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Interrogating Tradition

David Moffat

For twenty years the International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments (IASTE) has provided a point of contact for scholars interested in the broader social and political forces shaping the built environment. Since it was formed at an international symposium at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1988, its purpose has been to pull together the many strands of inquiry about architecture and settlement form that have escaped the privileged lens of Western art-historical scholarship.

The association has relied on the notion of “tradition” to unify this diverse project. Early on, this effort implied examining the rich informal and vernacular practices of non-Western or preindustrial cultures. But in the last ten years the scope has expanded to include critical engagement with the idea of tradition itself and the way it is commonly deployed, even in modern contexts, to value certain modes of building over others.

In its work, IASTE has been greatly aided by its cross-cultural stance. The view of one culture

from another can be of great use in uncovering hidden and often unquestioned attitudes toward building. The interdisciplinary nature of the organization has also helped members deemphasize proprietary jargon and present their research in more accessible forms.

A central focus of IASTE has been its biennial conferences. Three of the first five were held in Berkeley, where the association is headquartered. But beginning in 1998, they have been staged in locations (Bangkok, Dubai, Hong Kong, Trani (Italy), and Cairo) where attendees have been invited to visit local and regional heritage sites and new developments which demonstrate the influence of tradition.¹

The 2008 conference, from December 12 to 15 in Oxford, England, was no exception. Hosted by Oxford Brookes University, it featured some 140 presentations, several impressive keynote panels, bus tours of the London King’s Cross redevelopment and the towns and landscapes of the Cotswold region, and walking tours of classic and modern university buildings in Oxford itself.²

The eleventh IASTE conference also marked something of a transition within the organization. Its principal co-founder and director, Nezar AlSayyad, a professor of architecture and city and regional planning at Berkeley, will be stepping down at the end of 2009 in favor of an executive panel headed by Mark Gillem, a professor of architecture at the University of Oregon.³

For years, AlSayyad has been a driving force behind IASTE, and the themes of its conferences have been inspired by his desire to push investigations beyond the simple dichotomy of “traditional” and “modern” design. The theme for 2008, “Interrogating Tradition: Epistemologies,

Fundamentalisms, Regeneration and Practices,” reflected his desire to move discussion in a deliberately political direction.⁴

And of the conference subthemes, the most provocative concerned an emerging link between traditionalism and various forms of market and religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalist epistemologies frequently attempt to codify ordinarily fluid processes of tradition to bolster economic self-interest, militant ideologies, or threatened cultural identities.

A Diversity of Views and Approaches

As usual at IASTE conferences, the statement of theme yielded a range of responses—some answering the call to question the motives behind discourses of tradition, others tied to older concerns within the association. This range was evident in the five papers chosen as finalists for the Jeffrey Cook award, given in honor of the late University of Arizona professor and founding IASTE member.⁵

“The Future Tradition of Nature,” by Amy Murphy of the University of Southern California, investigated the relation between Japanese anime films and various discourses on ecology.

“The Legend of Brigadoon: Architecture, Identity and Choice in the Scottish Highlands,” by Daniel Maudlin of the University of Plymouth, examined the mismatch between image and reality in the stereotyping of highland house types.

“Bruce Grove Transferred: The Role of Diverse Traditions in Historic Conservation,” by Kate Jordan of the University of Portsmouth, documented the difficulties of heritage-redevelopment strategies in a culturally mixed area of London.

Opposite: An award-winning paper by Daniel Maudlin examined the complex mismatch between romantic image and historic reality in Highland Scottish house design. He presented the work of the Isle of Skye-based Dualchas Building Design (DBD) as an alternative. The house designed in 1998 for Dr. Alastair Barden, a Scottish Nationalist Party activist, combined concrete-block construction with a dry-stone outer wall to emulate the environmental qualities of a traditional, sod-roofed blackhouse. Its regional folkloric associations, however, are complicated by the close association today between Highland tradition and the imported forms of eighteenth-century British Classicism—the “improved” farmhouse and cottage. Among Scottish Gaels, the blackhouse is associated with backwardness and poverty. Photo courtesy of Dualchas Building Design.



“From Sleeping Porch to Sleeping Machine: Inverting Traditions of Fresh Air in North America,” by Charlie Hailey of the University of Florida, traced changing notions of healthy sleeping in American domestic architecture.

