

# Authenticity and Architecture

## Representation and Reconstruction in Context

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Throughout human history the cultural meanings of various architectural structures have been altered. This continuous change in our social environments is evidenced by the destruction of countless cities during World War II, and in recent memory by the damage and loss created by earthquakes, tsunamis, and terrorist activities. Our environments are constantly being altered, and these changes contribute to the disruption of our sense of continuity, our memories, and our shared meaning. Our reactions to these changes vary according to the layers of cultural, historic, and artistic identity that have been disrupted, challenging our perceptions of the authentic. In light of many European post-war reconstructions, architectural revivals, and post-historicized recreations, there is a form of suspended historical amnesia that contradictorily strives for both nostalgia and a simultaneously fixed-in-time architectural ideal that transcends historical and temporal context.

From an American perspective, a hypothetical parallel scenario, with regard to suspended amnesia, would be to recreate the World Trade Center, in New York City, in a pre-9/11 context. In fact, there were calls for just such a reconstruction of the towers<sup>1</sup> that would have been misleading and a revisionist oversimplification of the site's history.<sup>2</sup> How would visitors see the new towers, as original or reconstructed? Would one experience the structure as authentic, if that was of concern, and what would the benefit be, and to whom? Furthermore, what symbolic meanings would be imbued?

I would argue that any authoritative and privileged notion of authenticity and any supposition of a continuous architectural lineage – in either a Western or Eastern setting – is damaging to a building's history and context. This is especially true in light of the rebuilding of war-ravaged Dresden; the controversial interpretations of historical life at Colonial Williamsburg, in Virginia; the Paul Revere House, in Boston; the post-arson reconstruction of the Fantoft Stave Church, in Bergen, Norway; and the ritual destruction and rebuilding of the Ise

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<sup>1</sup> K.B. RICHBURG: 'Rebuilding at World Trade Center site long delayed', in *Washington Post* (Friday, September 11, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Numerous city planners and developers had proposed the reconstruction of the World Trade Center towers, as is.

Shrines, in Ise-Shi, Japan. Last but not least, are the many iconic churches that have been resurrected in Red Square, in Moscow, Russia.

This search for the authentic in reconstructed architecture similarly parallels the classical myth of the origins of architecture as defined in ancient times by the Roman architect Vitruvius, in his pivotal treatise *Ten books on architecture*,<sup>3</sup> and as subsequently idealized by Eisen's Primitive hut (*Adam's hut in paradise*), in the frontispiece of Laugier's *Essay on architecture*;<sup>4</sup> all of which influenced the design of various structural elements and proportioning systems employed by Renaissance architects. This was eventually echoed in the rise of Neo-Classicism, during the Age of Enlightenment, as a search for meaning, order, and a response to the developing crisis of modernity, and a world fraught with anxiety, turmoil, warfare, and destruction.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, our secularized post-Enlightenment search for meaning and authenticity can also be seen as a response to the broader crisis of modernity. Lionel Trilling suggests that because the word authenticity has been incorporated into 'the moral slang of our day [and] points to the peculiar nature of our fallen condition, our anxiety over the credibility of existences and of individual existences.'<sup>6</sup> Trilling implies that we have lost a sense of existence and meaning in our cultural traditions, and that our current search is to find identity, reference, and continuity with our past, reminiscent of a Biblical origin quest and the state of purity suggested by the setting of the Garden of Eden.

Pulitzer Prize winning architecture critic, Ada Louis Huxtable also comments on this condition, that<sup>7</sup>

To lose history is to lose place, identity, and meaning. But continuity can be achieved only ... in a way that works and matters ... [and] coupled with a sensitivity to and desire for their continued relevance and use, for their 'connectedness' [in the] ... continuum of social, cultural, urban, and architectural history.

More important is that an awareness of historical continuity and multi-layered complexities contribute to a richer and more authentic meaning of the genius loci (or spirit of place).

Furthermore, and according to the controversial architectural sociologist Andrew Potter, authenticity provides us with a way of describing and discussing 'things in the world, a way of making judgments, staking claims, and expressing

<sup>3</sup> M. VITRUVIUS POLLIO: *The architecture of Marcus Vitruvius Pollio in ten books* (transl. by J. GWILT) (London 1826).

