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Original Research Article

Examining Architectural Structures and Historic Urban Areas Through the Lens of Textual Analysis
Employing a Narrative Approach*

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ABSTRACT

Any theoretical framework designed to safeguard cultural heritage must address the question of "how" to ensure the continued existence of historical buildings and sites. In light of the disconnection from tradition and the past brought about by modernity, the proposed framework should strive to reestablish this severed connection. The objective of this article is to introduce a new framework for preserving historical buildings and sites, to revitalize this heritage. It examines how a narrative approach can confer significance and longevity to this heritage, enabling it not only to persist but also to evolve into an influential societal element while retaining its distinct identity and adapting to temporal changes for its preservation. Additionally, the article investigates integrating this approach with other methods to achieve sustainable outcomes in heritage preservation.

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Introduction

"The meaning of human existence is not just the power to change or master the world, but also the ability to be remembered and recollected in narrative discourse, to be memorable."

This is an interpretation from the book "The Human Condition" by Hannah Arendt (Ricoeur, 1991).

Preserving historic buildings and cities is not just a practical act to conserve their physical elements, such as bricks and tiles. However, it can also serve as a means to safeguard a narrative (Walter, 2014). This narrative evolves over time and unveils layers of history, culture, and human endeavor. This article examines the implications of a narrative preservation approach and argues that understanding the past, shaping the present, and guiding the future are essential (Andrew McClelland, 2013). Historical buildings and cities embody our shared heritage, witnessing the triumphs and tragedies of human history, the rise and fall of empires, the evolution of architectural styles, and changes in urban life patterns (ibid.). By preserving these structures, we not only conserve their physical form but also take steps to safeguard their narratives. However, it should be noted that preservation is not a static process but a dynamic interaction between the past and the present, and between preservation and change (Poulios, 2014).

This article explores the potential of preserving narratives to help navigate the complex path of urban development and to integrate historical legacies with the modern urban landscape, all while respecting the past. It advocates for a perspective that regards historical structures and urban environments not merely as remnants of bygone eras, but as dynamic entities that continue to evolve and adapt (Erica Avrami, 2019). The article advocates for the adoption of narrative preservation as a means of understanding our place in the world and our responsibilities towards it. It emphasizes the role of narrative as a conduit through time and space, enabling the uncovering and exploring hidden stories within these elements. These narratives can provide insights into our own identities and our shared human experiences (Walter, 2014). The results presented in this article were obtained using a descriptive research method. The results were achieved by gathering and analysis of data from library studies, examination of accessible texts, the opinions of thinkers and experts, and case studies.

What is the Narrative Conservation Approach?

The concept of narrative conservation underscores the importance of stories and hidden histories within historical buildings and urban areas. These structures not only embody physical entities but also serve as carriers of cultural and historical significance. This approach is dynamic and recognizes that preservation involves an ongoing interplay between the past and the present. In contrast, alternative methodologies, such as the "value-based methodology", focus on both tangible and intangible aspects of heritage. This includes historical, aesthetic, scientific, social, and spiritual values. The objective is to identify, assess, and harmonize these values to facilitate informed decision-making regarding preservation (Keitsch, 2020). Each of these methodologies possesses merits and drawbacks and can often complement each other. For instance, the narrative preservation approach can enhance the value-based methodology by providing a deeper understanding of the historical narratives associated with a building or urban area. Similarly, preservation efforts can benefit from understanding the narrative that makes a source culturally or historically significant (Barthel, 1989). Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that comparing these methodologies is a separate subject that is beyond the scope of this research and should be evaluated and analyzed independently. The narrative preservation approach offers a unique perspective on the conservation of historical heritage by highlighting the significance of stories and history. This approach allows us to view historic buildings and cities not only as physical structures but also as living entities that represent our collective heritage.

Biography, Chronology and Narrative

When initially encountering historical structures and landmarks, it is crucial to understand their evolution and the identities they have developed over time to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Consequently, scholars employ various approaches to comprehend the life of these structures, with biography and chronology being among the most prevalent methods. Despite their apparent similarities, these two methods differ in their organization and significance.

The study of buildings as a biography or historical timeline has always existed. Initially, it may be assumed that these expressions have the same meanings, but this is not the case. "Biography" is a specific form of narrative that typically adopts the style and approach of the writer. It is not necessary

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for the subject under discussion to be alive, meaning that the vitality and dynamism of the subject are not the focus of the biography. Biographies are generally presented as events that have occurred and concluded. It is also worth mentioning that biography does not attempt to shape the future and, therefore, cannot play a dynamic role in preserving and restoring historical buildings and sites in the future (Walter, 2020a).

