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Constructing the ‘Other’: Toward a Typology
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Constructing the ‘Other’: Toward a Typology
The relation between built form and culture is especially affected in both the exercises of constructing national identity and manufacturing heritage for commercial consumption. One may distinguish three different types of physical environments which are produced today with the planned intent of making them places for the deliberate representation of cultural tradition. Despite the differences between them, it should be emphasized that all three are ‘made,’ in the sense that they embody the clear objective of capturing, reconstructing, manufacturing, and possibly inventing social and built heritage.

The first type is based on the notion of using history to create a dream landscape, a ‘Wizard of Oz’ land where all conflicts within a given culture are resolved, and where all cultural aspects are reduced to their basic representations. In such a vision, all icons of culture, such as architectural styles, building typologies, and spatial configurations, simply become the cultures that they are meant to represent. Authenticity here is desired, and is achieved through the manipulation of images and experiences.

Although such a strategy was often invoked in the building programmes of some reactionary nationalistic regimes aimed at fixing an official ethnic heritage, the ultimate example is, of course, the commercial Disneyland. One must remember, however, that Disney was not the first to pioneer the idea of replicating places of the ‘other’ for people to experience; for example, the ‘World’s Fairs’ referred to earlier were engaged in just such an activity during the nineteenth century. Disney, however, was the first to recognize the permanent, continuing commercial potential of such installations. At another level, this process has also meshed with present trends, since it is precisely about the manufacture of global cultural products. This phenomenon has been developing for long enough for a certain convergence of consumer preferences and behaviour to have already taken place, as evident in the worldwide appeal of places like Disneyland. Obviously, such places prove that even if the heritage is hyped, history sells. According to Briavel Holcomb: ‘Despite critics who argue that the nostalgia industry distorts and commodifies the past, allusions to art and hints of heritage are vital colours in the urban marketer’s palette’.

The second type of environment that partakes of these processes of cultural objectification is that with a true claim to history, in the sense that it once was the site of an important historic event but over time has become marginalized. The attempt to resuscitate such environments (which may often be entire cities) by remaking them in their former image may serve one or both of two primary motives: to attract tourists for financial gain; or to serve as 'banks' of national memory and pride to ward off the subversive effects of historical change.
Colonial Williamsburg is a good example of such an environment. A replica of the capital of Revolutionary-era Virginia, it is arguably America’s premier public history site. Yet, like other history museums, its legitimacy depends on its claim to ‘real’ history, as embodied in actual buildings and artefacts. But Colonial Williamsburg itself has long been criticized by historians for many of the same reasons as theme parks. For example, Eric Gable and Richard Handler have called it little more than ‘an airbrushed, consumer-oriented, patriotic shrine celebrating an upscale idyll loosely based on the life style of Virginia’s Colonial elite’.4

Such criticisms have not gone unnoticed. As cultural administrators have sought to keep Colonial Williamsburg at the cutting edge of historical knowledge, a new group of historians, hired in the 1970s, attempted to refashion the site by (among other things) bringing greater prominence to African Americans both in the ranks of its employees and in its narrative of nationhood. Yet the influence of these historians has ultimately remained limited – not, however, because historians are poor contributors to the project of manufacturing an imaginable history, nor because they are reluctant to contribute to the parallel project of facilitating the consumption of heritage. Instead, the lack of ‘real’ history mainly derives from the concerns of management that visitors will not come, or return, unless their visits are enjoyable.5 Thus, depicting the harshness of slavery or any of early America’s other shortcomings would create a level of discomfort that might ultimately cut into Colonial Williamsburg’s popularity or profit. There is a deep irony here. Although tourists generally long to visit ‘authentic’ places, the authenticity they seek is primarily visual. Thus, their encounter with ‘real’ history remains marked by distance. And while they may wish to meet the world of the ‘other’, they also take great pains to limit its influence on them.

There is, however, a third type of environment that seeks to exploit cultural heritage, and in these places any claim to the reality of history is clearly secondary to its potential to generate commercial profit. It is in such places that the loosening of ties between the signs of a culture and their referents may be most apparent. Quite simply, to optimize the desire of the producers to manufacture cultural heritage and the tourists to consume it (all in as pleasant an environment as possible), it is now common for both groups to simply agree to dispense with any pretension to reality altogether. The best case here, of course, is the city of Las Vegas. Unlike the first two types of heritage environment, the sophisticated, themed casino complexes of Las Vegas do not pretend to authenticity. Thus, while the real Doge’s Palace does not sit directly on the Piazza San Marco, such an adjustment can easily be made in its desert sister, where the replica of this historic seat of government is the Venetian, a 120,000 square foot gambling casino. Likewise, the Rialto Bridge, which was once the only crossing over the Grand Canal, in Las Vegas is found to connect two powerful gambling institutions. And while the real Bridge of Sighs earned its name by serving prisoners en route to their executions, the only ‘sighs’ at the Las Vegas version are likely those of gamblers in the process of losing their money.

