Historical Significance through the Lens of Contemporary Social, Cultural, and Experiential Values

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The existing systems of classification of historical monuments can be hardly considered satisfactory. ... The analysis should cover the whole spectrum of values, not only artistic and documentary. ... In the conservation theory and practice a historical monument is treated as a kind of “black box,” in which all the monumental values and meanings are stored. To open such a “black box” and to grasp its functioning is objectively difficult. And probably traditional educated conservators will not succeed. Conservation is done by architects, historians of arts, archaeologists, who are not prepared to analyze the social, cultural, national or religious values. Therefore for this task specialist[s] from other branches need to be invited. They can help us.

– Boguslaw Szmygin, Lublin University of Technology

In the twenty-first century, historic preservationists must learn how to open Szmygin’s “black box” of values, but to do so requires an understanding of the subjective elements of human experience. Unfortunately, traditional methods for determining historical significance fail to identify these values because the questions being asked and the research methods being used cannot get at the subjective elements of cultural, social, and individual meanings. To understand the full range of values that people attribute to historic buildings, places, and landscapes requires the perspective of social scientists, such as anthropologists and sociologists, who are familiar with studying the subjective realm of human experience. In particular, these disciplines’ methodologies are critical to opening preservation’s black box of significance and reveal how everyday people value historic places. Once assessed, these values can be used to balance the traditional, objective values of experts such as historians, architects, and architectural historians. This paper will defend the need for these contemporary, subjective values of everyday people to help assess historical significance, define these values, and then describe how they can be assessed.

Overview
In defining historical significance, social and cultural themes may figure prominently, but these themes are always framed through the lens of the past. A mining district, for instance, may be historically important for the cultural practices of immigrants from Ireland. Contemporary social, cultural, and experiential values instead rely on what everyday people, at this very moment, think, feel, and behave in relation to historic places. Historical research methods, therefore, cannot reveal contemporary social, cultural, and experiential values. To understand these values requires the perspective of the social sciences and their research methodologies.

In the past fifteen years, there has been a growing dissatisfaction with the dominance of positivistic, expert/objective values used in traditional assessments of historical significance. Thomas King, one of the most widely read and respected authorities in cultural resource management, recently assessed the inadequacies of the National Register of Historic Places and concluded that the preparation of nominations can actually endanger historic places. He therefore recommends against nominating traditional cultural properties to the National Register. This situation arises from the inability of a National Register nomination to holistically capture the values associated with important places and therefore renders highly significant places unimportant in the eyes of the federal government and its agencies. (It is worth noting that the designation process used by local municipalities across the country is based on the federal model.) Thomas Green, a twenty-year employee of the New Jersey Historical Commission and a public historian, refers to the traditional approach of identifying historical significance as an “outmoded, positivistic concept of what history is and how it should be approached” because it assumes historical “facts” merely need to be collected and assembled with little or no interpretation. Another preservation professional, Jack Elliott, an historical archaeologist from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, decres that there is an overemphasis on the “informational” and
resolve into the objective, positivistic measures of significance required by traditional methods such as saving places to benefit architectural historians, or architects, or, for that matter, preservationists. The buildings, places, and landscapes that we value so highly are of benefit to everyone and, ultimately, improve human flourishing. It is critical, therefore, to understand how historic places contribute to human flourishing and existing assessments of historical significance are not up to this task.