"Historical timeline" or "chronology" is another approach that significantly helps our understanding of buildings and always explains events within a specific time frame. Although it may be synonymous with biography, in two cases, the accuracy of events and the process of selection and organization differ significantly from the biographical method. In this case, because this approach does not focus on shaping the future of a building or historical site, it practically neglects the importance of nurturing the identity of the building in its continued life (ibid.).

Among these methods, "Narrative" is a method that can encompass all temporal dimensions of cultural heritage, including buildings, sites, and neighborhoods. However, what does "narrative" mean? It is better to start by explaining its literal meaning. In Dehkhoda's dictionary, "narration" is defined as something that is transmitted or said from one person to another. In Moein's dictionary, it is defined as conveying a story. When examining the English term "narration" in the Oxford dictionary, it is found to have originated from the Latin word "narrate", which meant "to transmit." However, over time, its meaning has evolved to signify "knowing." The evolution of the term "narration" suggests its significance in shaping our perception of the world around us. Samuel Wells, in the context of urban areas, and historical edifices, defines narration as an effort to establish a cohesive connection between the past, present, and future. This process aims to give an identity to a structure or historical site, allowing it to maintain a strong and dynamic presence within its domain, while also promoting potential for growth and adaptation (Wells, 1998).

It is noteworthy that narration is an ongoing process without a definitive conclusion, a crucial aspect to consider in its definition. When a narrative reaches its conclusion, it effectively ceases to exist, contradicting the essence of it. Stephen Crites, in his work "The Quality of Narrative Experience," elaborates on this concept, asserting that narration encompasses all temporal experiences. He incorporates the "Chronology of Memory" and the "Scenario of Anticipation" in a way that blurs the distinction between the known past and the unknown future (Crites, 1971). In delineating narration and distinguishing it from the expressions mentioned above, it becomes evident that narration is a bridge between society and cultural heritage, interconnecting temporal periods. Furthermore, it lacks a definitive endpoint, as the perpetuation of a building or historical site requires the ongoing preservation of its identity and character. This sustained continuity enables structures, sites, and their conservation programs to embrace a progressive and non-conservative approach toward change. Consequently, a failure to embrace change and advancement, or stagnation, results in losing narratives.

The Essence of Narratives

Looking at buildings and cities as narratives is not a new concept. In 2010, Edward Hollis, in his book "The Secret Lives of Buildings," introduces buildings as narratives and tells the history of architecture through 13 stories. However, no attempt has been made thus far to establish a theoretical framework for this field. (Hollis, 2010) Narratives, as lived and experienced events, are one of the most essential factors in understanding changes in the dimensions of a city, neighborhood, and building. It is a crucial element in maintaining a sense of identity in a place where "change" is an inevitable aspect of life. This is why the narrative approach focuses on the continuity of the passage of time and is considered a positive component in signifying the dynamism of buildings and historic neighborhoods. It helps historical buildings and sites to be understood not only as a collection of artistic-historical values but also as "intergenerational," "communal," and "ongoing" elements in their society. In his book "Narrative Theory in Conservation," Nigel Walter[1] explains the significance of the term "Intergenerational" in establishing a solid connection with the past, particularly with tradition. He defines "Communal" as accepting the responsibility of current and future generations in preserving and continuing the legacy of heritage. Furthermore, he states that "Ongoing" implies that the heritage story is still unfolding and has not yet reached its conclusion. Ultimately, Walter argues that "the Narrative" is crucial in creating a meaningful and continuous connection across time, encompassing the past, present, and future. (Walter, 2020b)

Understanding historical buildings and sites as

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cohesive entities, rather than isolated parts, is the primary objective of this definition. It emphasizes the connection to their respective periods while also allowing for adaptation and relevance in the future. Along with being part of their society and maintaining effective relationships with others, they are constantly progressing and moving towards the future. All these components will work together like gears that play a significant role in preserving buildings and historical sites. Without the presence of each other, they will not function properly.

The prevalence of Narrative in various disciplines and its ability to establish effective connections with society, as well as its capacity to address complex issues and everyday events, contribute to its involvement in diverse fields. Scholars in narrative and hermeneutics argue that narration holds significant importance in psychology, ethics, and culture due to its inherent capabilities. Observing the pervasive presence of narratives in daily life further underscores the significance of narrative in comprehending the world around us (Mink, 1972). Barbara Hardy[2] 1968 aptly notes that narratives permeate various aspects of human experience, including dreams, memories, foresight, hope, despair, doubt, faith, correction, criticism, creation, rumor, learning, love, hatred and interest (Hardy, 1968). Additionally, Paul Ricoeur[3] 1984 emphasizes the essential role of narratives in creating a cohesive whole, highlighting their continuity from the past to the present and their potential extension into the future.

