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The Significance of the Place-Historical Narratives in the Context of Spatial Perspective

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the significance of the integrated relationship between the historic heritage building and the unique narrative of the land. It discusses the nature of this relationship in the context of how best to preserve the narrative of the place and the value it embodies for "the future realization of the potential past" (O’Neill, 2008:155). This refers to the “transition from the past to future in such a way as to secure the transfer of...significance.”

The named research focus arises out of proposed relocation of a heritage listed building named Sunnyside, built in 1895, to a new site. The Preliminary Relocation & Redevelopment Feasibility Proposal acknowledges the local government environmental heritage plan which aims to preserve the environmental heritage including the historic, scientific, cultural, social, archaeological, architectural, natural and aesthetic heritage of the region. However, it argues that the policy does not apply to the land. The proposed subdivision of the land aims to generate funds for a new visitor’s centre (Feasibility Report, 2012)).

This study aims to demonstrate the significance of the integrated link between the heritage building and the unique narrative of the land. It agrees that the narrative of the heritage building itself could be restated in a different location. On the other hand, O’Neill argues that places contribute to the significance. They bear “the imprint of the lives of a community that went before us that gives the place its significance in our lives today” (Ibid: 146). In that sense creation of a place that looks identical would have a different story. Further, it may be claimed that such option would inflict, what this research refers to, as an irreparable wound in a space endowed with a rich historical significance. Conversely, the relocation of the site would affect the place-
historical narratives or what may be considered as a history lesson at a glance and a confirmation of the actual life as documented and preserved for future generations. For this purpose, this study intends to demonstrate the close relational tie between the historic building named Sunny-side, its actual site and the place-historical narrative. Further, it explores the role the three elements play in the process of conservation and sustainability

2. SUNNYSIDE AND BRETTVILLE ESTATE – A BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY

The foundations of the Sunny-side historic building were laid in the early August of 1895. The work on the home was nearing completion by January 1, 1896. The original records show it was a simple but comfortable home containing eleven rooms. As shown in the photo, the main building was 32 x 32 feet with a front veranda and a hall running through the center. There were four rooms 12 x 12 feet with another four rooms in the upstairs section of the house. The back of the house contained a dining room and an additional 16 x 22 feet were attached to it to accommodate the kitchen, bathroom and storeroom (White, 1983: 260). The prospective residents waited anxiously for the completion of the building “We expect the carpenters to complete their work this week then we shall get settled” (White, WC, 1896).

At this point, the narrative of the house connected directly with the narrative of residents who occupied it from 1896 to 1900. As such, its value moved beyond the state of a static entity, which, with the passing years transformed into a heritage icon. Osborne (2001:42) argues. “There is no inherent identity in places” and it can be added, as well as in material objects. Rather, the simple transition, from a common entity, to a place where people lived, dreamed and experienced life, paved into its history a unique narrative. This research agrees with O’Neill’s (2008:163) view. He suggests that places matter to people "in virtue of embodying their history and cultural identities.” Osborne (2001:42) extends this argument further by pointing out that

Photo 1: Sunnyside: Photo taken in 1898 showing the original resident of the house and her staff.
people's actions and behaviour "turn objective space into subjective places". Arefi (1999:179) adds saying that people’s attachment to places contributes to a “sense of place” referred to by some as “structure of feeling” (Agnew, 1987). In this construct, which includes beliefs, attitudes, practices and dreams, one finds the birth of a narrative – the story of the place. In consequence, *Sunnyside* retained its significance not only as a listed heritage building dating back to the 1890s but its story (historical narrative) attracts each year over 2000 visitors both from Australia and different parts of the world.