Thus, unlike real cities, which often resort to the manufacture of heritage for political purposes, or nations which have willfully allowed the consumption of their traditions by others out of economic necessity, Las Vegas is the ultimate site for the consumption of the heritage of the ‘other’. Yet before rushing to dismiss such a project as kitsch, one must consider that in Las Vegas there is no hidden agenda. Las Vegas presents an outrightly manufactured heritage, based on the concept of copying the traditional forms of everywhere for the consumption of everyone. According to Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, in Las Vegas one may say, ‘the local and “exotic” are torn out of place and time to be repackaged for the world bazaar. Time and distance no longer mediate the encounter with “other” cultures.’6
Ultimately, one should not forget that the purpose of a categorization such as that I have just made between the three types of manufactured heritage environments is to point to certain social trends. Using such a categorical construction, it is possible to point out certain distinct types of effect on the relationship between tradition and tourist consumption on one hand, and cultural heritage and economic production on the other. Any such division into types may also be criticized because certain cases clearly span between categories, while others cannot be fit into the mould at all. In this regard, Seaside, Florida, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, might be said to fit between the first and the second categories; while Poundbury, England, and New Gurna, Egypt, might be said to fit between the second and third categories. Meanwhile, Celebration, Florida, might be said to occupy a position by itself. Perhaps most precisely because these cases would appear to be exceptions, it might be most useful to explore their cultural dynamics in greater depth.

It is important to recognize that some of the places mentioned here are the creations of a design movement called New Urbanism (originally known as neo-traditional urbanism). The town Seaside is perhaps the most well-known icon of this movement. Developed according to a strict zoning/design code known as Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND), it has been a great success in real estate terms. But like much of New Urbanism's output, it has also been criticized as a fake, involved with little more than the selling of nostalgia. Seaside has also been criticized for its exclusionary aesthetics and lack of social diversity. But perhaps the most severe criticism of it has directed at its particular form of physical determinism, best represented by the belief that 'community' can be created by simply copying historical urban forms.\[7\]

If tradition is about the absence of choice, as Yi-Fu Tuan argued some years ago,\[8\] heritage then is the deliberate embrace of a single choice as a means of defining the past in relationship to the future. It is clear from the work of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, that all traditions are invented.\[9\] Meanwhile, Benedict Anderson has shown that most nations are imagined communities.\[10\] Combining the views of these authors, it should become apparent that all heritage is socially manufactured, and that all traditions have the potential to be consumed.

Although the two activities, consuming tradition and manufacturing heritage, are thus produced by different agents, one cannot separate them from each other. In this global era, the consumption of tradition as a form of cultural demand and the manufacture of heritage as a field of commercial supply are two sides of the same coin. And many countries are now actively inventing or re-creating their own heritage, and using tourist revenues to do so. Their design agenda thus has two components: one politically self-serving; the other economically sustaining.

There are many cases around the world today in which the notion of a manufactured heritage has in this sense managed to take over a considerable segment of architectural practice. One might again cite the example of Singapore, alluded to earlier. Here, after government planners had ordered some of the most culturally distinct ethnic quarters to fall to the wrecker's ball, they realized they might actually need such places to compete in the new global tourist marketplace, with its emphasis on heritage sites. The challenge facing these same planners today, therefore, is to recreate new commercial areas that look ethnic enough to recapture some of the city's lost cultural heritage. Besides being patently fabricated, such actions reveal the craven tendency of many governments to bow to both political necessity and economic expediency. As Gupta and Ferguson have written, the new global context does seem to be recreating a sense of place and sense of community in positive ways, 'giving rise to an energetic cosmopolitanism in certain localities.' Yet, in other cases, 'local fragmentation may inspire a nostalgic, introverted
and parochial sense of local attachment and identity.' They therefore argue that even if globalization recontextualizes cultural localism, it often does so in ways that are 'equivocal and ambiguous'.

The situation of Hong Kong after its reunification with China in 1997 provides a slightly different twist on the same story. I first became aware of this dilemma at a conference I attended in December 1999, organized by the Hong Kong government to deal with the issues of heritage and tourism. I found the Hong Kong participants at this conference extremely enthusiastic about the prospect of putting their heritage to use for economic gain. However, the questions most participants forgot to ask were 'Whose heritage is to be preserved?' and 'To what end?' At the same time, it occurred to me that the most important topic such people could be beginning to address was how to recast their identity to fit the new reality of Hong Kong's political reunification with the mainland.