<sup>4</sup> M.-A. LAUGIER: *An essay on architecture* (Los Angeles 1977).

<sup>5</sup> R. FRY: 'An essay in aesthetics', in Ch. HARRISON & P. WOOD (eds.): *Art in theory: 1900-2000. An anthology of changing ideas* (Oxford 2007) 76.

<sup>6</sup> L. TRILLING: *Sincerity and authenticity* (Cambridge, MA 1972) 93.

<sup>7</sup> A.L. HUXTABLE: *The unreal America. Architecture and illusion* (New York City, NY 1997) 25.

preferences about our relationships to one another, to the world, and to things.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the significance and meaning of what is or is not deemed authentic can differ greatly across various cultural, religious, and social groups, and must be carefully observed from multiple viewpoints and experiences to determine the full diversity of what constitutes authentic meaning.

In the study of architecture, the Western Canon has for centuries dominated much academic thought and research. Typically defined as the collective cultural works produced in Greece, Italy, France, Spain, and England (though many would even object to this selective geographic categorization), the Western Canon is a constructed narrative that has often excluded alternative cultural viewpoints. Yet, even the terms East, West, as well as the Western Canon, are Eurocentric by its geographic reference and denotes an authoritative religious overtone in its canonical listing of perennial cultural and historic treasures, deemed to be of universal importance to all.

Ultimately, the narrative of the Western Canon, is just another form of cultural imperialism and privileging, in which sociologist Kenneth Gergen notes that ‘all competitive voices are either suppressed, or shown to be wrong.’<sup>9</sup> The Canon also poses a deeper issue, with regard to constructed realities. According to Chris Lawrence, if the Western Canon ‘had been different, our world would have been different and so would we.’<sup>10</sup> Thus a different world allows us to reframe taken-for-granted assumptions.

For example, in many parts of the U.S., picket fences and white painted wooden churches (in the Greek revival style), often romanticize the town or village green. As a still fledgling democracy in the 1830’s, the U.S. looked to the temples of ancient Greece, the first democracy, for prowess, pedigree, and architectural inspiration. At this same time, much of the ancient world was also being rediscovered and analyzed, to bolster inspiration in a host of Neo-Classically styled buildings. This was based on the assumption that the ruins of the Parthenon, in Athens, were as white as the stone found, when in fact by the early part of the twentieth century various scientific investigations revealed the original colors of antiquity in the pores of the stone ruins. Despite the new evidence, many scholars still wanted to believe that if Michelangelo’s sculptures during the Renaissance were not painted, then classical architecture should follow suit. Clearly a mistake!

Now re-imagine the New England town green, flanked by buildings with the re-discovered colors of the Parthenon. A different constructed narrative and history would certainly have pervaded. It is somewhat reminiscent of Jean

<sup>8</sup> A. POTTER: *The authenticity hoax* (New York City, NY 2010) 13.

<sup>9</sup> K.J. GERGEN: *An invitation to social construction* (London 2009) 66.

<sup>10</sup> C. LAWRENCE: ‘Thinking makes it so’, in *The journalist* 1/9

<http://thinkingmakesitso.wordpress.com/2010/04/02/canon-to-the-right-of-them> (accessed on August 2, 2013).

Baudrillard's *Simulacra and simulation*, and the notion of the 'real without origin or reality',<sup>11</sup> parallel to simulacrum in that an idea creates itself to be 'true',<sup>12</sup> and that one can no longer discern the 'real from the unreal ... [with] models of simulation in place to contrive [and] ... to reinvent the real as fiction ... because it has disappeared from our life.'<sup>13</sup>

As with the example of the New England town green, the architecture of that era had followed the accepted pre-existing Neo-Classical narrative, or established 'reality', without scant thought to alternative accounts of classical antiquity. Therefore, taken-for-granted and established narratives, like the Western Canon, must certainly be reexamined and challenged.