The National Trust Heritage Festival (The Herald, 2010) promoted *Sunnyside* as a well-preserved home dating back to 1895 containing some of the original furnishings of that period. At the same time, it highlighted the hub of its historical significance by promoting it as the home of the famous Seventh-day Adventist American writer. She is known as one of the most translated American authors of either gender who lived in Sunnyside from 1896 until 1900. An uneducated and frail woman she managed to produce approximately 100,000 pages, including letters, periodicals, articles, pamphlets and books (Land, 2005:319-22). *Sunnyside* is linked with the last five years of her stay in Australia (1891-1900) and especially with her contribution to the establishment of Avondale College of Higher Education. On the basis of the named connections, this research argues that the pivotal point relating to the conservation and the sustainability of this recognized heritage finds its locum in the totality of the place-historical narrative. This notion includes the fact that, in the past, places mattered to people; they still matter today and will continue to matter in the future.

Photo 2: Current of the Sunnyside Historic Building.

In contrast to the relocation proposal showing that only the house has local heritage significance, this paper argues that the historic value of the house cannot be dissociated from the historic value of the land. However, as argued by Palmer (2011:347) “the historical narratives of place, can be narrow and selective both in terms of what they pick out to remember and in the ways in which they emphasize what has, and what does contribute to making the places what they are.” In view of the named challenge, the historical value and significance of the place needs to move beyond the boundary of its immediate space for it developed in the crucible of a larger narrative, the story associated with the acquisition of the Brettville Estate for the school. Palmer argues correctly that, in the context of sustainability and preservation, the scope of the
place-historical narrative needs to be extended. In the case of Sunnyside, the narrative of the land preceded the narrative of the building. Although, the two narratives could be considered as distinctively different, a close examination of the data shows a bond or an integrated relationship that cannot be ignored.

The search to purchase a land to set up a Christian school commenced around April of 1894. The leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church examined one property fifty-five miles south of Sydney situated on Lake Illawarra. Then they moved on to another property seventy-six miles north of Sydney near Morisset. Times were difficult and financially challenging. “We are planning to buy a large tract of land, and can scarcely get enough money to go and see it” (White, 1983: 146). However, near Morisset, NSW, they examined the Brettville Estate of 1,500 acres selling for $4,500. A few days after the initial examination they reached the decision to purchase the land as a place for the school. Immediately after the initial decision the search party signed the contract and secured it by paying $125 with the proviso for further investigation. The progress was not without challenges. The committee received an unfavourable report about the quality of the land from an appointed government official. Firstly, the report suggested that the quality of the land was poor, and it required a lot of liming and draining (Benson, 1894). Secondly, finance was not available. When late in autumn the committee voted to purchase the Brettville estate for the named price of $4,500, they did so in good faith and trust in providential leading. William C. White, the son of Ellen G. White, who was directly involved with the acquisition of the land gave the following report. “On Thursday, June 28, I borrowed $150 from Mr Sherwin and $105 from the Australian Tract Society, and scrapped up all there was in our house, and made the payment of the $275 due on the first payment” (White, 1983: 153).

At this point, the two narratives find a common ground, namely the value instigated by human actions stemming from a visionary dream. These actions inject into the story of the land a new meaning and create an “ongoing reciprocal relationship between people and places they inhabit” (Osborne 2001: 42).

During the early developmental stages, Ellen G. White, the prime mover and promoter of the vision for the school, lived in Sydney. However, on July 7, 1895, she negotiated to purchase 40 acres of the Brettville Estate for the price of $1350. The purpose of this transaction was notable. She wrote (E.G. White. 1895), “The reason I purchase now is that I may furnish money which they [those connected the school] need so much now.” Another reason for the relocation from Sydney to Cooranbong was her visionary motivational determination. She was planning to develop a portion of her land to provide an object lesson of what could be done in agricultural lines (White, 1982: 332). Against all the prevailing odds, she stood her ground convinced about the suitability of the place and the providential leading. “Everything in this place had impressed me favorably except the fact we were far from the great thoroughfares of travel…” (E.G. White, 1894). She saw the land as the most suitable spot for the school. With this she expressed her faith in the divine guidance “With God’s blessings resting upon the school, the land with be blessed to produce good crops…” (E.G. White, 1894). Her confidence and firm determination was rewarded. A year after moving to her new home Sunnyside she wrote.