While it is difficult to find studies that use of contemporary social, cultural, and experiential values in defining historical significance, there are a number of useful examples. For instance, contemporary experiential values can be found in a phenomenological study I conducted in historic Charleston, South Carolina. Ann, a resident of this area, told me that her neighborhood gives her “a bit of melancholy sense [where] things are overwhelmed by the passage of time” because to her, this place is filled with mystery and intrigue. In a similar sense, Dave describes how historic Charleston is like a time machine to the past while Sam, looking at a balcony, describes how in his time travel to an antebellum era he saw in his mind’s eye “people sitting out there and just yaking and so forth with a mint julep.” The experiences my informants related were deeply personal and emotional and as such very difficult to resolve into the objective, positivistic measures of significance required by traditional methods such as

What is “positivism”? This paper uses the terms “positivism” and “positivistic,” which may be unfamiliar to readers. Before the postmodernism movement in the 1960s, there was a widespread belief that a singular truth could be uncovered for any research problem as long as a rigorous “scientific” method was employed. Moreover, researchers assumed that it was possible to get to the heart of any research problem and find the real “truth” with only observation and measurement and little or no interpretation. Methodological rigor consisted of separating the researcher from the phenomenon being studied to the highest degree possible. Any research design that blurred the lines between the researcher and subject was to be avoided at all costs. Positivism, therefore, is often synonymous with the scientific method, objectivity, quantification, remote observation, and prediction.

Starting in the 1960s and into the early 1970s, historians, philosophers, and social scientists began to question the assumption that singular truths existed and that detached objectivity was always appropriate in collecting and analyzing data. In particular, many researchers directly questioned the concept of truth, calling its very existence into question. In the most extreme example, known as relativism, there is no truth at all, only multiple interpretations. More moderate paradigms viewed reality as being constructed from experiences and truth, as such, was defined by triangulation and consensus. A prominent ethnographer, Clifford Geertz, famously questioned the ability of positivistic research designs to understand cultural phenomena. In his paper, he analyzed a wink from a positivistic and constructivist (or post-modern) perspective. In the former case, he described how the timing of a wink could be measured and objectively analyzed, but yet it utterly failed to reveal the real meaning behind a wink. In order to understand the meaning of the wink, the researcher must adopt an emic or inside perspective—the same as the person being studied—and in the process destroy the barrier between researcher and subject. The wink, in fact, conveyed a “thick” set of meanings that a “thin” positivistic research design completely missed. This is the perspective of ethnography today: to properly understand a phenomenon, the researcher must become part of the culture being studied and be accepted, as much as possible, as one of its members.

Today, while it is realized that positivistic methods have their place, for subjective phenomena, their usefulness can be quite limited and may lead to results that make little sense in relation to the research question. This is especially true when the object of the research is to understand qualitative meanings rather than to generate and analyze numerical data. Most disciplines, including history, anthropology, and sociology, have accepted postmodern approaches to research designs that incorporate multiple interpretive paradigms. Historic preservation, however, often relies on the type of positivistic research employed by historians prior to the postmodernism movement, and in doing so assumes that “facts” or truth can indeed exist independent of interpretation.
the National Register of Historic Places criteria. Moreover the “memories” they were sharing were often not factual and involved fantasies. Should preservationists then discard these meanings and the values behind them simply because they are too subjective and “difficult” to understand? While there is comfort in reducing the world into artificially objective and neat slices of reality, the real world is messy, complex, and far from black and white.

There are several other useful studies that have uncovered alternate ways in which historic places are valued which fail to meet the traditional, objective criteria of experts. For instance, a case study by Mason et al. of the Port Arthur historic site found a number of social and cultural values that traditional assessments of significance would have missed, including community attachment to the site, the value of the site in creating and fostering social identity, and its association with the spiritual values of aboriginal peoples. Setha Low, in a study of Ellis Island and Independence National Historic Park found that people’s values associated with the site varied tremendously based on ethnicity as well as how connected the sites were to the surrounding community. A case study of historic homeowners in New Orleans by Melinda Milligan revealed that the owners were attached to their homes because they anthropomorphized them, turning inanimate structures into living beings with feelings and needs. Lastly, in a study of native peoples living in context with Mexican archeological sites, Lisa Breglia found that the heritage associated with these places consists of a socially-created hierarchy of constantly shifting values within national, regional, and local cultures. All of these studies were performed by social scientists or experts with social science training and revealed the important, subjective ways in which everyday people valued historic places.