Narrative Approach

The aforementioned underscores the significance of each generation's responsibility and obligation to contribute to the preservation and interpretation of buildings and historical sites. This ensures their continued existence as dynamic and integrated entities with their historical context. Consequently, the term "intergenerational" has been included in the definition of narrative. Within the three components of "Intergenerational," "Communal," and "Ongoing," the social aspect is predominantly utilized in discussions directly related to living heritage. It emphasizes society, traditional skills, shared values, and intangible heritage. However, in the context of "Intergenerational," the emphasis is on tradition, which has become increasingly prominent in recent definitions. For instance, some scholars, such as Edmund Burke4, view tradition as synonymous with political conservatism (Burke, 2001). On the other hand, Alasdair MacIntyre[5] argues that tradition holds a distinct and contemporary significance, as it is intertwined with existing narratives and customs. He sees the life of a person or a society as a narrative that must be retold to a society composed of traditional ways, from which rational debate criteria are extracted (MacIntyre, 1985). He argues that we cannot think within the framework of a tradition, whether it is approved by us or not. However, if tradition is appropriately understood, it takes on a dialogical nature and becomes a broad debate that belongs to all generations. Since traditions are dynamic and generative, they can draw from pre-modern sources to effectively serve various industries. This includes protecting the freedom of action to establish a beneficial relationship between the needs of buildings and their surrounding environment, which undergo continuous changes (ibid.).

However, the main concern in hermeneutics is the extent to which and under what conditions we can engage with the past. Hermeneutics is a branch of knowledge that deals with interpreting texts of any kind. Hans-Georg Gadamer6, who, following his teacher Martin Heidegger7, sought to expand the reach of hermeneutic understanding to encompass all aspects of human existence, defined tradition as that which allows us to connect with the past. Therefore, it is crucial for our understanding of everything. "Tradition" for him is accompanied by "understanding," and understanding represents a "Fusion of Horizons" between the present and the past. In tradition, the process of integration is continuous, as the old and new are constantly interacting to combine and transform into "Living Values" without one overtaking the other (Gadamer, 1989).

Perpetual preservation is always in opposition to the destructive effects of distinguishing between what is new and what is old (Walter, 2020c). However, it has so far been unable to overcome the challenge of applying the above statement in reverse, which is to differentiate between the old and the new. As a result, by separating and distinguishing old buildings and objects, we hinder the "Fusion of Horizons" that, according to Gadamer's definition, is essential for the vitality of the tradition as a whole and for preserving the object/building within that tradition. It can be said that tradition can be "conservative," not politically, but in terms of empowering a society to preserve its cultural heritage and ensure the successful transfer of these traditions from one generation to another. Therefore, a tradition, in this sense has more of a

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"radical" (return to the root) concept than a conservative one.

After Paul Ricoeur's reflections in the book "Time and Narrative," narrative theory has been widely utilized in the field of humanities. However, some have resisted it due to concerns about the misuse of narrative and its potential psychological harm, mainly when used as a framework for extracting individual identity. This viewpoint is shared by thinkers like Peter Lamarque8, who discusses the concept of the "Opacity of Narrative" (Lamarque, 2014). Claims of validity may sometimes be exaggerated; however, the role of narrative in preserving identity, whether it be historical fabric or buildings, remains valid. In the sense that it is capable of changing while maintaining the continuity of the past, present, and future. A dual temporal concept referred to by William Dowling9. He explains that the experience from within the narrative can only be understood by the narrator, who at the end of the story (as far as it has gone), stands and looks back at the past. The narrator can confidently conclude about the meaning and importance of the events recounted. In this regard, the narrator is an expert in the preservation field. It is at this point that an unmistakable resemblance to S Walter øren Kierkegaard's[10] interpretation is evident: "Life can only be understood backward; but it must be lived forwards" (Walter, 2020c). Hence, narratives are oriented towards both the past and the future. The interpretation and utilization of narratives are typically entrusted to an expert with the keenest insight. This approach stands in stark contrast to the prevailing historical valuation method, which currently receives significant attention and is widely applied. This method typically assesses buildings and historical sites based on their intrinsic components, often neglecting their connection to their historical context as a secondary consideration. Ultimately, it can be inferred that narratives serve as a crucial conduit for connecting every building and historical site and the individuals within their society. Through construction, restoration, and the evocation of identity, these narratives establish and maintain a connection, thereby serving as a means of preserving lost identities.