We have been living off our garden this year. Last year we had but few potatoes, but this year we have enough for ourselves and a good supply for our neighbours also. So we testify that the school land will yield abundantly this coming year if the Lord’s blessings will attend our labors. We are now eating sweet corn that this land has produced, and we enjoy it much. (E.G. White, Letter 92, 1897)

However, the impact of her contribution moved far beyond the mundane ordinary matters associated with daily life. Even though, she was instrumental in setting up institutions such as Avondale College of Higher Education, the Sanitarium Health Food Company and the Sydney Adventist Hospital, Sunnyside became a place where she penned two of her major literary works. In the first book, The Desire of Ages (1898), she explored the theme of God’s involvement in human life. In 1898, she commenced to work on the book Education published in 1903. In this book, she explored the principles of the higher view of education in which she discussed the dynamics of God’s purpose for life, namely the development of the spiritual, mental and physical faculties (Skrzypaszek & Ferret, 2010: 186). The principles imbedded in the named
publications crafted the inspirational fabrics of the extended narrative. In consequence, the narrative associated with *Sunnyside* provided a relationally spiritual connection with the educational institution known today as Avondale College of Higher Education. It was officially opened on April 28, 1897 consisting of six staff and only ten students. Prior to the official opening of the school, White coupled her pioneering and visionary determination with pragmatism. “There must not be one day’s postponement... if there is but one student present, we will begin the school at the appointed time” (E.G. White, Letter, 149, 1897).

Even though, the residential developments in the area created a physical gap between Avondale College Campus and *Sunnyside* the brief historical survey demonstrates a close integrated relationship between the named entities. Firstly, from their inception, they were all part of the same land, the Brettville Estate. Secondly, one may observe a gradually progressive development of the place-historical narratives shaped by people’s ideologically spiritual vision, dedication and commitment. More so, the historical data suggests that the narratives stemmed from the nerve centre, a simple house named Sunnyside, occupied by a person whose life in this community shaped the contours of narrative of the place. It is evident that the physical distance was always there, and it may be also argued that the named entities developed distinctive narratives. However, this research argues they were all united under the banner of one common denominator, the philosophically spiritual and socially relevant driving force - the vision to motivate and develop the spiritual, mental and physical faculties of human life. In other words, the accrued threads of the narratives help to shape an attachment and “facilitate the social construction of a place” (Burley, Jenkins, Laska, Davis, 2007). This paper suggests that the historic building *Sunnyside*, its land and the remaining entities of the Brettville Estate form a significant interrelated part of the grand place-historical narrative.

3. THE PLACE-HISTORICAL NARRATIVES IN THE CONTEXT OF SPATIAL PERSPECTIVE

The demands and pressures of the contemporary world exert financial constraints on the conservation of heritage. The question one needs to confront is how best to preserve the place-historical narrative and the value it embodies to secure into the future the transfer of significance.

At this point, it is important to engage in the discussion the concept of spatial perspective and its contribution to the sustainability of the historic building in its current location as part of the grand-historical narrative. Palmer argues that a ‘temporal perspective’ approach to the challenge of sustainability, based on decision and policies “for futures that continue, sustain and fulfill” is not sufficient (Palmer, 355). The fact is that these are often subject to power of politics, distortion and even betrayal of the past (Alivizatou, 2011:43). As already demonstrated, places are spaces invested with meaning and the narrative of one-place impacts the narratives of people in other places. However, this paper agrees that a temporal, time-oriented perspective, where the only option to provide solutions is on the horizontal scale (the backwards and forward movement), does not provide a great scope for creative solutions. More so, the resulting tension between attachment to the past and a frantic drive to remain relevant and financially viable impacts the creative application of the past towards the future realization of its potential. To support this view Palmer quotes Cresswell (1996) who suggest another option. He argues. “Places need to be understood as sites that are connected to others around the world in constantly evolving networks which are social, cultural and natural/environmental. Places need to be understood through the path that lead in and out” (Ibid. 43). In other words, he provides an alternative option to view and analyze the value of the specific historical entities and the role they play in the formation of the place-historical narrative from an optically vertical perspective.