What these examples point to are the dangers of heritage professionals who compromise their positions with regard to the tourist industry. After all, the tourist industry is a business, and not a charity, and both its ethics and aesthetics primarily respond to market demands.

The ties of heritage managers to nationalist agendas must also be considered suspect. Nationalism is, and always has been, a divisive governing philosophy because at its core it is exclusionary. The nationalist agenda has always been to set up contrasts: my nation versus yours; my history versus yours; and finally my identity versus yours. Such distinctions have been at the centre of many violent conflicts (which, in turn, may owe their origins to irreconcilable identity positions). To preserve heritage for such exclusionary ends serves little purpose other than to increase the potential for further escalating the sources of intra- or international conflict.

Here is the dilemma of globalization. Because of the importance of the heritage tourism industry in the economy of nations, preserving heritage has become important not only for economic sustenance but also so that nations, regions and cities may position themselves to compete globally. The paradox is that investment in heritage may only stir up further nationalist sentiment that often leads only to invocations of superiority and isolationist tendencies.

As Kevin Robins has written, one must remember that 'Globalization pulls cultures in different, contradictory, and often conflictual, ways. It is about the "de-territorialization" of culture, but it also involves cultural "re-territorialization". It is about the increasing mobility of culture, but also about new cultural fixities.' According to Gupta and Ferguson globalization is also associated with new dynamics of relocalization:

It is about the achievement of a new global-local nexus, about new and intricate relations between global space and local place. The global-local nexus is about the relation between globalizing and particularizing dynamics in the strategy of the global corporation, and the 'local' should be seen as a fluid and relational space, constituted only in and through its relation to the global...Indeed, the very celebration and recognition of 'difference' and 'otherness' may itself conceal more subtle and insidious relations of power... Robins has further written that globalization is about the '...increasing transnationalization of economic and cultural life, frequently imagined in terms of the creation of a global space and community in which we shall all be global citizens and neighbours.' The proliferation of common cultural references across the world evokes for some a cosmopolitan ideal. 'There is the
sense that cultural encounters across frontiers can create new and productive kinds of cultural fusion and hybridity.\(^\text{16}\)

But the great danger lurking in this new global citizenship, of course, is the erosion of the public sphere. Briavel Holcomb has reported that a high official in the tourist industry once said, 'I can think of no industry other than tourism where the interests of the public and private sectors so closely converge?' Holcomb went on to argue, however, that this observation, 'rings truest when public means government leaders (rather than community) and private means business (not the private citizen).' Holcomb further remarked that the criteria for evaluating the relative costs and benefits of tourism to the public are both volatile and contested.\(^\text{17}\) The real issues here involve who manages heritage sites, and how these are in turn managed in relation to both the demands of the tourist market and the goals of the national or municipal governments that control them.\(^\text{18}\)

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1 There are, of course, many other classifications produced by others that may be helpful in this regard. See, for example, S.S. Fainstein and D.R. Judd, 'Cities as Places to Play', in Judd and Fainstein (eds.), *The Tourist City*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. In this chapter, Fainstein and Judd sort out three basic types of tourist cities: resort cities, which are places created expressly for consumption by visitors; tourist-historic cities, which have been sites of tourism for a long time and have transformed themselves into tourist sites through conscious promotion and reconstruction of heritage; and converted cities, which have built an infrastructure for the purpose of attracting visitors, but where the tourist space is insulated from the larger urban milieu within a process of uneven development (see pp. 262-267).
2 Gupta and Ferguson, 'Beyond Culture'.
3 B. Holcomb, 'Marketing Cities for Tourism', in Judd and Fainstein (eds.), *The Tourist City*, p. 65.
5 Ibid.
6 Gupta and Ferguson, 'Beyond Culture', pp. 6-23.
11 Gupta and Ferguson, 'Beyond Culture', pp. 6-23.
14 Gupta and Ferguson, 'Beyond Culture', pp. 6-23.
16 Ibid., p. 38.
17 Holcomb, 'Marketing Cities for Tourism', p. 65.
Given such conditions, heritage managers – whether nations, cities, agencies or individuals – carry a responsibility that must be separated both from the possibilities of the market and the desires of national or municipal governments. While this may be unrealistic, an appropriate course of heritage administration for the twenty-first century could involve management by non-profit, nongovernmental organizations with philanthropic funding, supervised by local municipalities or regions.