

Reading Tom Mayes' series of blog posts *Why do old places matter* is really a joyful process. It's very easy to flow with examples he illustrated and get to the point that he wants to make, and, most importantly, echoing with his brilliant ideas. This short response paper is split into two parts: the first part discusses contents from posts *Architecture*, *History*, and *Beauty* which focus more on the historic places and philosophy behind historic places; whereas the second part, including discussion of posts *Continuity*, *Memory*, *Individual Identity & Civic State* *National and Universal Identity*, focus more on people and people's psychological needs related to the historic places. For both parts, I'd like to briefly conclude Mayes' points in each of his posts, followed by my reflections and questions while and after reading them.

Architecture, History and Beauty

In Mayes' post about *Architecture*, he mainly states that the historic places should be preserved for both the values of architectures themselves, as well as the values that are given by the ages after time that could not be retrieved if the places are demolished, such as craftsman's spirit, artifact's wisdom and hidden secrets behind the architectures. I especially appreciate the point that he also pays attention to the preservation of present architectures, saying "preservation is not only about things in the past" and uses the example of the American Folk Art Museum. It is often easy to be neglected by people that present will become past someday in future. Buildings we are having today are also important. Do not remember to preserve them after they have been damaged and become history. In the *History* post, Mayes



The dome
of Papal
Basilica of
St. Peter in
Vatican
(up)

The dome
of Theatiner
Church St.
Kajetan in
Munich
(right)

Both credit
to author



points out that the preservation of historic places could help us experience history better by being in the places where the celebrities once stood and historic events took place. In the *Beauty* post, Mayes brings up that the emotional impact that the beauty of historic places give us has been, in many cases, the first intention of preserving the building – because we think they are beautiful and want to preserve this beauty. I echoed so strongly with Mayes "moment of gasp", which when I first saw the dome of Papal Basilica of St. Peter and Theatiner Church St. Kajetan, I was so shocked by the incredible masterpiece and filled with the awe as he mentioned. Mayes further argued that though the understanding of beauty has

always been changing and never be the same between people, there should be an agreement on the important role that beauty play in our city and life and should be a serious determinant factor in future historic preservation's decision-making.

There is almost no doubt that these three factors are crucial to weigh the values of historic places. However, it seems like dilemmas that we are facing in the historic preservation field nowadays are not usually about whether this place should be preserved, but more often about which historic places should be preserved. In other words, it is not about determine the values of places, but about selecting the limited number of places from big collections of historic places since it is impossible to preserve all the historic places. Many of the historic places that we are facing are not like Basilica of St. Peter or President Lincoln's Cottage that have obvious architectural or history values which we may easily draw a line to distinguish them from other "old buildings" in daily life. Especially for buildings that are not too special by themselves, but have much greater values within a community, such as the Victorian residential houses in Port Gamble in Washington state, it is usually very hard to make the selection if the resources are limited and we can't preserve the entire community. Moreover, it is not only the selection among historic places, but also the selections among old and new for limited land resources. Even despite the economic factors, the judgment on the beauty of historic places and new constructions greatly diversified. For instance most people prefer the modern buildings and consider skyscrapers as the only symbol of progression in many developing cities in China. We may give criteria for judging the value of history and architecture, like National Register Criteria for Evaluation. But it is very unlikely to give criteria to taste of beauty, let alone the appreciation of beauty changes itself through time.

Continuity, Memory, Individual Identity & Universal Identity

Mayes defines terms like "sense of orientation" "place attachment" and "rootedness", and states that the existence of historic places could give people a sense of balance and stable. They are the carriers of memories that could always connect people to their past. Though we keep gaining more memories and refreshing our identities, the historic places are the "reference point" that glue all these pieces together and ensure this continuity. They make the memory more durable and, as "urban reminder", they trigger people's motivation of

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connecting to memories that they don't know. This reminds me the experience of seeing the iron and brick pieces that mark out the Berlin Wall's location and the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church that left the damaged spire as memorial. To the young Germans who have not experienced WWII or the division of their country, the existence of historic places in their city build up the connections between them and the memories that are not directly belong to them, but are important to know.

However, I realized that historic places might become different from what they used to be like after preservation and restoration. To what extend shall we draw the line of alternation so that it does not destroy the connections between people and their memories, but at the same time allow the historic places to meet the modern needs? My grandfather was grew up in Beijing and used to spend entire afternoon at Qianmen Avenue after school. After the restoration of Qianmen Avenue according to archives of historic architecture and bringing in new business, my grandfather went there once and told me that it just looked like a huge chunk of fancy toys that felt so alienated and does not look like what he remembered at all. I think from this point, even the function and the architecture style of the avenue remained the same, something innate had been changed which broke the connection between the elder generations and their memories. It is definitely impossible to keep the historic places intact as they used to be like if we want them to survive in modern society. Yet, the way of preserving them is crucially important so they could still function as the "sense of orientation" for people.



*The Berlin Wall Path in Berlin (up)
Credit to thejetpacker.com*



*The Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin (left)
Credit to Gerard M*



*Qianmen Ave. with historic street view (left) and street view after restoration (right).
Credit to Halashao*