

Lecture 6: The Politics of Significance II: Poe, McKim and the NYU Law School Project

This week's class featured a guest speaker, Susan Lowance from the architecture firm Kohn Pedersen Fox.

Introduction and Announcements: Students should be prepared to give a short presentation in class on April 5th about their final research paper.

Class Outline:

Review last week's field trip.
Discuss the readings.
Listen to presentation by guest speaker.

The class began with a brief discussion of the trip to the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, Massachusetts the previous week. Several students commented on the interpretive approach by the Museum. In particular, the Museum focused its tour and exhibits towards the goal of showing how the house and setting provide insights into the life and poetry of Emily Dickinson. In this way, the "significance" of this particular historic site is based in the life of an individual (Criterion B in the language of National Register of Historic Places eligibility).

Next, the class discussed the week's readings with particular attention to Mehrotra (2004) on cultural significance in Bombay, Hoaglund (1998) on the application of historic significance in preservation practice in the United States, and Zerubavel (2004) on changing notions of significance at Masada in Israel.

Students noted that the articles showed some of the problems with a fixed idea of historic significance. In Bombay, many of the most lively and culturally significant places in the city are outside of the districts of "historic" colonial architecture. Drawing on discussions in previous classes, several students noted how the post-colonial context shapes preservation politics and notions of cultural-historic significance.

The class reviewed and discussed Hoaglund's (1998) description of the conflict between the regulation of residential historic districts and their use as living places. The class discussed how sometimes "history" can be seen in the changes over time and not simply the "fixed" way of establishing a "period of significance."

Finally, in considering the Masada case, several students commented on how it shows how meaning can be imposed on a historic site (and the interpretation of events that took place there) for political purposes- in this case the goals of Zionism and the establishment of the state of Israel. It was also commented that the archeological discoveries at the site and changing political context within Israel led to changing interpretation of the site and new understandings of what makes it significant. Specifically, the discovery of religious artifacts led to the view that the site has primary significance for its evidence of continued religious practice and less for its association with patriotism or bravery.

Presentation by Guest Speaker

Susan Lowance presented a detailed description of the design and construction of a new building for the New York University School of Law in Manhattan. The case involved several interrelated "historic" issues: the character of Greenwich Village and the area around Washington Square Park, the historic Judson Church (a landmark), an annex to the Church which hosted a variety of important cultural events, and a townhouse that poet Edgar Allen Poe once lived in. She explained from the perspective of one of the architects working on the proposed new building how this controversial project unfolded, showing a wealth of visual materials in a powerpoint presentation: numerous historic photos of the area, renderings of proposed plans, and newspaper clippings showing press reports during the design and construction process.

Ms. Lowance described how an intricate compromise was worked out between the university and various groups opposed to (1) the demolition of the so-called Poe House, (2) the demolition of the annex, and/or (3) the construction of the new building. Instrumental in process of getting the new building built, she explained, was a legal settlement between the law school and various parties. Interestingly, one of the key provisions of this agreement involved the protection not of a building per se, but of a view. The agreement stated that the building be constructed in such a manner that when viewed from Washington Square Arch blue sky would remain visible behind the historic tower of Judson Church.

The agreement allowed construction of the new Law School building, but required various steps be taken to commemorate or interpret the Annex and the Poe House. Lowance explained how a reconstruction of the exterior features of both demolished buildings was incorporated into the exterior design of the new building, detailing the great amount of time and effort required to produce it. Some of the issues encountered in the process included code requirements that treated the reconstruction as new construction (making it more difficult to reproduce the historic appearance), the identification of which material artifacts to save from the Poe House and how to incorporate them into the new building, and determining how to organize interior spatial volumes in concert with exterior fenestration.

The presentation ended with a brief question and answer session with students. It was commented that the project seemed to reflect first and foremost the phenomenon of "planning as deal making." In addition, one student remarked that local residents and community groups seemed primarily concerned about the potential impact on the architectural and social character of Greenwich Village: that is, neighborhood compatibility rather than, strictly speaking, historic preservation. Several students commented on the appearance of the "Poe Room" in the new building, asking questions about how it is used and by whom.