In architecture, as with other disciplines, research into alternative narratives and influences provides for a more encompassing and richer understanding of architectural context against historical reframing. This inquiry falls under the sociological framework of social construction. Sheila McNamee, a professor of social theory and communication, outlines the concept of social construction in her work *Research as social construction*.<sup>14</sup>

The main premise of social construction is that meaning is not an individual phenomenon. It is not located in the private mind of a person, nor does one person unilaterally determine it. Meaning (and thus reality), to the constructionist, is an achievement of people coordinating their activities together.

Therefore, there are multiple layers of meaning embedded in architecture formed by the history and traditions of its communities; albeit with little communal consensus. We find multiple subjective meanings and experiences re-invented and re-interpreted, as an invented tradition, a concept examined by social historian Eric Hobsbawm: "Invented tradition" is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by ... accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.<sup>15</sup> This is most problematic in various architectural reconstructions that imply continuity with the past. In Norway, for example, the issue of continuity is somewhat contradicted by the fact that many medieval stave churches have been relocated, rebuilt, or conjectured. This disputable continuity is very much the case with the Fantoft Stave Church, in Bergen, destroyed by arsonists in 1992, and then subsequently rebuilt with traditional building methods and materials. This chronological break often challenges the authentic nature of the Fantoft Stave Church in the minds of its visitors. This is a curious conundrum in Norway, and elsewhere, in

<sup>11</sup> J. BAUDRILLARD: *Simulacra and simulation* (Ann Arbor, MI 1994) 1.

<sup>12</sup> POTTER: *The authenticity hoax* 113.

<sup>13</sup> BAUDRILLARD: *Simulacra and simulation* 124.

<sup>14</sup> S. MCNAMEE: 'Research as social construction. Transformative inquiry', in *Saúde & transformação social (Health & social change)* 1/1 (2010) 12.

<sup>15</sup> E. HOBSBAWM & T. RANGER: *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge 1983) 1-2.

light of the many cultural and artistic traditions that have been re-invented and re-appropriated, and which have suffered from discontinuity with the past.

In Japan, a similar condition exists at the Shinto site of the much-revered Ise Shrines, which were originally appropriated and adapted from granary structures. They are considered by many historians to be ‘the most important buildings in Japan’s early agrarian society’.<sup>16</sup> Dissociated from their original use as granaries, the buildings are now immersed in religious symbolism based on agrarian customs, in addition to many other diverse cultural and historic layers.<sup>17</sup>

According to the Shikinen Sengu ceremony, the shrines would be built and rebuilt on adjoining sites every twenty years, as has been the custom for over 1200 years, and with few exceptions. This rebuilding is done in deference to the ritual of *wabi-sabi*, which is a Japanese worldview and awareness of incompleteness, the cycle of death and rebirth, and the impermanence of all things. While often described as an aesthetic principle,<sup>18</sup> *wabi-sabi* is also a philosophical construct that typically refers to more phenomenological and subjective spatial features (not limited to architecture), and tied to an appreciative awareness as part of a more spiritual, cultural, and symbolic association.

In a similar construct of symbolic meanings and attachments, that adapt and transcend the initial form and its history, is the Paul Revere House in Boston, ma, which was restored to the date of about 1680; a century before and a story shorter than when the colonial era patriot lived in the house. The setting gives visitors a somewhat erroneous historical context and impression that Revere may have once lived in this building, despite the historical, physical, and temporal discrepancies. The Paul Revere House in its current form is nonetheless revered (pun intended), as an invented tradition relative to American history, and very much still an authentic experience. The confusion lies in that by 1770, when Revere and his family first lived in the house it had an added third floor, and would certainly not have been recognizable to them in its current restored state. The restoration does, however, offer a hybrid and iconic representation of colonial American architecture, deemed more appropriate to an invented and constructed image of Revere than of a specific colonial time period. Sadly, visitors typically leave with no sense of Revere’s authentic historical environment.

<sup>16</sup> F.S. KLEINER: *Gardner’s art through the ages. Non-Western perspectives* (Boston, MA 2006) 92.

<sup>17</sup> The removed and dissociative use of the granaries at the Ise Shrines is similar to the architectural form of the Roman basilica, which had programmatically served as a public assembly and law court during Roman times, and then later re-appropriated as a Christian church after the fall of Rome; hence the current use of the term basilica. The basilica, as with the Ise Shrines, can also be seen as an invented tradition in architectural practice.