In addition to Cresswell’s ‘in and out scale’ and the named elements such as social, cultural and natural/environmental, this research suggests the inclusion of another component, namely the ideologically/philosophical and spiritual element of life. As previously demonstrated, the spiritually relational principles contributed to the formation of an extended narrative of place.
The above diagram provides a graphic illustration of the integrated relationship between the named elements on the vertical and horizontal scale. This study agrees with Palmer’s view that the spatial factors are “just as important in terms of what makes a place as the interpretation of what has happened in the past in the places” (Ibid). Further, it proposes that in relation to the horizontal time continuum, where the value of certain historical entities may lose its original ideological value and significance, the elements involved in the ‘in and out flow’ generate in the flow of collective memory, inspirational coordinates, for, relevant to the time and place identity. The diagram shows that Sunnyside is significant not only as a historical building belonging to a distant past. The dotted line links it with the vertical ‘in and out’ flow, or the impact of the ideologically spiritual principles that found its application not only in the development of the school but, in its application to the local community. In that sense, both the house and the land embody the narrative of the people who lived, dreamed and experienced the challenges of life back in the 1890s. This point is so graphically encapsulated in the words of the local entrepreneurial businessman, Thomas Russell. On the departure note given to Ellen White before she left Australia in the 1900, he wrote. “Mrs White’s presence in our little village [Cooranbong] will be greatly missed. The widow and the orphan found in her a helper. She sheltered, clothed and fed those in need and where gloom was cast her presence brought sunshine.”

Here, the heart of the place-narrative moves beyond architectural structures, designs and even beyond the significance based on historical heritage. Rather, it reaches the depth of what Arefi (1999:182) refers to as “collective consciousness”. In this context, the historical entities within a given space play a significant role in the formation of the narrative of the place, but they are simply to be seen as means to the end. Here, Arefi calls for a deeper understanding of the connections between places that reach beyond a test based on the external functional abilities such as architectural ability and talent for design. Rather, he touches the core of the matter arguing for an understanding based on “social norms and collective consciousness” (Ibid:182). In this hub, the physical, cultural, emotional and spiritual elements of human actions remain a significant part of the unbroken chain of one grand place-historical narrative.
4. PRACTICAL APPLICATION- THE QUESTION OF SUSTAINABILITY

It has already been stated that the narrative of the heritage building itself could be restated in a different location. As pointed by Azaryahu and Foote (2008, 180), “Stories can be told anywhere. Events may be told orally at the place where they occurred regardless of the existence of commemorative features in the local scene.” It may be also observed that material objects have more affinity, with the temporal configuration than the spatial (Ibid, 182). In consequence, it is easy to disregard the role they play in the context of the special perspective.

This paper argues that the geographically spaced locations create what can be referred to as a pathway of spiritual and reflective pilgrimage (Kong, 2005:496) – an object lesson in time and space. The visual affinity with the original place enhances the scope of human imagination to identify with the heartbeat of the narrative, the collective consciousness. In its proximity, both the objective and subjective elements of the narrative revive human responsiveness to evaluative one’s self-understanding (Basso 1996:34). Within this scope, the preservation of heritage entities such as land and others are not to be seen as an isolated collection of static resources. Nelson and Preston (2005) argue that they need to be considered as “dynamic, interconnected systems with abiotic, biotic, and cultural dimensions.” According to Kong (2005:497), they represent “the identity, interest and ideology of certain social groups” and thus become “ideological tools to serve a community or nations building agenda.” This inclusive interconnectedness between land and the historical sites is the central fulcrum and a driving force for the preservation and sustainability of the grand narrative for future generations. In this context, the spatial dimension enmeshes the skeletons of the buildings and places with the framework of religious, social and cultural life. Such grand narrative highlights the stories of the dreams that once shaped the community’s values and identity and as stated by Palmer such narratives inspire “what it means for humans to flourish” (Palmer, 358). In such an environment, preservation of specific place-narrative “makes explicit what which is implicit in the local landscape” (Azaharyahu and Foote, 179). Diagram 1 illustrates the contours of a storyline, a pathway for a self-reflective spiritual pilgrimage. Here, the narrative that gives coherence becomes part of what makes for a flourishing of human life (O’Neill, 2008:197). The reflective and self-evaluative journey allows visitors to relive the story of the past in the framework of a new sense of place, a sense of passion, vision, determination and commitment engraved in the grand place-historical narrative (McCabe & Foster, 2008). Beranek (2010:102) points out correctly “these founding narratives are often integral to the preservation of the site.”