Case Study

Although narrative has a long history in philosophical fields, it has only been a few years since it has been studied explicitly in conservation and used as a method for data analysis by experts. Books and articles are among these studies, but few practical examples can be mentioned. For example, in 2022, Weihan Rong undertook a project titled "Narrative and Heritage: Exploring the Value of Chinese Confucian Courtyards in Architectural Conservation". The project aimed to establish a connection between narrative and cultural heritage, to revive and promote the growth of such heritage in China using this approach. He also presented the method adopted for collecting narratives briefly in the form of a table in his short article with the same name, which can be seen in Fig. 1. He states that to gather narratives effectively and develop his desired conservation plan, he begins by observing them, which is a crucial aspect of his work. In the next step, he listens to previously unheard narratives and collects information about them. Finally, he interprets the narratives he has gathered and attempts to reflect these interpretations in a society that embraces narratives (Rong & Bahauddin, 2023). Although the method presented in this article has been effective for the author, it can be adapted to the needs and circumstances of each project. It can also be modified by adding or reducing stages as necessary.

Conclusion

The future of conservation as a unified concept lies in achieving positive outcomes and establishing a solid connection with conservation and its underlying

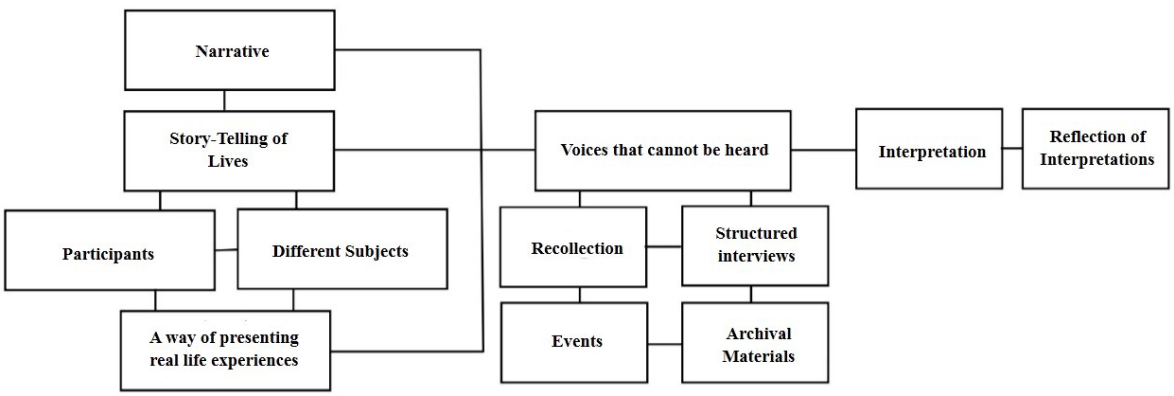


Fig. 1. The method used by Weihan Rong in collecting narratives. Source: Authors.

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theories. Value-based conservation presents several limitations, particularly to living structures, which require a comprehensive understanding of their complex histories and the compounded pressures associated with their use in the future. This approach limits shared societal values to the current generation and may be vulnerable to exploitation by so-called "experts" who lack sufficient knowledge to take responsible action. Despite these constraints, the crucial step in improving conservation outcomes, especially for living structures and historical sites, involves the creation of a new theoretical framework. This novel framework, the narrative approach, seeks to establish a connection between individuals and cultural heritage. It perceives buildings and sites as distinct personalities and identities that can influence their surrounding environment. Recognizing that living structures continue to serve as sites for ongoing cultural production enables conservation to maintain its rightful place in numerous instances. This approach holds potential benefits not only for heritage preservation but also for overall conservation. The narrative approach may serve as a suitable alternative or complement to previous methods, providing a clear and enduring structure to support the preservation and vitality of historical buildings and sites of various types.

Endnotes

1. Nigel Walter, Specialist Conservation Architect active in both architectural practice and research./ 2. Barbara Hardy, 1924-2016, was a British literary critic./ 3. Paul Ricoeur, 1913-2005, was a prominent French philosopher and writer./ 4. Edmund Burke, 1729-1797, was an English-Irish politician, economist, and philosopher./ 5. Alasdair MacIntyre, born in 1929, is a Scottish-American philosopher./ 6. Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1900-2002 was one of the pioneers of philosophical hermeneutics./ 7. Martin Heidegger, 1889-1976, was a German philosopher who is best known for contributions to phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism./ 8. Peter Lamarque, British aesthetician and philosopher of art./ 9. William Dowling, 1944, a prominent professor of English and American literature.

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