<sup>18</sup> *Wabi-sabi* is roughly translated into English as ‘rustic’, and somewhat of a misnomer with no direct Japanese translation.

Other instances in the U.S. of this constructed authentic experience, based on invented historical traditions, are exemplified by various historically themed open-air architecture museums, such as Strawberry Banke (NH), Colonial Williamsburg (VA), Olde Sturbridge Village (MA), and Plimoth Plantation (MA), which misleadingly display an historical continuity and constructed narrative in order to meet a specific social need, historical function, or target audience.

Colonial Williamsburg, in particular, is both well-known and controversial. The original town of Williamsburg, VA, after the American Revolutionary War, had fallen to arson, decay, and ruin, and was sent into further decline by the removal of the state capital to Richmond, VA. By the 1930's, and still a shadow of its former self, the Rockefeller family had stepped in with funds and contracted for the entire town to be faithfully and authentically re-conjectured and idealized as a pseudo-historical colonial whole. Colonial Williamsburg had been reborn as 'a sanitized restoration project that took most of the messiness and complexity out of history.'<sup>19</sup> In fact, the architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable wrote, that:<sup>20</sup>

Williamsburg is an extraordinary, conscientious, and expensive exercise in historical playacting in which real and imitation treasures and modern copies are carelessly confused in everyone's mind ... [where] the end effect has been to devalue authenticity and denigrate the genuine heritage ... to which an era and a people gave life.

In Colonial Williamsburg, the Rockefellers, along with various administrators, architects, and conservators, had also curiously decided to restore the town to just one narrative of colonial American life, which did not include the perspective of African Americans, especially with regard to slavery and the life of many free African Americans from that time period. Since the 1970's, there have been many attempts to rectify the initial sanitized perspective with more inclusive displays and architectural restorations that tries to show a more diverse colonial American experience.

In a similar development, in Russia, during the 1930's, Stalin had ordered the destruction of many prominent buildings on Red Square, in Moscow. Two particular buildings, the Kazan Cathedral and the Resurrection Gate Church (both from the seventeenth century), were razed in order to make way for various Soviet administrative offices and activities. While a great loss to the fabric of the city square, thankfully Stalin never got around to fulfilling his desire to raze the iconic Cathedral of St. Basil's.

By the 1990's, in an interesting turn of events, President Putin and other officials, in a nostalgic coup of historical re-invention, looked to restore Red Square to a previously fixed-in-time narrative, by removing the Soviet-bloc architecture that had replaced a few of the razed buildings. Today, these replicated churches

<sup>19</sup> C. RIFKIND: 'Faking it', in *Metropolis* (December/January 1997/1998).

<sup>20</sup> HUXTABLE: *The unreal America* 25.

flank the square as authentic copies in a revived narrative, conjured up from historical images and memories; but nonetheless revered by the people, but akin to Russian icons.

In Warsaw, Poland, as well, there are many examples of resurrected narratives, created by the massive urban devastation that had occurred during World War ii (including the Siege of Warsaw in 1939, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, and the Warsaw Uprising in 1944), which led to a concerted rebuilding effort to restore the Old Town (Stare Miasto), the Town Square (Rynek), and the Royal Castle (Zamek Królewski), all of which had been brutally leveled. As with Colonial Williamsburg, the people of Warsaw saw the paradoxical and overriding need to rebuild and reconnect the past with their present. Of concern though, is the implied sense of authenticity, which unbeknownst to the typical tourist provides a somewhat disconnected, simulated, and nostalgic representation of Warsaw.