**Types of values**

The first step in understanding contemporary social, cultural, and experiential values is to define these values in relation to authenticity because the perceived “realness” of an historic place directly influences how people value it. Authenticity, therefore, is a definition of what is “real” and what is “fake.” Authenticity is traditionally defined in historic preservation through an objective analysis of extant building or landscape materials. This material- or fabric-based perspective demands that sufficient fabric must exist from certain periods of time; with insufficient fabric there is a lack of authenticity. Authenticity has additional connotations beyond a direct connection with building and landscape fabric, however. One need go no further than to look at how the word is used in everyday language: an “authentic” Italian cannoli is not required to be the original and only cannoli ever created, but must simply employ authentic ideas and correct items in its construction. Thus, in this sense authenticity is not fabric-centered, it is idea-centered or constructed from meanings. Authenticity is also used in connection with an occurrence as in an authentic experience, such as a trip to Venice, Italy compared “The Venetian” in Las Vegas, replete with experiential overtones. In this last instance, authenticity is therefore experience-centered. Jamal and Hill describe and name these types of authenticity as “objective” authenticity, “constructed” authenticity, and “personal” authenticity. For the purposes of this paper, the first two terms will be used, unmodified, while the last term will be referred to as “phenomenological” or experiential authenticity instead of “personal” authenticity even though the meaning remains unchanged. Each one of these concepts of authenticity is uniquely associated with a corresponding set of expert/objective values, sociocultural values, or experiential values. It is important to remember that the list of values that will be explored is not meant to be an all-inclusive or exhaustive list, but instead represents the typical kinds of values that social scientists and preservationists have commonly encountered in association with historic places.

**Fabric-based authenticity**

Fabric-based authenticity forms the core of traditional definitions of historical integrity, such as the seven aspects of integrity described by the National Park Service. Objective values are associated
with this kind of authenticity, wherein “original” building or landscape fabric or fabric that has witnessed the passage of events from an important period of significance, remains extant. The goals behind objective values are to achieve a high degree of detachment in the assessment process and attempt to quantify when possible as with rarity value or the number of historical facts associated with a particular place. These values are the domain of educated experts—either academics or professionals—who use their skills to define value based on their own discipline’s standards; as a result the public may have difficulty in understanding the rationale behind these kinds of expert-value definitions. (Sometimes even experts from disparate disciplines will not even agree on these values.) An example is an architectural historian who may place a very high value on a building because it is designed by William Strickland.

**Types of expert/objective values associated with fabric-based authenticity**

**Historical positivism value:** This value refers to the systematic gathering of “facts” to support a given historical association in a methodological framework that assumes these facts can exist independently of relativistic or pluralistic interpretation. For instance, one creates a National Register nomination by assembling historical facts that must prove that a property is associated with an event or person from the past (i.e., criteria “A” and “B” and to some extent, criterion “C”) through explicating broad themes and patterns. The greater the number of these facts, such as a notable person lived in a house during a certain period of time, the more historically significant the property is.

**Informational value:** The ability of historical objects to provide useful data on their origin, construction, or various material characteristics. This value is associated with criterion “D” in the National Register.

**Artistic/design value:** This value is especially associated with the academic contexts of art and architectural history, and to a more limited extent, urban studies or urban history. This value is associated with criterion “C” in the National Register.

**Rarity value:** As with any object, the fewer the number of examples of it there are, the more valuable it is as a unique embodiment of other values, such as informational or historical. Directions for preparing a National Register nomination, for instance, direct the preparer to focus on the “unique,” “distinctive,” or “rare” when making value judgments as to what is worthy of acceptance.

