FUTURIST RHETORIC IN US HISTORIC PRESERVATION: A REVIEW OF CURRENT PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT:

Historic Preservation is an inherently retrospective discipline. The evaluation of the tangible manifestations of the cultural environment surrounding us is solely based on hindsight. At the same time the heritage profession has espoused a futurist stance by arguing that the heritage sites need to be managed and preserved in a spirit of altruistic stewardship for the benefit of future generations.

This paper examines the notion of “preserving the past for the future”, will assess its ubiquity of the phraseology and attempt to trace its origins and diachronic development. It will posit that the steep rise in popularity of futurist positioning statements, titles of publications and slogans on heritage posters is connected with a public perception of uncertainty about the present and the immediate future, and a concomitant “flight” into the largely nostalgic perception of the past.

Key Words:
Culture heritage management; future studies; stewardship.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

Historic Preservation is an inherently retrospective discipline. The evaluation of the tangible manifestations of the cultural environment surrounding us is solely based on hindsight. It is carried out through an examination of the historical and social processes that gave rise to the buildings, sites, places and cultural landscapes as they present themselves today and through ascertaining the nature and the strength of the values the community projects onto these heritage items (Lockwood and Spennemann 2001; Spennemann 2006a and 2006b). The historic preservation community tends to struggle with places that are very recent, as is exemplified by the discussions on the inclusion of late twentieth century architecture on the US National Register of Historical Places (Shull, Sherfy and Luce, 1990, Longstreth, 1992; Kelly, 2003). While, e.g., the formal recognition of late 20th century architecture is easier under the Australian heritage management framework, even there the recognition of very recent or emergent heritage is fraught with problems (Spennemann, u.r.a).

The formal processes hinder the recognition of historic places even in instances where the heritage value was self-evident the moment the event occurred. An example is the case of the protection of places associated with the historical event of the first humans stepping onto the surface of the Moon on occasion of the Apollo XI mission. This applies to both the sites on the lunar surface (cf. Spennemann 2004a and 2006c) and on Earth to both sites (cf. Spennemann and Kosmer, 2005) and major items of moveable cultural heritage (Spennemann, 2005). While the management of human heritage in outer space is gradually being addressed at least on a conceptual level (cf. Barclay, 2003; Spennemann, 2004a), the conceptualization of strategies to deal with truly future heritage, such as that created by robots, is just beginning (Spennemann 2006d and 2007a).

The whole *raison d’etre* of historic preservation is to manage heritage places in place—and to the degree it is reasonably possible—also unchanged. For historic preservation the three-dimensional, tangible sites that are imbued by the public with significance, it is these sites that can be used as tangible evidence (in the literal sense) to present and interpret the past for present and future generations. No one would advocate demolishing the Independence Hall in Philadelphia and attempting to maintain its heritage value through the photographs and documents that are existence. Yet that is what has been argued by some historic professionals in response to a comment that the extant (Apollo XI) and emergent space heritage is under threat.

At the same time as heritage managers struggle to come to terms with modern heritage as well as emergent heritage(s), the heritage profession has espoused—at least publicly—a futurist stance by arguing that the heritage sites need to be managed and preserved in a spirit of altruistic stewardship for the benefit of future generations (cf. Office of Historic Preservation, 1997; Delaware State Historic Preservation Office, 2001; Kentucky Heritage Council, 2003). The notion of “preserving the past for the future” is so ubiquitous today that few will query its origins or its validity. Cynics, on the other hand, may well argue that the heritage field appears to lack a clear sense of purpose and clings to clichés that seem to pull at the heartstrings of the audience in order to mask its own befuddlement.

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1 Anonimous reviewer’s remark to an earlier draft.