Germany has also been rebuilding its disconnected narratives and history, since the war. Of particular note is the city of Dresden, located in the former Soviet-controlled East Germany, which is transforming at a very fast pace. Historically, the city has been built and rebuilt on multiple occasions, starting with a massive fire in 1685; numerous bombing raids during World War ii; and most recently reconfigured by Soviet ideas on urban renewal. According to architectural historian Mark Jarzombek, the city is ‘a history of the problematic interweaving of overlapping and competing narratives about its past and future.’<sup>21</sup> As a result, urban planners are often faced with a complexity of meanings and erasures when rebuilding. The most notable reconstructed narrative in Dresden has been the leveled Frauenkirche, which was bombed and ‘left abandoned ... [in a] heap of blackened stones’<sup>22</sup> during World War ii. The rebuilt cathedral even includes stone fragments from the original rubble pile (by means of computer modeling), as a nod to its past, but somewhat controversial in that it replaced the familiar memorial aspect of the rubble pile. Overall, there has been a steady sifting through the competing narrative layers in Dresden, from its medieval past, to the synagogue and Jewish ghetto, to the baroque masterpiece of the Zwinger, and finally to the modernist governmental buildings of the Soviet occupation. A varied history indeed!

To complete this discussion, it is interesting to study a different approach in the reconstruction of historic architecture. Consider the abstracted interpretive site of Benjamin Franklin’s home, in Philadelphia, pa, designed by Robert Venturi. At Franklin Court, the visitor is not subjected to either conventional or imposed material representations, but rather to a ghostly outline, in steel, implying a condition of gestalt, to which visitors are invited to create an individual un-

<sup>21</sup> M. JARZOMBEC: ‘Disguised visibilities: Dresden’, in E. BASTÉA (ed.): *Memory and architecture* (Albuquerque, NM 2004) 51-52.

<sup>22</sup> JARZOMBEC: ‘Disguised visibilities: Dresden’ 55.

derstanding and impression of the colonial era building. In effect, the physical material is removed from strict narrative interpretations, still allowing an aura of authenticity. For Venturi, the building draws upon a type of authenticity constructed from the preconceived iconography of American architecture and materials.

This emphasis on mental construction echoes some of the philosophical dilemmas posed by Joseph Kosuth's work titled, 'One and three chairs'. As one may ask, is the idea of the chair (or for example Franklin Court) any less real than the physical manifestation? Art historian Marilyn Stokstad addresses this particular issue through Kosuth's work, which 'leads the viewer from the physical chair to the purely linguistic ideal of "chairness" and invites the question of which is the most "real"'.<sup>23</sup> Kosuth's 'chair' is not signified by the written definition of chair, the photographed chair, or the physical representation of chair, but by what is more freely constructed in the mind, of what a 'chair' is, which is unique to each visitor and determined by the layers of their own traditions.<sup>24</sup> The same would apply to Franklin Court, in which one mentally constructs what an American colonial era structure would look like. With both Franklin Court and Kosuth's work the transcendence occurs when the physical realm is removed from the representative, thereby allowing the visitor or observer to interpret the ideas freely, without imposed expectations and limitations.

Overall, this exploration of just a few of the issues surrounding authenticity in architecture, begins to address the various contributing voices and overlapping layers of forgotten or marginalized histories, related to altered environments, human atrocity, decay, collective memory, culture, religion, politics, bias, and societal differences. Consequently, design choices must consider, acknowledge, and integrate, both the accepted and marginalized aspects of the past and present, toward the future. It is my hope that the various issues and perspectives that this work has drawn upon, will offer architects and historic preservationists the opportunity to continually challenge their assumptions and taken-for-granted beliefs and begin to address alternative positions and perceptions beyond first impressions, or as they are culturally predetermined. While the interpretations of architectural meaning can be variably subjective and context dependent, they may also best be understood by the layers of traditions, rituals, and narratives embedded in cultural and regional histories that come to reshape our environments and our sense of continuity.

Lastly, the layers of authenticity offer opportunities to explore compelling and more complex solutions in architecture. According to David Lowenthal, at the 1994 Nara Conference on Authenticity, and his work on 'Changing Criteria of

<sup>23</sup> M. STOKSTAD: *Art history* (Upper Saddle River, NJ 2008) 1160.

<sup>24</sup> Related to the philosophical discussion described by Jacques Derrida, pertaining to the word 'dog' as a signifier of that particular animal, but not of any particular species, trait, or for that matter a specific dog.



Authenticity', he offers the following reflection: 'Authenticity is in practice, never absolute, always relative.'<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> D. LOWENTHAL: 'Changing criteria of authenticity', in *Nara conference on authenticity* (UNESCO World Heritage Centre/ICCROM & ICOMOS 2008) 123.