**Constructed authenticity**

As explained earlier, authenticity can be defined through the lens of ideas or meanings rather than physical fabric. In this sense, a heritage object that is deemed authentic achieves this state through culturally- or socially-approved ideas or meanings that can exist independently of physical reality. For instance, in Japan, authenticity is defined this manner. The “1000-year old” temples in Japan may actually contain very little original fabric from their construction, but what is preserved are the ideas embodied in their construction rather than the actual construction materials; as a symbol, the temples are preserved. Every year, a painstaking process rebuilds parts of these structures. The methods used in doing this activity employ traditional crafts; much care is taken to preserve the symbolic ideas conveyed by the temple through replicative design. Preservation of fabric is a secondary concern.

**Types of sociocultural values associated with constructed authenticity**

**Symbolic value:** This value represents objects or environments that embody and transmit important cultural meanings, such as the previously mentioned temples in Japan. Other examples include prominent buildings such as the White House or the Taj Mahal. Certain cultural landscapes may have symbolic value such as Central Park in New York or Ayers Rock in Australia.
Technical value: Great achievements of the past are often admired for their genius and engineering prowess that represent some of the greatest achievements of humankind. The Empire State Building is an example as are many of the massive concrete dams constructed across the country during the Great Depression.

Educational value: Historic places can offer much in the way of educational value, from learning how people lived in and designed buildings and places to learning how to respect different cultures’ contribution to world heritage. This value goes back to the earliest days of historic preservation in the United States exemplified by Wendell Phillips’ 1876 speech to save the Old South Meeting House in Boston.

Recreational value: The English Heritage describes recreational activities in historic places as being “a vital part of people’s everyday life and experiences.” Many heritage landscapes offer a variety of recreation activities. The grounds of Independence Hall in Philadelphia, for instance, are frequently utilized by large numbers of people.

Spiritual/religious value: Certain places are connected with the religious beliefs of people. Usually associated with indigenous peoples, this value can be potentially applied to any cultural group.

Use value: Perhaps one of the most important values to be ascribed to buildings and places, this value is defined as the ability of a building, place, or landscape to provide a benefit that is typically linked to an economically justifiable purpose.

Social capital/identity value: This value relates to the social uses of the historic environment, such as group gatherings and ceremonial activities, which help to reinforce community identity and build social capital and foster social cohesion.

Cultural attachment value: Environmental psychologists and geographers argue that phenomenon of place attachment fits best within a phenomenological framework and individual experience, but Setha Low claims that there is also a cultural dimension to place attachment. Attachment, therefore, can also form when individual experience aggregates at the group level to include “cultural beliefs and practices that link people to place.”

Phenomenological (experiential) authenticity

Phenomenology is the philosophical study of beginnings applied to the highly personal, individual experience in the “lifeworld.” It seeks to uncover the subjective elements of personal experience the moment they occur before subsequent personal reflection reduces the richness of the experience. Phenomenological authenticity focuses on the individual’s experience of being in and relating to the world by utilizing Merleau-Ponty’s foundational work as “a way of thinking through the body in its participatory reaction with the world” to reveal emotional attachments to certain places. For instance, upon entering the Notre Dame Cathedral, one might immediately feel sensations of awe and wonder accompanied by a spine-tingling sensation. This initial, emotional reaction to a place is what phenomenology attempts to understand, which is why it is frequently used in nursing research to study people’s experience with pain. Research in sense of place and place attachment by humanistic geographers, such as Yi-Fu Tuan and David Seamon, is also based on phenomenology. If we accept that the emotional bond with a place has a phenomenological basis then the fundamental basis of historical authenticity resides on individuals’ lifeworld experiences. Other forms of authenticity—fabric-based and constructed—must therefore rest on this phenomenological platform.
Types of experiential values associated with phenomenological authenticity

**Age value:** Over a century ago, Alois Riegl, a well-known Austrian art historian, defined “age value” as a phenomenon that “addresses the emotions directly” through an “imperfection, a lack of completeness, a tendency to dissolve shape and color.” Concepts such as patina and decay are associated with age value. Thus, people’s emotional attachment to place can be catalyzed by the way materials change over time.