“Stealth Gentrification: Camouflage and Commerce on the Lower East Side,” by Lara Belkind of Harvard University, probed the deliberately obscure, hip-cultural transformation of a formerly low-income area of New York City.

Two plenary panels also gave a good sense of the range of interests within the association. “Fundamentalisms and Tradition” sought to demonstrate how larger social and political currents affect built environments. Derek Gregory, of the University of British Columbia,

first argued that tropes of terror, tradition, and tribalism, related to a “reenchantment” with warfare in the West, have altered views of the built environment. In sites of conflict like Iraq and Afghanistan this may lead to the emergence of a “counter-city,” a place of stark ethnic, religious, and political division. Brigitte Piquard, from Oxford Brookes, then examined various ways that traditionalism has reemerged in urban contexts worldwide as a popular strategy for coping with the effects of natural disaster, social conflict, warfare, bad governance, or acts of terror.

The second panel, featuring Howard Davis and Kingston Heath, both of the University of Oregon, concentrated on the “regeneration” of vernacular building processes, a long-standing preoccupation of many in the

association, reflecting their concern for the value of cultural self-determination. Davis argued that architects need to rediscover tradition as a mode of practice rather than a source of building style. He pointed to new technologies such as global positioning systems and computer fabrication that offer ways to increase local control over building production. Heath argued that regional distinctiveness, rather than defined formal or historical characteristics, is the key attribute of vernacular design, and that this distinctiveness emerges from adaptation to local climatic and cultural factors.

An Open-Ended Mission

As an interdisciplinary organization, IASTE has long engaged in soul-searching as to its mission. It was founded on the view that the built



environment is sufficiently complex that it cannot be fully understood from any one perspective. Several conference participants noted they were attracted to the association because it embraced an “uncanon” of architectural scholarship; others commented that IASTE has tried to make room for the quirky and improvident as well as the normative and well-to-do. But the open-ended nature of its discussions has also caused members to periodically revisit its purpose.

Above: Another DBD house design, Druim Ba, reflects other aspects of the complex material and social history of Highland Scottish design. A white, single-story, timber-frame box, its south wall opens with full-height glass doors to a steel and oak verandah. According to Maudlin, “the design, takes full advantage of the formal similarities between eighteenth-century everyday Classicism and Modernism to produce a synthesis of the Highland improved cottage and a twentieth-century design aesthetic.” Photo courtesy of Dualchas Building Design.

One of IASTE’s original points of departure was that the handing down of traditions from one generation to the next was central to the development of a rich kaleidoscope of built forms, cultural symbols, and the skills needed to craft them. This continuity was interrupted by modernism, which proposed uniform standards of design that could be developed and deployed across cultures.

As several speakers noted, however, tradition only emerged as an alternative value system when modernity’s failures started to become evident in the early 1960s. In the years since, as the understanding of modernity has changed and adapted, splintered and reformed, and as the dynamics of tradition have been reexamined, this original sense of opposition has become more complex and nuanced.

The formation of a built territory remains central to every culture. And even in modern cultures this may involve forces and practices that purport to be beyond question. But,

as many 2008 conference presentations sought to show, such narratives of “the way things have always been done” are usually created to maintain the predominance of certain social or perceptual constructs. In some vernacular settings, this can be seen as relatively benign social process, a response to a basic need to create value and meaning through a common sense of artistry. But it can also be interpreted through a more political prism as a way to reinforce the interests of certain groups over others.

Within IASTE, recognition of the latter condition has led to many studies of the ways design practice has been used to dominate and reorganize the territory of non-Western peoples. Papers at past conferences have dealt with the formation of cities as instruments of European colonial domination. Others have explored “native” traditions that become integral to the ways of the colonizers. Still others have examined the struggle of postcolonial societies to reckon with their mixed heritages.

In this regard, IASTE research has shown that (nativist and essentialist claims to the contrary) all cultures are to some extent hybrid. And it has revealed how traditions migrate and change over time and distance, as societies adapt building elements from one another, deal with shifting economies and environmental crises, and endure conflict and restructuring.

The most recent evidence of these processes has been the rise of an integrated, worldwide consumer economy. “Traditional” design elements from hundreds of cultures are now freely deployed to add value and appeal to the developments of a global real estate industry. The way these meanings are constituted offers a rich vein of scholarship, exposing how “hyper” traditions now employ elements

whose value as displaced signs may far exceed their original function or cultural significance. Likewise, IASTE has become increasingly concerned with the dislocation of heritage value, exposing how invocations of traditional building practices may sometimes be used to displace the very people who created them.