In contrast, the relocation of the site would impact the experiential component of the narrative or what may be considered as a history lesson at a glance or confirmation of the actual life documented and preserved for future generations. Further, it would also inflict what this research refers to as an irreparable wound in space endowed with a rich historical significance. On the basis of these finds, this paper recommends that any plans and strategies relating to the preservation and conservation of the heritage buildings should move beyond the scope of temporal needs. Failing to do so, leads to the prospect of betraying or distorting the meaningful impact of the place-historical narratives. Researchers Van Assche and Lo (2011:123) conclude “a valuable place encourages local co-operation, long term strategies, sustainable use” but more so “it encourages comprehensive planning and respect for the landscape”. This paper also suggests that the spatial focus assures that any such policies for the future need to retain an inclusion of the place-historical narratives. Lastly it argues that the pathway of the spiritual and reflective pilgrimage shaped by the relational integration of the narratives play a key role in the adaptation of passion, vision, determination and commitment engraved in the grand place-historical narrative.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on a case study, this paper aimed to show the closely knitted relationship between a historic house and the unique narrative of its land. Primarily it dealt with the place-historical narrative in the context of a special perspective and the role it plays in the process of conservation and sustainability.

The brief historical survey demonstrated how the value of the house links with the narrative of its immediate site and the extended narrative of the Brettville Estate. On the basis of the
named connections, the pivotal point relating to the conservation and sustainability of this recognized heritage site, find its locum in the totality of the place-historical narrative. In this context, the historic value of the house cannot be dissociated from the historic value of the land. In addition, the value of the land connects with the progressive development of the place-historical narrative shaped by the ideologically spiritual vision, namely the development of the spiritual, mental and physical faculties of human life. Hence it concluded that the historic building, its land and the remaining entities of the Brettville Estate form a significant part of the grand-historical narrative.

The application of the spatial perspective enhanced the argument a step further. It demonstrated that the ‘in and out flow’ generate in the collective memory inspirational coordinates for collective consciousness. These in turn, with the physical, emotional and spiritual elements of human action unify the grand-narrative of the place and transform it into a pathway of a spiritual reflective pilgrimage. Here, the affinity with the original place/land enhanced the scope of human imaginations to identify with the hub of the narrative – collective consciousness, linking the past with the present. Finally, this paper recommended that any plans and policies relating to the preservation and sustainability of the heritage buildings should move beyond the scope of temporal needs. Rather, it should retain in this visioning a complete inclusion of the grand place-historical narrative.

Notes

1 Preliminary Relocation & Redevelopment Feasibility Report “Sunnyside”, Lot 2 DP 204207, Avondale Rd, Cooranbong. Submitted by JW Planning Pty Ltd, 11. The “Sunnyside” house has a local heritage significance pursuant to Schedule 4 of the Lake Macquarie Local Environmental Plan 2004 (Item CB-31). Therefore, any application for a new development outcome on the site needs to be considered with respect to the Heritage Provision Clauses 43-54 of the Lake Macquarie Local Environmental Plan 2004.


3 For over 10 years, Avondale College of Higher Education has received five star ratings in the Good Universities Guide, ranking Avondale amongst some of Australia's top universities. In 2012, Avondale topped the Educational Experience rankings, receiving five star ratings in staff-student ratio, staff qualifications, teaching quality, generic skills and overall satisfaction.

http://www.avondale.edu.au/information::About_Us/

4 Thomas Russell, Cooranbong, 13 May, 1900 Autograph Album given to E.G. White on her departure from Australia to America.

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