**Newness value:** Riegl also discussed this value in diametric opposition to age value. With age comes “the disintegrating effect of natural forces,” while newness value allows for the complete expression of “form and color.”

**Spatial value:** This term is derived from landscape architect Randy Hester’s work in community-influenced landscape design in which he links “unconscious attachment to place” with the valuation of spatial elements of landscape. Spatial value, while associated with aesthetics, is more effective in communicating its phenomenological relationship with place attachment.

**Attachment value:** People have emotional bonds with specific places. Also known as “place attachment,” this value is predicated on how one experiences a place based on certain environmental cues which are often provided in abundance in historic places. While there is a widespread belief that the first reaction to a building or a landscape is emotional, historic preservation doctrine actively discourages a consideration of emotional connections to place to help define significance.

Gathering sociocultural and experiential values

There is no single, universal procedure that can be used to collect, analyze, and then utilize sociocultural and experiential values to inform historical significance. Much depends on how the research problem is defined, the particular question that is being asked, and the context for that question. Social scientists are well versed in the issue of defining a research problem and have written a wide variety of books on the subject. What is altogether absent, however, is how social science research methodologies can specifically be used to help define historical significance. It is for this reason that a brief overview of research methodologies and their application is in order. Many of these techniques may be quite new to individuals coming from a public history or design background. While it is outside the scope of this paper to delve into a full overview of multidisciplinary research design (there are many authors that have already done so), a quick overview of social science methodologies and methods is useful in order to bring a common understanding to this discussion. An in-depth explanation of the ontological and epistemological orientations of different qualitative and quantitative traditions has been attempted before so this overview will take a pragmatic and introductory approach to the subject with the expectation that the reader will seek additional resources on research design which are supplied in the research methodologies table included in this paper.

Generally speaking, research methodologies fall into quantitative and qualitative traditions. The quantitative one is perhaps the oldest and is associated with the positivistic sciences organized by Auguste Comte in the early part of the nineteenth century. If the research question requires measurable or quantifiable data, a quantitative approach is a good fit. If the research question seeks meanings or subjective data, then a qualitative approach is a common choice. A mixed methodological approach combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies in a manner that will tend increase the accuracy of the results through a triangulation process. One methodology may follow the other sequentially or be accomplished in parallel; the design is up to the researcher. Creswell, for instance, offers a good explanation of how to design mixed methodological research.

A method is the tool with which data is collected; every method is associated with at least one methodology. For instance interviews, which are a method, are associated with the methodologies of ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory. Treatment and control groups are methods that are
exclusively associated with the methodology of experimental research. As with any tool, methods must be chosen for their ability to answer a research question. Thus, with any research project, the approach is top down, usually in this order:

1. Define the problem (contextualize the need for the research)
2. Define the research question (relate to the problem)
3. Select a methodology for its ability to answer the research question
4. Select methods for the ability to gather data relevant to answering the research question.

Guidance on the use of these methodologies and methods can be found within their parent disciplines. For instance, anthropology has a well-developed knowledge base for ethnographies while sociology has a knowledge base for grounded theory. Each discipline has developed their methodologies for specific purposes rooted in their epistemological traditions; knowing why these techniques were created can be useful in understanding their applicability for a particular research question. For instance, action research was developed out of a need to empower disadvantaged groups to take action for themselves to solve a problem. Therefore research that focuses on empowering people to take action based on how they define important historic places would fit within this approach. Grounded theory was developed in order to create sociological theories and places a high standard on validity through repeated visits to the field until no variations in data are observed. Grounded theory, for instance, could be used to generate a theory as to why people become attached to certain places, but not to others in particular built environments.

To date I have located only one social science research approach that has been specifically designed for assessing heritage values. In the 1990s, Setha Low adapted existing ethnographic methods for the purpose of assessing heritage values. Her “Rapid Ethnographic Assessment Procedure” (REAP) is now being taught in a few historic preservation programs, usually in a studio situation, such as the University of Pennsylvania. The goal is to “help conservation professionals and managers understand the complexity of social relations and cultural dynamics at play in the conservation planning and development of heritage sites.”