Looking Ahead

In a final plenary session at the 2008 conference, Greig Crysler of the University of California, Berkeley, Dianne Harris of the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, and Mark Jarzombek of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology were assigned to reflect on some of these issues, summarize the content of four days of presentations, and speculate on the future of the association.

Crysler noted that IASTE's focus on the value of tradition has migrated from what James Clifford called the "ethnographic pastoral" to critical engagement with the commodification of heritage assets that has emerged as a byproduct of globalization. Nevertheless, he said, benign and emancipatory traditional epistemologies are still "conjugated in terms of community," and resist branded notions of cultural authenticity. Harris argued that what really makes the work of IASTE significant is its fine-grained analysis of the built environment and its reflections on how the environment can be used to assert many different forms of identity. Jarzombek pointed out that tradition can no longer be deployed as a mode of resistance against the evils of commodification because it, too, has been subsumed within the modern world. But this just means scholars have to interrogate themselves at the same time they interrogate traditions.

The theme of self-awareness came up repeatedly in subsequent comments from the floor and by panel members. Indeed, a refrain over the entire four days was that researchers and designers must be vigilant as to whose heritage they privilege, for what purpose, and to whose benefit.

At the final plenary session, this theme briefly led some to question the continued usefulness of tradition as an organizing concept for the association. But others quickly pointed out that while tradition may serve some chiefly as a lever to gain moral or commercial advantage, it also provides a powerful critical tool of common understanding.

Marcel Vellinga, the local conference director, also argued that there is a pronounced lack of direction in the shaping of contemporary built environments. While understanding of contemporary processes of tradition includes an awareness of commodification, many populations remain profoundly disconnected from the worlds in which they live. A regeneration of traditional building practices might also help address such immediate problems as climate change.

It was left to Dell Upton of UCLA to challenge such relatively sanguine views. As a discussant in the first plenary session he had noted that formulations of tradition may be highly sophisticated but culturally naïve. Following Paul Bourdieu, he suggested it is perhaps better to understand culture as a set of constantly changing principles. Academic debate tends to reify this diffuse and heterogeneous reality. This may be one reason for the continuing disappointment of those who view tradition as a form of enduring cultural capital that can be used to resist or assist economic development and political change.

What remained was AlSsayad's flexible definition: "Tradition is a dynamic project for the interpretation of a past in the service of a particular position in the present and for the purposes of a specific imagined future."

Notes

1. Three edited books have emerged from IASTE conferences. They are Nezar AlSsayad and Jean-Paul Bourdier, eds., *Dwellings, Settlements and Tradition: Cross Cultural Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988); Nezar AlSsayad, ed., *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage: Global Norms and Urban Forms in the Age of Tourism* (London: Routledge, 2001); and Nezar AlSsayad, ed., *The End of Tradition?* (London: Routledge, 2004).
2. The International Vernacular Architecture Unit at Oxford Brookes played a major role in coordinating work on the *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, edited by professor Paul Oliver of Oxford Brookes. Its complementary volume, *The Atlas of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, by Oliver, IVAU director Marcel Vellinga, and cartographer Alexander Bridge, was published by Routledge in 2007.
3. The executive committee will consist of Gillem and Mina Rajagopalan of New York University, Ipek Tureli of Brown University, Heba Farouk Ahmed of Cairo University, Montira Unakul of UNESCO Bangkok, Duanfang Lu of the University of Sydney, and Hesham Abdelfattah of Cairo University. All have been students of AlSsayad and are longtime IASTE members.
4. The call for papers invoked a need to question "rationalities of tradition in relation to their construction and their implications for practice." It went on to argue: "Such avenues of inquiry provide ways to examine how traditional knowledge is formulated and deployed in the political sphere, including the post-conflict reconstruction of society and space, the use of tradition by the 'state' as a means of co-optation or governance, or the manner in which fundamentalism is 'framed' and used by different interest and social groups."
5. The prize is given to the two best papers submitted in advance to the conference. This year's winners were Amy Murphy and Daniel Maudlin. All five papers will be published in upcoming issues of the organization's journal, *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*.