



Ever-Present Past

HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND THE NATIVE AMERICAN MIND

It doesn't end.
In all growing from all earths to all skies,
In all touching all things,
In all soothing the aches of all years,
It doesn't end.

—SIMON ORTIZ, Acoma Pueblo

As a Cheyenne, I have often contemplated the meaning of “historic preservation” from a Native-American point of view. I have also pondered the longer-range implications for the historic preservation movement in the context of Native American life and culture. In the course of my ruminations, I recalled a statement once made by an elder from the Fort Mohave Reservation in California:

When we think of historical preservation, I suppose you think of something that is old, something that has happened in the past and that you want to put away on a shelf and bring it out and look at [it] every now and then.... I was so puzzled by the whole thing that I looked up 'historical' and it said "a significant past event"... In our way of thinking, everything is a significant event, and the past is as real to us as being here right now. We are all connected to the things that happened at the beginning of our existence. And those things live on as they are handed down to us.

I would like to offer two points for your consideration. The first is that if the purpose of historic preservation in the United States is, as I believe, to protect sites that tell the story of America's complex and diverse cultural heritage, then we have focused far too little, and understand not nearly enough about contributions made by Native Americans.

My mind runs through a litany of achievements that predate European contact but are integral parts

of our shared cultural heritage. I think of the monuments of the Ohio Valley—Serpent Mound and the Newark Earthworks, a suite of geometrically perfect octagons and circles that stretch across the landscape for many kilometers—which reflect an advanced understanding of astronomy. I think of Poverty Point in Louisiana, a sun-aligned settlement that was seven times the size of its contemporary Stonehenge in Britain, and that developed and prospered while its contemporary, Rome, was quite literally little more than a rural village. I think of an urban settlement at Cahokia near St. Louis, MO, which reached its apogee during Europe's Middle Ages. It had a population now estimated by demographers at some 30,000 to 50,000 people, considerably more populous than contemporaneous London, England. It had an urban landscape characterized by vast ceremonial centers, plazas, and monumental earthen pyramids that rose some 12 stories high. I also think of Acoma Pueblo, which has occupied an incomparable mesa landscape for well over a millennium.

Not only do Native American sites and places exist that are an important part of our shared history and cultural heritage, but, to turn the phrase around, the importance of place in Native American thinking is an essential element in our view of historic preservation. Having grown up Cheyenne, I am profoundly aware, for example, of the pivotal importance of place from a ceremonial, ritual, and spiritual point of view. I think most naturally of Bear Butte, located in the western part of South Dakota, just beyond the Black Hills. The

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Butte lies at the heart of Cheyenne spiritual identity. It is where, according to our traditional beliefs, Mitsuehuevi, perhaps our most significant spiritual leader, spoke with Grandfather and Grandmother, an event that marks the beginning of time for the Cheyenne. More important, perhaps, is that, rather than being regarded as a place firmly fixed in the past, Bear Butte is of equal or even greater importance in contemporary history and cultural life. On almost any day, particularly during the summer, prayer cloths can be seen tied to the branches of trees dotting the flanks of the Butte, left by Cheyenne who made pilgrimages to the site for purpose of spiritual renewal, to this most holy of places. For Native Americans, place has always had a transcendent historical and cultural significance that is essential to our lives and a critical element of our ceremonial, ritual, and spiritual practice.

To understand the Native American concept of “historic preservation,” one must see time and space as integral, mutually dependent, and whole. For us, time is neither linear nor segmented, but rather an uninterrupted continuum where the past, present, and future seamlessly intersect where the past is as real as the present.

The Native American concept of place is analogous to our concepts of time. Place is essentially whole—that is, there is little difference between the built and non-built environments. They are not apart or separate from each other, not the former in spite of or in conquest of the latter, but inextricably linked in both a physical and metaphysical sense.

So then, what are the implications of all of the above for historic

preservation? First, I hope that all Americans, especially those who consider themselves preservationists, will recognize, finally, that Native America not only represents an indispensable part of this nation’s shared cultural heritage and history, but also that its accomplishments and contributions to culture and heritage are substantial and important. Second, I hope that, in the future, preservationists will work with Native American communities to ensure the protection of both structures and sites that are associated with the Native American experience. They are, indeed, a vital part of our collective history and cultural heritage in this country, and they deserve to be protected and preserved.

Places and environments, whether they be built or non-built, are not just pieces in history, threads of cultural connection long ago severed. Like Bear Butte or the Black Hills, they continue to be linked undeniably with how Native America lives, right now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Is not the ultimate point of historic preservation that, through time and notwithstanding its passage, certain places, be they structures or sites, retain a historical and cultural importance and significance, not just for the past but also for the future, that transcends time? Native Americans have no difficulty whatsoever understanding an affirmative answer to this question. For those in the preservation field, I invite you to sign us up, and work with us, as we will with you. We may be some of the most natural allies historic preservation has in this country. For us, history, and the history of a site does not end. ■