While framed in ethnographic traditions, the REAP approach also includes other social science methodologies including phenomenology and the historical/interpretive methodology. The methods utilized include physical traces mapping, behavioral mapping, transect walks, individual interviews, expert interviews, impromptu group interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and the use of historical and archival documents.

**Putting it all together**

Sociocultural and experiential values should supplement, rather than replace, traditional expert/objective values in order to develop a holistic assessment of historical significance. A formulaic approach to implementing this balance is not only difficult, at best, but potentially dangerous as each historic place has unique characteristics based on its context. In some situations expert/objective values would have the highest prominence such as monumental works of architectural genius, while in others, such as what appear on the surface to be plain, ordinary places would have a much greater emphasis placed on sociocultural and experiential values. Ultimately, a complete assessment of all the values associated with a historic place needs to be assembled first before entering a decision-making phase in regard to protection or interventions. Each place should therefore be handled on a case-by-case basis.

City planning has long relied on community input to help guide decision-making processes, as has historic preservation. The recommendation to incorporate sociocultural and experiential values in defining historical significance simply improves on an already established process. The result is a much more comprehensive and accurate assessment of stakeholders’ values that can help guide how we plan for changes in the historic built environment.
# Table of potential research methodologies to investigate contemporary social, cultural, and experiential values

This list is not meant to be all-inclusive, but rather represents many of the common research traditions in the social sciences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradigm</th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Quantitative</th>
<th>Quasi-experimental design</th>
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<td><strong>Methodology</strong></td>
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<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td>Grounded Theory</td>
<td>Action (Collaborative/ Participatory) Research</td>
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<td>Theoretical frame</td>
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<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Symbolic interactionism</td>
<td>Humanistic psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent disciplines</td>
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<td>Philosophy, humanistic geography, architecture</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated methods</td>
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<td>Interviews, reflection on literature</td>
<td>Interviews, participant observation</td>
<td>Storytelling, sociodrama, plays, skits, puppets, song, drawing, painting along with methods used in other qualitative/quantitative research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reveals</td>
<td>Cultural values associated with heritage</td>
<td>Individual “essential” values associated with heritage</td>
<td>Theories about cultural valuation processes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analytical procedure</td>
<td>Identification of patterns and themes from an “emic” or inside perspective</td>
<td>Identification of patterns and themes through a process of “open” unbiased reflection</td>
<td>Identification of a “grounded” theory through a process of continual collection, recollection, analysis, and reanalysis of field data until a consistent theory emerges</td>
<td>Direct involvement of human subjects as co-researchers in an iterative data collection and analysis process that leads to a practical end</td>
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<td>Example research questions</td>
<td>Which heritage resources hold the highest value for a cultural group? Why are these resources important to this group?</td>
<td>What is the nature of being in certain places that engenders attachment to these places? What is the meaning of these places for the individual?</td>
<td>Why do some cultural resources become valuable while others do not? What is the nature of this process?</td>
<td>What actions can a disempowered local group take to locate and protect their heritage?</td>
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General handbooks include: Denzin & Lincoln (2005); Singleton & Straights (2005); Creswell (2003); Punch (2005); Maxwell (2005); Yin (2003).
List of general reference books on social science methodologies referenced in table


NOTES


6 Examples of preservation doctrines include the process to nominate a property to the National Register of Historic Places, the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards, the Venice Charter, and the SPAB Manifesto.

7 Randall Mason, David Myers and Marta de la Torre, Port Arthur Historic Site: A Case Study (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2003).


12 The seven aspects of integrity according to the National Park Service are location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. See http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb34/nrb34_8.htm


18 Ibid.


26 Ibid., 80.
33 Ibid., 37, 38.