups are understood and evaluated in terms of the dominant group's values. In a sense it is a closed, self-referencing system. In Canadian society, for example, the meaning of the term "heritage" has been appropriated by an activist heritage advocacy, dominated by the values of white, urban, middle class professionals. This hegemony primarily sees heritage as architecture where aesthetic values prevail, preferably the way a place appeared when it was first built. All other values are defined within the terms of this group. The working-class, vernacular landscape, for example, is not even seen.

The task for heritage conservation is not to try to maintain the integrity of the different discourses, because for the most part they cannot be assimilated. Nor should conservation choose one set of values over another. I think what heritage conservation practice must understand is that values are always articulated within some discourse and that conservation decisions must try to accommodate and give expression to as many of the different values as possible. Think back to the quote from the Declaration of San Antonio above: understand history and significance over time, understand all stakeholder interests comprehensively, understand the presence of conflict, and understand that if conflicts cannot be mediated, the site becomes the point of convergence for a multiplicity of co-existing values. Most of all the Declaration warns us not to manipulate the values of the dominant hegemony over the others.

This approach squares itself nicely with the principles of values-based management and gives it even more credence and depth. Values are socially constructed, but often within powerful discourses. Values are contingent upon the interplay between the discourses where each discourse claims to hold the correct meaning of the past. By definition there are multiple meanings and these meanings collide because of the differing value systems.

So where do we go with these ideas?

At the beginning of this paper we explored the Canadian Register of Historic Places and the statement of significance contained in each register record. Value is identified reductively (historic, aesthetic, scientific, etc.). It is not known how values are elicited, but hopefully they are determined within some kind of overall context. The question which arises is whose values are being given preference in that context, because we know by definition that both the values and context can be conceived within a set discourse.

If we are going to elicit values which represent multiple stakeholder interests, the following notions should be considered. First, realize that all values of a place must be identified without giving preference to any one set. Second, understand and accept that values are socially constructed within discourses which strive to become hegemonic. Some of them may be reconciled with each but others may not. In a number of cases the differences can only be accepted. And third, accept that new meanings and values will be produced for a historic place in the future. Value formulation needs to be treated as a dynamic process, not as a set of static outcomes.

How will this approach affect conservation action?

First, determine the level of intervention which best expresses the diversity of values. This could be preservation, rehabilitation or restoration. Following long-standing conservation practice, the principle of minimal intervention should be followed, because it offers the best chance that the largest diversity of values will be conserved. Second, references to value and character-defining elements in the Standards section of The Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada should be read with this diversity in mind. And third, the guidelines should be interpreted flexibly, to ensure that the maximum range of values can be accommodated within conservation action. If this kind of approach is adopted, a truly values-centred approach to heritage conservation may emerge in Canada.